

A KINGDOM KEEPERS NOVEL

THE RETURN

BOOK ONE

DISNEY LANDS



NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

RIDLEY  PEARSON

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DEDICATION

To Wayne McSwain, who for something like forty years worked backstage at the Magic Kingdom, including Splash Mountain, where I met him during a behind-the-scenes research trip. He retired this year, and if it weren't for him there would be no Wayne in the books—but “Fred” instead. (And Wayne is way cooler!) Thanks, Wayne, and the hundreds of others who, day in and day out, are faceless and nameless for the most part, working tirelessly to make the parks and the cruise ships the best experiences ever! *The Return—Disney Lands* is dedicated to all of you!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To the terrific Kingdom Keeper Insiders, thank you for all the hard work! It's another level of fun to write parts of this book with readers of the series, and see their contributions in the book. (Look carefully, you will see them!) Congrats to the few who made it into *The Return*! Well done! (You can see their real names at the end of the book.) I posted some tricky challenges. The number and quality of the submissions was unexpectedly impressive! Please stay with the project at kingdomkeepersinsider.com—and the app.

Thanks to all the Keepers who contributed to the research for *The Return—Disney Lands*. These include: Nick Perkins, who helped inspire the series concept, Brooke Muschott (Keeper Extraordinaire), VIP Guide Katie (Disneyland), VIP Guide Janet (Walt Disney World), and the many Imagineers who have helped me over the years—especially Alex Wright.

Becky Cline and Kevin Kern at Walt Disney Archives continue to help me dig and delve into archival materials, while Chris Ostrander, Karl Holz, Thomas Schumacher, and myriad other Disney executives smooth the way to allowing me this wonderful exploration of “Everything Disney.” I have the best job on earth!

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“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, girls and boys, welcome to the D23 presentation we’ve all been waiting for! Eight years ago Disney Imagineers, under the direction of Disney Legend Wayne Kresky, came up with an innovative and game-changing alternative to our old friend, Pal Mickey. Five young men and women from Orlando became our first Disney Hosts Interactive, or DHIs. That’s also an acronym for Daylight Hologram Imaging! Which gives you a small hint of whom you’re about to meet!”

The packed crowd in Ballroom B, Level 3 of the Anaheim Convention Center broke into thunderous applause. The speaker, a man named Joe Garlington, a well-known Disney Imagineer, was like his boss, Bruce Vaughn, considered a Disney celebrity.

“As hologram characters within the parks, these five courageous young people have not only introduced thousands of families to the magic of our attractions, but they’ve also, as a group, become known to all of us as . . . wait for it . . . the . . .”

Hundreds of people screamed in unison: “Kingdom Keepers!”

Another brace of applause rattled the folding walls separating the line of ballrooms.

“That’s right! So please help me give it up to the five people most responsible for saving our beloved Disneyland from outside threats: Finn, Willa, Philby, Maybeck, and Charlene—our company treasure, the Kingdom Keepers!”

The crowd jumped to its feet, cheering and waving, shooting off photos in a blinding explosion of flashing white lights.

The five teens charged up onto the riser and waved back at the crowd. They slipped onto raised stools, grabbing the wireless microphones left there for them.

The interview began in earnest. Finn Whitman, who’d matured from a gawky middle-school boy into a young man with a strong jaw and penetrating eyes, was identified as the leader of the group. Dell Philby, a redhead with a soft British accent who was both a rock climber and a computer whiz, was dubbed the MacGyver of the group, though the old television show reference was lost on many in attendance. The gorgeous blonde, Charlene, received additional applause because she currently starred in a Disney Channel show. By far the most athletic of the five, she answered questions about how some of her more

difficult battles with Disney villains had helped lead to the rescue of Disneyland. Terry Maybeck stood slightly over six feet tall, his dreads making him look even taller. He made jokes about being the only African-American of the five, but became uncharacteristically serious when discussing his artist's eye and his tendency to take great personal risks when required. The clear stud of the group, Maybeck received the most screaming from the girls when his short interview concluded.

Willa Angelo spoke softly; Joe had to pry responses from her. She begrudgingly admitted that she'd assumed the role of Philby's high-tech counterpart. Joe also coaxed from her that she'd received a 34 on the ACT, a nearly perfect score, and had earned full scholarship offers from UCLA, Washington University, and Wellesley College. She wouldn't tell the group which she'd accepted, however.

The event lasted a total of fifteen minutes. Another roar of applause sent the Kingdom Keepers off to a greenroom where they would wait before being led to a poster-signing event in the main hall.

Accompanied by a pair of Cast Members, the five cut across a wide concourse on their way to the room. A large gathering of well-wishers and fans already crowded the area, cheering for the Keepers like they were actors or rock stars. Event programs waved; people called out

for autographs. The Keepers were happy to oblige, stopping to sign their names or pose for a quick selfie.

During one such photo-op, Finn Whitman caught sight of a girl with dark olive skin and a hint of Asian eyes, squinting with concern. Amanda. He winked at her. But she shook her head vigorously, her eyes darting to her left. Following her gaze, Finn caught sight of Jess, held back by the cluster of fans. No great surprise. The two girls traveled everywhere together. “Two peas in a pod,” Maybeck’s aunt Bess called them.

Jess waved her arms, clearly signaling *No*. Finn worked to communicate through facial expressions, *What?*

Jess pointed to her head. Amanda made a signal like she was sleeping. Finn understood: Jess had dreamed something bad—a special ability she possessed. Amanda pointed across the hall and shook her head more violently.

Finn and the others were aimed where Amanda was pointing as she called out, “Don’t go in there!”

Finn tugged on Philby’s shirt. “Not the greenroom.”

“Are you kidding me? We stay out here, we’ll be eaten alive.”

“Amanda and Jess.” Finn pointed them out. The crowd took on a life of its own, pushing and surging in the direction of the greenroom’s door. The fans knew

where the Keepers were headed, and in the process of following them, they were herding the Keepers in that direction.

Amanda and Jess slipped behind the crowd, Amanda looking as if she might cry.

“Seriously,” Finn shouted to Philby, “I think Jess dreamed something bad about this.”

He won Philby’s attention. Jess’s dreams were not to be ignored. As Philby stopped short, Finn crashed into him. Finn planted his feet, resisting, but the crowd’s will won out.

“This is ugly!” Charlene cried.

The dreaded door swung open.

“We do not want to go in there,” Finn said.

“I get it!” Philby said. “But I don’t think we have . . .”

The Keepers were pushed into the greenroom. Cast Members fought off the fans and shut the door.

Willa screamed.

A man in a waiter’s uniform lay writhing on the floor, green foam oozing from his mouth and nostrils. His eyes were rolled back into his head, showing only the milky white of his eyeballs. He twitched and jerked. A seizure.

Maybeck hollered, “Someone call an ambulance!”