

Chapter 1

The Howling

Willow didn't know what had woken her, but she was wide awake, her eyes open and her heart banging like a drum inside her chest. Her mind spun, trying to remember where she was.

New bed.

New house.

New town.

She lay in the darkness, straining her ears to hear what had pulled her from sleep.

Water gurgled through the pipes. A clock ticked. A lorry rumbled along a road.

Moonbeams cast monster shadows on the wall behind her, and dark shapes lurked in the corners of the room.

Shivers ran down Willow's spine.

Sniff lifted his head and growled softly from the end of Willow's bed.

'What is it, Sniff?' Willow whispered.
'Did you hear something too?'

She pulled Sniff closer and held him against her chest. Sniff was a small, scruffy dog from the dog rescue centre. He had one eye, wonky teeth, and a brave heart. No one had wanted him. Everyone had passed him by, looking for cute puppies. But the moment Willow had seen him, she just knew they had to be together. It wasn't so

much that Willow had chosen Sniff, but that Sniff had chosen Willow. Sniff loved her more than anything in the world.

Sniff growled softly again.

Then Willow heard what had woken her. It was a howl; a wild howl into the night. It was a low sound at first, rising to a high-pitched cry, and it was coming through the open window. Willow climbed out of bed and tiptoed across the room with Sniff in her arms. She peered out. A crescent moon spread silver light over the garden and the trees of the scrubby patch of wasteland beyond.

A wind rushed through the leaves, and the branches heaved and fell. It sounded like a storm raging across an ocean from a faraway world.







The howl rose again, wilder this time. It was a piercing cry that made Willow feel scared and lonely all at the same time.

The wind curled into Willow's bedroom and tugged at her hair. It scattered paper on her desk and lifted the curtains. It felt as if a wild thing was whirling around in her room. Sniff growled again, and Willow slammed the window shut.

Hairs prickled on the back of her neck.

Something was out there in the scrap of wasteland beyond the garden. She pulled the curtains tightly together. She wished her bedroom faced the front of the house instead of the woods. She thought about climbing into bed with Mum and Dad, but she knew they were tired. They had been at the hospital all day with her little brother,



Freddie. She climbed back into her own bed and fell into a restless sleep where she dreamed she was lost in a deep dark forest. She dreamed she was running and running, chased by monsters that hid in the shadows. Worst of all, however hard she searched, she just couldn't find Freddie.



Chapter 2

Dognapped

Willow woke again to bright sunlight. She opened the curtains and peered out.

The summer sky was blue with puffy white clouds drifting high above. Below her, the garden stretched away to two old gnarled apple trees at the far end. Clothes flapped on the washing line, and somewhere an ice cream van tinkled its tune.

It was hard to imagine the howling last night. Had she dreamed it?

She could hear the clattering of plates in the kitchen and went downstairs, with Sniff following closely at her heels.

Mum and Dad were busy emptying boxes and trying to find places to put things in their new house.

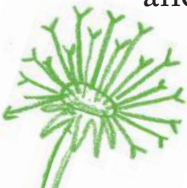
‘Hello, sleepyhead,’ said Dad.

Mum looked at the clock. ‘It’s almost lunchtime. Didn’t you get much sleep?’

‘Not much,’ said Willow. ‘Did you hear anything last night?’

‘Like what?’ said Mum.

A monster was what she wanted to say, but it sounded so silly now. ‘It’s nothing,’ she said, but she couldn’t help looking out at the wood beyond the footpath at the bottom of the garden. Trees rose up, tall and scraggly above the thickets of bramble



and nettles. It looked scary and dark, and Willow decided that she would never set foot in there. Ever. ‘What’s in that wood?’ she asked.

‘It’s not exactly a wood,’ said Dad. ‘It’s the gardens and grounds of an old house that burned down long ago. It’s a bit of a wasteland in the town now. It’s a mess. It’s overgrown with weeds. I’ve heard people dump rubbish in there too. It needs a good tidy-up.’

‘It’d be nice if it could be made into a park,’ said Mum.

‘I expect houses will be built there,’ said Dad. ‘It needs something doing to it.’


Willow stared down towards the scrubby patch of land. Brambles lay like thick coils of barbed wire on the other side of the



ditch, as if the wasteland was trying to keep people out.


‘I’m off to see Freddie soon,’ said Mum.

‘Can I come with you?’ asked Willow.



‘I’ve got an appointment with his doctor this afternoon. But you can come with me tomorrow,’ said Mum. ‘He’ll love to see you.’

Willow sighed. Freddie was nearly three years old, but he had been poorly since he had been born and sometimes needed to stay in hospital. Willow’s mum and dad had decided to move to a new house to be closer to the hospital so that they could all be together.



‘What will you do today?’ asked Mum.


Willow shrugged her shoulders. If she were back in their old house, she’d play with her friends in the park. She didn’t know




anyone here.

Mum smiled. 'Well, you've got Dad all to yourself today.'

Dad sat down in an old armchair and yawned. 'We could explore the garden. Why don't you get an old sheet we can string up between the branches of the apple trees and make a den?'



Willow said goodbye to Mum and went to her bedroom to fetch her rucksack. She hadn't spent much time with Dad for ages because he had been busy with work and the move and hospital visits seeing Freddie. Today it would be just the two of them. She had Dad all to herself. She packed her skipping rope and fleecy bedcover to make a tent den and went downstairs to find him.



But Dad was in the armchair, snoring loudly.

‘Dad?’ she said.

Dad didn’t even move. He was fast asleep.

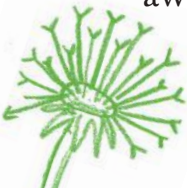
She thought about waking him but didn’t want to bother him. She decided to let him rest.

Willow sighed. ‘It’s just you and me again, Sniff.’

‘Uff!’ agreed Sniff.

Willow walked down to the end of the garden with Sniff running ahead, his nose to the ground. The garden was long and thin with the two gnarled apple trees at the end where grasses grew tall and wild.

It didn’t seem much fun building the den by herself. Her school friends were far, far away in another town. Maybe one day she



could build a den with Freddie. She sighed. She wished she could take the garden to Freddie.

Maybe she could, she thought. She could collect things from the new garden and show them to him.



Willow began searching for garden treasures.

She pulled a dandelion and blew the seeds into the air. She wished again for Freddie to be out of hospital, and for Mum and Dad to be happy and not worried all the time. She watched her wishes drift up, up, and away.

She remembered last night's dream of being chased by monsters and losing Freddie. The dark made everything more frightening.

'No monsters,' she called to Sniff.

But Sniff wasn't listening. He was looking





into the hedge at the bottom of the garden.

A low growl rose in his throat.

‘What is it, Sniff?’ whispered Willow.

Sniff moved closer, sniffing at the hedge.

Something large was moving behind it.

Twigs snapped. Dry leaves rustled.

‘Sniff!’ called Willow.

The whole hedge seemed to bend
towards Sniff.

Willow jumped to her feet. ‘Sniff, come
back.’

‘Uff!’ Barked Sniff. ‘Grrr . . . uff.’

Willow blinked once and saw something
reach out from the hedge and grab hold of
Sniff.

Willow blinked twice.

And Sniff was gone.