



FURRY FRIENDS

Sophie's Squeaky Surprise

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SCHOLASTIC

For Eva and Phoebe

*With huge thanks to Annie –
we must go back to Paris!*



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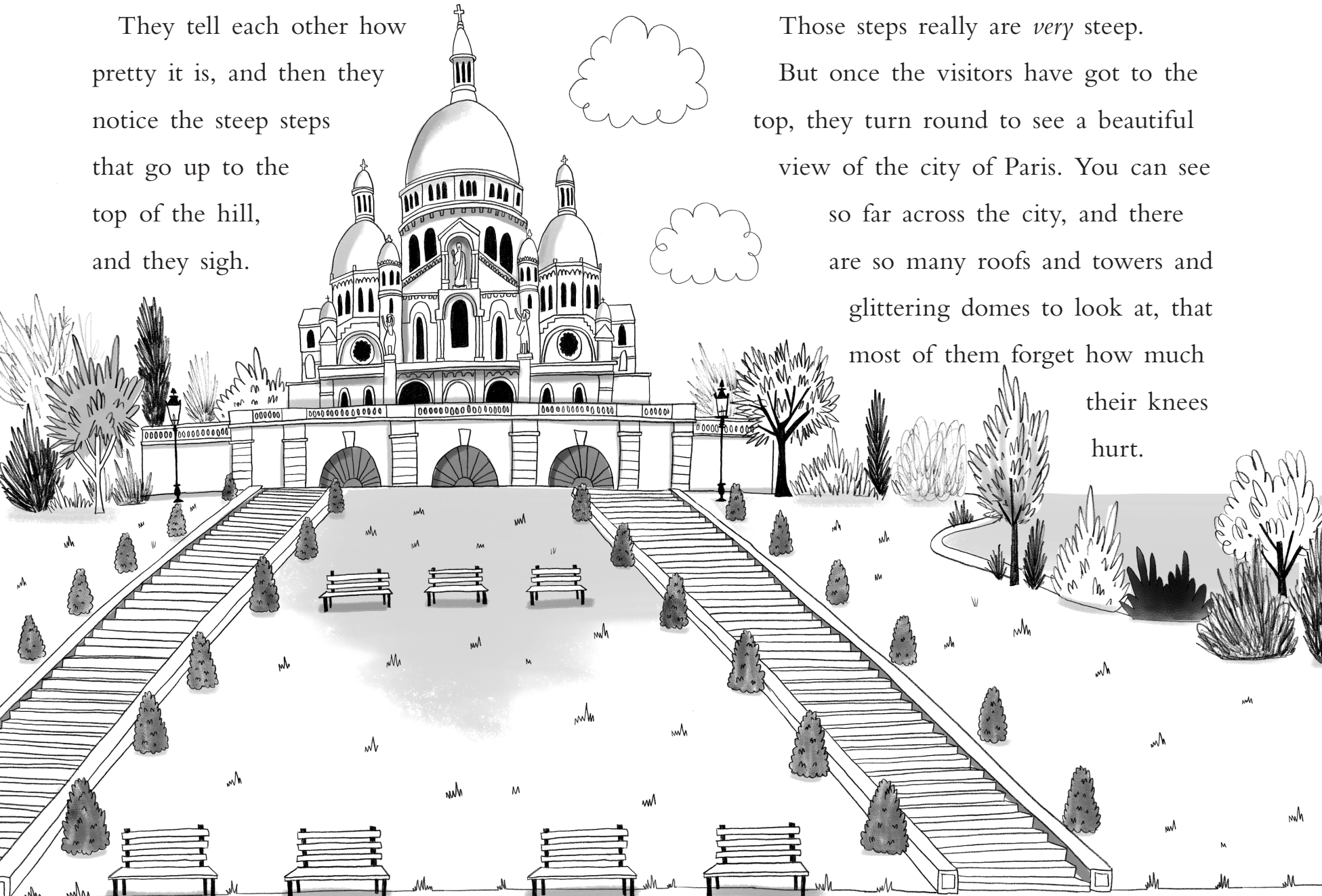
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In a great big city, in the middle of
France, is a church that stands on a hill.

The church is white, with a dome
on the top, and it looks like a wedding
cake. It's a very old church, and very
famous, so every day lots of people come
to visit.

They tell each other how pretty it is, and then they notice the steep steps that go up to the top of the hill, and they sigh.



Those steps really are *very* steep. But once the visitors have got to the top, they turn round to see a beautiful view of the city of Paris. You can see so far across the city, and there are so many roofs and towers and glittering domes to look at, that most of them forget how much their knees hurt.

The view is so beautiful that hardly any of the visitors look back at the steep grass slope, and the steps they've climbed. They never think about what's underneath.

Or who...

Only a very few people ever find out, and this is *their* story.



CHAPTER ONE

Sophie peered out over the view, watching the sunlight sparkle on the windows, and wondering who lived there, under the roofs. She couldn't see her own house from here, or she didn't think she could, anyway. She hadn't lived in Paris for long enough to know.



The city *was* very beautiful, but it still didn't feel like home. Sophie sighed, and rested her chin on her hands. She missed her old house, and her old bedroom, and her cat, Oscar. Grandma was looking

after him while they lived in Paris, but Sophie was sure that Oscar missed her, almost as much as she missed him.

“What are you looking at?” Dan squashed up next to her, leaning over the stone balcony.

“Just things,” Sophie said vaguely. “The view.”

“Boring,” Dan muttered. “This is taking ages. And I'm hungry.” He turned round, holding his tummy in both hands and made a starving face at Sophie. His nose scrunched up like a rabbit's, and Sophie smirked. She crossed her eyes and poked her tongue out at the corner of her mouth to make Dan laugh. After all,

even a wonderful view can be boring when you've been looking at it for a *VERY LONG TIME*.

All the people who live in Paris love their city so much, and many of them walk up the steep steps to the church on their wedding days to have their photographs taken next to the wonderful view. But it can take an awful long time to get the photographs right, especially when it's windy and your auntie's wedding dress won't stay still properly.

"Sophie and Dan! Stop making faces like that! You're making Dad giggle, and he's supposed to be taking romantic photos!" Mum glared at them, but Dad

rolled his eyes, and stuck his tongue out at Dan. Sophie thought Dad might be a bit bored with the photos as well.

This church was one of Sophie's favourite places in Paris. It was so pretty, and there was the fountain to look at, and all the people. She even liked its name, *Sacré Coeur*, which meant Sacred Heart. Sophie thought it was very special to have a whole church that was all about love. Auntie Lou's wedding had been beautiful too, but Sophie had got up early for Mum to curl her hair and fuss over her dress, and she was tired of having to stand still and smile.

"Go and play," Auntie Lou suggested.

“Go and run around for a bit. You can come back and be in the photos later.”

“Later?” Dad moaned. “I thought we’d nearly finished!” But Sophie and Dan were already halfway down the white marble steps, and couldn’t hear him.



“I wish we’d brought a ball...” Dan said, as they stopped in front of the fountain that stood below the balcony. He was looking at the grassy slope of the hill. “Do you think Mum would mind if we went home and got one? It wouldn’t take five minutes.”

“Yes, she would! And anyway, even *you* couldn’t play football on that grass,” Sophie pointed out. “It would just roll down to the bottom.”

“Exactly. That would make it more fun! Uphill football, I’ve just invented it. I might be famous!”

Sophie shook her head. “I don’t think all the people taking photos would be

very impressed either. There are loads of them. They'd tell you off."

"Huh." But Dan looked round at all the visitors, and realized Sophie was right. No one looked as if they wanted to play football. And there was an old lady sitting on the bench over there with a really pointy umbrella, the kind with a parrot's head handle. She looked like she'd happily use the pointy end to stab footballs, and even the parrot seemed to be giving him a fierce glare.

"Race you up and down the balustrades then!" He grabbed her hand and hurried her down the two flights of stairs to the path.

Sophie squirmed. The balustrades were the stone slopes at the sides of the steps. They were wide and flat, and Dan loved to run up and down them. He'd discovered the game the first time they came to visit the church, just after they'd moved to Paris, and since *Sacré Coeur* was on their way home from school, he'd been practising. But the game made Sophie feel sick, especially when it had been raining and the stone was all slick and slippery. She was sure that he would fall off.

"Come on, Sophie!" Dan hopped up to the stonework. "You get up on the other side. Bet I can beat you back to the top!"

Sophie stood on the bottom step, looking anxiously at the flat white slope. She didn't want to run up it – but if she refused, Dan would keep on and on teasing her.

“Baby!” her brother called scornfully, and Sophie scowled. She was only a year younger than Dan! She was not a baby! Carefully, the tip of her tongue sticking out between her teeth, she stepped on to the balustrade. It wasn't really so very high, after all... And Dan looked so surprised that she'd done it! Sophie grinned at him.

“Go!” Dan yelled, dashing away up the slope. Sophie gasped, and raced after him,

wishing she had trainers on, and not her best shoes with the glittery bows.



She slithered a little, and gasped and reached out her hands to balance, wishing there was something to hold on to – a tree maybe. But there was only the perfect short green grass, and every

so often those funny little cone-shaped bushes that almost looked like upside-down ice creams.

Halfway to the top, Dan let out a yell as he spotted one of his friends from school on the other side of the hill. He hopped down and raced across the grass to see Benjamin, leaving Sophie glaring after him. He'd just abandoned their race, after she'd been brave enough to climb the balustrade at last. How could he? She folded her arms and tapped her foot crossly on the stone. Brothers! They were so rude!

If only she had a friend to play with, too. It wasn't fair. Sophie watched Dan

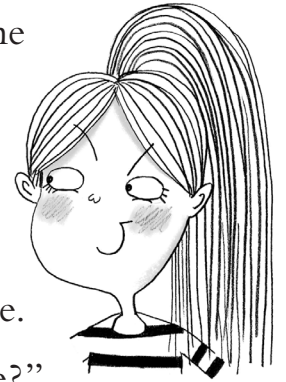
and Benjamin chasing each other across the grass, and sighed sadly. Somehow, she just hadn't found anybody she liked that much at school yet. Even though Mum had spoken French to them ever since they were little, Sophie still felt as though she wasn't doing it quite right. The teachers told her she was doing ever so well, but the girls in her class looked at her funny whenever she opened her mouth. And then they just ran off. After some days at school, Sophie wondered if she might forget how to talk at all. It was nothing like back home. Mum had suggested sending emails to her friends from their

school in London, and Sophie had, but it wasn't the same at all. All the fun things that Elizabeth and Zara told her in their replies only made Sophie feel more left out.



The only girls who'd really spoken to her were Chloe and Adrienne, and that was because their teacher had asked them to look after the new girl. Sophie had decided halfway through the first morning that she'd much rather be unlooked-after. Chloe didn't do anything except twitch her nose and giggle, which was boring, though bearable, but Sophie thought

Adrienne was possibly the nastiest person she had ever met. Because her voice was so sweet and soft, the things she said sounded perfectly nice at first. It was only when Sophie thought back that she realized how horrible they actually were.



“So, why *did* you move here?”
Adrienne had a way of looking at Sophie with her head on one side that made Sophie feel like she was some ugly sort of beetle.

“Your French is quite good. For an English person, I mean...”

“I suppose that's an *English* skirt. It's very ... interesting.”

Sophie gave a little shiver, even though the sun was warm on her bare shoulders. It was a hot September afternoon, but Adrienne's pretty voice was like cold water trickling down her spine, even when she was only remembering it.

She sighed again, and then shuddered as Dan and Benjamin started a race, rolling down the grassy slope.

And then she fell off.

Afterwards, Sophie wasn't quite sure how she did it. She hadn't even been moving. But her feet seemed to slip suddenly from underneath her, and then her arms were flapping uselessly at the air. There was a thump, and she was flat

on the grass on her tummy, next to one of those strange little cone-shaped bushes.

Sophie lay there, gasping and trying not to cry. She wanted Dan to come and pick her up – but at the same time she didn't want him knowing she'd been silly enough to fall.

“Are you all right?”

It wasn't Dan. The mystery voice was speaking in French, and Dan would have spoken to her in English. It just didn't sound like Dan, anyway. Sophie hoped it wasn't the old lady with the parrot umbrella. She would probably say it was all Sophie's own fault, and insist on taking her back to Mum and Dad and

Auntie Lou and the endless photographs.

But surely even a very little old lady wouldn't have such a high, squeaky voice?

Sophie turned her head slightly, and squeaked herself.

Staring at her worriedly was a tiny furry face, ginger-and-

white, with neat little ears, and shining eyes.

“Are you hurt?”

the squeaky voice said again, and this time there was no doubt about it. It was definitely this small furry person who was talking to her.

“No, I'm not. Thank you for asking,”

Sophie whispered, trying to sit up.

“Oh, good. Yes, that's right. Much better.” The guinea pig – for now that she was the right way up, Sophie could see that's what the furry little person was – nodded approvingly. “You didn't hit your head?”

“I don't think so,” Sophie murmured, shaking it gently. Though if she had bumped her head, it would explain why she was talking to a guinea pig. And, more importantly, how the guinea pig seemed to be talking back.

“Are you imaginary?” she asked, wondering if she had actually hit her head *very hard*.

