

Chapter 1

James Alastair lived in a small red-brick house, part of a terrace of houses in a little town beside the North Sea. All his life he had wanted a greyhound. Greyhounds are long lean dogs: tremendously fast runners that are sometimes trained to be racers and win prizes for their owners. James Alastair dreamed of owning a racing greyhound. He dreamed of owning the fastest greyhound in the world.

One day – the day before his ninth birthday – James was walking home from school, wondering what his mother and father would give him for his present. He knew it would not be a greyhound, and he was afraid that it would not be a bicycle either. Everyone in his class had a bicycle except James. Suddenly, he stopped.

There, on the pavement in front of him, was a wooden basket – the sort that gardeners use for carrying small plants and trowels. Inside it, coiled up very small, was a little animal. It had a little snouty face like a tiny crocodile, but much smiley. It had round nostrils and loving, deep amber eyes. It had two sharp ears that stood up, rather like a horse's. It had a fat little body covered in scales and a long, long tail like nothing in the world. Running down its spine was a row of hard, triangle-shaped spikes. Its plump feet had sharp golden claws. It was a bright emerald green. It was shimmering all over with the light of a very strong magic spell. James could hardly see it for the power of the magic spell. Instead he saw the very thing he wanted most in the world.

“A greyhound!” James said in absolute wonder. “A greyhound puppy!”

