

CHAPTER 1

“Some people are just pigs,” I said to myself as I reached down and picked up another ice-cream bar wrapper from the ground. I dropped it into the garbage can that sat right beside where the wrapper had been dropped. It seemed like no matter how many garbage cans we placed around the property there were some people who just didn’t care.

Although I guess I really shouldn’t complain that much, because it was my idea to sell the ice-cream bars in the first place. And more people meant more ice-cream bars, which meant more money, and we needed money to feed the animals. Speaking of which, the animals weren’t going to feed themselves.

I walked back over to the food cart, a three-wheeled contraption Mr. McCurdy had built. Awkward to push around, it was large enough to hold all the meat the

big cats ate. It was truly amazing how much food they could go through. A full-grown male tiger could eat fifty kilograms of meat in one meal, though we would never dream of feeding one that much at once.

Almost on cue there was a tremendous roar, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. No matter how many times I heard Simba roar, it still had that effect on me. There was maybe nothing in nature as amazing — and as frightening — as the roar of a lion. He roared again.

“I’m coming!” I yelled. “Keep your mane on!”

I pushed the cart a little faster. I was slightly behind schedule, and the animals always seemed a little impatient, as if they could tell time and knew I was late. More likely they probably just smelled me coming or, I guess, sniffed the food cart coming. There were a lot of dead chickens, not to mention pieces of deer, along with other assorted chunks of roadkill.

Simba roared for a third time, and I doubled my pace. Sometimes he got all the other cats going and then the wolves would join in. The visitors to the game farm loved the noise, but I knew it bothered the buffalo and the deer.

As I approached his pen, Simba came right up to the fence. His tail twitched angrily back and forth and his golden eyes glared intensely at me. Even through the fence — the safe, high, metal chain-link fence — I

still felt my heart flutter and my stomach rise into my throat. I knew in the logical, thinking part of my brain that I was safe and that Simba couldn't possibly get out and grab me. But there was another part — the long-ago, under-evolved monkey part of the brain — that wanted me to run away and climb to the very top of the tallest tree I could find.

Really that made no sense. For one thing, not only could I not outrun a lion, but I never had been very good at climbing trees. Now my brother, Nick, he was a different matter. He could climb trees like nobody's business. Then again, he really hadn't evolved very far from the monkeys.

I lifted the cart's lid, and the smell of raw meat wafted up at me. Bending slightly away from the opening, I reached in and pulled out a chicken — a dead, headless, plucked chicken.

Simba raised a paw and pressed it against the fence, which gave ever so slightly against his force. I ducked under the handrail behind which visitors stayed and walked along the fence. Simba paralleled me on the other side of the fence. I moved until I came to the porthole — an opening in the fence large enough to put a chicken through. Simba put one of his front paws on the porthole, then reached out through it, demonstrating that the porthole was also big enough for a lion to get his own food if it came too close.

Suddenly, *I* felt like food, and stepped back to get safely out of the range of the roving paw. I waited for Simba to back off, but he didn't. With Simba perched right there, I had no way to get the chicken through the opening. If I tossed it toward the porthole, Simba could just grab it and pull it through. Or maybe he would knock it down and it would be there outside the cage on the ground and out of his reach. There was no way I was going to go and get it if that happened.

I looked up at the top of the fence. Would it be possible for me to toss the chicken that high? It was almost three metres tall and was topped by strands of barbed wire that extended above that. On the very top was a single strand of electric wire, just as there was with every cage holding a big cat. It held a current of electricity that wouldn't kill a cat but would certainly deliver enough of a sting to make it let go and drop back to the ground. I had obviously never climbed to the top and touched one of the wires, but I had accidentally backed into a similar wire we used to keep the deer in their pen. It had felt like a whole lot of bees buzzing around in my butt — an experience I hoped never to repeat.

The fence was pretty high, but I thought I could probably toss the bird over it. I grabbed the chicken by the neck and started to swing it back and forth, pumping my arm, and then at the highest point I let it fly. It flew into the air, higher and higher, hit the very top of

the fence, the electric wire, and then began to tumble over and . . . stuck. The chicken got hung up on the very top of the fence!

Great, there was a dead chicken tangled up on the electric wire. How would I get it down? Would the wind just blow it off, or would it stay there and rot? And what about the electrical current in the wire? Would it slowly cook the chicken? Was that possible? Would it start to smell because it was rotting or because it was cooking?

Suddenly, Simba jumped into the air, threw his weight against the fence with a thunderous crash and sent me backwards, almost tumbling over the handrail before I regained my balance. The big cat fell back to the ground, the fence rocked and the chicken dropped off. Simba then sprang forward and scooped up the chicken in his mouth. The bird almost completely disappeared with a sickening crunch.

“That was quite the catch, Sarah.”

I turned around. It was Nick, my eleven-year-old brother.

“Certainly a much better *catch* than the *throw* you made,” he continued. “Though the best part was when you almost fell over the handrail. I thought your gracefulness was only surpassed by your throwing arm.”

“Have you finished changing the water in all the pens?” I asked. I was trying to switch the subject

because I knew it was hard to beat my brother in one of these arguments.

“I’m getting there.”

“And what does that mean?”

“It means I’ve done a number of the pens.”

“And would that number be sixteen or seventeen, like in all of them?”

“More like five, but five is still a number.”

“Then maybe you should stop standing around annoying me and make that number bigger.”

Nick saluted. “Yes, *sir!*”

“It’s about time you showed me a little respect.”

“I don’t know what you mean, Sarah. I’ve always tried to give you as little respect as possible.”

“You better get going before I toss a dead chicken at you.”

“That’s not a really dangerous threat. After all, I’ve seen you throw.” He started snickering to himself.

I fought the urge to reach into the food cart, grab a chicken and wing it at him. But what was the point? He was right. Even if I did throw it, I wouldn’t hit him.

“Just get going . . . okay?” My voice sounded more like a desperate plea than an order.

Nick strolled away, and I headed toward the next pen. It was next door and held one of our newest animals.

“Hello, Woody,” I said as I came up to the pen.

Woody trotted right up to the fence. While Simba

was scary, Woody was just playful. Acting like a big brown house cat, he pressed his body against the fence and rubbed back and forth, rising on his back legs to put more pressure against the fence. I ducked under the handrail and put my hand against the fence so I could tickle Woody behind the ear. Normally, I wouldn't do this to a big cat, especially a big cat who was new and who I didn't know that well, but Woody was different.

He was a male lion, just like Simba, but he had been "fixed" when he was little. That meant he looked more like a female lion and would never grow as big or develop a mane like Simba. He also never roared. Instead he made a little meowing sound like a house cat. And I guess, really, he was a big house cat. Woody had been the mascot of a motorcycle gang and had lived in their clubhouse. He spent the first two years of his life wandering around eating pretzels and burgers and lapping up beer. Woody would have still been living with the bikers if the city hadn't changed the bylaws making it illegal to have a lion. That meant Woody either had to be put down or find another place to live. And that was why he had come to live at Mr. McCurdy's farm, which we had recently named Tiger Town.

Woody had only been here about a month, but the bikers had already visited him twice. They were big and bearded and dressed in leather when they roared up on their Harley-Davidsons. I had been next to

Woody's pen that first time. We both heard the bikes. I didn't know what it was. He did. He got all frisky and excited. I didn't know what those bikers did or didn't do, but judging from the way Woody acted when they appeared, they'd been good to him.

It was interesting watching all the other visitors to the farm watching the bikers. It was obvious that people were curious. And scared. Strange, but I didn't find them scary at all. Maybe it was because they treated Woody well, and I always thought that anybody who liked animals was okay. Maybe it was just because after spending all my time around lions and tigers I wasn't that scared of anything anymore.

"I've got your breakfast, Woody," I said.

Woody sat on his back haunches as if he knew what I'd said and what was going to happen next. I dropped the chicken in through the porthole. Woody didn't move. He merely sat there, waiting. He was such a well-behaved lion — words that didn't normally go together too often.

"Okay, Woody, you can have it."

He got up and walked over to the chicken. Carefully, almost gently, he took it in his mouth. It looked as if he was trying to eat it without hurting it.

"Sorry I can't give you any pretzels to go along with the chicken."

"Excuse me."

I turned around. A woman and a girl — around my brother's age — stood behind me.

"I was wondering if I could ask you a question?" the woman asked.

"It's all part of the job." People were always asking questions. I hoped she wasn't going to ask me if I was serious about the pretzels.

"It's not really a question about the animals."

"That's okay. I can answer questions about anything here at Tiger Town." My mother always said there was no such thing as a stupid question. After fielding questions here, I knew she was wrong.

"Actually," the woman said, "my question is about your job. My daughter —" she gestured to the girl at her side "— loves animals. She wants to have a career working with them, but she doesn't realize you have to go to school for a long time and get a really good education before that can happen. We were wondering what sort of education she needs to get a job like yours."

I shook my head. "I really don't know."

"Well, what education do you have? Do you have a degree in zoology or biology, or are you a veterinarian?"

"I don't have any degrees . . . not yet, anyway. I'm only fifteen."

"I . . . I'm sorry," the woman stammered. "I just thought you were older."

“That’s okay,” I said. People often did think I was older. Older, like sixteen or so, but not older like an adult. My brother always said it wasn’t that I *looked* older but that I *acted* older. He said about fifty or sixty years old because I had stopped acting like his mother and had begun acting like his *grandmother*. He was lucky I wasn’t his mother or grandmother, or he would be grounded until *he* was a grandfather.

“So this isn’t a full-time job,” the woman said.

“No, it’s what I do on weekends and evenings. I’m a volunteer. We’re all just volunteers.”

“But there must be some experts who are in charge.”

“There are,” I agreed. “There’s Mr. McCurdy and Vladimir. They’re in charge.”

“That’s good to hear. Are *they* zoologists?”

“They’re experts — real experts who know everything about animals. But they sort of learned on the job.”

“What sort of job did they have?” she asked.

“They both worked for the circus.”

“The circus! They must have *some* sort of formal education!”

“I don’t really know about Vladimir,” I said, though I was pretty sure he didn’t. “But Mr. McCurdy dropped out of school long before he finished high school.”

“It’s hard to believe they’d put somebody in charge who doesn’t even have a high school diploma.”

“Nobody *put* him in charge.” Now I was starting to feel irritated. I knew she was trying to make some point to her daughter about an education, but it felt more like she was calling me a liar or disrespecting Mr. McCurdy. “Mr. McCurdy owns half the animals and Vladimir owns the other half.”

“But where did they even get all these animals?”

“Some are from Mr. McCurdy’s days in the circus. He brought them with him when he retired back to this farm. Others belonged to Vladimir. And all the latest animals were just sort of donated.”

“Donated?”

I nodded. “Sometimes people have an animal they can’t keep. They’re looking for a new home for it.”

“When you say ‘people,’ do you mean like people at another zoo?”

“Not zoos. People. People have an exotic animal they can’t keep for one reason or another and they need to find a new home for it.”

“I can see that with a cat or a dog,” the woman said. “I just can’t imagine that people have a tiger or lion they don’t want. Actually, I can’t imagine people even having a lion or a tiger.”

I laughed. “A year ago I wouldn’t have believed it myself. You’d be surprised. People have lions and tigers and bears that they keep in their barns and basements and garages.”

“That’s hard to believe.”

“The proof is all around you,” I said, gesturing at the pens that surrounded us.

“Amazing,” she said, shaking her head slowly. “Just amazing.”

“I’ve got to get back to work,” I said. “Do you have any more questions I can answer?”

“Not really,” the woman said.

“I have one,” the daughter said.

I looked at her. “Go ahead.”

“Do you think I could work here?”

I smiled. “Go up to the farmhouse and talk to Mr. McCurdy. Tell him I sent you.”

“Thanks,” she said.