



## CHAPTER 1

It was raining hard as Frankie, Louise and Charlie ran along the pavement. Max, Frankie's dog, was on his lead and scampered to keep up.

"Nearly there now!" called Louise.

She turned into a doorway next to a Chinese supermarket, and

Frankie and Charlie piled in after her.

“Welcome to the Chinese Cultural Centre,” said Louise.

They were standing in a foyer, and there were posters on a noticeboard advertising everything from lessons in Mandarin to restaurants to travel agents. Louise’s gran was Chinese, and Louise came here a lot. Max shook himself dry and looked up at Frankie with a bedraggled face.

“We’re early,” said Louise, looking around. “Maybe my sifu isn’t here yet.”

“What’s a *sifu*?” asked Charlie.

“It’s the name we give to the kung fu teacher,” Louise replied. She took off her coat and hung it on a peg. As Frankie did the same, she pointed to Max. “He’d better stay out here. I’m not sure he can take part in the kung fu class.”

Max cocked his head as if he was insulted and Frankie laughed. He was looking forward to trying something new. Louise had been learning the martial art for two years, so she’d already completed lots of grades. Underneath her coat she was wearing a black kung fu

suit with white cuffs and toggles across the front.

Frankie's eyes widened as he spotted Charlie peeling off his goalie gloves. Louise gasped too.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

Charlie shrugged. "I didn't think I could wear them in the class."

"You can't," she said. "But you *never* take them off!"

"Yeah," said Frankie. "You say goalkeepers always need to be ready."

Charlie sighed. "I'm not a goalkeeper any more though, am I?"

Frankie shared a look with

Louise. He knew why his friend was in such a sad mood. Charlie had let in four goals against the Basset Road team earlier in the week. One had been really embarrassing, because he'd tripped over his own feet.

"We all have bad games," said Louise, putting her arm around Charlie's shoulder. "Perhaps the kung fu will help with your balance and positioning. It's not all chops and kicks, you know."

Charlie gave a small smile. "It can't make me any worse."

Frankie had never seen him so glum.

“Come on, I’ll show you the training room,” said Louise.

She slid open a door and they walked into a large room with mats on the floor and a mirror covering the whole wall at one end. On the other walls, there were pictures of men and women doing high kicks and strange moves, and lots of painted Chinese lettering that Frankie didn’t understand.

But the most impressive thing in the room was a huge decorated dragon. It seemed to be made of cardboard and paper, with frills and horns and multi-coloured scales. It

had golden eyes that scowled under its arched brows.

“Wow!” he said.

“We use it at festivals,” said Louise. “It takes four or five people to lift it, and they perform a dragon dance.”

“It looks scary!” said Charlie.

“Not at all,” said a voice behind them. A small man in a suit similar to Louise’s stepped into the room, folding an umbrella. He had a newspaper tucked under his arm.

“Sifu Tan!” said Louise. She gave a bow, with her hands clasped together.

The old man put down the

paper and the umbrella on a table and bowed in return. "Hello, Louise. These must be your friends Charlie and Frankie." Sifu Tan frowned. "But which one is which? I heard that Charlie always wore gloves, even in bed at night."



Charlie blushed and didn't say anything, so Frankie stepped in. "He's Charlie," he said, pointing at his friend. "I'm Frankie."

Max barked. "And that's Max," said Frankie.

Sifu Tan bowed to them then picked up the newspaper again. "I hear you're both as keen on football as Louise. This might interest you."

As he unfolded the paper, Frankie saw that the writing was all in Chinese script. The front cover picture showed a boy not much older than him, standing beside a football which was resting on a cushion.

“What’s it about?” said Frankie.

“Is that boy some sort of star football player in China?”

Louise looked over the sifu’s shoulder. “The headline says ‘Proof! China invented football!’”

“I always thought we invented football in England,” said Frankie.

Louise read on. “Apparently, the boy discovered an ancient porcelain football buried in his garden. Scientists think it’s over two thousand years old!”

“What’s the point of a football made out of pottery?” said Charlie. “It would break!”

“They think it might have been

just for decoration,” said Louise, laughing. “There are twelve panels, all showing different creatures in the Chinese Zodiac. It’s been bought by a museum and they’re going to put it on show.”

Frankie stared at the picture. “I’d love to see it!” he gasped.

“Bet it’s not as good as your football,” said Charlie with a wink, nodding towards Frankie’s rucksack. Frankie kept the magic football with him now, in case his brother Kevin tried to get his hands on it to cause mischief.

The sifu stretched his arms. “Looks like no one else is coming,”

he said. "We should warm up before practice. How about we use your football for some exercises, Frankie?"

Frankie felt a rush of panic. What if the football decided to do something magical? "Er . . . I'm not sure . . ."

"Come on," said the sifu. "Until today, I would have said it wasn't traditional to use a ball in kung fu. But now I've read that newspaper article, it might be fun. I was quite a good player in my youth."

Frankie reluctantly took out the ball and handed it to Sifu Tan.

"Right!" said the teacher. "Let's

start by running in a circle around the room.”

Max waited by the door while they set off. Sifu Tan stood in the centre of the hall, kicking the ball out for them to pass back. Then they'd swap positions, or change direction. Soon Frankie was working up a sweat.

Somewhere, a phone rang. “Excuse me” said Sifu Tan. “Why don't you throw it to each other, to warm up your arms.” He left the room.

“He's very fit for an old man,” said Charlie, bending over and breathing hard.

“He’s been practising kung fu since he was three years old,” said Louise. “Here, catch this!”

She threw the ball to Charlie, but he jumped too short. It arced straight for the paper dragon.

*Oh no!* thought Frankie. He saw his own horrified expression in the mirror.

The ball dropped right into the dragon’s mouth.

At the same moment, the mirror’s surface began to buckle and his reflection blurred. It looked as though the glass was melting.

“Something’s happening!” said Louise.

Frankie's skin tingled. "It's the football's magic," he said. As the room around them became distorted, he was sure the dragon winked at him. Then everything vanished in a flash of light.