

Chapter One

Diving with Dolphins

Zoe Parker splashed through the water, giggling as a playful young dolphin swooped along beside her. It was a warm Friday afternoon at the Rescue Zoo and the last of the visitors had gone home — which meant that Zoe Parker could play with all her animal friends!

As soon as everyone had left the zoo,

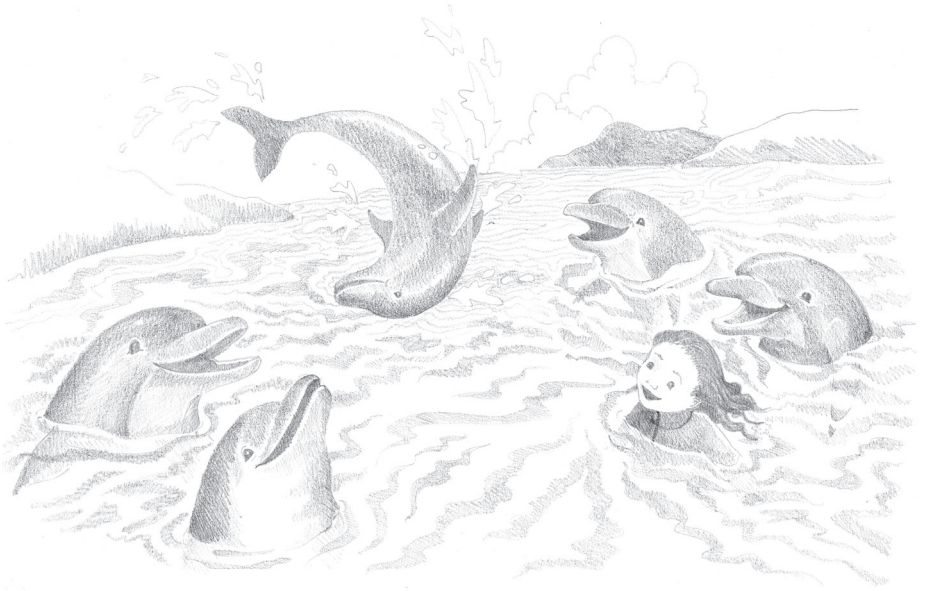


Zoe had put her wetsuit on and rushed straight to the lagoon for a swim. There were five bottlenose dolphins at the zoo, who lived together in a small group called a “pod.” They were some of the smartest creatures Zoe had ever met — and some of the friendliest too!

As Zoe swam with the pod, the smallest dolphin popped her head above the surface. She chattered cheerfully and Zoe grinned. “I love swimming with you too, Coral,” she replied.

Coral squeaked happily. Wriggling, she leaped out of the water, turned a fast, slippery somersault, then dived back in. Zoe laughed as the young dolphin splashed around proudly.

“Hurry up, Zoe. I’m hungry!” called a little voice.



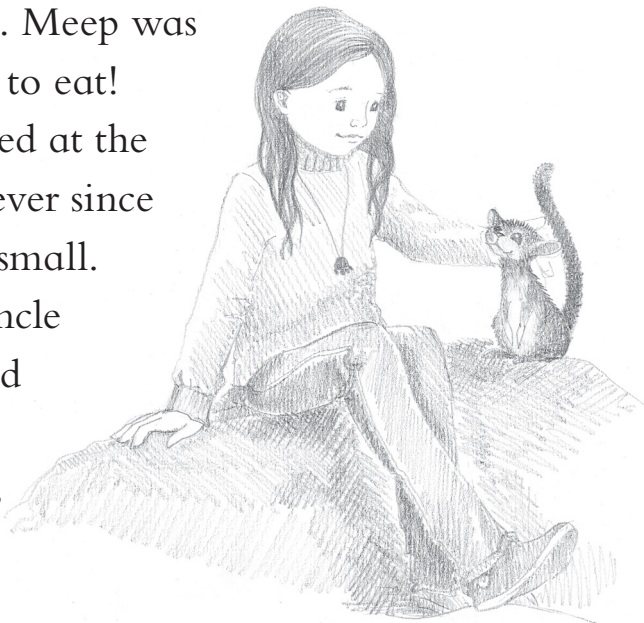
Zoe turned to smile at her best friend, who was hopping up and down impatiently at the edge of the water.

Meep was a tiny gray mouse lemur with huge golden eyes and a long, curling tail. He was very cute, but also very mischievous! He went everywhere with Zoe, except when she went swimming, because he hated getting wet.



“Coming, Meep!” Zoe called to the playful lemur. She kicked her way over to the side, with the dolphins splashing along behind her. She climbed out and grabbed a fluffy towel that she’d left on a nearby rock. When she was dry, she pulled her jeans and a sweater over her swimsuit and sat down on the rocks next to Meep. “We’ll get you a snack in just a minute,” she promised him, stroking his little head. Meep was always ready to eat!

Zoe had lived at the Rescue Zoo ever since she was very small. Her Great-Uncle Horace owned the zoo, and was a famous



animal expert and explorer. While he was traveling around the world, he'd met lots of injured, lost, and frightened animals, so he'd decided to turn his home and yards into the Rescue Zoo, a home for any animal in need.

Zoe's mom was the zoo vet, and Zoe, her mom, and Meep lived in a cottage on the edge of the zoo, so her mom could help any sick animal at any time, even in the middle of the night. Zoe thought she was the luckiest girl in the world to live so close to so many amazing animals.

But there was something even more special about Zoe. She could *talk* to animals! All animals can secretly understand what humans say, but hardly anyone knows that. Zoe was one of the few people who could understand



animals, and talk to them. But she had to be very careful to keep their secret and only speak to them when there was no one else around.

Coral swam over to the edge of the lagoon and clicked curiously. “I don’t know when Great-Uncle Horace is coming back next, Coral,” Zoe replied sadly. The Rescue Zoo’s owner still traveled around the world looking for animals in danger, and only returned when he’d found a new creature in need of a safe home. “A postcard arrived from Alaska last week — he’s been helping a grizzly bear with a sore throat. But it could be weeks until he comes back with the Rescue Zoo’s next animal.”

Reaching down, she stroked Coral’s smooth snout and added, “Luckily for

me, the zoo already has hundreds of wonderful animal friends!”

Meep bounced up and down again. “Zoe, I’m still hungry,” the little lemur said hopefully.

Zoe laughed. “All right, Meep, let’s go home. I’ll come swimming again soon, Coral. Bye, everyone!”

As the dolphins clicked good-bye, Zoe and Meep started wandering back toward the cottage, chatting about all the fun things they could do over the weekend. With all the visitors gone, the zoo was quiet and peaceful. The only sounds Zoe could hear were from the animals around her. Two panda cubs played tag in their enclosure. The flamingos squawked and waved their wings. And the enormous white rhino,



Mwamba, grunted a friendly greeting as they passed.

Suddenly, Meep's ears perked up.
"Listen, Zoe!" he chattered.



Zoe stopped. Over the snorts, squeaks, and whinnies of the animals came a deep growling sound. Zoe had grown up knowing the calls of every single creature at the zoo, and recognized it right away. It was one of the leopards. But the leopard enclosure was at the other side of the zoo — and this rumbling growl was very close by!

“Do you think Asha or Kafi has escaped, Zoe?” Meep asked nervously.

“We’d better find out. Come on!” Zoe replied, and they rushed down the path toward the sound. Asha and Kafi were her friends, and Zoe knew they’d never hurt her or Meep, but it was still dangerous for a big cat to be loose. And if any of the timid gazelles found out, they’d be *very* frightened.



As they reached the parrot enclosure, there was another giant growl. It sounded as if the leopard was right next to them! Zoe looked around anxiously, but there was no sign of Asha or Kafi's beautiful spotted coats on the pathway or in the bushes around the nearby enclosures.

"I don't understand, Meep," said Zoe, frowning. "Where is the noise coming from?"

Meep scampered to the top of the fence and peered down into the nearest enclosure. "Maybe the parrots will know," he suggested.

Zoe followed Meep up to the enclosure and peered in. It was a large forest enclosure, full of trees. She spotted the scarlet macaw, Ruby, right away because of her glossy rainbow-colored



feathers, but it took her a while to spot Cupid's emerald-green body among the leaves.

The cheerful lovebird flapped over to Zoe and perched on a branch in front of her, bobbing his pink head up and down in greeting. Rio, a white cockatoo with a bright-yellow crest sticking up from his head like a spiky hairstyle, followed behind him.





Although the birds wouldn't live together in the wild, they liked living together in a friendly flock.

“Have you seen a leopard around here?” Meep called. “We think one might have escaped!”

To Zoe's surprise, the parrots burst out laughing, flapping their bright wings in the air. Then Ruby opened her beak — and made the sound of a leopard growling! Zoe gasped. “It was you!” she said, smiling in relief. “It wasn't a leopard at all. You naughty thing, Ruby!”

The parrot fluffed her feathers proudly and made a loud trumpeting noise, which made Meep squeal with laughter. It sounded just like Oscar, the African elephant.

Giggling, Zoe waved to the parrots and continued down the path with Meep on her shoulder. As they walked toward the cottage where they lived, the sun began to set, bathing the zoo in beautiful reds and pinks.

Meep yawned sleepily and snuggled against Zoe. “All that swimming has made me tired,” he chirped.

Zoe giggled as she cuddled her friend. “You didn’t even *go* swimming, Meep!”

They turned the final corner to the cottage — and suddenly Meep was wide awake again, chattering in glee. Zoe gasped. Outside the cottage, swaying gently in the evening breeze, was a huge, colorful hot-air balloon. Great-Uncle Horace was back!