

For Maisie Nolan in Manchester

Special thanks to Valerie Wilding

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CHAPTER ONE

A Visit from Goldie

Lily Hart cradled a guinea pig in her arms as she waited at the barn door for her best friend. The tiny animal peeped happily as Lily gently pet its chocolate-brown fur.

“You’re almost asleep, Coco!” Lily said as the guinea pig’s eyes began to close.

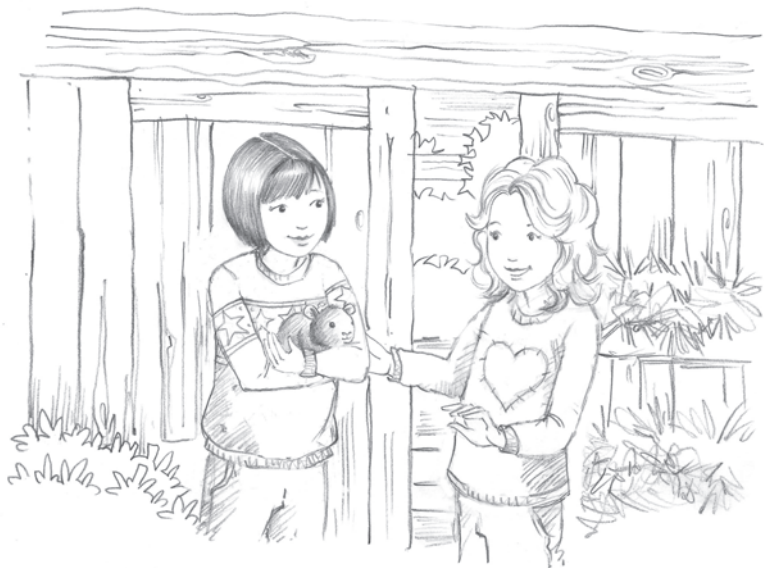


The barn was hidden behind a group of trees in Lily's yard. Mr. and Mrs. Hart had converted it into the Helping Paw Wildlife Hospital, and all kinds of animals were taken care of there. Both Lily and her friend Jess adored animals and loved to help out whenever they could!

Suddenly Lily saw a girl with blond curly hair and a big grin running toward her. Jess! In moments, Jess was petting the guinea pig delightedly.

“Coco's leg healed quickly, didn't it?”
Jess said happily.





Lily nodded. “But she still seems not quite herself. She’s always so sleepy.”

They went into the barn, which was filled with hutches of all shapes and sizes. Jess opened the door of an empty hutch, and Lily gently put Coco inside.

The guinea pig squeaked noisily as she





crept into a corner
and settled into
the fresh sawdust.

Lily sighed.

“I’m sure there’s
something else

wrong with her. I wish I knew what.

Mom and Dad don’t know, either.”

“And they know everything there is to
know about animals,” said Jess. Mr. and
Mrs. Hart were both vets. “Maybe she’s
missing her owner,” she suggested.

The girls had spent yesterday putting
up notices around town and knocking on





doors to ask if anyone had lost their guinea pig. But no one had. So the girls had named her Coco and Lily's parents agreed that she could live at the hospital until they found her owner.

Lily closed the hutch, then listened. "Did you hear that?" She looked at Jess in excitement. "It sounded like a *meow . . .*"

Jess ran to open the barn door. A beautiful golden cat bounded inside.

"Goldie!" Lily cried.

Goldie was a magical cat and their special friend. She lived in Friendship



Forest, a secret world where all the animals could talk!

Lily and Jess bent to pet her. But Goldie didn't seem as happy to see them as she usually was. She wasn't purring and her tail was flicking from side to side.

“My kitten Pixie does that when she's upset,” said Jess anxiously. “I wonder what Grizelda's done this time!”

Grizelda was a wicked witch who wanted to make all the animals leave Friendship Forest so she could have it for herself. She had some helpers in her mischief-making—dragons! So far, Lily





and Jess had stopped three of the dragons from ruining the forest, but they knew Grizelda still had one more dragon left.

Lily crouched down. “Whatever’s happening, we’re ready to help,” she told the cat. “Take us back to Friendship Forest, Goldie, and then you can tell us what’s wrong!”

Goldie mewed up at them. Then she ran out of the barn and across the lawn. Lily and Jess dashed after her, and followed her over the stepping stones that crossed Brightley Stream and led up to the Friendship Tree. Its branches were bare,



but as the cat reached it, buds appeared on every twig and burst into leaves as green as Goldie's eyes. A bumblebee buzzed around the yellow flowers that had sprung up under the tree, and birds chased each other through the branches, singing happily.

Goldie pawed at some words carved into the tree's bark. Together, the girls read them aloud: "Friendship Forest!"

A door appeared in the trunk. Jess grasped the leaf-shaped handle and opened it. Golden light shone out, dancing over them like sunbeams.

