**MY SCHOOL IS A ZOO**

By Betsy Eliot

CHAPTER ONE

Notes from the Wild:

A gaggle of peacocks has gathered to put on a show. (Technically, the correct term for female peacocks is peahens, and more than one is called a pride, but “gaggle” seems to better suit the group.) The head peacock—identified by her central position, as well as her impressive display of plumage—shakes her tail to assure the attention of all nearby males of the species.

Nearby, a sloth slowly makes his way to his destination. The dragging arms and rumpled appearance are typical of the species. The animal appears unhappy to have been awoken from its long slumber.

Herds of sheep mindlessly follow the pack, appearing more involved in roaming than in a specific destination. When one tries to break free, it is targeted by a pack of roving dogs, who steer it back to the protection of the herd.

It is a normal day at the Carlsboro Middle School habitat.

My school is a zoo. Some people would take that as an insult, but not me. Once you understand nature, it’s easier to figure out where you fit in.

“Lexi!”

Emmy Pierce ran down the hall, unconcerned with the “no running” rule. It was one of the first lessons she’d taught me about school: you didn’t have to follow every guideline in the student handbook. And there were a lot of rules!

“I missed the bus,” she gasped. “Bailey tried to eat my back-pack.”

I checked the chomped strap. There didn’t seem to be any pieces missing. “Did you have your lunch inside?”

She nodded. “I should have known better than to leave it by the door.”

“A dog’s sense of smell is up to ten thousand times more sensitive than a humans,” I reminded her.

“Especially when my mother makes tuna. Even though she froze my sandwich so it would last until lunch, it still stinks.”

Tuna was an aromatic food choice. And, like dolphins, they never rested while in the sea. Most people didn’t know that.

“How is Bailey feeling?” I asked. I hadn’t seen the German Sheprador: a Shepherd/ Labrador mix since Emmy brought her in with a bad case of ate-a-sock.

“She’s amazing. The best dog ever.”

The animal seemed to be making up for a troubled puppy-hood by eating everything it could swallow. Emmy told me the story about finding Bailey, skinny and shivering, behind the 24/7 in town. She’d taken it home to join their three-legged cat and a retired ten-year-old greyhound. Sometimes Emmy had almost as many animals under her roof as we did at Animals-R-Us.

“How’s Missy?” she asked. “We have to get them together for a play date soon.”

The two animals were buddies, like Emmy and me. “She’s getting chunky. I had to put her on a diet.”

“She’s the cutest thing. And so smart.”

“People don’t realize how intelligent pigs are.”

We’d adopted the pot-belly when someone abandoned her at the wildlife sanctuary where we used to live. Because she could have been considered a snack by some of our wilder guests, I adopted her and trained her myself. She was potty trained to go outside, could walk on a leash, and could do tricks. We’d had to put special locks on the cabinets because she’d found a way to open the latches. When it comes to food, pigs really are pigs.

“They are the fifth smartest animal in the world, you know,” I told her though I didn’t like to brag.

“Really? That’s cool. How do they give the tests?”

I thought for a moment. It was a good point. “I have no idea, but I want that job when I get old enough.”

“You could do it. You’re amazing with animals.”

I should be. For a long time, they’d been my only friends. That’s what happens when your mother is a veterinarian who cares for everything from lions to llamas, and the only kids you get to see are baby goats.

The sanctuary had been started by my parents before I was born, and my mother had continued it even after my father was tragically killed in a liger (lion/tiger mashup) attack. We’d moved to Carlsboro after my grandfather died, so my mother could take over his veterinary clinic.

The move was as shocking as plopping a penguin into the desert. And school was the hardest adjustment. The maze of classrooms, the social rules everyone else seemed to understand (don’t tell Macey Dillon she looks fat, even if she asks for the truth).

Emmy had taken me under her wing, which, by the way, is something momma birds actually do to protect their young.

We’d met on the first day of seventh grade—a level determined by age rather than level of knowledge. It’s only one of the many strange things about a public school system.

I’d been standing outside the brick and stone-columned building waiting for a bell that would mean we could go in, a fact I’d discovered when I’d attempted to enter early. I didn’t see the point in delaying since we were all waiting around, ready to get started, but the teacher at the door had turned me away with a warning about troublemakers.

As I wandered back into the crowd, I observed clusters of children grouped together, identifiable by their similar dress. One group was all in black, another in almost identical leggings and boots. The noise level of the crowd hurt my ears.

A girl with red hair and a face full of freckles walked up to me. At first I figured she was a volunteer who’d been sent to show me around, but I’d later found the school didn’t provide that type of service.

“You look like you’re going to throw up,” she greeted.

“I don’t think that would be wise.” I wasn’t sure what to expect inside the mysterious stone walls, but it was never a good idea to show weakness to your enemies.

“I’m Emmy Pierce,” she introduced. “Are you new here? I don’t remember seeing you last year.”

“My name is Lexi. Lexi Livingston. This is my first day of school.”

Her spotted forehead scrunched. “Yeah, mine too. Everybody’s, actually. That’s why they call it the first day of school.”

“I mean it’s my first day in a school *ever*.”

Her jaw dropped open and she looked at me with concern. “Oh no. Do you know your A,B,C’s? Some of these classes can be pretty hard.” She spoke slowly, as if I had to read her lips. “Like History. I hate History. And Math.”

“I’ve been keeping up.” In fact my testing scored far above grade level. Being homeschooled at the sanctuary had given me many advantages—including avoiding the awkwardness of first day of school.

“You are so lucky,” Emmy decided. “I wish I never had to go to school.”

I agreed. I’d been doing fine without it. But now that the nearest school was closer than fifty miles away, my mother had insisted. She said I needed socialization skills.

“Don’t worry,” Emmy said. “I know most of the kids here. They’re not so bad. The jocks and cheerleaders can be a little cliquey, but they mostly ignore you. The freaks are in their own little world, and of course the drama queens think it’s all about them.”

I’d had no idea what she was talking about.

But I soon discover that the food chain of a middle school wasn’t so different from your average jungle.

I placed my books for the second part of my day inside my locker, which was necessary because we were only allowed to go back to our lockers before school, after school, and during the lunch period. A revolving schedule meant our classes changed daily, inevitably causing confusion and chaos for some students when the schedule was misread and materials were left behind.

When there was only me, a subject could be covered based on how easily it was learned or how much interest it held. Animals were an obvious interest because they were all around me and so fascinating to observe. But with over three hundred kids in seventh grade, structure and standards were needed.

Or at least that’s what the principal claimed when I pointed out the flaws of the public school system.

My locker door was yanked out of my hand and slammed, nearly catching my fingers inside.

“Freak,” Kyle Williamson said, continuing down the hall surrounded by a group of his friends.

Kyle would probably defend the educational system, even though he was proof that it didn’t work. He’d seemed angry with me since my very first science class when I’d attempted to answer every question asked by the teacher. (I could have responded to them all, but she’d stopped calling on me even though I’d raised my hand as directed.)

“What’s his problem?” Emmy asked. “He’s always doing that.”

It had become a ritual of sorts. Along with the subtle bump by Morgan and her friends whenever they passed by. But that wasn’t personal. Morgan, Peregrine, and Fawn, who happened to be the prettiest girls in school, always traveled in a pack of three. They walked side by side through the crowded halls of Carlsboro so anyone who stood in their way got knocked aside. As a result their pathway seemed to open as they walked by.

I suppose I had to take partial blame. I’d made the mistake of trying to talk to them once after research had suggested that being friendly was a good way to make friends. They’d been gathered around Morgan’s locker, taking turns looking into the mirror inside.

“Hi, I’m Lexi. I’m new here. Did you know that you are all named after animals? The Morgan horse, Peregrine falcon, and of course a baby deer?”

I’d thought it was a good conversation starter. Their namesake animals were majestic and beautiful. It wasn’t like they were called monkfish, warthog, and mole rat.

They didn’t seem to agree.

The three girls whirled to face me, identical expressions of horror on their faces.

“Go away.”

“Don’t ever speak to us again.”

“Run. Now.”

Although I hadn’t made new friends that day, I’d learned a valuable lesson: Not everyone is an animal lover.

The year was two thirds over, (the hundred-and-eighty-five day school year; not the calendar year. Don’t ask.) but I still hadn’t gotten used to it. I was starting to think I never would. If not for Emmy, I’d have been more isolated and alone than I was at the sanctuary.

“I’m going to the mall after school with Paula and Celia,” she said, leaning against the row of lockers. “Do you want to come?”

Wandering around a giant box of stores was an actual pastime; one I hadn’t quite mastered. Besides, Emmy’s other friends only talked to her or each other. They acted as if I didn’t exist. Emmy didn’t seem to notice.

“I can’t. I have to work at the clinic.” There was always something to do at a vet’s office. I’d been working with animals for so long I was like one of the staff.

A bell meant we had five minutes to get to class. Bells were big at Carlsboro. They reminded me of a study of animal behavior that trained dogs to react to the sound.

At school, the signal seemed to cause a bustle of frantic movement and noise. Like the sudden increased racket coming from a group of boys huddled around a locker. Bobby Farrell yanked on another kid’s underwear. I didn’t see the humor in that, but the group seemed to think it was hysterical. A crash of bodies against the wall caused a girl nearby to yelp. Kids passing in the hallway made a wide circle around them.

Emmy shook her head. “Those kids are such animals.”

Now that she mentioned it, they reminded me of the monkeys that amused themselves and others at the sanctuary. They were identical in every way … except for posture.

I froze. “Wait. What did you say?”

“That Bobby is so annoying.”

The gangly teen flicked something at a nearby girl. I think it was his form of a mating ritual. I’d once seen a chimpanzee do the same thing.

The truth hit me like lightning in an open pasture. *These kids are animals!* “Of course,” I said slowly. “Why haven’t I realized it before?”

“I know. Look at him. He’s disgusting.”

Emmy was right; Bobby was pretty disgusting. I’d seen better behavior in a pack of wild dogs, but that wasn’t what I meant. “No, I mean we’re all animals.”

Suddenly everything seemed so clear. School was no different from the outside world. There were timid mice and bloodthirsty wolves and flighty geese.

“Emmy, you’re a genius!”

She looked confused. Usually when people said that, they were being sarcastic. But I’d finally figured it out. They were all animals. Like the outside world, they did what came naturally.

I’d noticed the comparison before, right at the beginning of the year, actually. It was hard to miss when there were so many similarities. But now I realized I was closer to the truth than I’d realized. To test my theory, I looked around me in the crowded hallway.

Flash Miller was the school’s star athlete. (His real name is Gordon, but everyone calls him by the nickname. He appeared big and bulky rather than speedy, but I wasn’t enough of a sports expert to know.) He strode through the group, surrounded by smaller, less aggressive versions of himself. He ruled the school because of his physical abilities and appearance.

“Flash is the king of the jungle.”

At the other end of the corridor, Morgan and her friends preened and primped in brightly colored clothes and makeup. They pretended not to notice Flash’s approach but their laughter got louder and their movements more exaggerated.

“Look at Morgan and her friends,” I said. “Have you ever noticed how much they act like peacocks?”

“Um, I guess so.”

“Bright plumage. Small heads. Vain. They’re identical specimens.”

Emmy smiled. “Now that you mention it, they do like to shake their tail feathers.”

“And what about Alan Wilkens? Doesn’t he remind you of a giraffe?” The star basketball player was a foot taller than the other kids, so it was easy to spot him in the hall.

“He does, sort of. He could definitely reach the tall leaves of a tree.”

She seemed to think we were playing a game, but I’d never been more serious. This explained everything.

I pointed out a group of girls twittering with their heads together. “What about them? They’re obvious prairie dogs, right?”

“I’ve never seen an actual prairie dog,” Emmy admitted.

Social, chatty, you almost never saw one alone. “Trust me. They’re exactly alike.”

Boyd Dunn dragged himself down the hall. He must be lost, since his homeroom wasn’t in this wing. Or maybe he was about to whip off his shirt again and show how he could make his belly talk.

“Check out Boyd,” I said as he walked by. “He is clearly a baboon.”

He heard the comment and seemed to take it personally. He glared at me and snarled.

Emmy ducked her head, her freckles popping on a flushed face. “He’s not that bad,” she whispered after he’d passed. “I think he’s funny.”

“He’s a big, hairy clown. He has all the classic signs of an overgrown primate.”

“Even if what you’re saying is true,” she whispered, “you don’t want anyone to hear you.”

I trusted Emmy’s understanding of middle school enough to lower my voice. “Why not? It’s perfectly natural. Why would they mind the comparison?”

“Well, you know, because people aren’t animals.”

“Of course they are. It’s simple biology.”

“Then they don’t want to think they are,” she argued.

Emmy had a good point. Human awareness made us believe we were better than other creatures although we shared many of the same characteristics.

Why hadn’t I seen it before?

When I’d first come to Carlsboro, it felt like I’d been dropped onto an alien planet. I didn’t understand the references or the behaviors. I didn’t belong here.

But the kids weren’t so different from the creatures I’d watched my whole life. Some were wild. Some were mean. Others were mellow or social or slimy. The same rules applied.

To test my theory, I looked at my friend and tried to figure out her classification.

The answer was obvious. Emmy was a dog. Warm-hearted and loyal. Man’s best friend. A Saint Bernard to be exact. Trustworthy and protective and always ready to come to the rescue of those in need.

I almost shared my idea; she’d be happy to discover she shared the characteristics of her favorite creature. But a commotion at the end of the corridor diverted my attention. It also caught the attention of all the animals around me. A hush fell over the group, like the sudden quiet in nature that comes before an unseen storm.

A boy walked down the hall. I didn’t recognize him.

He walked alone, seeming unaware of all the attention he attracted. I knew what it was like to have all eyes turned on you, although he didn’t appear as overwhelmed or nervous as I’d been.

The peacocks stopped primping and stared openly, as if they were hungry and they’d just heard the sound of food containers opening.

“Who is that?” Emmy asked.

“I don’t know.”

“He must be new here. I’ve never seen him before.”

“I guess so.” The poor kid didn’t know what he had ahead of him.

A hush fell in his wake. He didn’t seem to notice, but I didn’t know how he could miss it.

The warning bell rang, but the kids were slow to scatter until the new student walked out of range.