

CHAPTER 1

“I don’t understand why we have to go,” I said to Mr. McCurdy as we left his house and strolled toward the barn.

“It’s only going to be for a week, Sarah,” he answered.

“That’s one week too long. All I wanted to do this summer was to hang around, spend time with my friends and help you with your animals.”

“I think I can take care of the animals for a few days without your help. And it’s not like I don’t have help besides the two of you.”

He was right about that. All of our friends were always over to help.

“I’ve got so many people helping that I could go away for a few days, so I think we can get by without you and your brother for a week. It isn’t like you’re being sent to jail. You’re going to a camp.”

“A camp,” I muttered, shaking my head. “I’m way too old to be going to any stupid camp!”

Mr. McCurdy laughed. “Sarah, unless my memory is failing . . . and it does happen when you get to be seventy-five, you’re only fourteen. As far as I can tell, about the only things you’re too old for are diapers, soothers and tricycles!”

“Funny, very funny.”

“I try. Besides, it might even be fun,” Mr. McCurdy said.

“Don’t you remember that my brother is coming with me? How could anything involving Nick be fun?”

“I don’t know why you’d say something like that. Nick always seems like a real hoot to me.”

“He’s a real something,” I said under my breath.

“And it sounds like it’s going to be exciting. Just imagine, an exotic animal camp. What did you say they called it?”

“Zoo camp. I guess it could be . . . okay,” I admitted reluctantly.

“When I was your age, the only way I could learn about animals was to run away and join the circus. Who knows, you might learn something new.”

“I already know lots about animals, and anything I don’t know I can learn right here from you!” I protested.

“That’s a mighty fine compliment, Sarah, but there’s lots of things that a broken-down, old circus man like

me doesn't know that you might learn at that camp. I bet they have some mighty fine experts there."

"First off, you're not broken-down, and second, I bet you know more about animals than most of the experts in the whole world!"

Mr. McCurdy smiled. "Well, I do know a thing or two about animals and . . ." He paused. "I noticed you didn't argue the part about me being old."

"Um . . . it was just . . . that —"

Mr. McCurdy started to laugh again. "Don't go twisting yourself into a pretzel there, girl. I was just funning with ya! Who could argue with me being old? I think the only thing around this farm that's older than me is the dirt under my feet.

"Here," he said as he handed me the feed bucket, "I'm going to see if I can find Brent while you feed Buddha."

I took the bucket from him. It held two dead chickens, their heads hanging over the side of the pail. As I walked across the barn floor, Buddha got to his feet and came toward the bars of his cage. Even though I'd known Buddha for almost a year, even though I knew he was safely in the cage and couldn't get out, even though I knew he liked me and wouldn't hurt me, the sight of him standing there still took my breath away. Something about a three-hundred-and-sixty-kilogram Siberian tiger gliding across the floor, his golden eyes

glowing brightly, made the hairs on the back of my neck and arms stand right up.

“How are you doing, boy?” I asked softly as I stopped at the cage.

He rubbed his head against the bars, causing them to bulge out slightly under his weight. Hesitantly and slowly, I reached a hand between the bars and scratched Buddha behind one of his ears. He loved being rubbed there, and he pressed hard against my hand.

Suddenly he spun his head around and his tongue flicked out and licked my fingers. Instantly I withdrew my hand. I knew Buddha wouldn’t hurt me — at least he hadn’t in the ten months I’d known him — but I still didn’t like any part of me near that massive mouth.

With one hand, I pulled a dead chicken out of the bucket and tried to hide it behind my back so Buddha couldn’t see it. Then I took the bucket and set it on the ground with a noisy thud. Buddha stared at the bucket that he knew always contained food. I’d placed it clearly in his view, but far enough away from the bars that he couldn’t reach out a paw and hook it toward him.

Casually, while Buddha focused on the feed bucket, I moved to the far end of the cage. I slowly reached between the bars, swung the chicken and tossed it into the cage. As it flew, its legs, wings and head pinwheeled out, and then Buddha bounded across the pen and grabbed it mid-flight!