

Chapter 1

Trouble in the Wilderness

It isn't every day that a dragon turns up in the garden.

Willow's brother, Freddie, found it. He and Willow had been searching for fossils in the soil where Dad had been digging. Dad was clearing a space for a summer house.

Freddie cupped his hands around something small that wriggled inside his fingers. 'Dragon, dragon, dragon!' he yelled.

'Let's see,' said Willow.

Freddie shook his head and held it against his chest. 'Mine.'

Freddie was three years old. He loved dragons. His favourite toy was a fluffy pink dragon that Willow had given him for his second birthday.

'I won't take it,' said Willow. 'I just want to look at it.'

Freddie slowly uncurled his fingers. 'Dragon,' he whispered.

Willow peered at it. It did look a bit like a very



small dragon. It was long, thin, and wriggly, with four squat legs and feet that gripped onto Freddie's fingers. It had a crest from the top of its head all the way down its back to the end of its long tail.

'It hasn't got any wings,' said Willow.

'It's a baby dragon,' said Freddie.

Willow wondered if it might be a lizard, but it didn't have any scales. It was soft and squidgy and slightly damp. 'Let's show Dad.'

Dad was having a tea break with Nana on the bench outside the back door. Nana had made Willow's favourite triple chocolate-chip cookies.

Freddie proudly plopped the baby dragon on Nana's lap. 'Dragon!' he said.

Nana took one look and screamed. 'Ugh!' She flicked it away and it flew through the air, landing on the patio.

Freddie saw Nana's horrified face and covered

his eyes and howled too. Then Sniff, Willow's dog, rushed outside, barking and joining in with all the noise.

'It's OK,' Willow said. She scooped Freddie's dragon in her hands. 'Look, Freddie. I've found it. It's not hurt.'

Sniff tried to look too, but Willow pushed him away.

Freddie peered at it through his fingers.

'Take it away,' said Nana. 'It's dirty. You'll have to wash your hands now.'

'It's Freddie's dragon,' said Willow. She held it out for Freddie, but he shook his head.

'Dirty,' he said.

Dad looked over her shoulder. 'I think it's a newt. An amphibian. A bit like a frog.'

'Put it back,' said Nana. 'You know Freddie has to be careful not to pick up germs.'


Freddie had been poorly since he was born and sometimes needed time in hospital. It's why Willow and her family had moved to the new house in the new town, to be closer to the hospital. The doctors said Freddie had to be careful not to pick up coughs and colds. Willow's mum and dad were always trying to keep things clean.

'It's clean dirt,' said Willow.

'There's no such thing as clean dirt,' said Nana, whose own cupboards were full of the latest cleaning products. 'Take it away. You'll have to wash your hands now if you want a cookie.'

Willow sighed. 'Come on, Freddie,' she said. 'Show us where you found it.'

Freddie didn't want to hold his dragon again, but he led Dad and Willow down the garden. The last owner of the house hadn't done anything with the garden for years, and the grass was so long that




it came up to Willow's waist. The bushes were overgrown and tangled with brambles and ivy. Nettles grew in thick green clumps and bindweed curled around the washing line.



Mr Snow, the neighbour, put his head over the fence. 'Afternoon,' he said. 'Good to see this place having a tidy-up at last.'

Dad grinned. 'It's a bit of a jungle. We'll soon sort it out.'

Willow walked on, and when Mr Snow was out of earshot, she turned to Dad. 'I like it wild like this,' she said. 'Can't we keep it like this for me and Freddie?'



Dad smiled and nodded his head towards Mr Snow. 'Not everyone likes a jungle. It is a bit of a mess, and we need to clear these weeds.'

Willow sighed. 'Where did you find your dragon, Freddie?'



‘There,’ said Freddie. He pointed to the ground where Dad had been digging.

Willow just stared at some of the empty spaces where the bushes had been pulled up. She turned to Dad. ‘We can’t pull up all the bushes. Freddie’s dragon lives beneath them.’

‘I’m sure there are plenty of other places for it to live,’ said Dad. ‘I think newts like damp places near ponds.’

Willow looked around. The neighbours’ gardens had patios and tiny squares of cut grass. Not a flower was out of place and it looked like weeds were forbidden. They didn’t have ponds either. ‘Where will it go if we dig up its home? It has to have somewhere to live.’

‘My dragon,’ said Freddie, peering into Willow’s hand.

‘I’ve got an idea,’ said Dad. ‘Wait here.’

While Willow waited, she looked closely at the newt in her hand. It turned its head to the side and its beady little eyes looked up at her.

Freddie touched it gently with his finger. 'Dirty?' he asked.

'No,' said Willow. 'Here, you hold it.' She passed him the newt and Freddie wrinkled up his nose as the newt crawled across his hands.

'Tickles,' he said.

Willow laughed. 'We'll call him Mr Tickles.'

Dad arrived back with a large glass tank. 'I knew I had my old fish tank somewhere. We can make a home for it in here. Freddie will be able to look at it any time he wants to.'


Willow helped Dad scoop soil, some old leaves, and some stones into the fish tank.

'We'll put in a bowl of water like a small pond,' said Dad.




‘Zoo,’ said Freddie.

‘Yes,’ laughed Dad. ‘Yes, you have your very own zoo now.’





Mum came down the garden and inspected Mr Tickle in his new tank. ‘Come on, Freddie. It’s your afternoon nap time. She lifted Freddie up into her arms and Dad picked up the tank with Mr Tickle.

Willow watched them walk back to the house and sighed. There was no one to play with now. ‘Come on, Sniff,’ she called. But Sniff was sniffing at the hedge at the bottom of the garden, his tail wagging furiously. ‘What is it, Sniff?’



Something flew over the hedge and landed with a plop at her feet.

Willow picked it up. It was a crumpled piece of paper, screwed up in a tight ball. She carefully opened it out and read the message scrawled on



the paper: *Trouble in the Wilderness. Come now!*

Below the words were four different paw prints
and a feather.

Fox, Bear, Hare, Mouse, and Raven.

Willow's heart skipped a beat.

This was a call to the Wilderness.

The Wild Things were in trouble and needed
her help.

