

## Extinction Island Deleted Scene

OAKLEY LAVEAU WHISTLED at the ten-foot alligator snapping its jaws and begging for marshmallows from a pair of tourists. Dirty brown water spilled over its sharp teeth and through its wide lower jaw. “Marvin, don’t you ever get enough?”

As if to answer, or maybe as a more insistent plea for food, Marvin did a vigorous barrel roll and splashed water on the dock.

She jumped out of the way and laughed. “You’re not a gator. You’re a hog.”

Spinning on her heels, she headed toward the freshly painted tour boat whose stark white hull stood out against the murky water like a radiant pearl. Bright red lettering on the side proclaimed the Lazy Lizard to be the Best Swamp Tour in Louisiana. The newly refurbished boat put to shame the dirty, chipped office and outbuildings still awaiting their revitalization. The Louisiana heat and humidity worked its way deep into anything made of wood.

Movement from the corner of her eye caused Oakley to look over her shoulder. A male tourist had squeezed between the protective rope barrier. He held a marshmallow out to Marvin, trying to coax him closer. She swung around and yelled in her official tour-guide voice. “Sir, bring your body back behind the ropes. Now.”

The man’s eyes went wide, not because of her yell, but because in a split second Marvin had zipped through the water and was now within a few inches of his hand. The man dropped the marshmallow and backpedaled behind the fence.

She shot him a long glare before she turned again toward the boat. He would get the standard safety speech when he boarded. For now, he should pay attention to the warning signs. Big gators like Marvin had a bite that could cut through bone.

As she reached the hull of the boat, her boss, Ogden “Raptor” Greene, strolled over. His nickname was a nod to his favorite type of dinosaur and also to his position as the Field Behaviorist for the dinosaurs at the U.S. Death Penalty Detention Center in Costa Rica, better known as Extinction Island.

Raptor gave her a reluctant smile. “Hey, Oak. Thanks for coming in.”

“Of course. Whatever you need.” It was her day off, but Raptor had called her to cover for Monica Bordelon, Oakley’s former best friend.

The wooden door to the bathroom swung open and thumped against the outside wall. Monica stumbled out, looking haggard. She brushed at the front of her shirt, walked a few paces, then leaned over the wooden walkway and threw up into the bordering foliage.

If anyone deserved to puke for a while, it was Monica, but rather than satisfaction, sadness engulfed Oakley in a bone-deep ache. Hard to believe their years of friendship had shattered over a guy.

*Monica and Matt.* Their names even sounded like they belonged together. Tall, vivacious, and blond, Monica was everything Oakley wasn't. She understood why guys fell for Monica's charming laugh, her well-timed jokes, and her bright smile. It might have been okay for Matt to choose Monica, if he hadn't committed to Oakley first.

Funny thing was, she didn't miss Matt nearly as much as she missed her friendship with Monica. Their conflict pinched at Oakley's heart, not to mention how it negatively affected their workplace. She swept her hair into a ponytail and stood silent against Monica's glare.

Monica opened her mouth to speak. Raptor put a hand out to stop her. "Go home before you say something you might regret to your new manager."

Oakley's jaw dropped as joy rushed through her. She searched Raptor's face. Did he mean it? Had he truly made *her* the permanent manager? She and Monica had both functioned as assistant manager for the last several months. They switched off whenever Raptor visited Extinction Island, which he'd done more often lately—something about tracking the dinosaurs in a new way. Once he finally decided he needed a permanent manager, he'd taken more than a month to decide.

Raptor winked at her, and in that moment, she held her head high. He must have noticed her striving to be professional in the midst of the awkwardness with Monica, and he had rewarded her for it.

Monica tensed her jaw. Before she could say anything, she bent at the waist and puked again, on her own shoes.

Oakley took a big step back. "Guess I'd better get some tours going then." On lighter feet, she waltzed over to the stern of the tour boat and called out to the visitors milling about. "Green tickets, please line up here."

Most of the customers in the waiting area lined up, and she began taking tickets. The boat rocked and swayed as each passenger entered and took a seat on the long benches running down the sides and through the middle.

Near the end of the line, she paused to smile at two little boys, both probably under five years old and likely brothers. The oldest one held a ragged, stuffed alligator. “Can I tell you a secret?” she asked him.

His large brown eyes bubbled with excitement.

She leaned down and tapped the stuffed gator on the nose. “If you’re a good passenger, I’ll let you hold a real alligator.”

“Wh ... What?”

“Don’t worry. He’s just a baby, and he’s really cute.”

The boy shot a nervous, yet excited, glance at his little brother. Then, he gave a shy nod as he went to find a seat on the boat with his parents.

As the last man in line approached, she had to stretch her neck to look up at him. He towered over her with dark hair combed back and curling at his ears, a narrow aquiline nose, and a jaw lined in rough stubble.

For a few seconds, the man just stared at her. Maybe he wondered if she could handle the job. Her French heritage had given her a shorter-than-average stature that was often a liability with the gators. Whenever she assisted Raptor, he had to do all the heavy lifting. Maybe she should have specialized in the biology of squirrels instead of large reptiles.

She gave the man a confident smile and took his ticket. “Sit anywhere. Both the inside and outside rows will get a good view of the gators.”

The man moved to an inside seat across from the family with the two boys. She latched the gate to secure the railing that encircled the seats, then headed to the front to pick up her microphone.

“Ladies and gentlemen ...” She looked straight at the young brothers and was rewarded with big smiles. “Thank you for joining the Lazy Lizard swamp tour this afternoon. Not only will you see gigantic gators, up to fifteen feet long, you’ll also get to feed them and hold a baby gator.”

She shifted the motor into gear while Marvin easily swooshed out of the way of the bow. When she'd cleared the dock, she shifted into reverse to navigate the swamp. Her seat faced the stern of the boat to allow her to interact more with the passengers.

The trees closed in for a stretch, creating a comforting canopy and a cooler spot on the river. As they passed through, the summer sun again beat down on the roof of the boat. Without the fiberglass covering for shade, the ride would be miserably hot.

"Here is our first customer." From the shelter of a downed tree, a gator they called Dusty swam straight for the boat. "Dusty is six feet long, but he's only about four years old so he is still growing."

Down each side of the boat, she passed several bags of marshmallows. "To keep our gators healthy, we allow a maximum of two per person. As you can imagine, a steady diet of only marshmallows wouldn't be good for them."

A few people threw out their marshmallows, including the younger boy. The older one held on to his, pretending to feed it to his stuffed gator.

She moved the boat along, showing them several smaller gators before swinging the boat in a circle. They had come to the deeper section of the swamp where Blackie lived, a fourteen-foot-long gator with a dark scar on its back. Usually, the sound of the motor slowing and the watercraft spinning called the gator out. Today, she didn't see it.

She stood and turned in a circle. The boat went silent as everyone searched. Was Blackie hiding from the heat? It was the gator the guests oohed and ahed over because of its size and because it would smack the side of the boat, dragging rough scales along the metal.

"There." She pointed at a small island just as Blackie slipped into the water.

"I'll get it to come." The voice sounded like one of the little boys.

From the corner of her eye, she saw his small figure lean over. A dark shape bumped him, and then a splash.

The boy had fallen in! Her heart rate soared and her stomach seized up.

She dashed to the railing.

He bobbed and sputtered, without even enough breath to scream.

His mother let out a shriek and reached over the side, trying in vain to grab her son. The boy's father shoved his hands into his hair and stared out at the water, seemingly frozen in shock.

Her gaze darted to Blackie who continued a swift swim toward the boat. She had only seconds to get to the boy before the gator did.

Without thinking, she stepped onto the railing and jumped. The warm, dirty water closed in over her head. She pushed up to the surface and swam for where she'd seen the boy.

He wasn't there.

A single marshmallow floated where he should have been. She dove under, searching through the turbid water. Through the haze, she spotted a small hand still clutching a stuffed gator. She snagged him and pulled him up.

As they broke the surface, he choked in the fresh air. He was alive. She wrapped her right arm around his rib cage and paddled backward with her left.

Another glance in front caused her heart to stutter. Blackie swam full force toward them, now only six feet away.

Her head throbbed and burned from adrenaline. Pain spiked behind her eyes. This was no time for a migraine. She had to get the boy out of here.

Someone dropped the rescue ladder with a splash, something she should have thought of before she'd jumped. It hung four feet behind them.

The tall, dark-haired man leaned down along the ladder, his long arms ready to pull the boy up. If only she could make it.

She kicked out in a scissor-kick as hard as she could. Her foot hit Blackie's nose, startling the gator.

She kicked again, taking advantage of its confusion.

One final kick brought her to the ladder. She swung the boy behind her and into the man's grasping hands. The boy was safe, but the gator had recovered its senses.

Blackie lunged toward her, its mouth open, its teeth shining like razor sharp daggers.

Her migraine intensified, closing her vision off to tiny pinpricks. She screamed and shoved a hand at Blackie as if she could push the gator away. Her head felt like it was splitting apart. She squeezed her eyes shut just as Blackie's jaws began to close.

A strong tug on her arm pulled her under. Her eyes flew open. She gasped and sucked in water.

Adrenaline exploded through her veins, releasing all of her energy in one quick pulse, one last desperate attempt to survive. She pumped her legs, kicked, and breached the surface.

Then, her body failed her.

Her reserves gone, she floated listlessly on her back. She moved her head to the right and cringed. Blood swirled in the brackish water. *Her* blood. From her hand? Her arm? What was bleeding?

She felt lightheaded and turned away.

Her gaze moved to her left—to a sight more incomprehensible. The gator floated on its side, unmoving, clearly dead. What had killed it?