

Grampian Zoo had closed to the public half an hour ago. Director Dougal McTaggart leant back in his office chair. He loved this time of day. It was as though every single creature let out a simultaneous sigh of relief once the gates clanged shut. He heard the keepers calling goodnight to each other as they headed home for tea. He should leave too, but first he'd take one last stroll through the grounds. He enjoyed having the place to himself.

He had stopped to watch the chimpanzees when his walkie-talkie crackled into life. A desperate voice could be heard pleading, "Help! I need help! Is anyone there? Oh, please..."

"Chris?"

"Yes!"


"Where are you?"

"With Alisha! It's... She's... Help! Please help me!"

Dougal McTaggart didn't wait to hear more. He sprinted down the path towards the elephant house.

The door was wide open. Inside, Alisha, the old cow elephant, was calmly scratching her giant buttocks against the rough surface of the far wall. The zoo director could see Chris's booted legs behind her. The keeper was pinned against the stonework.

Dougal didn't phone for help. He needed to act, now. He leapt the barrier, then squeezed between the



iron bars. He fished the remains of a chocolate bar from his pocket, held it up and called the elephant's name.

Alisha lumbered forward, allowing Chris to fall to the ground. Taking the chocolate delicately in the tip of her trunk, the elephant eyed the zoo director thoughtfully before transferring it to her mouth. He edged around her vast bulk towards the unconscious figure. But when he got closer he recoiled in shock. It wasn't Chris – it was a shop dummy! What was going on?

Then he heard a movement behind him. A voice giving a word of command. Obediently Alisha lifted her trunk in salute and stepped smartly back. This time it was the zoo director who was caught against the wall. But he was no plastic mannequin. The sheer weight of the cow elephant cracked his ribs one by one. As the life was squeezed out of him, someone began to laugh. Malicious. Vengeful. Cruel. It was the last sound Dougal McTaggart ever heard.

tyger, tyger,
burning bright.

My name is Poppy Fields. I'm not a huge fan of the Animal Kingdom. It's not that I don't like the natural world – if a wild creature stumbles across my path, I'm quite happy to look at it for as long as it wants to hang around. But if there's a choice between watching *someone* and watching *something* I'll usually opt for *someone*. Which turned out to be a big mistake when Graham and I visited the zoo. If I'd paid more attention to our furry friends I might have prevented several beastly murders.

It was a few weeks after Easter. Graham and I were back at school and nothing exciting seemed likely to happen any time soon. But then Mum announced that

she'd won first prize in some charity raffle: a long weekend break for a family of four at Farleigh Manor Zoo. Mum rang to explain she was the single mother of an only child and they said we could each bring a friend. So she invited her best mate, Becca, and I invited Graham. The zoo booked us in for the May bank holiday weekend, and at the crack of dawn on the Saturday morning we set off.

Farleigh Manor had once been a stately home set in hundreds of acres of private parkland. You know the kind of thing – a sweeping driveway and huge lawns kept manicured by gazillions of gardeners; vast staircases and elegant rooms with massive chandeliers and gleaming silverware kept polished by armies of maids. A rich businessman had bought the whole estate from an impoverished aristocrat a while ago. Peter Monkton had made his fortune by manufacturing dodgy fast food with names like Chicky Chunkies, Beefy Blocks and Duckie Dazzlers. When he'd hit sixty-five he'd retired to Farleigh Manor and put his feet up. He'd wanted to live the quiet life of an English country gentleman, but he got bored stiff within a year. So he ended up stuffing the grounds with wild animals and turning the place into a tourist attraction. He did a good job of it – the place became really popular with families who wanted a good day out, and pretty soon

he was getting thousands of visitors a year. But then Peter died and his son, Anthony, inherited the lot.

Anthony Monkton was what my mum called “eccentric” and Becca called “barking mad”. To be honest, some of what he did sounded pretty bizarre. Graham had printed off reams of information that he’d found on the Internet (he likes to be prepared for things), so we looked through it on the way up. The first thing we noticed was that Anthony Monkton had a distinctive taste in clothes. There were several pictures of him swanning about in brightly coloured kaftans. He sported a pointy beard at least fifteen centimetres long and a ludicrously extravagant moustache that was waxed into lethal-looking spikes at each end. Apparently he was fascinated by New Age philosophies, and freely confessed to sleeping in a pyramid-shaped tent that he’d erected in his private apartments, claiming it gave him a “mystical energy”. He had recently started adding his own touches to Farleigh Manor. First of all a series of yurts – big, domed tents – had sprouted like mushrooms on the front lawn, where people could try out alternative therapies to Rebalance their Karma. Then he’d gone even further and converted the west wing of the manor into the Healing Harmony Hotel and Spa. It was newly opened, so the raffle prize had been part of a publicity stunt to attract customers. Mum – who’d recently been

attacked by a mad, drill-wielding workman – said that a dose of highly concentrated rest and relaxation was just what she needed. She and Becca were planning to try out all the facilities on offer. Meanwhile, Graham and I were having three days Behind the Scenes with the keepers, getting a chance to meet some of the animals up close and personal.

I had to admit that the idea of combining a health spa and a zoo was totally weird. Anthony Monkton had to be a genuine, real-life eccentric. I couldn't wait to meet him.

It was a long drive to Farleigh Manor, and we'd set off so early that before long I started to doze. By the time Mum pulled up outside the front entrance I was deeply asleep. Being woken up by a load of angry shouting came as quite a shock.

I opened my eyes to see a group of about fifteen people bunched around the barrier by the ticket office, stopping us from going in. They were waving placards furiously, and one of them crashed his into our wind-screen so hard that I thought he might crack the glass. Just in case we couldn't read them for ourselves, they were all shouting their slogans at the tops of their voices.

“Keep Wild Animals in the Wild!”

“Free the Captives!”

“End This Imprisonment NOW!”

Mum wasn't pleased, but Becca was positively irate. She wound down her window and said acidly to the leading protester, "You're blocking our way. That's illegal."

The protester – a ferret-faced man of about thirty – came right back with a caustic remark of his own. "You're going in there," he said in a strong Scottish accent, pointing through the gates. "That's immoral."

"Oh, for heaven's sake! We can't be doing with all this. We're just here for the weekend. Move out of the road or I'll call the police." Becca pulled out her mobile and started tapping the keys. The ferret-faced man lowered his placard and backed away reluctantly.

"Anthony Monkton should be locked up in a cage!" he yelled at Becca.

"You tell her, Christopher!" a girl protester egged him on.

"Give him a taste of his own medicine!" added another.

"Exploiting innocent animals to line his pockets. He's evil!" screamed a fourth. "And you lot shouldn't be supporting him!"

Complaining loudly, the protesters huddled together like extremely bad-tempered sheep as Mum accelerated towards the ticket office.

"Bunny huggers," the man in the glass booth

grumbled, jerking his thumb towards the mob. His name tag declared him to be Ron Baker. “Sorry about them. They’ve been at it for months. You’d think they’d have better things to do with their lives.”

“We won the raffle,” Mum told him by way of reply. “We’re staying for the weekend. The booking’s in my name. Lili Fields?”

The man consulted his computer screen. “Oh yes. The Healing Harmony Hotel and Spa,” he said, and his lip curled into a slight sneer of disapproval. “Follow the drive to the house and take the right-hand fork. You’ll find the entrance in the courtyard to the rear of the building. Enjoy your stay, Ms Fields.” He didn’t sound at all convinced that we would. He pressed a button, the barrier lifted and Mum drove through, away from the noise of the protesters’ chants. For a while I could still see their faces in the wing mirror. The ferrety guy – Christopher – looked like he was boiling with furious thoughts. Hatred oozed from every pore – you could see it in the hunch of his shoulders, in his tightly clenched fists – and I felt a sudden prickle of apprehension. Was it just my imagination, or did he look like he could do someone some serious damage?

As we drove through the grounds I had the distinct impression that the zoo had seen better days. I’d had

a quick look at the map that Graham had printed off, so I knew it was divided into four themed areas: the African Savannah, the Rainforest, the Australian Outback and the Frozone, where they kept animals from the icy poles. From what I could see through the car window, the enclosures seemed nice and big and the animals looked well fed and cared for – but the signs were faded, the paint was chipped, and weeds grew in cracks in the paths. The whole place felt kind of unloved. Neglected. As if the person in charge had his mind on Higher Things. Then we got our first glimpse of the house – an amazingly grand mansion that was somehow totally eclipsed by the brightly coloured flags flying from the crop of domed yurts that dotted the grass in front of it. You could tell at a glance where Anthony Monkton’s heart lay.

The manor’s huge south-facing façade looked out over the yurt-strewn lawn, and on either side – propping it up like a pair of bookends – were two long, rather less impressive wings. We turned right along the side of the east wing, where Anthony Monkton had his private apartments, and came to an arch that led through to an enclosed, rectangular courtyard. The west wing – where the spa was housed – was opposite us when Mum parked. The fourth side, on our right, comprised a coach house (now the education centre) and stables

(now the zoo stores). The offices were on the left, in the basement that had once been the servants' quarters.

Mum's plan was to check in and deliver our gear to our rooms, then she and Becca would go for a sauna while Graham and I wandered around the zoo. We weren't due to meet our first keeper until 11 a.m. so we had a bit of time to explore on our own.

But as soon as she switched off the engine and we all climbed out of the car, we found ourselves right in the middle of another drama.

The office staff had obviously only just arrived for work. Two smartly dressed women in high-heeled shoes were standing on the cobbles looking perplexed. Behind them were three zoo keepers, distinguishable by their matching wellies and overalls. All five staff were staring at the back of the house.

REMEMBER S.M.? had been sprayed across the wall in big block capitals with blood-red paint.

Graham and I exchanged a quick, curious glance.

"S.M.?" I heard one of the women say. "What does that mean, Angie?" The person I assumed was Angie seemed equally mystified. She didn't answer.

I looked beyond her to the keepers. A blonde twenty-something-ish girl with her hair scraped back into a ponytail had her hand to her mouth. Behind her

was a stick-insect-thin man of about the same age, and beside him stood an older guy who'd grown a massive beard to make up for his baldness but unfortunately had ended up looking as if his head was on upside down. Physically they were all totally different, yet there was something oddly similar about them. I stared for a few seconds, trying to work out what it was, then realized with a jolt of surprise that it was the expressions on their faces. While the office staff were puzzled and unsure what to do, the keepers were looking... What? My eyes flicked from face to face. It was the strangest thing. They weren't happy; they weren't pleased. They were *satisfied* – as if the right thing had finally been done.

Just then, another keeper – whose name tag helpfully declared him to be Charlie Bales – came through the archway with an empty wheelbarrow, obviously heading towards the stores. When he saw the writing, he stopped, and the same look of grim satisfaction spread across his features. He nodded his head as if in approval.

“S.M.,” he said, dropping the barrow’s handles. “Well, well, well.” He looked at the assembled crowd and asked, “Anyone told our glorious leader?”

They all shook their heads but said nothing. Charlie Bales pulled a walkie-talkie from his top

pocket and pressed a couple of buttons.

“April? It’s Charlie. Could you tell Mr Monkton that someone’s sprayed some graffiti out here?”

We could hear April relate the message to her boss in a broad Birmingham accent. There was a grunt of alarm – the sound of a man who’d rather not be bothered by the real world.

“You can deal with it, can’t you, April?” a timid voice protested. “Can’t you get someone to wash it off? What’s the man called? Jerry, is it? That chap in the maintenance department. Get him to do it.”

“April, tell Mr Monkton it’s not the protesters’ usual stuff,” Charlie said calmly. “This is on the wall of the house. I think he should take a look. This message seems ... personal.”

“What does it say?” asked April. Charlie read out the words loud and clear. They were met with a long silence. Then April said to her employer, “I suppose you’d better have a look, sir. It won’t take a minute.” There was the sound of a chair being pushed back. Two minutes later, Anthony Monkton joined us in the courtyard with his secretary.

The sight of a man in a flowing yellow kaftan and purple beret was every bit as bizarre as I’d hoped. He looked as if he was wearing a nightie. His unruly grey hair poked out from the beret like a collection

of rodents' tails – rats trying to desert a sinking ship, I thought. He wore a necklace with a large crystal dangling from it, which he clung to with one hand as if it would give him magical protection.

It was the first time I'd ever been in close proximity to a genuinely eccentric person. I was gripped – and I wasn't the only one. Every single member of staff stiffened and pulled themselves up a little when he appeared. Shoulders went back, chins were raised. It was almost as if they were standing to attention. But then I noticed that what showed in their eyes wasn't respect. It varied from person to person, but I saw traces of pity. Disappointment. Dislike. And – in Charlie Bales's face – open contempt.

Mr Monkton looked at the writing while the keepers looked at him, waiting for his reaction. Their boss rummaged in the pockets of his kaftan for his glasses. Once he found them he gave them a rub with a hanky before putting them on his nose. Eventually he said, "I don't understand. S.M.? Who...?"

There was a tense silence. Every staff member apart from April wore the same expression. Disgust.

At last Charlie Bales spoke. "Sandy," he said. The name seemed to thud onto the cobblestones.

"Sandy?" echoed Mr Monkton, baffled. "Sandy who?"

The female keeper gasped. Pain flashed across her face. The stick insect next to her scowled at his boss.

“Sandy Milford.” Charlie’s voice was quiet but deadly.

And yet Mr Monkton seemed entirely unaware of their seething emotions. His face contracted into a tight frown and he said vaguely, “Sandy Milford? The keeper who...? Oh dear... Yes, of course. Terrible thing. Very sad. Tragic.” A nerve twitched in his cheek. “April, sort it out, will you? Wash it off, or paint over it or something. I’ll be in my office if anyone needs me.” He took off his glasses but didn’t move. It was as though he couldn’t quite remember where his office was.

April came to his rescue. “Let’s go inside, shall we, sir?” She looked at the others. “Come on, everyone,” she said briskly. “Back to work. Mr Monkton doesn’t pay you just to stand around.”

Dismissed, the staff left the courtyard. Then April’s eyes fell on Mum and Becca standing uncertainly by the car. “Can I help you?” she asked.

“Oh!” Mum looked flummoxed for a moment. “Er – we’re staying in the hotel. We won the raffle.”

“Ah, yes. Congratulations. Ms Fields, isn’t it? You’ll find the reception area through those double doors. Enjoy your stay.”

