THE TIGER
ON HIS BACK

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With huge thanks to tattoo artist
Luke Ashley and to Danny Barratt

CHAPTER 1
Sofia's secret

"Will it hurt?" Sofia wanted to know.

"'Course it will," her friend Lydia told her.

"What am I doing?!" Sofia asked. Her heart was thumping wildly, because *Help! Here it was!* The Covent Garden Tattoo studio.

Lydia grabbed Sofia's arm. "Come on, animal rights girl! If you want a tiger tattooed on your bum, you've got to suffer for it!"

"I'm not having it on my bum!" Sofia exclaimed.

"Wherever."

Sofia's stomach flipped every time she thought about her tattoo – this secret that would soon be out of her head and inked into her skin. It was something that would be there on her body for the rest of her life – yes, until the day she died.

"Come on, Sofe," Lydia said.

"It's all right for you …" Sofia hung back.

"This guy's brilliant. If he can light up his colours on me, he'll dazzle away on you."

Lydia was talking about her skin being black while Sofia's was white. But the real difference between them was that Lydia's tattoos didn't have to be secret. Her mum and dad had tattoos and they showed them off, while Sofia's mother pulled a face every time she saw one.

"You're making a *statement*, girl," Lydia said. "An' it's going to be a clear and strong statement about you, Sofia Drake. That's what you told me."

And that was true – it was exactly why Sofia wanted her tattoo. If her exam results were OK, she would go to university in September to study Wildlife Conservation. And her secret tiger's head tattoo would be her promise to herself that

she would devote her life to keeping rare animals alive on this earth.

"So, are we going in or not?" Lydia said. Her patience had begun to run out.

Sofia found her tiger spirit. "In. Of course in."

The studio was near Covent Garden Market in an arcade of shops and cafes – all such *painless* places. Lydia led the way inside. The ground floor was for piercing, and Annie, the piercer, told them to go on up to the first floor to find Sol. The stairs were steep, every step asking Sofia, *Are you sure, girl?* They went up to a small landing where an open door showed a tattooing bed with a length of surgical paper on top. Ready for someone. But it wouldn't be Sofia. *No way! Not today!*

"Go in." A man had come out of a room behind them. He was tall, with no piercings or facial tattoos. "You'll have to squeeze up."

"Hiya, Sol." Lydia bounced a bit and seemed very pleased to see him.

"Hi," Sol replied.

"This is Sofe – Sofia," Lydia went on.

Sol shook Sofia's hand. He was a couple of years older than her and wore a baseball cap with a light strapped around it. He threw a pair of disposable gloves into a bin as he followed them into the room with the bed, then waved an arm at a small settee against the wall – an invitation to sit. From speakers in the ceiling, Amy Whitehouse was singing "Tears Dry On Their Own".

"Sofe's dad's a famous actor," Lydia announced.

"*Lydia!*" Sofia groaned.

"Tony Drake. You know, *Murder HQ* on TV." Lydia carried on regardless.

"Sorry, I don't," Sol said. "Overdosed on TV as a kid. So …"

He sat in a swivel chair next to the bed. "You tell me what you want," he said to Sofia. His folded arms were tattooed like beautiful works of art, Japanese designs that could have been done on silk. "Lydia said something about a tiger?" he prompted.

Sofia told Sol what she wanted. "A fully grown tiger's head and nothing cuddly. It's got to be

defiant and dangerous – not vulnerable as if it's in someone's gunsights."

"Why?" Sol asked.

"Why, what?" Did he want an argument about killing wildlife?

"Why do you want it? What's it for? A badge of belonging? I used to tattoo gangs at another place, all with the same Russian star. Or is it for credibility?"

Sofia stiffened her body in self-defence. This guy really did come to the point! "Yes!" she said. "*My own* credibility."

Sol didn't frown; his face was open, neither friendly nor unfriendly.

"It'll remind me of what I'm about when things get hard," she went on. "Exams, people, tricky situations."

Sol nodded. "So where do you want this badge? Do you want to display it?"

"No – it's just for me," Sofia explained. "It needs to be somewhere … *discreet*."

"Discreet … Do you mean secret? If you do, a good place is the outside of the leg, high up." Sol's

voice was as matter-of-fact as a doctor's. "It's not too tender there and it can be hidden beneath your clothes."

Sofia wanted time to think but Sol stood up – the meeting was over. "Give me your phone number, I'll send you a couple of designs and we'll go from there. I'll tell you the price, book you in and I'll do it in one session. And don't forget your passport. I need to see proof that you're over eighteen." He had recited his list like the end of a radio advert. Then he looked her right in the eye. "So why's your tattoo a secret? Wouldn't your parents be proud of your commitment to wildlife?"

Sofia was ready for this. "They are – but they'd rather they saw it in a picture frame." Talk of her parents made her stomach churn again. Now she had to go home and start telling the lie of a lifetime. She was good at bending the truth, but this was on another level. And as for saying sorry? No, ma'am!