





With special thanks to Natalie Doherty

For Louis x

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Chapter One

Christmas Comes to the Rescue Zoo

“Jingle Bells! Jingle Bells! Jingle all the way!” sang Zoe Parker, bursting through the door and dropping her schoolbag on the floor. “Meep, where are you? I’m home, and school’s out for Christmas!”

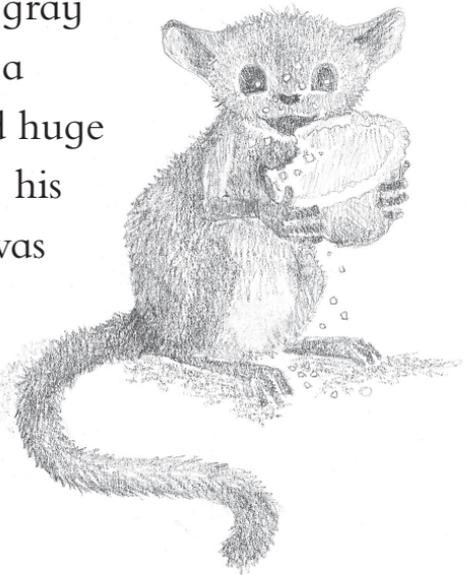
Zoe’s home was very unusual and very special. She lived in a little cottage, but it



wasn't on a normal street. It was on the grounds of the Rescue Zoo—and Zoe's neighbors were the zoo animals!

There was a happy squeak from the kitchen and Zoe went to see what her best friend was up to. Meep was sitting on the kitchen table, nibbling a mini meat pie. He was a tiny gray mouse lemur with a long, curly tail and huge golden eyes. Today his playful little face was covered in crumbs!

“Meep! I hope you haven't eaten all the mini pies again,” said Zoe, trying not to laugh.



“Only two,” chirped Meep happily.

The Lucky Snow Leopard

“Christmastime is fun. There are so many tasty things to eat!”

Zoe scooped her friend up for a hug.

“Come on, Meep. Mom and the zookeepers promised to wait until I was back from school before they decorate the Rescue Zoo Christmas tree!”

“Let’s go!” squeaked Meep excitedly, bouncing out of Zoe’s arms and scampering to the front door.

Together, the two friends raced through the zoo. The gates had closed early to visitors today so that the zoo staff could help with the decorations, and the path was empty and glittering with frost. The air was cold, and Christmas lights were strung along the fences, twinkling like stars. Zoe grinned as she walked along. Everything was starting to feel very



Christmassy—especially at the penguin enclosure. This year, the keepers had built a little ice skating rink next to the penguins' home with a wooden hut where visitors could borrow ice skates.

Zoe peered over the fence of the enclosure and called out to the nearest penguin. “Hi, Poppy! Do you know when the ice skating rink opens?”

The little penguin waddled up to the fence and squeaked back, flapping her wings eagerly. “Ooh, tomorrow?” said Zoe happily. “I can't wait to have a turn!”

Poppy tilted her head to one side and squeaked curiously. “No, I've never done it before,” explained Zoe. “I don't think I'll be very good, but it looks fun!”

Poppy waved a wing as Zoe and Meep continued along the path. Zoe couldn't

help grinning as the lions roared to say hello, and the flamingos squawked a friendly greeting. This was the main reason Zoe loved her home at the zoo so much. She knew a very big secret: Animals understand every word people say and can talk to them. Most people don't understand their barks, squeals, and grunts—but Zoe did! She had never told anyone though. It was a special secret between her and her animal friends.

A few minutes later, Zoe and Meep stopped outside a brand-new enclosure. It wasn't open yet, and the gate was still boarded up with a big piece of wood. Zoe stood on her tiptoes to peek over the fence, and Meep climbed onto her head to get a better look. "Can you see anything, Meep?" asked Zoe hopefully.



“It’s very big and I can see some trees and some rocks, but that’s all,” the little lemur chattered.

Zoe sighed. “I *wish* we knew what it was for!”

Not a single person at the Rescue Zoo knew what the new enclosure was for. A month ago, a postcard had arrived from Zoe’s Great-Uncle Horace. In his messy handwriting, he’d asked the keepers at the zoo to build it and explained exactly what it should look like. But he hadn’t said what animal would live there!



The Lucky Snow Leopard

Great-Uncle Horace was the owner of the Rescue Zoo. He was a famous explorer, and he'd started the zoo because of all the lost, injured, or frightened animals he'd met on his adventures. Now the Rescue Zoo was a safe home for any creature in need. Zoe's mom was the zoo vet, and they had lived in their little cottage at the edge of the zoo since Zoe was tiny. Great-Uncle Horace still traveled around the world and brought new animals back to the zoo whenever he found them. Zoe hoped the mysterious postcard meant he'd be home soon—along with the zoo's newest member.

“I wonder what the new animal might be, Meep,” Zoe said, feeling a little bubble of excitement in her tummy. “Imagine if Great-Uncle Horace came home over the



holidays. That would make this the best Christmas ever!”

“He might arrive on Christmas Eve, just like Santa Claus!” chirped Meep enthusiastically.

“I just hope he comes back soon,” Zoe added. “I really miss him.”

Around the next corner was a park where visitors had picnics in the summer. But now, there was an enormous Christmas tree standing right in the middle of it. “Wow,” breathed Zoe, staring up at the tree, which towered above her. “It’s taller than our cottage, Meep. I think that’s the biggest one we’ve ever had!”

Around it, the zookeepers were unpacking boxes of Christmas decorations. Zoe’s mom was unwinding some tinsel. “There you are, Zoe!” she

said, coming over to kiss her daughter's cheek. "Now we can get started!"

From the smiling faces around her, Zoe could tell that everyone was feeling very merry. The panda keeper, Stephanie, was walking around with a tray of mini pies, and the giraffe keeper, Frankie, was humming Christmas tunes. Zoe joined in with the song as she hung sparkly ornaments on the tree. "*Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright!*"

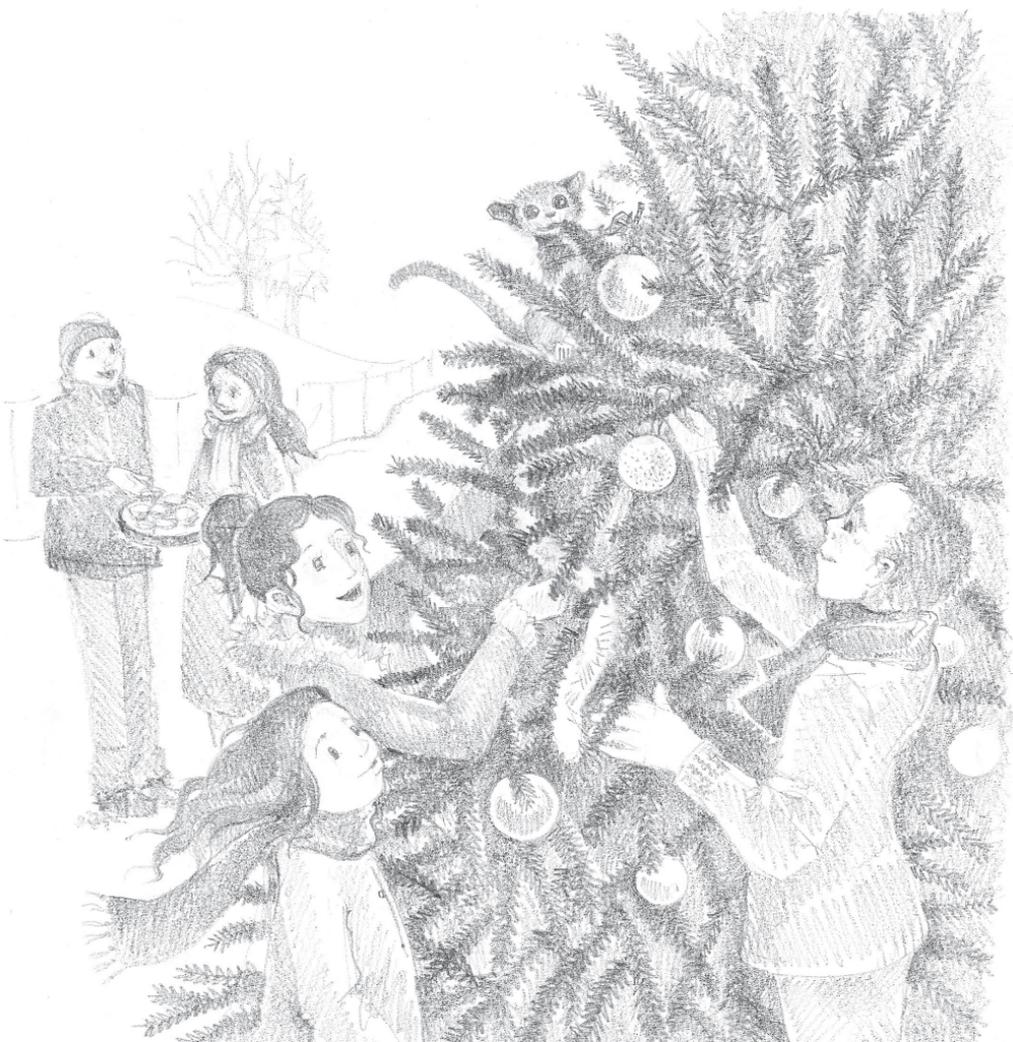
"I want to help!" Meep chirped, tugging at the end of Zoe's scarf.

Zoe dropped her voice to a whisper so that no one would hear her talking to Meep. "Here," she said, placing a small, glittery ornament in his tiny paws. "Can you put this high up, where we can't reach?"

Meep nodded and scampered up the



tree. He hung the ornament on a branch and chattered proudly just as Zoe's mom glanced up. "Look! Smart Meep's helping us."



The Lucky Snow Leopard

“It’s almost as if he understands what to do,” added Stephanie.

Zoe smiled to herself.

Finally, there was one decoration left. Zoe’s heart sank as her mom unwrapped a shiny gold star. “Great-Uncle Horace *always* puts the star at the top of the tree,” she said sadly. “We can’t do it without him.”

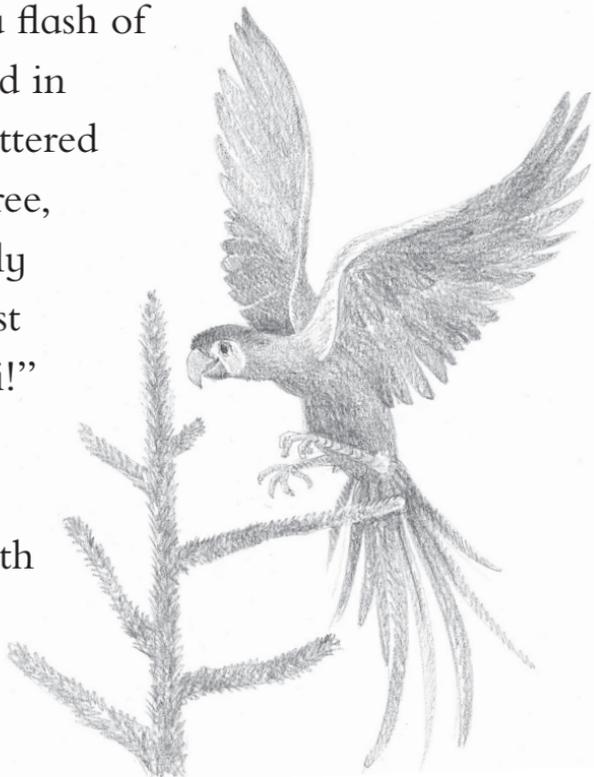
“Nonsense,” snapped a voice behind her. Zoe groaned as Mr. Pinch, the horrible zoo manager, marched into the park. “I’ll put up the star this year. I am in charge of the zoo while Mr. Higgins is away, after all,” he announced importantly. Noticing all the boxes scattered around, he scowled. “Although if you ask me, Christmas makes far too much mess. All that nasty tinsel and wrapping paper everywhere?”



Ugh! I can't wait until it's over and everything's cleaned up again."

He tucked the gold star in his pocket and started climbing the ladder that the zookeepers had put next to the tree. Zoe frowned at him. Mr. Pinch was always complaining, but she couldn't believe he was even grumbling about Christmas!

Suddenly, a flash of blue appeared in the sky. It fluttered around the tree, landing gently on the highest branch. "Kiki!" cried Zoe, her heart thumping with excitement.



Kiki was a beautiful hyacinth macaw, with glossy feathers and a long, curved beak. She belonged to Great-Uncle Horace and went everywhere with him. “So that means . . .” began Zoe, looking around eagerly.

“Hello, everyone! I’m back!” called a cheerful voice.

Zoe and the crowd turned around, and everyone gasped. The Rescue Zoo reindeer, Ronny and Ruthie, were trotting into the park. They were pulling a huge sleigh behind them, which had the Rescue Zoo symbol, a colorful hot air balloon, painted on one side. Tucked inside the sleigh was a large wooden crate, and perched on the front seat was a beaming man with a white beard and a red wool hat.



“I see I’m just in time to put the star on the tree! You didn’t think I’d miss it, did you?” he called cheerfully.

“Hooray!” cried Zoe, jumping up and down. “Great-Uncle Horace!”

