

# Freddy's Magic Garden

Excerpt 1 –

## The Vacant Lot

... We didn't need to, as playing on the vacant lot was so much fun. We jumped over the tall grass, played hide and seek, and chased each other. If only we weren't so hungry all the time. Our Maman would go out several times a day to find something to eat, but that spring, the weather was boiling, and food was scarcer than gold. Even the supply of flies and worms came up short. Water, too, was sorely lacking. It hadn't rained for months, and all the puddles in the vacant lot had dried up. Evening after evening, our poor Maman came back with nothing. What little she could find from time to time was for us, her kittens. We were only two weeks old but were already eating solid food because our Maman could hardly give us any more milk. The situation was desperate, and events almost turned out tragically.

## Exhausted, Yet So Brave

It had been a particularly tough week. For several days, we had nothing to eat and nothing to drink, and our Maman had no more milk left to offer us, not even a drop. Caramel became so poorly that she refused to leave the inside of our home. Maman was afraid for her, but she, too, was so weak that she wobbled and dragged her paws when she walked. I still had enough strength to chase flies; from time to time, I even managed to swallow one or bring it to Maman and Caramel. But soon, I too, became too tired and stayed inside, curled up next to my sister. One dreadfully hot afternoon, the three of us were lying inside our tiny home, unable to find the strength to get up. Caramel and I were snuggled up to Maman, and she was kissing us from time to time to cheer us up. I felt her desperation. I don't know how it was possible, but I could always feel what Maman felt, even when she was not near me. Gathering her last strength, Maman decided to try searching for food one last time. "Don't move from the house," she said. "Just wait for me; I won't be long." And she wobbled away, her poor paws hardly able to carry her.

I remember it well – it was the longest afternoon of my life: I truly believed our Maman would never return. Later she told us how it went.

After more than an hour of wandering through the neighbouring gardens, our Maman had visited every place she knew. Yet she couldn't find any food. There wasn't a single crumb in front of the bakery. Neither were there any leftovers near the dustbins; there was nothing in the saucers of the neighbourhood cats, and even the dog bowls were hopelessly empty.

*If only I could find something for the little ones,* thought Maman. Poor little black kitty, so thin that we could have counted her ribs if we had known how to count, yet she cared only about the two of us. Even her once-shiny black coat had become dull and grey.

She had been walking around for hours, and the afternoon was almost ending. She had never ventured so far from the vacant lot before. She thought, *I should go back now, while my legs can still carry me. I'm usually back by now. The poor kids must be worried.* She imagined the two of us sitting by the gate, desperately calling for her. *They must be so impatient,* she thought. She felt her strength failing – would she even be able to return home? She stopped in front of a small wall at the end of a little garden; she could see a paved path leading to a terrace on the other side. Should she try this last garden? She knew that jumping up on the wall would exhaust her, even though it was a low one. *I'll just look in this new garden, and then I'll go home,* she thought. So, she gathered all her remaining strength and jumped over, only to find herself in yet another unknown garden.

A vast bamboo hedge lined the paved pathway leading to the large terrace. *There may be some food on this terrace,* thought our Maman. She saw a fountain at the end of the path: fresh water! She hadn't had any for days, and she was so thirsty. *Quick,* she thought, *I can reach it; I can do it! I want to drink, drink!*

Sadly, her poor paws refused to carry her just those few steps further. Too weak to take even one more step, she collapsed halfway between the fountain and the terrace in the middle of the path.

She lay there on the warm flagstones, unable to get up and drag herself any further. *What will become of my darlings?* She wondered. *Who will take care of them if I don't return?* She was filled with sadness.

Maman knew she should meow, and call for help. Maybe there was another cat in this garden that could help her. She thought of her neighbour, that vain Charlotte. If only

she were close, she would be willing to help. And even that pirate Big Head, the gardens' bandit, would help. After all, wasn't he the kids' dad? Cats do help each other when needed. She tried to meow, but no sound came from her exhausted little body. *This is the end*, she thought. *My little ones, my poor little ones! If only they were here, near me.* She closed her beautiful green eyes and sank into a coma-like sleep.

Dear reader, do you believe in miracles? I do!

For you see, the garden where our Maman was trespassing belonged to Mum. Yes, the very Mum who was to pick me up off the pavement one stormy night a few weeks later. But a lot would happen in the meantime.

I'll let Mum tell you how she first met our Maman. She knows the story better.

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### Life Hanging by a Thin Thread

I remember my first meeting with the little black kitty very well. It was a hot April afternoon. I was working in my home office on the first floor when suddenly I saw a small black shape in the garden, creeping along the path. It was moving with great difficulty, as if each step forward were a challenge. It frequently stopped, sat down to regain strength, and resumed its slow walk towards the terrace. Looking closer, I saw that it was a cat: a tiny black kitty. Suddenly, the little kitty collapsed on her side, stretching out her legs and lying motionless.

At first, I was afraid she was dead, but then I realised that she might just be utterly exhausted. I rushed to the kitchen to fill a bowl with cat food and another with fresh water. Once in the garden, I approached her slowly, trying not to make any noise.

Had she noticed my presence? She showed no sign of it: her little body remained motionless, and her ears did not twitch. I called her softly – I was close to her now.

Her fur was dull and dirty, and one of her hind legs seemed hurt; a trickle of dried blood was visible. She was skinny, and I thought it must have been a long since her last meal. I put the two bowls close to her head and drew back a few steps.

I don't know how long I waited, but it was long enough to get me worried. Just as I had decided to fetch a basket and take her to the vet, she raised her tiny, skinny head, looked up at me and opened her mouth, probably to greet me with a meow. But no sound came out. She was so weak that even her voice had failed her.

"Poor baby," I said, "my little darling, eat a little. Look, I brought you some delicious food!" She raised her head to the bowl's height and caught a couple of cat biscuits. After swallowing them with difficulty, she got up by folding her front legs under her body. In this uncomfortable position, she started eating biscuit after biscuit with long intervals between bites. Any hungry cat would have pounced on the food and emptied the bowl. But this poor kitty was so exhausted that even eating was a task beyond her strength.

That day, her life was hanging by a fragile thread. Had I not seen her, she would have stayed there, lying on our garden's paved path, sinking little by little into unconsciousness and then into nothingness.

A good quarter of an hour later, with some more biscuits swallowed, she had enough energy to sit up properly and eat and drink with more spirit.

That day, she stayed in our garden for over two hours. She kept eating little by little, then resting again. I was so happy to have rescued her that I kept running into the kitchen, looking for good things to offer her. Ham, leftover chicken, a bowl of milk, treats – whatever I thought would please her. There was plenty of cat food at my house to feed my seven Maine Coons. They weren't allowed into the garden but could come to the patio. Curiously, on that day, and probably because it was so hot, they all slept inside.

It had started to get dark when she finally decided that her belly was full enough. She rummaged in her plate and carefully picked out the most prominent remaining piece of ham, holding it tightly in her mouth. She looked at me as if to say thank you, turned around, and slowly started to walk towards the low wall from where she had probably come. Carrying the piece of ham was not easy; she often stopped to put it on the ground and rest a little before picking it up again and continuing on her way.

It was evident that this kitty had little kittens somewhere. But where?

I followed her progress, trying to spot her tiny body here and there while she slipped from garden to garden, hedge to hedge, but it was difficult to make out her black shape as the darkness descended. All I could do was hope she would return the next day for more food.

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