

Andy Shepherd

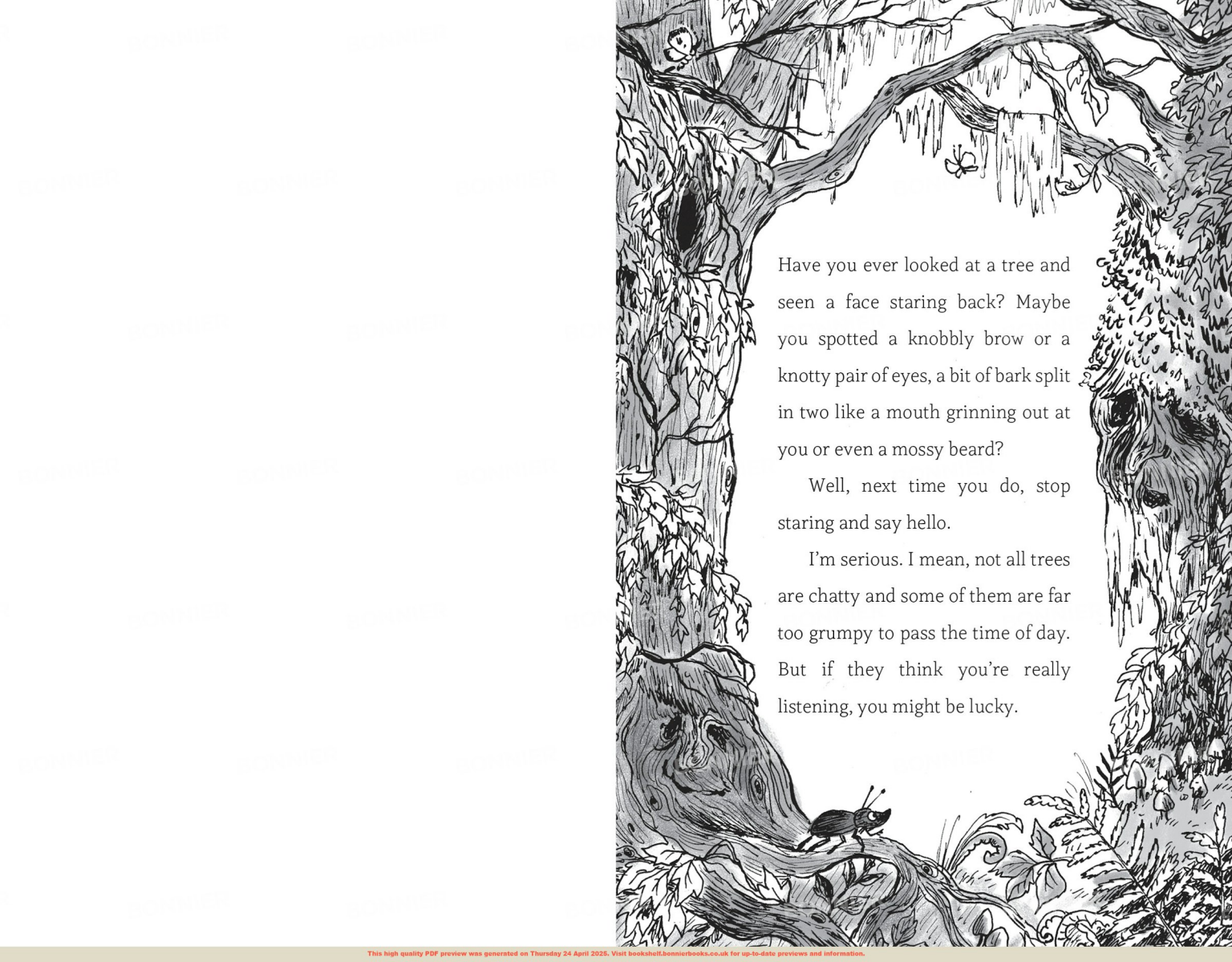
'Brimming with
humour and heart,
wonder and wildness'

Abi Elphinstone

THE WOOD WHERE MAGIC GROWS



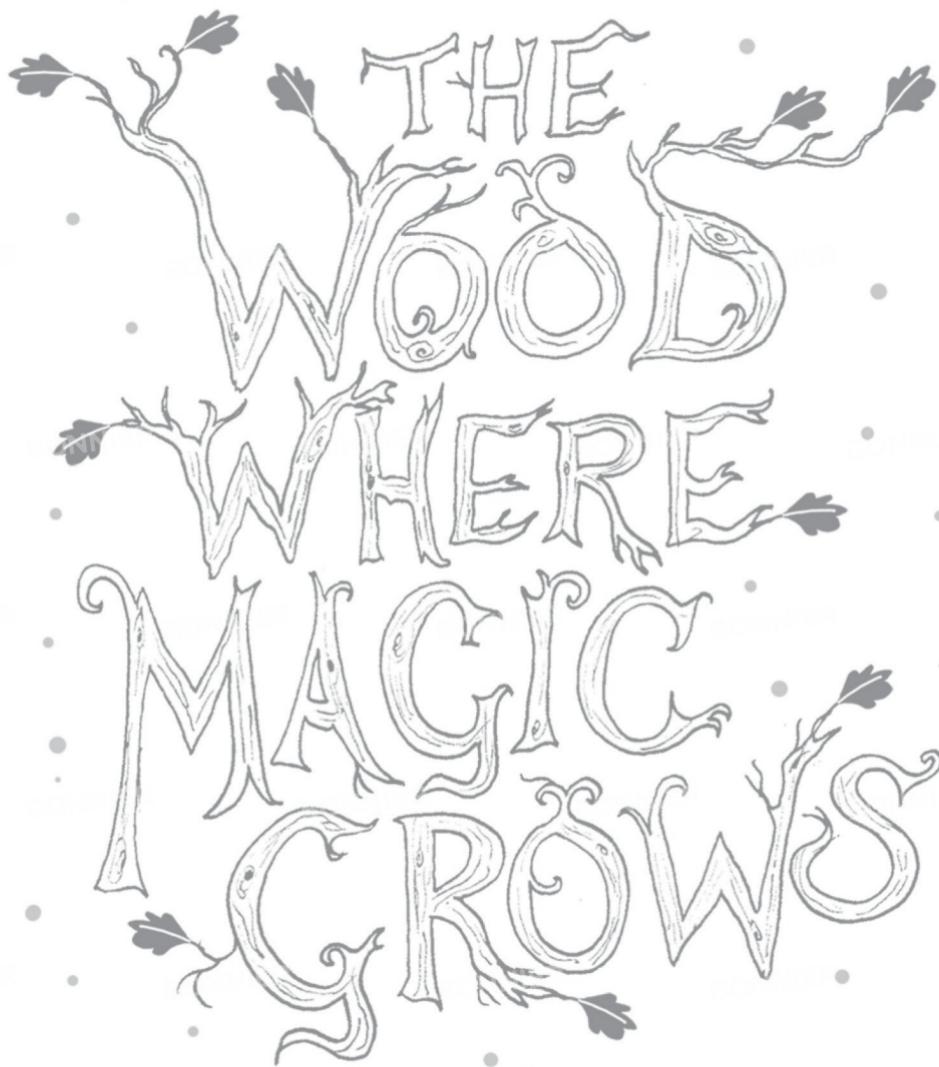
Illustrated by
Ellie Snowdon



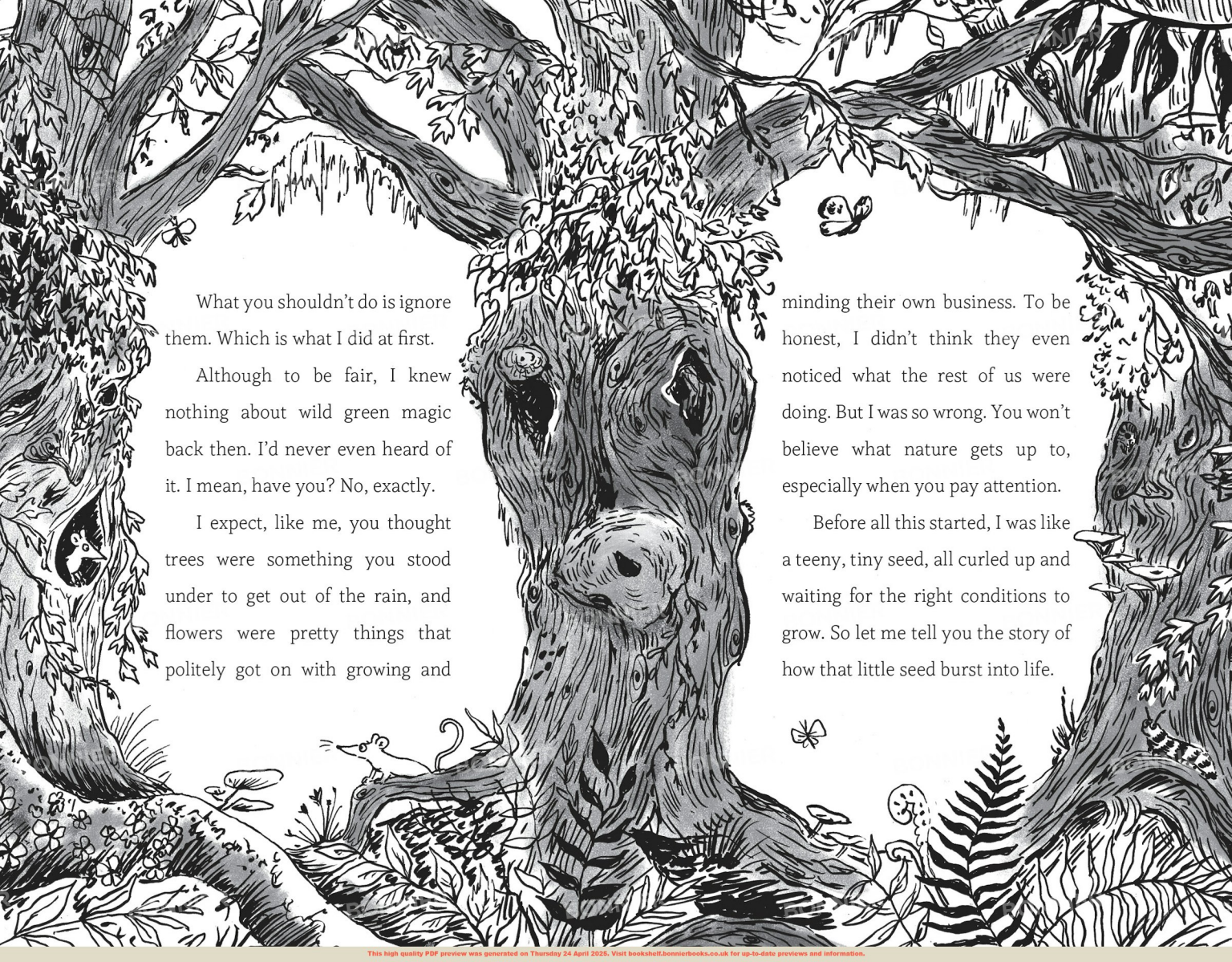
Have you ever looked at a tree and seen a face staring back? Maybe you spotted a knobbly brow or a knotty pair of eyes, a bit of bark split in two like a mouth grinning out at you or even a mossy beard?

Well, next time you do, stop staring and say hello.

I'm serious. I mean, not all trees are chatty and some of them are far too grumpy to pass the time of day. But if they think you're really listening, you might be lucky.



THE
WOOD
WHERE
MAGIC
GROWS



What you shouldn't do is ignore them. Which is what I did at first.

Although to be fair, I knew nothing about wild green magic back then. I'd never even heard of it. I mean, have you? No, exactly.

I expect, like me, you thought trees were something you stood under to get out of the rain, and flowers were pretty things that politely got on with growing and

minding their own business. To be honest, I didn't think they even noticed what the rest of us were doing. But I was so wrong. You won't believe what nature gets up to, especially when you pay attention.

Before all this started, I was like a teeny, tiny seed, all curled up and waiting for the right conditions to grow. So let me tell you the story of how that little seed burst into life.

Also by Andy Shepherd

The Boy Who Grew Dragons

The Boy Who Lived With Dragons

The Boy Who Flew With Dragons

The Boy Who Dreamed of Dragons

The Boy Who Sang With Dragons

The Ultimate Guide to Growing Dragons





I love my bed. Apart from a week in the summer when we go and stay in a caravan and the sometimes sleepovers I have with my best friend Rafi, I've slept in it ever since I was little. It's perfectly moulded to my shape.

But I wasn't lying in my bed. I was in a bed that squeaked and groaned and kept jabbing me with its springs, like it couldn't believe I had the nerve to sleep in it and I should get out and go away, thank you very much.

'It's very noisy,' whispered a voice, and I almost jumped out of the not-my-bed, having totally forgotten Cal was in the room as well.

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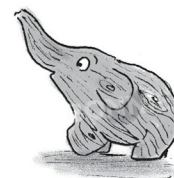
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For Ian, Ben & Jonas
all my love always x



‘Are you asleep?’ he said.

Which was a daft thing to ask because I was sitting up staring at him, trying to stop my heart hammering.

I shook my head.

‘I’ve been counting all the places I could be trying to sleep that are noisier than here,’ he said, wriggling out from the covers. ‘Like behind a gushing waterfall. Or at a whizz-fizzing fireworks display. Or curled up with a bellowing buffalo.’ He sat cross-legged on the quilt and started tracing a finger round the diamond pattern in front of him. ‘It was more interesting than sheep.’

‘I think the sheep are meant to be boring,’ I said. ‘That’s the point. They’re supposed to bore you into sleep.’

He looked up, his eyes growing wide with understanding. ‘I wish I knew stuff like you do,’ he said, as if I’d just imparted the wisest piece of advice the world had ever heard. ‘How did your brain get to be so big?’

I thought he was making fun of me, but he sat there looking like he actually expected an answer. And I sat

there wondering what to say, as I often did with my new little brother.

My mum and Cal’s dad had what they called a ‘whirlwind romance’, and me and Cal had been flung together in the whirl of that wind and now we were here in this house, sharing a room.

Or rather a bed, as Cal leaped onto mine with a startled, ‘What was that?’

I glanced over to the window just as another tap sounded.

Cal didn’t take his eyes off the flowery curtain and grabbed my arm.

The tapping continued. Slow and steady.

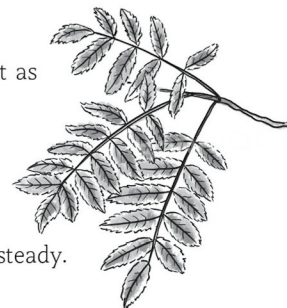
Tap. Tap. Tap.

Then a bit faster. *Tap. Tap. Tap.*

Then it paused and there was a *scratch*.

Cal didn’t like that one bit.

Normally I’d have been just as alarmed as he was. But I wasn’t. Not because I’m brave, but because I remembered the tree I’d seen earlier. It had been so dark



when we arrived that Mum had held up her phone torch to lead us through the back gate to find the key we'd been left. The tree stood right by the house, a knobbly branch slung over the back door like a protective arm, while another leafy limb stretched up towards the windows above. Mum had needed to bend to avoid the leaves as she fumbled with the lock.

'It's just a branch knocking against the window,' I said.

But Cal was not convinced.

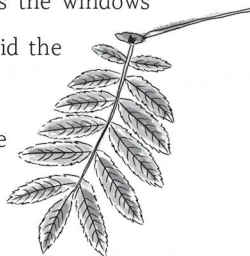
The *tap tap scratch* was getting louder. More insistent.

'It's a thing,' he said, voice quivering. 'A scary thing. A monster. And it sounds like it wants to get in.' His hand squeezed my arm even tighter. 'You won't let me get got by the monster, will you, Iggy?'

I groaned along with the bed as I unpeeled his grip, got up and crossed the room.

I pulled back the curtain with a flourish, like a magician performing a vanishing trick.

A branch was tapping and scraping at the window, its



leaves all smooshed up against the glass like they were peering in at us.

'See, it's just the tree,' I said.

Cal peered out suspiciously and when he saw there was no monster sprang out of his hiding place.

'You scared it away!' he cried delightedly. 'I knew you would!'

'There *are* no monsters,' I said. 'It's the tree that's been tapping.'

'Trees don't tap,' he said with absolute confidence.

'And monsters do?'

He nodded furiously. Then whispered, 'What if it comes back?'

I decided to open the window, hoping it would push back the branch and make some room between it and the glass, but the tree sprang in through the opening, leafy limbs tumbling past me. I hurriedly tried to lift some of the branches back out, but just as I managed to get one onto the other side of the sill another trailed through. It was like wrestling a friendly green octopus!





started snuffling, the tree started tapping again.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

When it got louder, I knew I had no choice but to open the window to try to push the branches away.

But the weird thing was that when I crossed the room and opened the curtains, there were no leaves or twigs pressing up against the glass at all.

In fact, the arms of the octopus tree were stretching in the other direction completely. They all pointed away from the house, down the garden.

Except for one twiggy stem that pointed straight at me, curling upwards at the end like a beckoning finger.

Cal started giggling.

And I did too as the leaves tickled my face.

'Come and help,' I urged as a cascade of shiny green ivy looped around my feet.

Together we finally managed to get the tree and the ivy back on the outside, and I pulled the window closed.

We fell back onto our beds, Cal still laughing as he shook leaf debris from his hair. It took ages for him to get all the giggle out and finally drop off. Then, just as he

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The Tiger Who Came to Breakfast

I was woken in the morning by a tiger leaping across the room and landing on me.

‘Why are you still in bed, blobby-head?’ the tiger roared. ‘Let’s go exploring!’

I batted the stripy tail away from my face where it was being swished to excellent effect. Cal, who wore the tiger onesie me and Mum had bought him for his birthday pretty much permanently, added another ‘Blob blob blobby-head’ just for good measure.

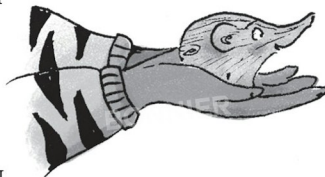
Just so you know, apart from when he’s hiding from monsters, Cal’s generally very bouncy. That was

something else I was still getting used to.

That and waking up in a completely different room of course, a room that actually looked more like a greenhouse. There were plants everywhere! They were lined up on the floor and a whole table against one wall heaved with pots, each one holding a bedraggled-looking flower.

And it wasn’t just plants, there were animals too. Well, wooden ones. There was a very upright duck standing by the door like a guard that we’d nearly tripped over when we came in and several mice peeking out from between the pots.

‘Look what I found!’ Cal declared, and held up a tiny wooden elephant nestled on his palm. ‘I’m going to call her Tiny. I think that’s her mummy over there.’ He pointed to a slightly larger elephant, which had its trunk raised in salute.



Along with the duck, mice and elephants there was

also a bushy-tailed fox with a coat of reddish wood
and a paler grain running down its belly, and a
miniature owl nestled in an eggcup.



The cottage's owner obviously liked
bees a lot too, because they were
everywhere I looked. Painted on the plant
pots, flying across a mug left on the floor,
and there was even a really pretty
wooden one with gold-tipped wings
next to a watering can. It was far
bigger than any bumblebee I'd ever



seen, with a body the size of a ping-pong ball.
If a bee that big buzzed in my face I might
just run a mile. I secretly hoped insects
weren't all mutantly bigger here than in cities.

The bee wasn't looking at me though; it was staring
up at a pair of wooden bookend squirrels who were
turned away from each other as if they'd been squabbling,
their tails held haughtily in the air. Neither of them was
doing a very good job of looking after the books, as

several had tumbled to the floor.

Cal settled down on my bed with Tiny, the pocket-
sized elephant, and chirpily presented me with a slice of
bread. There was nothing on it, unless you counted the
thumb prints gouged into it.

'Hurry up and eat,' he urged, bouncing up and down.

'Someone's bright-eyed and bushy-tailed at least,'
Mum said, appearing in the doorway mid-yawn.

'I'm staaaarving,' Cal growled. 'Can we have pancakes?
Dad *always* makes me pancakes.'

With his back to the door, Cal winked at me, or I
think that's what he was trying to do; he actually just
scrunched up both his eyes. I could already tell Mum
wasn't believing a word of it.

Then Mitchell appeared behind her, a huge grin
across his face. He was the tallest person I'd ever met and
he had to duck to get through all the doorways here.

'Don't know about you lot, but I slept like a log after
arriving so late and trying to find this place,' he said.
'Everyone sleep OK?'



I looked over at Cal who yawned. Between tickly trees and giggly brothers, we really hadn't had the best night's sleep.

Mum had told me it might take some time to get used to sharing a room after always having my own space. Right now she was looking at me with quite a lot of hope. Like us getting on OK on our first night somehow meant this new life, with the four of us together, would all be OK too.

'Yeah, we slept fine,' I said.

'Brilliant,' Mitchell said. 'Right, I'm off out to stock up on provisions.'

He gave Mum a squeeze and they both headed down to the kitchen.

'Hey, Iggy?' Cal called.

I turned back to see him with his own slice of bread stuck to his face, nibbled out holes revealing his eyes and mouth behind the doughy mask. He grinned, delighted at my wide-eyed stare.

But it wasn't the fact he'd taken to wearing food that

had left me so startled, it was that out of the corner of my eye I could have sworn I saw the nearest squirrel's bushy wooden tail flick!





Clearly the move and lack of sleep were messing with my head. I wondered about just rolling over and going back to sleep, but the tiger in my room definitely wasn't on board with that plan.

So, with Mum cheerfully instructing me as big brother to 'keep an eye', we headed outside to explore, ducking to avoid the leafy tickles of the octopus tree that patted our hair with its fern-like leaves as we passed.

I glanced up at the cottage, the place we'd left our cosy flat to come and live. The houses on either side of it were much bigger. With its thatched roof, this one sat

between them like a little mouse wearing a straw hat, and the octopus tree stuck up proudly like a feather protruding from it. I couldn't help noticing that while last night the topmost branches had seemed to point down the garden, now they looked more like outstretched arms desperately trying to catch someone's attention.

I headed further down the garden with Cal scampering behind me like an overexcited puppy.

The garden was really long and it got wider as we went further. It also got wilder, and we swished our way through straggly grass and spires of purple and white flowers that bobbed their heads as we passed.

There were fruit trees here too, standing in huddles, their pink blossomy branches almost touching and their leaves whispering around us.

And then the garden stopped pretending to be a garden at all and opened up into a sort of field that our row of houses backed onto. It was dotted with scrubby grass and tangly bushes and looked even wilder and



messier than what we'd walked through already. On the other side there was a line of trees where a wood began.

Now, I'd never had a garden. But this, this looked more like a park than a garden to me.

'What's that?' Cal asked.

Turning, I looked where he was pointing. Off to our left, just on the edge of the field, there was a huge tree with dangly branches draping itself over a cabin, which was so covered in ivy it was hard to see the boards of wood. It was like the tree was hiding it away, saying, 'Move on, nothing to see here.'

'I think someone lives there,' I said, remembering that Mum had said the owner of the cottage lived at the bottom of the garden and that was why the rent was so low.

Before I'd even finished talking, Cal had bounded over to the cabin and was knocking on the door. I watched him, wondering if big brothers were meant to take the lead in this sort of thing.

When no one answered, he went round to the side to peer in at a window.

'Hey, you can't do that,' I said, hurrying over.

'I can't see anyway,' he grumbled. 'There's too much tree and plant in the way.'

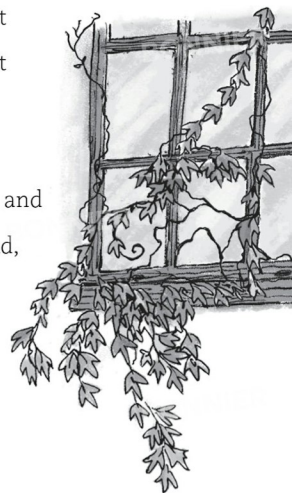
He pushed further through the leaves, disappearing completely from sight, and a moment later I heard a little 'Oh!' quickly followed by an 'Ow!' and then a quiet 'I think I'm stuck.'

I started pushing my way through the mass of green, the spindly twigs catching on my clothes. Long narrow leaves trailed over my face, making it hard to see, and I stumbled as my foot caught on a root.

'Cal?' I hissed.

I rounded the back of the cabin and spotted him a foot off the ground, plastered against the wooden boards like Spider-Man scaling a wall. His hands and most of each leg were completely covered by ivy.

'What are you doing?'



He glanced up to a window just above him, mostly hidden by more leafy tendrils.

'Are you serious? You take being nosy to a whole other level,' I huffed.

'I couldn't get high enough anyway,' he said grumpily. 'I got all tangled up in this,'

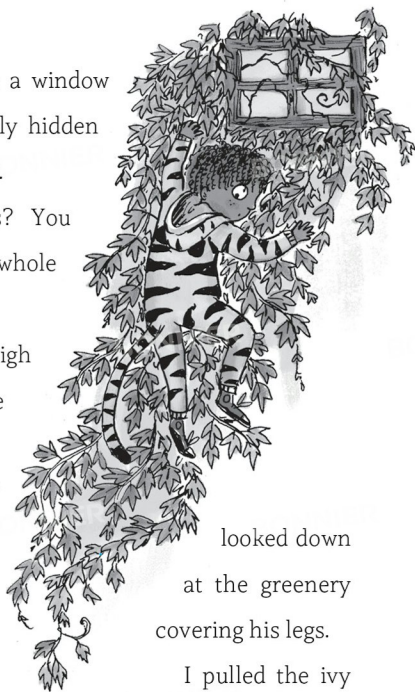
and he

looked down at the greenery covering his legs.

I pulled the ivy aside and he jumped down.

'Come on,' I said. 'We should go before someone sees us.'

But that was easier said than done, because this tree clearly had other ideas.



4 Awfulots, Monsters and Marauding Hedges

'We'll have to push our way through,' I said as we stared back at the tangle of dangly branches and leaves. 'We got in. We can get out.'

I started elbowing my way forward, keeping my hands up to protect my face. But it was like being in a jungle! I couldn't even see where I was leading Cal.

As we moved on, the tree murmured and creaked around us. Every time we took a step, our feet caught on the trailing ivy or stumbled over crisscrossing roots bursting through the ground. I felt my arm snag on a branch and was yanked back just as Cal toppled into me.

He grabbed me and clung on as I stared down at our feet and legs. They were wrapped in greenery that seemed to get tighter the more we tried to wriggle free.

'I don't like it,' Cal squeaked, brushing a rain of earwigs from his head that had tumbled down from somewhere above. 'Make it stop.'

His hand gripped my arm tighter. I didn't like it either, but I couldn't admit that.

I peered all around, hoping to see a way through. I couldn't figure out where the cabin was any more. It was like a veil of green had fallen and hidden the world away.

'Keep still,' I said as calmly as I could, and gently loosened the ivy round his feet so he could step away. Then I did the same with the tangle around my own. 'This way,' I said, picking a direction and hoping for the best.

But as I turned, I felt a branch jabbing into my side, pushing me, making me lurch the other way. I caught hold of Cal's hand before we could be separated. We

staggered on, poked and prodded by twiggy fingers, until finally the tree spat us out and we emerged, brushing leaves and bugs from our hair and faces.

'Not quite as tickly as the octopus tree,' I said, giving him a friendly nudge.

'It kept poking me,' he replied, and his words came out all juddery as he desperately tried to hold back the tears.

I remembered Rafi lobbing a biscuit at his little sister once when she was having a meltdown because he wouldn't let her draw all over his homework. 'Distract and divert,' he said his mum called it. Maybe that would work for tears too.

I didn't have any biscuits, but I did know something that might distract Cal.

I hunkered down behind one of the scrubby bushes nearby and put my finger on my lips.

'Do you want the Awfulots to see you?' I said.

'The what?' he asked mid-sniff, taking a step towards me.



I pulled him down and then, peering round the shrub, pointed towards a larger bush a little way in front.

‘Awful things the Awfulots. They guard Scrubby End.’ I shuddered dramatically and waved at the scrappy field. ‘We need to lead them away from our secret base.’ And I pointed to a huge broad tree further across the field that stood like a sentry on its own. ‘It’s up there. The best hidden headquarters ever.’

A flash of excitement lit up Cal’s face. ‘Brilliant!’ he said. All sniffs and soggy eyes were gone in an instant as he jumped feet first into the game.

I grinned, relieved at how fast he could bounce back. ‘Follow me,’ I said.

But Cal shook his head, pointed to a bush in the opposite direction and ran. I chased after him and we kept low, fanning out as we got closer. Suddenly Cal skidded to a halt and gave a gasp. At first I thought he was just really into the game and wondered what exactly he was imagining these Awfulots looked like, but as I caught up, the bush started to shake and I glimpsed something

moving behind it. Then I saw what was facing him and let out a gasp of my own.

It was a pig. But if you’re picturing a cute pink piglet, think again. This was a beast! A monster pig, mud caked onto its patches of black and pink skin. Its ears, pointed forward, were bigger than my hands. It turned to stare at me and it did not look happy.

Did pigs charge like bulls? I had no idea, but with the size of this thing Cal would be sent flying. And so would I.

The pig snorted and grunted and turned to look at Cal, who was frozen to the spot.

‘Run!’ I shouted.

And we both fled back towards the garden and the safety of the cottage, pursued by the blood-curdling squeals of the startled pig.

Breathless and panting, I couldn’t help thinking that we’d only just arrived and Cal had already gone snooping, got us attacked by a tree and now we were being chased by an angry wild pig. Honestly, did little brothers always get you into this much trouble?





As we sprinted up the garden Cal gave a squeal that was almost as blood-curdling as the pig's had been. He veered into me, nearly sending me flying, and out of the corner of my eye I saw what had startled him. Part of the hedge that ran down the garden had suddenly broken away and was lumbering towards us!

There was an even louder squeal from behind and I turned to see the beast thundering closer. With horror I realised that we were trapped between a savage pig and a marauding hedge monster! What kind of garden was this?

There was nowhere to hide. And they were gaining on us – fast!



I grabbed Cal and pulled him behind me. All I could think was that I was supposed to be in charge, that's what Mum had said. 'You're in charge, Iggy. Big brothers look after little brothers. You'll be brilliant.' Not sure she'd think I was doing very brilliantly so far!



Then just as I thought the beast would barrel into us, sending us flying like skittles, it shot past and ran straight at the shambling hedge. We watched open-mouthed as the hedge bent down and started scratching the pig behind the ears.



Then it stood and faced us, waved a leafy greeting and shuffled over.

'Don't mind Wellington – he won't bother you,' said the hedge brightly.

Cal peered round me and said crossly, 'He just chased us right out of that field.' He was clearly not bothered by the fact he was talking to a plant!

I wagged my glasses, wondering if I'd knocked them skewy and was missing something important. Hedges did not walk and talk.

'He was after these,' the hedge said.

A leafy branch dangled a bag of what looked like pieces of apple. I peered closer at the walking talking hedge and suddenly another branch reached up and swept a curtain of greenery aside to reveal a wrinkly face with two sparkly eyes.

As I stared, the hedge started lifting off the cascading garlands of green to reveal . . . a person! She was wearing baggy brown trousers and a knobbly



knitted green jumper and her short silvery grey hair was littered with leaves and sticks.

Cal cut straight to it. 'Why are you dressed like a tree?' he demanded.

'I'm preparing,' she said simply. She smiled down at the pig called Wellington, who I felt was now staring at me like I was a juicy piece of apple he wanted to take a giant bite out of.

'For what?' I asked.

'My May Fair celebrations. Jack of the Green needs to dance.'

And then she merrily – and very loudly – burst into song: 'We of the green will grow!'



Cal and I looked at each other and then back at her, none the wiser, but she just said, 'So you're the family who've rented my cottage?'

She peered a bit closer at us.

'It's not everyone's cup of tea. The last lot who turned up hardly got their feet in the door. Wasn't quite what they imagined, I think. But then we haven't had children at Greenacre for a very long time.'

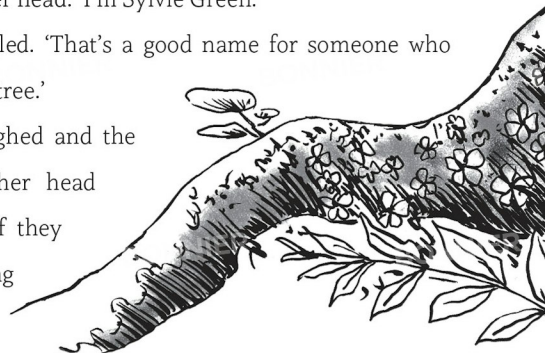
She glanced down at the pig and gave him another scratch.

'Might be just what the place needs, hey, Wellington?'

She bent and picked up a stick and added it to the clump on her head. 'I'm Sylvie Green.'

Cal giggled. 'That's a good name for someone who looks like a tree.'

She laughed and the leaves on her head rustled as if they were joining in the joke.



‘My name’s Cal,’ he said, then added in a voice that made it sound like he was announcing something gravely serious, ‘and this is my big brother, Iggy.’

I raised a hand to wave at Sylvie, and she gave a little nod. ‘Heading off for an explore, are you?’ she asked.

Cal’s eyes lit up. ‘We already have! And we got attacked by a tree!’ He pointed over at her cabin. ‘We were lucky to get out!’

I wondered if we were going to get a telling-off for going where we shouldn’t, but she just chuckled.

‘Yes, that one has got a bit unruly, hasn’t it? Willow trees grow fast and they’re not very easy to keep in check.’

Relieved that it didn’t look like we were in trouble, I asked, ‘Can we go in the wood too?’

‘As far as I’m concerned, you can explore as much as you like,’ she said. ‘Of course you’ll hear some people say all sorts of nonsense about Wildtop Wood.’

‘What sort of nonsense?’ I asked.



‘About it not being safe in there,’ replied Sylvie.

Cal quickly glanced over to the line of trees. ‘Are there monsters?’ he asked, alarmed.

Sylvie laughed again. ‘No monsters, no.’

‘So they’re wrong about it not being safe?’ I checked.

‘Well, I go in and out all the time and I look perfectly fine, don’t I?’

Cal sighed with relief, and before I had a chance to reply that, apart from looking like a tree herself, I thought she did, he butted in: ‘I want to make a den, Iggy. Can we?’

He turned to Sylvie. ‘And can we climb the trees?’

She shone a grin at him. ‘If you find a tree willing to let you climb it, you probably should. It’d be downright rude not to. You can have a little chat while you’re up there – trees and plants like a good natter. In fact, I’m just off to catch up with some oak saplings myself.’

Now it was my turn to laugh. ‘You don’t actually talk to them, do you?’

‘Of course,’ she said. ‘Trees are very good listeners.’




Cal crouched down and I swear I saw him whisper something to the grass, but then he jumped up again when Wellington gave a snort and took a step towards him. He quickly retreated behind me, keeping his wary eyes fixed on the pig.

When we got back up to the cottage, we found the wind had blown a branch of the octopus tree across the back door, stopping us from entering. I lifted it out of the way, but more light-green shoots tumbled down around us.

Even when we finally managed to make it through the door, I couldn't get it closed after us because the tree had left part of itself wedged there, like someone sticking their foot in the way, refusing to be locked out.

Even when we finally managed to make it through the door, I couldn't get it closed after us because the tree had left part of itself wedged there, like someone sticking their foot in the way, refusing to be locked out.

‘How are we going to get  back to our secret base?’ Cal asked, brushing leaves from his hair as I joined him at the kitchen table. ‘Have you got a plan? If we can’t get there without being chased by Wellington, what are we going to do?’

‘You being chased by a boot?’ Mitchell asked with a chuckle as he poured us both a glass of milk. ‘Makes a change from monsters, I guess.’

‘Not a wellington,’ I replied. ‘Wellington the pig.’

‘There’s a pig?’ Mum asked. ‘But they’re so sweet. Clever too.’

‘Not this one,’ Cal said fiercely. ‘Well, he might be clever but he’s definitely not sweet. He almost bit Iggy’s leg right off.’

Mum looked at me, alarmed.

‘He didn’t actually bite me,’ I said hastily.

‘But he could have,’ Cal said through a slurp of milk. ‘It’s lucky Sylvie was there to stop him.’

‘I’m sure he was just curious,’ Mum said, taking the cup of tea Mitchell had handed her and sitting down. ‘So

you’ve met Sylvie Green then? I’ve only spoken to her on the phone. What’s she like?’

Cal and I looked at each other.

‘Well, she’s definitely green,’ I said. And Cal giggled.



Later when I looked out the window, I could see Wellington standing guard beneath the apple trees. He stared back at me. It was clear that the Beast from Scrubby End was intent on barring our way.

Cal told me that he was one thousand per cent certain I’d figure it out. So, I guess I’d just have to get cracking and come up with something, since it looked like making plans was another thing big brothers were expected to do.

I stood in the doorway, hoping inspiration would strike, as Cal begged Mitchell to take a break from unpacking and watch some football with him. Mitchell readily agreed and started plugging in wires to set the TV up, while Cal dived onto the sofa as if he was saving the crucial goal.

'You going to join us?' Mitchell asked, slumping down and letting Cal tuck in next to him, but I shook my head.

I didn't really like football. When Mitchell had handed me a present of a brand-new football shirt on our first meeting, I wondered if he was hoping I'd throw myself into the game, like Cal. Instead I'd stuffed it down the back of my bed and hoped he wouldn't start talking to me about the offside rule, and, worse, expect me to know what he was on about. All I knew was I felt a bit 'offside' now, with them chatting away on the sofa.

'I'll give Mum a hand,' I said.

At which point they both cheered. But I hoped that was because of the goal someone had just scored, rather than anything I'd said.

Mum had got diverted from unpacking as well and was poring over a book.

'Is there anything in that book about dealing with pigs?' I asked.



'Not in this one,' Mum replied. 'But there's all sorts on

these shelves. And even more through in the hall.'

As I stood up from the table, something pinged off the back of my head. I rubbed the spot and looked around, confused.

'You OK, love?' Mum asked.

I nodded, my eyes now scanning the floor. An acorn rolled across the tiles and settled at my feet. Where on earth had that come from? I looked about and noticed another pair of



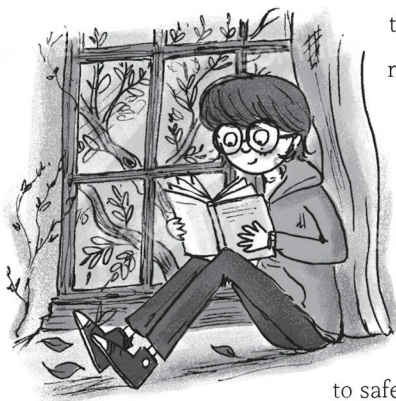
wooden bookend squirrels up on the dresser. These had also failed to hold up any books; they lay higgledy-piggledy along the shelf. The squirrels stared back at me. Unblinking. A thought slunk into my brain but promptly scarpered, too embarrassed to linger. Of course a wooden squirrel hadn't fired an acorn at me! Confused and still rubbing my head, I made my way into the hall.

There were two low bookshelves with a cushioned window seat sandwiched between them. A host of plants sat on top of the shelves, their spindly green fingers

hanging down and brushing the books. I recognised the messy sprouting leaves of a spider plant, like the one Miss Fariq had in class, hoarding a stack of books. A little wooden mouse was keeping them company behind the curtain of green.



I couldn't spot anything about pigs as I scanned the spines, just lots of books about plants and plumbing and thatch and boats and loads of storybooks. I perched on



the window seat and read a story about a merman who'd been captured by an angry fisherman and locked away in a tower, until he'd escaped and swum

to safety. And another tale about two huge dragons, one red and one white, flying over the countryside and fighting a terrible battle.



When I wiped the smeary glass of the window to let in a bit more light, I saw the branches of the octopus tree crowding up against the house again, like it was trying to read along with me.

'I wonder what sort of tree you are?' I murmured, remembering how Sylvie had mentioned the willow tree we'd fought our way through by her cabin. 'Apart from nosy and tickly that is!'

A moment later, as if the world had given it a friendly nudge, the answer basically landed in my lap. The pile of books guarded by the spider plant suddenly toppled, the topmost one sliding from the shelf onto the cushion beside me, making me jump.

I reached over and picked up the small green book. It was called *The Magic of Trees*. I glanced up and saw that the wooden mouse, which must have been sent reeling by the tumbling stack, was now teetering on the edge, peering down at the book in my hands. I gently nudged it back, so it didn't fall off as well.



Then I opened the book and slowly turned the pages. It was full of all sorts of trees, with close-up illustrations of leaves and bark.

Every few pages I looked up to try to match what I was seeing in the book to what was waving at me from outside the window.

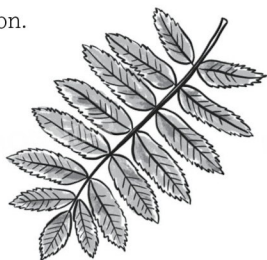
Eventually I settled on a page. This tree had leaves – the book called them ‘leaflets’ – arranged in pairs along a stem, with another leaflet at the end. They were long and oval and had wiggly edges, which it called ‘serrated’. They were just like the ones on the octopus tree! I spun round, delighted, holding up the illustration.

‘So you’re a rowan?’

And then I lowered my voice. Because I hadn’t actually meant to start talking to trees!

I went back to the book.

‘The rowan tree is well known for being magical and is often planted close to houses for protection. It is said that rowans prevent travellers from getting lost, and there are



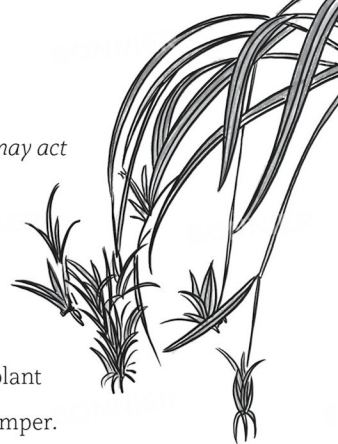
those who believe the rowan tree may act as a portal.’

I suddenly felt a shiver run down my spine.

And I realised one of the spindly tendrils of the spider plant had wriggled its way down my jumper.

I looked back out at the octopus tree. This probably sounds weird, but the way it was moving made me feel like it was properly waving at me.

And this might sound even weirder, but before I could stop myself, I actually waved back.





The next day started wet, rain spilling down the windows and gurgling from the overflowing gutters. We'd have happily gone exploring despite the sogginess, but it turned out Wellington liked the rain too and he had taken up residence in a muddy puddle even closer to the cottage. Every time we looked out the window, he was staring right at us, like he was daring us to even attempt to get past him.

Mum and Mitchell kept trying to reassure us that Wellington was perfectly harmless, but then Mitchell had gone out to see if he could find Sylvie and dashed back in looking flustered.



'That is a big pig,' he'd huffed.

And after that no one mentioned going out again.



Instead we spent the next two days either cooped up inside or traipsing in and out of shops. Mitchell had got a job as the Head of Geography at the nearby secondary school, so he was scouring the local charity shops looking for things to decorate his classroom. And Mum was putting up her 'Better Call Mel' fliers. They listed everything from teaching beginner French to painting and decorating to community craft workshops and party planning. The list went on and on. Basically there wasn't much my mum couldn't do. She'd been everyone's go-to person back at home and she said she just needed to get the word out here now.

The village was so much smaller than the city I was used to. There wasn't a big fancy playground like the one near our old flat, just a little one next to the supermarket with a couple of swings and a broken roundabout.



The whole thing made Cal even more fidgety to get out to play at home. I could feel him getting frustrated with me for not coming up with a pig plan yet.

‘Oh, will you look at that?’ Mum said crossly as we came out of the supermarket on the second afternoon. ‘I only put that flier up yesterday and someone’s gone and covered it up already.’

She unpinned the poster and was about to move it further along so people could clearly read both when there was a loud, ‘Excuse me’, from behind us.

‘That’s important information,’ the voice continued. A woman wearing a smartly ironed shirt and grey trousers with a pleat you could cut your finger on pushed past me and snatched the poster out of Mum’s hands. ‘You can’t just take community meeting information off the board.’

Mum was obviously a bit flustered, but she held her ground. Calmly, she said, ‘I was just moving it a little. I have information too I’d like people to see.’ And she pointed at her own flier.



The woman peered at it and then spun round to focus her gaze on a girl who was standing quietly behind her. She was about the same age as me, though quite a lot taller. She had short spiky red hair and, by the looks of the white shirt and buckled belt with plastic cutlass that she was wearing, appeared to be mostly pirate.

‘Oh, for heaven’s sake, Lavender,’ the woman scolded. ‘I apologise for my daughter,’ she added, turning back to Mum.

And I wondered if it was the way the girl had positioned the flier she was apologising for, or the whole of her daughter.



‘I’m Councillor Thornwood,’ she went on, hastily pinning her poster onto the board and then turning back to take Mum’s hand in a stiff handshake.

‘Mel,’ Mum replied. ‘We’ve just moved here.’

Councillor Thornwood gave us the sort of smile that looked like it had been ordered to be there and would quite happily slink off again as soon as it got the chance. ‘Well, welcome to our little neck of the woods.’

Her gaze flicked over to me and Cal. ‘You two will be delighted to hear that there’s a new supervised play area opening next week. There’s plenty to keep you occupied and out of trouble round here.’

Mum turned to us. ‘That sounds good, doesn’t it?’ She looked back at Councillor Thornwood and added, ‘They’ve enjoyed exploring the place so far. We’re renting Sylvie Green’s cottage. Do you know her?’

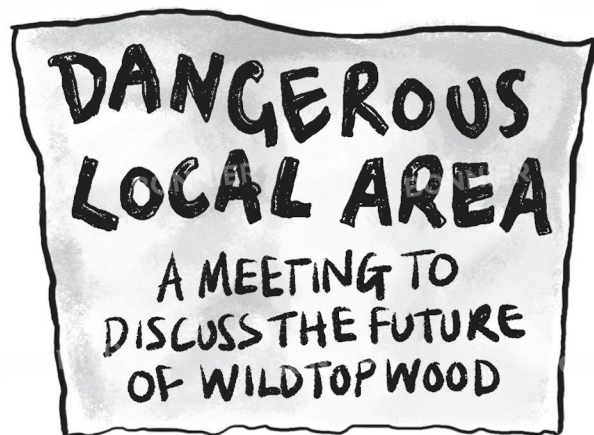
The councillor let out a snort of laughter. ‘Oh yes, everyone knows Sylvie. Our self-appointed Guardian of

the Green.’ She rolled her eyes. ‘As if none of the rest of us are doing our bit,’ she added huffily. ‘We won Village in Bloom three years running, thanks to my efforts, I’ll have you know.’

When none of us burst into applause at this, she shook off the disappointment and continued.

‘You really should come along to this meeting.’ And she jabbed the poster with her finger.

We all paused to actually read the headline. In black letters were the words:





And underneath there was a picture of some trees with a hazard sign plastered across them.

I glanced at Cal, whose eyes had just got very wide.

'Looks like we've just met one of the people Sylvie warned us about,' I whispered as we headed back to the car. 'I wonder why she thinks the wood is so dangerous.'

'Sylvie doesn't think it is and surely she should know,' Cal insisted, clearly trying to reassure himself.

I nodded.

'Exactly. Anyway, who calls a playground a "supervised play area"?'



'Do you think Sylvie has someone who helps in the garden?' Mum said when we pulled up at the cottage. 'Or is it up to us to keep it under control?'

'It's probably up to us while we're here,' Mitchell said.

'I don't remember it being this overgrown in the photos,' said Mum, sounding a bit weary.

'I don't remember it being this overgrown three days ago!' Mitchell replied with a laugh. 'There has been a lot of rain. I guess things just grow quicker in the countryside.'

'They do in our patch,' Mum said. 'We seem to have got the one house in the street that's been built in a jungle.'

She wasn't wrong. The straggly grass of the front garden was up to our waists and went all the way to the ivy-clad walls of the cottage. You could hardly see the bricks as the whole cottage looked green. It was definitely living up to its name of Greenacre! Even the hedge down the side of the house had elbowed its way further and further across the gap, so that inquisitive twigs snagged our clothes as we passed. And we had to tread carefully over clumps of tiny pink flowers that burst out of cracks between the paving slabs of the path.

Everywhere we looked, things were growing at an alarming rate.

It wasn't just outside either. Inside, the plants we lived with were growing bigger and glossier all the time. A parade of leaves constantly brushed our faces as we passed them in the hall, and Mum had needed to move several of the pots in the kitchen because leafy tendrils kept dangling into what

she or Mitchell were cooking, as if they were taste-testing our meals.

At bedtime that evening Cal came running out of the bathroom waving his toothbrush at me, a horrified look on his face.

'It's green,' he said. And once he'd stopped flicking it in my face so I could see it properly, I realised he was right. The bristles were coated in a layer of furry moss.

'Have you noticed the amount of moss on the sills and frames?' Mum said. 'We won't be able to see out soon! Some probably fell off the window frame and landed in the pot.'

Cal shook his head. 'I think it grew there.'

Had it? I was beginning to wonder. Every time we woke up, we were met by more and more flowers blooming. No longer bedraggled, they bobbed their colourful faces and threw their leafy arms out wide. Would we wake up to find moss growing on us next? Just this morning I'd found a heap of acorns in my bed and a coil of ivy tangled in my trousers.

Suddenly the words Sylvie had sung flew into my head:

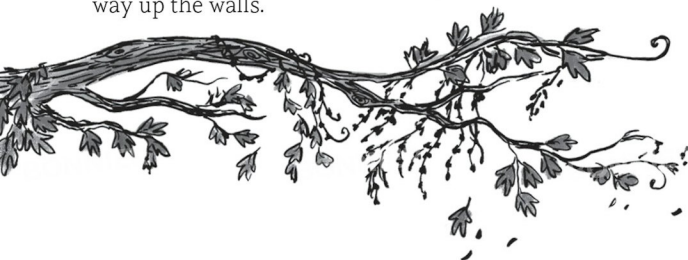
'We of the green will grow!'

Well, there was no question, the green was definitely growing!



It must have been all the wildly growing greenery that set off the dream I had that night.

I was lying in bed covered in so many leaves I looked like an abominable leaf monster! Spindly branches twined around my legs, and stems with unfurling buds were stretching from floor to ceiling. A cascade of ivy tumbled in through the half-open window, clambering its way up the walls.



You know the picture book with the Wild Things and the kid Max who wakes up and finds grass and trees growing all round his bed? Well, that was my room.



I watched as one long yellowy-green tendril wound across the floor and up towards my face, like an outstretched finger. It was getting dangerously close, so close it could be about to pick my nose!

Then something started tugging at my leg, dragging me down the bed. More leafy stems pulled me upright



and I found myself being lifted and carried towards the open window. The octopus tree reached towards me and coiled around my arms, pulling me until my face felt the clear fresh air. And then it gently lifted me into its branches. All around me, leaves rustled and whispered. I began to climb, knotty bark and damp wood against my hands. I clambered through a world that smelled earthy and warm. The rustling followed me, overtook me and then led me on.

Until at last my head emerged from the treetop. I gazed out, but instead of the usual garden view there was a vast sea of trees. They had swept up the garden and filled it. Silvery moonlight dappled their leaves, making them shimmer with a bright green glow. I rested my open

hands on the fanned leaves of the octopus tree, fingertip to leafy fingertip, and gazed out over them.

In places I spotted trees that were taller than the rest. The nearest one looked just like the sentry tree I'd

told Cal we'd have our secret base in; it had the same sturdy broad arms and round lobed leaves. Some of its branches reached towards me, while others waved further into the distance. I saw the wave get passed from one tall tree to the next, until all of those that peeked over the canopy of the wood were waving. Around me, the rustling that filled the air grew louder, more urgent.

I felt myself leaning forward. I wanted to leap from tree to tree. To chase after the excited wave and disappear with it through the treetops.

Then the tugging began again.

Tug. Tug. Tug.





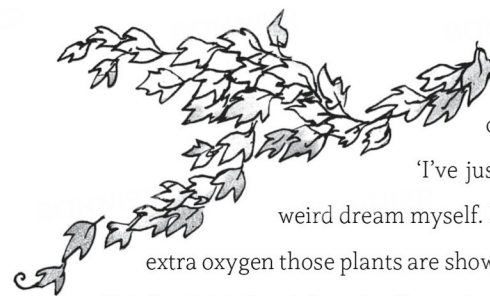
9 Chaos in the Kitchen

The next second I was being tugged back into the room and out of sleep by Cal.

My eyes snapped open and I stared down at the covers. No leaves.

‘Tiny’s scared,’ Cal said, pulling at my sleeve and holding out the little wooden elephant. ‘She keeps lifting her trunk like she’s doing that trumpety thing, and don’t they do that when they’re frightened?’

I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes. ‘Maybe something was chasing her in your dream?’ I suggested, hoping my next enormous yawn would remind him it was the middle



of the night.

‘I’ve just had a pretty weird dream myself. Must be all the extra oxygen those plants are showering us with.’

Cal shook his head fiercely. ‘I wasn’t dreaming. She was right in front of me, bouncing on my tummy like I was a trampoline. Then she started running up and down my bed. What if she’s a watch-elephant and is trying to raise the alarm?’

I opened my mouth, but then shut it again, unsure what to say.

‘Maybe you should try and get some sleep,’ I said.

Before he could protest, there was a CRASH from downstairs. We looked at each other, alarmed.

‘I told you!’ he hissed. ‘It’s burglars!’ he added, sounding more excited than afraid. ‘Let’s catch them! We’ll probably get a reward.’

‘Not when it’s your own house,’ I said. ‘Anyway, it was probably just the wind.’ But Cal was looking at me like I was some kind of superhero and he was my sidekick,



waiting for me to jump into action.

‘OK,’ I said, clambering out of bed. ‘You wait here. I’ll go and investigate.’

I grabbed the wooden duck that stood by the door. If there was a burglar, at least I could throw it as a distraction.

‘I’m coming too,’ Cal whispered, and clung on to the back of my onesie.

We crept downstairs and I gingerly opened the door to the kitchen, holding the duck out ahead of us.

‘What a mess!’ Cal said, peeping round me to get a good look.

The table where Mitchell had left things out for breakfast was a sea of oatly flakes spilling out from a box on its side. There were several upended breakfast bowls, rising up through the flakes like the humped backs of whales.



A cup lay smashed on the tiled floor, which must have been the crash we’d heard. Books had tumbled from the bookshelf next to the window and there seemed to be a layer of white floury dust over everything. One of the taps was running too and I hurried over to the sink to turn it off.

As I did, I felt something hit the back of my head. I spun round to see Cal by the dresser, a little pile of acorns in his hand.

‘Hey!’ I hissed. ‘What did you do that for?’

‘Um . . . I didn’t,’ he said slowly. He pointed up to the top of the dresser. ‘The squirrel did.’

I looked at where he was pointing and saw the wooden squirrel bookend.

‘Not funny, Cal,’ I whispered back.

‘I don’t think she was aiming at you,’ he added. ‘I think she was trying to hit that other squirrel.’ He pointed behind me to another squirrel, on the floor by some wellies. ‘Maybe they’re having a fight.’

‘Don’t be daft,’ I said. Although I was beginning to have a slightly odd feeling in my tummy. Why weren’t



the squirrels next to each other on the shelf where they'd been earlier?

'I'm not daft,' Cal said crossly. 'And I wasn't dreaming.'

And with that he reached into his pocket, lifted out the elephant and gently placed her on the table.

He stared at her for a second or two and I wondered what he was waiting for – and then she charged.



'I told you!' Cal cried.

But before I could reply, the duck I was holding slowly turned its head and stared right at me. I dropped it onto the table and stepped back, my eyes darting between it and Tiny, who was now racing past the teapot.

I stared open-mouthed as the little wooden elephant skidded to a halt at the edge of the table, where she began stamping up and down, waving her trunk and shaking her head back and forth so her ears flapped wildly.

And then the room exploded into life.

Two miniature wooden mice scampered out of the

The thoughts in my head were running in circles like the excited elephant, and tumbling over themselves just as often.

‘What’s happening?’ I cried.

And just as suddenly, the mayhem stopped.

‘Why aren’t they moving?’ Cal asked, which made me stifle a giggle as a few seconds ago it had been the exact opposite question bursting out of me.

Every creature in the room was frozen, eyes fixed on us like they were waiting for us to do something. But what?

Eventually the fox took a step closer and prodded my foot with its nose. It turned its head to look at Tiny’s mum who was standing beside one of the wellies at the back door. She shuffled forward slowly and lifted her trunk a little, ears rippling. She was not as full of bounce as Tiny, but I could tell she was excited.

I stepped back from another nudge by the fox, just as a lone acorn arced over my head and dropped into one of the boots by the door. Both wellies, I saw now, were overflowing with acorns.

I think I understood a split second before the next acorn ricocheted off my head, but then again maybe the squirrel’s last shot finally tapped the idea into my brain. Picturing the heap of acorns I’d found in my bed, I laughed.



‘I think they’ve been trying to tell us how to deal with the pig!’

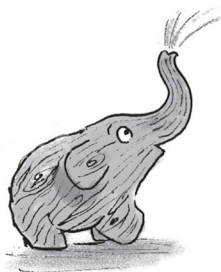
Cal looked utterly confused.

I pointed at the green welly. ‘I think Wellington loves acorns!’

A grin spread across his face as he understood.

And the room erupted once more.

It was pretty clear from the way the squirrels were racing up and down and the mice were leaping left, right and centre that I was right. The whole room’s spirits had lifted with relief that we’d cottoned on at last. Tiny looked set to fall off the table in her eagerness to reach her mum,



so Cal quickly lifted her down. She ran in circles round the bigger elephant, trunk held high in a triumphant trumpet.

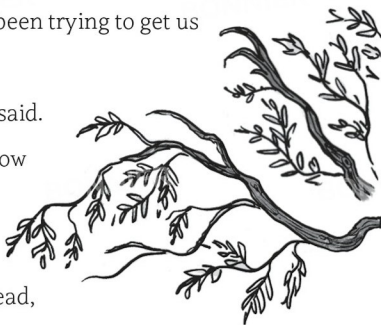
'It looks like they're just as keen for us to get out there as we are,' I said.

Then I noticed the leaves of the octopus tree pressed up against the window, each one waving cheerily at us. I remembered the branches pointing down the garden and the way it had barred the door earlier.

'I think maybe the tree's been trying to get us outside too.'

'The octopus tree?' Cal said. He hurried over to the window and pushed it open, and a leafy branch shot in and brushed the top of his head, ruffling his hair.

He laughed, delighted, and scooped up Tiny. 'This is amazing. Weird. But amazing!'



He grinned at the little elephant stamping up and down happily on the palm of his hand. 'But how can it be happening?'

I stared back at him. He really thought I knew the answer to that? I was having enough trouble just wrapping my head around the dancing wooden elephant in front of my nose. I reached out to rescue a little mouse who, being much slower than the rest, looked in danger of being jumped on by their madly leaping friends. I gently placed the mouse by the duck I'd brought down from the bedroom. Unlike the other animals, it had stood sedately to the side, turning its head slowly back and forth as it witnessed the games unfolding.

'I have no idea,' I said at last. 'But I bet if anyone knows, it's Sylvie. She must know about this lot living in her house. Especially when they make so much mess!'

Cal grinned at me. 'I knew you'd know what to do! Let's go and ask her.'

He peered out the window through the still waving leaves.



‘Not in the middle of the night,’ I said. ‘We can’t go banging on her door and waking her up right now.’

‘I think she’s already up,’ Cal answered. And he pointed.

Way down at the bottom of the garden I could make out the huge outline of the tree where the cabin stood shrouded in leaves. And as I looked, I noticed there was a light. It swung from side to side as it moved slowly away from the cabin. Eyes fixed, we watched the light float away, inching its way out across the stretch of field.

Until finally it disappeared into the wood.



The animals were experts at making a mess, but they weren't very helpful when it came to tidying up. By the time we'd crawled back into bed we were both grubby and exhausted. But the grins hadn't left our faces for a second.

The next morning the animals were clearly excited for us to put our pig defence plan into action. They woke us at the crack of dawn, Tiny trampling on Cal's tummy and the squirrels leaping onto my face! They scarpered pretty quickly when they heard Mum come down the hall. She stuck her head round the door, groaning about early morning wake-up screams. I guess I must have

shrieked pretty loudly at the squirrel alarm clock.

We didn't mind the early start though. We were eager to rush out to Sylvie's cabin, though a bit less eager to face Wellington. Armed with acorns, we tentatively stepped outside. And were immediately met by the excited rustling of the octopus tree, who shooed us past with fluttering leaves.

I wish I could say that I felt brave walking down the garden, but the further I went, the more my hand began to shake. So much, in fact, that a trail of acorns had already spilled out of the cloth bag I was holding.

'We are sure about this plan, aren't we?' Cal asked nervously, eyes darting from side to side as he kept watch for surprise pig attacks.

I quickly nodded. And I went back to telling myself, 'Big brothers are brave,' over and over in my head.

But when Wellington appeared, I knew I wasn't brave. And even if there had been a tiny shred of brave growing in me, it had already legged it back to the house. Cal was

backing away, muttering that at least monsters only came out at night.

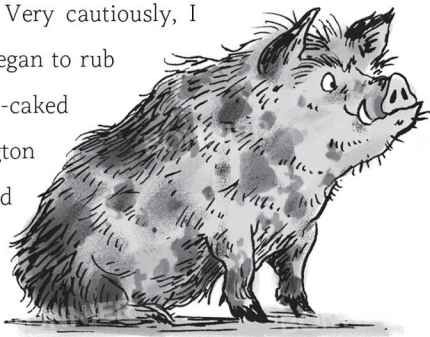
Wellington gave a snort and started barrelling towards us. I pushed Cal ahead of me as I broke into a run. 'Distract and divert' rushed into my mind and I quickly grabbed a handful of acorns and threw them into the air. But I'm not good at throwing, and instead of flying outwards into Wellington's path, they launched upwards and then rained down on us, making us even more of a target!

I started backing away, preparing to run back to the safety of the cottage, when I tripped on a root sticking out of the ground that I was convinced hadn't been there before. I fell and instinctively curled into a ball to brace for full-on pig attack. At least, I thought, as I closed my eyes, I'd buy Cal some time to get away.

But I didn't get eaten or even bitten. Instead Wellington started munching away at the acorns around me, giving deep contented grunts. As I started to clamber to my feet, the pig leaned against me, nearly pushing me

over. But when he nudged my hand with his head, I realised he was just looking for more treats.

I remembered the way Sylvie had scratched him between the ears. Very cautiously, I reached out and began to rub the pig's hairy mud-caked skin. And Wellington huffed happily and promptly sat down like a giant dog at my heel.



To say Cal was impressed was an understatement.

‘Iggy! You did it!’ he cried.

With Wellington trotting beside me, we hurried down the garden, both of us excited now to find Sylvie and see what she could tell us.

I skidded to a halt, about to knock, when I saw the door was already slightly ajar.

‘Er . . . hello?’ I said as I pushed it open and peered in.

But there was no one there. I stepped into the cabin

and Cal followed. It was cosy inside, with a little kitchen area and a ladder leading up to a platform with a bed on it, that stuck out over part of the room. At the back, I spotted the window that must have been the one Cal had tried to see through. It was completely covered by a blanket of green; in fact the ivy was curling in through a gap and growing along the edges of the bed. The messy tangle had even started tumbling down the steps to the floor.



Around us, the walls were lined with shelves crammed with jars, books, saucepans and plants, and in the centre of the room was a table covered in tools and pieces of wood. A few were carved into spoons with petals on the handles and there was one that looked like it was on its way to becoming a duck.

Cal looked triumphant. ‘See, she must know! She makes them,’ he said. ‘She’s got to know what’s going on in the cottage.’

Then there was a creak and a voice piped up:

‘And what exactly is going on up there?’



We both spun round expecting to see Sylvie, or if not her then the leafy outline of Hedge Sylvie. But instead, standing in the doorway, there was a girl about my age wearing blue dungarees, shiny green boots and a hat made out of sticks.

She grinned at us and waggled her sticky head.

'I saw you move in,' she said. 'I see a lot of things.' She looked us up and down and I shifted uncomfortably. I don't always like people looking at me that closely. Sometimes I see their eyes widen when they spot my birthmark. It's mostly hidden by my long hair, you see,



but the tail of it curls right across my cheek. I say tail because when we first met each other, Cal told me it looked like a dragon and said he wished he had a cool dragon on his face. Mum did a little grimace because she knows I don't really like people saying stuff about it, but I'd much rather Cal think it was cool than whisper about it like some kids do. I actually liked the idea of my own personal dragon curled round my neck protecting me. Anyway, the girl's eyes stayed their normal size, although on laser focus, and they seemed more interested in the duck I'd picked up from the table.

'You're in our garden,' I said. 'And why is your head covered in sticks?'

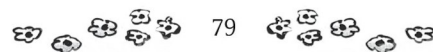


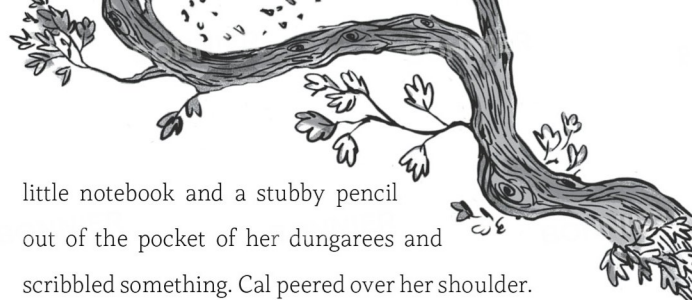
'Camouflage!' she declared, taking off her hat. Then quickly she added, 'I wasn't spying on you though. I was spying on the cabin.'

'Are you really a spy?' Cal asked, incredulous.

'Unofficial,' she said. 'I've gone rogue.'

Cal pointed to her blue hearing aids. 'Are they part of your spy gear?'





She laughed. 'Not exactly. But they're pretty handy. They help me hear stuff.'

'Oh, right. So, if you're not official, does that mean you can tell us your name?' he said. 'I'm Cal and this is Iggy. We're brothers.'

'Hello, brothers Cal and Iggy,' she said. 'I can tell you my name, but I'll have to swear you to secrecy.' She looked about her as if some dastardly villain might jump out from behind a cupboard.

Cal held out his little finger gravely.

She linked hers with his and said seriously, 'It's Mae. Ready to protect.'

Then she wagged her little finger at him and said, 'My pinkie is a lethal weapon.'

Cal giggled.

Not wanting Sylvie to come back and find us in her cabin, I headed outside and they both followed.

'Seriously,' I said, turning back to them, 'why are you spying on Sylvie?'

'Is that her name?' Mae asked eagerly. She took a

little notebook and a stubby pencil out of the pocket of her dungarees and scribbled something. Cal peered over her shoulder.

'I've been recording everything,' she said. 'I mean, it's not heaps yet because we only moved in a week ago.' And she pointed to the large house that towered over Sylvie's cottage. 'But things are afoot, believe me.'

Cal stared down at her boots, looking confused. 'What's that mean?' he whispered to me.

'I can't hear when you whisper,' Mae said. 'At least, not when you're talking to my feet.' She grinned at him and he repeated what he'd said.

'It means, things are happening,' she explained, and then added eagerly, 'So what have you seen?'

I wasn't sure admitting that we'd been wrestling trees and seen a load of wooden animals come to life was the kind of thing to share with someone I'd only just met. What if the things she was talking about were ordinary boring things and she was just playing some kind of spy

game? While I tried to decide what to tell her, Cal clearly had no hesitation.

He reached into his pocket and brought out the little elephant. Tiny stood still on his palm as Mae peered down. Then she raised her trunk, flicking Mae on the nose. Mae leaped back and laughed with delight.

'Brilliant!' she cried.



'And there's more,' Cal shared excitedly.

'There are squirrels and mice and a really pretty bee.'

He laughed as the bee with the gold-tipped wings suddenly buzzed out of my hood.

I sprang to the side in surprise.

'You had a stowaway this whole time,' Cal said happily.

The bee flew around my head before settling on my outstretched hand.

'I knew it!' Mae said. 'I saw a squirrel the other day,' she explained. 'It ran down our garden and through the hedge into yours. But it wasn't fluffy or furry. It looked like it was made of wood. I pushed my way through, but it had already disappeared. I'm pretty sure there was a fox too. And that's not all. Have you two noticed how stuff grows really fast round here?'



Cal and I looked at each other. Quickly I described the greenery erupting around the house and the tree barging its way into our room. And how we couldn't even clean our teeth without getting a mouthful of moss.

When I stopped talking, Mae beamed at us, as if now finally the adventure could properly begin.



'So what do *you* think is going on?' Mae asked me.

I shrugged. 'We don't know. That's why we came to find Sylvie.'

'Maybe she's still in the wood,' Cal said. And he told Mae about seeing the light disappear into the trees the night before.

Mae quickly rifled through the pages of her notebook. 'I've seen her go in and out of the wood loads – I've got times and everything. It's weird because my mum went on and on about not going in there because she's been told it isn't safe.'

‘That’s what we heard yesterday,’ I said. ‘There’s even a meeting about Wildtop Wood.’

‘But it’s not what Sylvie said, is it, Iggy?’ Cal insisted. ‘And you said she wouldn’t tell us it was OK to explore if there really was anything dangerous in there.’

He turned to look up at me and I knew exactly what he was asking. What kind of big brother are you going to be? Awesome cool exciting big brother who’s up for exploring, or boring big brother?

Mae looked at me just as expectantly.

‘We should go in and find her,’ I said, making a snap decision.

And they both grinned.



‘So how do we get in?’ Cal asked as we stood at the edge of the wood.

He had a point. In front of us there was a wildly matted tangle of undergrowth. Dark green nettles as tall as us barricaded the gaps between the trees, and dense



spiky stuff that Mae said was bracken grew around their trunks. We went up and down, looking for a path or a way through.

‘I know a nettle rash isn’t exactly high danger,’ I said. ‘But it’s not much fun either. Maybe this isn’t such a good idea.’

But Mae shook her head and suddenly took the plunge.

‘I’m going in,’ she cried heroically, holding her arms in front of her face as she pushed her way through. I was about to follow when Cal

shouted my name. I turned and saw that he’d wandered further along and was crouching down.

‘Hang on,’ I said to Mae. I hurried over to him, wondering if he’d hurt himself.

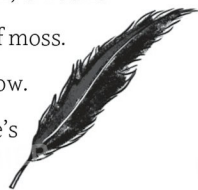
‘Look at these,’ he said, and pointed to a low tree stump.



On the surface was a shallow indent, and collected inside it were a long black feather that glinted purple in the light, a piece of blue-tinged eggshell, a round pebble, a broad leaf and a small mound of moss.

They were all laid out carefully in a row.

'That's weird,' I said. 'It's like someone's displaying a collection.'



'I know,' Cal agreed. 'Like I do with all my animal rubbers,' he added.

Tiny, who was standing in his T-shirt pocket, waved her little trunk back and forth, clearly excited by what we'd found.

Then I noticed something scratched into the wood around the top of the dip.

'The Green is waiting.'

The gold-tipped bee, who had followed us all the way across the field, now flew down and bumbled around in front of me, its wings a golden blur and its antennae twitching. After a few moments, it buzzed away into the wood.



We grinned at each other, eager to find a way through and follow it.

Just before we set off, I reached into my hoodie and brought out a shiny acorn.

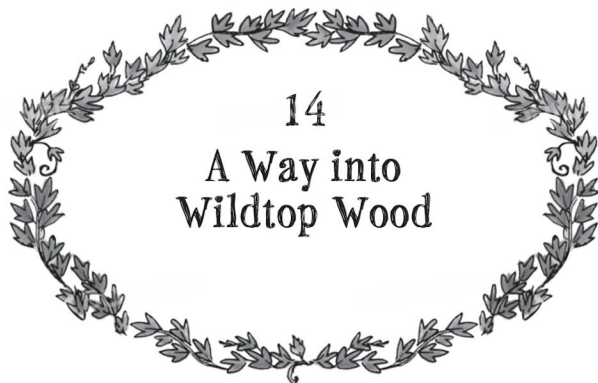
'I still keep finding them in my pockets,' I said, and laid it on the tree stump, our own little treasure that had helped us get this far.

'It's weird to think there's a whole tree inside one of these,' I added. 'Just imagine how many trees there'd be in Sylvie's house right now if all those acorns started growing!'

Cal's eyes got wide and he peered down at the seed warily, like a tree might suddenly shoot out fully grown and hit him in the face.

And then suddenly there was a shriek, and Mae yelled, 'Help!'





Thanks to the bracken, Mae hadn't spotted a ditch that ran along the edge of the wood like a shallow moat. She'd slipped down into it and got stuck. Her sleeves were snagged in the trailing branches of a small gnarly tree and, with her arms up, she looked like a puppet on a string, dangling there.

It took both of us to untangle her clothes and help her to safety. She stood next to us, shaking her soggy, muddy trainers.

'I thought you were right behind me,' she said.

'I was,' I replied, wiping mud off my own shoe, 'but



then Cal found something. I said, "Hang on".'

'I didn't hear you,' she said a bit crossly.

'Sorry,' I said quickly. 'I should have waited to make sure you had.'

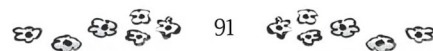
'It's just easier to hear when you're looking at me and we're closer,' said Mae. 'I can lip read then too. Let's keep looking. Sylvie goes in and out all the time, so there must be ways through.'

And then I saw the perfect opening. A parting in the tangle of nettles between two of the trees. There was even a log we could use to cross the ditch. It was right in front of where Cal and I had been standing by the tree stump. How we'd missed it I don't know!

'Look,' I said, pointing to it.

We still had to wriggle through loads of straggly and really sticky green stems. But these were a lot more friendly than nettles, clinging onto us as we passed like they were excited to hitch a ride.

By the time we'd clambered through we looked mostly green ourselves.



‘There’s loads of this stuff down the end of our garden,’ Mae said. ‘Dad told me it’s called “catchweed” – I can see why now!’



‘At least we’re camouflaged.’ Cal giggled as he rearranged some of the stems into a furry green collar.

Once we were past the first wave of tangly undergrowth the wood became a different place altogether. For one thing it was much quieter. In the dappled cover of the trees it was hushed; even the rustle of leaves was a whisper. It almost felt as though the trees were waiting to see what we would do. And as I thought about the octopus tree, I wondered if maybe they were.

One tree with reddish-brown bark leaned low over us, like it was curious to get a better look, and I could hear the gentle buzz of bees humming from its branches. Rabbits, startled by our appearance, hopped away, disappearing into hidden burrows. And above us a blackbird opened its yellow beak and suddenly began to sing, sharing the news of our arrival.



Standing there, it felt like I’d walked into a kaleidoscope and all the colours were flickering into focus. I’d never noticed how many different greens there were in the world! There were other colours too, orange and vivid red leaves and blue from the bell-shaped flowers that swept around our feet. Mae was grinning as she took it all in.

Suddenly Cal gave a gasp and squeaked, ‘Over there!’

He ran off through the trees and I quickly hurried after him, wondering how much time big brothers spent chasing after small brothers, because in my limited experience it was turning out to be quite a lot!

‘What is it?’ Mae asked as she ran alongside.

‘I don’t know. He spotted something,’ I said. ‘Maybe it was Sylvie.’

‘It was a deer,’ Cal called back as he slowed down. ‘But it’s gone now. I think it was hurt because it was limping a bit.’

‘Let’s split up and look for it,’ Mae said at once. ‘It might need our help.’



I searched around, but I couldn't see any sign of the deer among the flowers. I walked on with the blue ebbing and flowing around my feet, until after a bit I heard Cal calling out. I turned and saw him standing with Mae, cradling something.

'I found her!' he cried happily.

'Is she OK?' I called back.

He stared down at the little deer in his arms. 'She's a bit -' he hunted around for the right word - 'gappy.'

'Gappy?' I asked.

Confused, I hurried over to them. A head, peeking over his arm, saw me and then nestled down again. And my eyes nearly popped out. This little deer was made of sticks!



'What on earth . . . ?' I said, bending closer to take a better look. I couldn't get over how all those mismatched sticks could come together and, despite the odd angles and holes, still look so perfectly deer-like. I reached out a finger and the deer snuffled at it, making me laugh out loud.

'She's hurt,' Cal said. 'Her leg is bent.'

'Isn't it supposed to be like that?' I said, stroking her head. 'It's just the way the stick is.'

He looked again. 'Oh yeah,' he said. 'Do you think Sylvie made her too?'

He gently lowered her to the ground and the deer stood there, staring up at us. Then she sprang away. She did lurch about a bit, but she looked just as bouncy as Cal. A moment later, she stopped, turned and looked back at us.

'She wants to play,' he said, delighted, and bounded after the deer with Mae at his heels.

Just as something huge bounded out of the trees straight at me!

15 A Thorny Encounter

I've always wanted to fly – that would be my wish if I ever met a genie, and my superpower if I ever got to choose

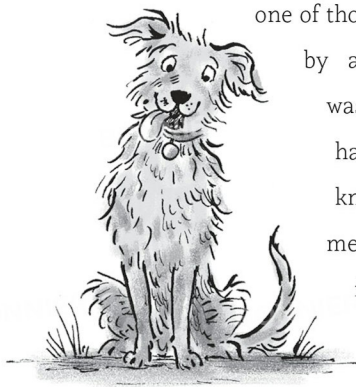
one of those. But being sent flying

by a massive shaggy dog wasn't the kind of flying I'd

had in mind. The landing knocked the breath out of

me and left me with a face full of leaf. I was also

pinned to the ground by two muddy paws.



Luckily I quickly discovered I was in more danger of being licked to death than mauled! I rolled over, gently pushing the dog off. It sat down in front of me, head cocked to the side, tongue lolling and tail wagging so hard it sent leaves scattering.

I glanced around for an owner, but there was only Mae and Cal, who, having lost sight of the deer, were now hurrying over.

'Hey, who's this?' Mae said as the dog bounded towards them.

'I don't know, but they're friendly,' I called quickly, reassuring Cal, who was looking a bit nervous of the overexcitable shaggy hound.

Then there was a shout: 'Artemis. Art-e-mis!'

Instead of returning obediently, Artemis started barking wildly and running round in circles as if unsure where the voice was coming from.

'Quick, grab her collar,' I said as the dog went past Mae. 'Before she gets herself completely lost in here.'

Thanks to some string Mae fished out of her pocket,



we fashioned a lead and led Artemis back out of the wood.

If I thought we were going to get a relieved owner showering us with thanks, I was catastrophically wrong. Instead, as we emerged from between the trees, we were met by someone giving a sharp intake of breath and hissing, 'You're not supposed to go in there.'

It was the red-haired girl, Lavender, who we'd seen outside the supermarket. This time she was wearing a pair of gauzy butterfly wings with a bow slung over her shoulder. Before I could brace myself, her mother strode up. Councillor Thornwood's eyes flicked between us and then down to her disobedient dog. It was hard to say who she was more disappointed by.

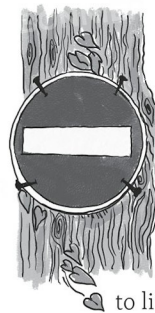
She snatched the string out of Mae's hand and quickly snapped her own robust lead onto Artemis's collar.

'I thought I warned you the other day about this wood,' she said. 'It's not safe.'

Then I noticed the signs she'd laid on the ground while she dealt with Artemis.

In bright red letters were the words *Danger* and

Keep Out. And on one of the trees I saw she'd already hammered a *No Entry* sign straight into the trunk.



'This is exactly why I told you we needed the signs, Lavender. Come on, the sooner we get the rest of these up, the better.' She turned back to glare at us. 'Honestly, my warnings fall on deaf ears around here.'

Mae scowled. 'I don't need to hear perfectly to listen to people,' she said fiercely. And then she muttered, 'I hate it when people say stuff like that.'

Thornwood's eyes flicked to Mae's hearing aids and I saw her cheeks flush red.

'I didn't mean . . . ' Thornwood said briskly, but then instead of an apology she covered her embarrassment by just barking, 'Run along. I don't expect to see you here again. It's for your own safety.'

Undeterred, Mae said quietly, 'It didn't look unsafe to me.' And I couldn't help admiring her for saying anything in the face of that glare.

'Well, it is,' Thornwood insisted. 'Branches have been

falling all over the place, and I'm sure there are warrens in that wood so big they'll collapse into sinkholes if anyone treads near them. This is exactly why I've campaigned for the play area, so that unsuspecting people like you aren't put in harm's way. Now go away and stay away or I'll be talking to your parents.'

The glare continued as she waited for us to actually move on. I'm not kidding – that laser focus of hers could have started a wildfire.

'I don't care what she says,' Cal muttered grumpily as we headed off. 'It didn't feel scary in there at all. *She's* the scary one.'

He wasn't wrong and I couldn't help feeling that the spiky woman had just pricked a hole in our excited bubble, letting all the air out.

'How are we going to find Sylvie if we can't go in the wood?' Mae demanded.

'We'll just have to wait for her to come out,' I said, and then added, 'I've got the perfect place to keep a look out and stay out of the way of that thorny woman. Come on!'



'You've got a secret base?' Mae asked, sounding impressed.

Cal nodded. 'It's going to be brilliant, isn't it, Iggy?'

'It is if we can get up to it,' I said, suddenly realising as we got closer how massive the tree I'd chosen for our hidden headquarters actually was. It was like it had stepped out of the wood into the field just to give itself room to properly stretch its thick limbs.

'Tigers are brilliant at climbing,' Cal said happily. I eyed his stripy legs. His onesie was mostly covered by my old hoodie that he'd taken to wearing. I just hoped he was right.

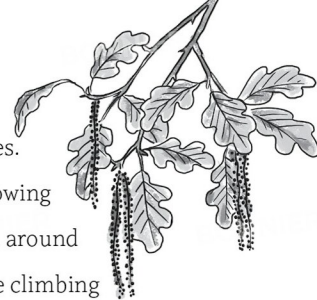


He raced ahead and was already off the ground by the time we reached the tree. He dangled, feet wrapped round a branch, head hanging, and then let go with one hand.

My heart leaped like a piece of popcorn popping in the pan. If little brothers fell out of trees, did big brothers get the blame?

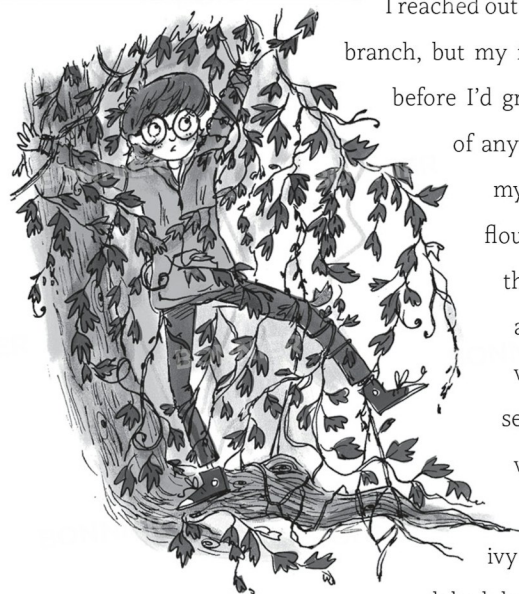
'Stay there, I'm coming up,' I said. But guess what – he didn't listen. He swung himself up and clambered away into the green and my popcorn heart did another leap as he vanished.

Luckily this seemed to be the kind of tree that wanted you to climb it and had grown useful stepping branches just to be polite. But it was still tricky because it was so covered in ivy. It was hard to tell where I could put my foot and if my hand was grasping at an actual branch or might just slip off into thin air. There were also masses of flowery catkins, dangling down in rows to form a frilly



curtain that trailed over our faces.

As I climbed higher, following Cal's giggles, the tangle of green around me got thicker. I could hear Mae climbing up in time with me, but the trunk was so wide I couldn't actually see her.



I reached out for the next branch, but my foot slipped before I'd grabbed hold of anything. I fell, my heart left floundering in thin air, like a fish out of water. But a second later I was caught in a net of ivy and round lobed leaves, green

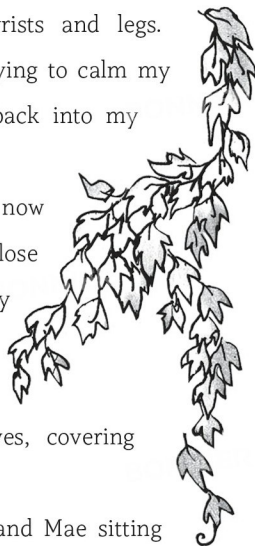
tendrils wrapping round my wrists and legs. I clutched the tree, gratefully, trying to calm my fish-flapping heart as it swam back into my chest.

I could hear Cal singing loudly now and felt glad he hadn't been close enough to see. I whispered my thanks to the tree for having such helpful foliage and watched the light dancing between the leaves, covering everything in a soft green glow.

Clambering up, I found Cal and Mae sitting comfortably astride a branch.

'Budge up,' I said.

We all shuffled along the thick arm of the tree. There was a creaking sound and the branch shook, making us all wobble. I quickly grasped the woody limb above and as I did, I noticed something through the bunches of round-lobed leaves. But it wasn't another branch, it was flat boards, like the underside of a floor.



Leaving Cal and Mae, I scrambled back and onto the branch above. Gripping with my legs to keep myself balanced, I stretched up and started to move the greenery aside. And I couldn't stop myself from grinning, because there, camouflaged behind the leaves, was a small green door.



'A tree house!' Cal cried when he'd climbed up to join me. 'I've always wanted a tree house. But we never had a tree to put one in. Anyway, Dad won't let me climb high stuff since I fell off Seb's climbing frame.'

He gave a sheepish grin and I glanced down through the branches to the ground below, secretly relieved he'd kept that quiet.

'Maybe there'll be trapdoors and secret entrances and spy holes,' I said.

'And we could make one of those whizzy zip slides for quick escapes. Like the one we went on at that big

park, remember?' Cal said gleefully.

'Let's get in and see,' Mae said. 'A floor and a door are a start anyway.'

As I moved the last of the ivy away and began to push, I heard Cal giggle and say, 'Thank you.'

I turned round. 'Thanks for what?'

'Not you, the tree,' he said. 'I just wobbled, but it's OK – the branch propped me up.'

'It's a very helpful tree,' I agreed, remembering the stepping branches and the net of ivy. It made me think of the friendly octopus tree. Then I pictured the unruly one by Sylvie's cabin. What had she said about some trees letting you climb them and others not?

Suddenly from behind the half-open door, there came a loud thud.

'I expect we just rattled something,' I said, seeing Cal's eyes widen. 'Or a gust of wind got in.'

Cal nodded, although I noticed he let me and Mae go in first.

The tree house was bigger than I expected. There were



wood-slatted walls and a rickety roof, although it looked as if no one had been in it for a long time. The walls were a crisscross of vines and leaves, and part of the tree had grown up through the floor and carried on up through the roof. It was like the tree had been so excited to find a tree house perched on it that it had burst in to join the fun.

I pushed the door closed after us and immediately spotted the bushy wooden tail of a squirrel. The pair of bookends from the kitchen scampered across the floor and sprang onto the net of ivy on one wall. They hung there, beady eyes watching us. Then the one closest to me flicked its tail and the other began scampering in circles. No wonder the books in the kitchen had been left higgledy piggledy. The squirrels didn't sit still long enough to hold them up! They looked pretty happy with themselves though.

'I think Higgy and Flick have been waiting for us!' I

said with a laugh. 'It seems our secret base isn't so secret after all!'

'This is brilliant!' Cal exclaimed.

I peered out through the small square window in the far wall and through the canopy of green.

Cal was craning over my shoulder to get a better look.

'Hey, that next tree is leaning close enough that I bet we could jump to it.'

'If your dad doesn't want you climbing trees, I'm pretty sure he wouldn't want you jumping between them,' I said quickly, still wondering what Mitchell would say about Cal being up so high.

For the first time ever Cal scowled at me.

'Imagine if we could go from tree to tree through the wood though,' Mae mused. 'We'd never have to worry about bumping into that woman again. We could travel through the treetops. No one would even know we were there.'

‘Exactly,’ Cal cried, giving her a high five.

‘We’d be the Treetoppers!’ Mae said happily.

My mind flashed back to the dream I’d had and the feeling of wanting to leap from tree to tree. And how the rustling had grown louder and more urgent, like the trees were excited I was there, poised and ready.

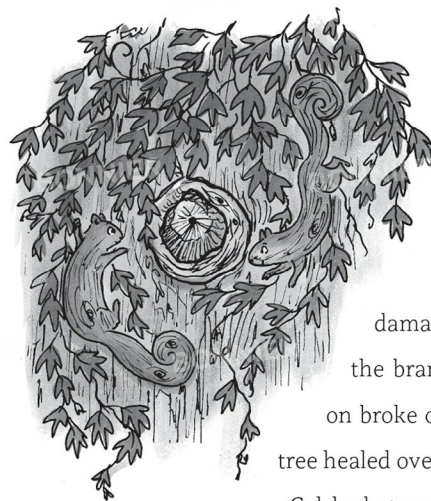
Just then Higgy and Flick started scrabbling at the ivy around the tree trunk. We watched as they cleared it away, revealing the knobbly grooved bark beneath. They carried on, busily, their tails flicking, which I guessed was their way of communicating.

‘I think they’re trying to tell us something,’ I said, moving closer.

Cal let out an awed gasp. ‘It’s like a giant eye!’ he said.

And he was sort of right. What had emerged from behind the ivy did look like an eye. There was a thick rim of gnarly bark round the edge, but the inside was smooth and flat, with a dark circle in the middle like a pupil.

‘Poor tree,’ Mae said. ‘It must have lost one of its branches.’



‘Why do you say that?’ I asked.

‘That’s what happens. The tree in our garden got damaged in a storm and the branch I had my swing on broke off. After a while the tree healed over – it’s like a scar.’

Cal had stepped forward and was peering into the pupil.

‘It’s a spy hole,’ he said. Then he stepped back quickly. ‘I just saw something move inside the tree.’

‘It was probably a trick of the light,’ I said.

‘Or a beetle,’ Mae suggested.

Cal frowned. ‘I think the tree’s hollow.’

‘It could be,’ I replied, not wanting to squash any more of his ideas. ‘Lots of trees are.’

Cal was staring at something halfway down the rim of the giant eye. It was mushroom-shaped and as I watched

he reached out and touched it. Immediately he yanked his hand back.

‘What is it?’ I asked.

‘That’s not a normal mushroom,’ Cal said. ‘It rattled when I held it.’ He paused and looked carefully at it again. ‘I think it’s a doorknob.’

I glanced at Mae, who gave me a ‘he’s your brother – what is he on about?’ look.

‘See for yourself,’ he insisted crossly, and he dragged me towards the eye.

I squinted through the dark circle of the pupil where Cal had been looking and let out a breath.

Turns out sometimes little brothers do know what they’re talking about.

‘Can you see?’ he asked excitedly.

I nodded, a massive grin plastered across my face. Mae, looking flummoxed, rushed forward to peer through too. When she turned back to us, her eyes were bright and wide.

‘Are those steps going up?’



Mae grabbed for the mushroom doorknob and started pulling at it.

‘If it is a door, then it’s stuck,’ she said disappointedly.

‘Or locked,’ Cal added.

‘In that case,’ I said, ‘we just need to find the key to unlock it.’

And Cal grinned.

It definitely felt nicer to be grinned at than scowled at by Cal, but a second later Mae rained on my parade a bit.

‘There isn’t a keyhole though, so there can’t be a key to unlock it,’ she said.



She had a point. Maybe it was just stuck after all. But I got the feeling it was more than that. When I tried to pull the doorknob, it felt like I was pulling against something, something that was holding it shut.

‘Maybe it’s not an actual key. Think about it – in stories people are always opening doors with magic words.’

Immediately, and in unison, we chanted, ‘Open Sesame!’

At which point . . . nothing happened.

Cal found a groove that he decided might be a keyhole and started wagging a stick in it, convinced he had expert lockpicking skills. Nothing happened with that either. So, then we started throwing every magical word or phrase we’d ever heard in the door’s direction, but still it stayed firmly shut. I noticed Mae rest one hand over the other, palms facing her, and then she swung the outside hand outwards like a door swinging open. Nothing happened to the door though.

‘It’s no good,’ Mae said. ‘We’ll just have to try something else.’

‘But what?’ I asked.

She shrugged and I suddenly wished Rafi was here – he loved solving puzzles.

‘Maybe Sylvie knows about the door?’ Cal suggested. ‘I wish she’d hurry up and come back.’

‘Hey,’ Mae said excitedly as she peered out the window. ‘There’s that deer again,’ and she pointed down to where the sticky deer was bounding round the trunk.

‘It wants to play,’ Cal declared. ‘Come on!’

He hurried out of the tree house and started clambering down and I quickly followed after him, hoping he wouldn’t slip in his eagerness. When we all reached the ground, the gappy deer zigzagged between us. I reached out a hand to it, but it bounded away across the field.



Halfway to the wood it stopped. It stared at us for a moment, bobbed its head, then turned and leaped onwards towards the trees.

'I told you!' Cal said. And he shot off after it.

Just before he disappeared into the wood Cal slowed down, and a second later a figure came into view.

'Sylvie!' I cried and Mae and I raced over to join them.

'Hello again,' she said. 'I see you've gained an explorer.'

'This is Mae,' I said.

Mae gave a wave and Sylvie smiled in greeting. Then she looked quizzically over at Cal, who was still looking around for the little deer.



'Did you see where it went?' he asked.

'Where what went?'

'The deer. It ran right into the wood just before you showed up.'

Sylvie turned and stared into the trees, but the deer was nowhere to be seen.

'You were lucky to see one. They're pretty shy, you know.'

'Not this one,' Cal said happily. 'I thought she was playing a game, but I think she was leading us to you!'

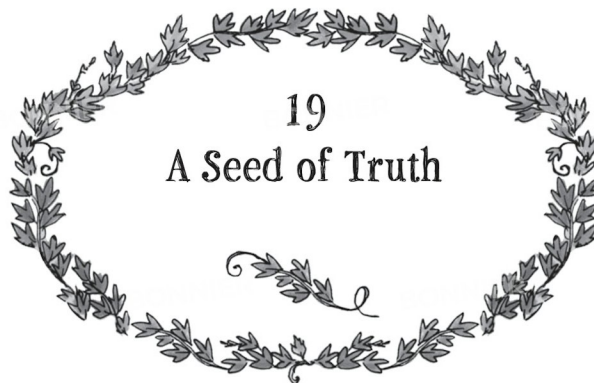
'It's the sticky deer,' I said quickly when Sylvie looked confused. 'You made her, just like all the animals in the house, didn't you? The bookend squirrels and the mice and the bee.'

'And the wooden elephants,' added Cal. 'I call the baby one Tiny.'

'Oh, those,' Sylvie said, realisation dawning. 'Do you like them? They're so much fun to make. There's a long tradition of using the things the wood gifts us. I make all sorts!' She added, 'Of course, I always leave a little gift of

my own in return. Something I've made or found. So the wood knows I'm a friend. I'm always making bits and pieces or finding little treasures. The little deer was just the start. I've gone even bigger with the –'

But before she could finish, Cal, who was too excited to hold it in any longer, interrupted. 'They're fun to play with too,' he said. 'When they're not wrecking your kitchen. Higgy and Flick the squirrels made a right mess. But they were just flinging acorns about to tell us how to make friends with Wellington. And once we worked that out, we could get back into the garden and go exploring again. And we found the tree house. Up there.' He pointed up to the tree as he rattled on. 'And Higgy and Flick showed us the little door. And that's why we've been looking for you. To find out how come they're alive and if you know how we can get through the door. I mean, it's all brilliant, but how is it happening?'



Cal paused, out of breath, and Sylvie looked bowled over by this tidal wave of words.

She looked to me and then to Mae, and I could tell that this was all new to her and that she was waiting for us to say that everything Cal had said was part of some elaborate game. But we must have looked as expectant as Cal, because the smile that had begun to spread across her face faded.

'You don't know, do you?' I said quietly. 'You haven't seen anything?'

'I've seen a lot of things,' she replied seriously, and

then added more gently, 'But no, I've not seen wooden animals scampering about or secret doors in trees. Though I wish I had.'

'You don't believe us,' Cal said crossly. 'You think we're making it all up, like it's just a silly story.'

'Now hold on, I never said I didn't believe you. And there's definitely nothing silly about stories,' she said quickly. 'They're as wild and full of life as these woods. This place is full of stories. Most places are. They have this canny knack of rooting us and making us grow in ways we never expected.' She smiled. 'You know, my mum always used to say there was a wild green magic in the world if we bothered to stop and notice. And the old stories are part of it. Like Jack in the Green or Herne the Hunter, and that's not even to mention the dryads in the trees.'

It was clear from Cal's and Mae's faces that I wasn't the only one who hadn't got a clue what those stories were. Looking thoughtful, Sylvie peered into the wood. Then she turned back to us before she spoke again. I was

beginning to notice how she made a point of always showing Mae her face.

'The best stories always have a seed of truth in them somewhere. And who knows what might grow with them, with a bit of imagination?'

Cal grumbled something none of us could hear. But seeing his crumpled face, Mae wrapped an arm round him.

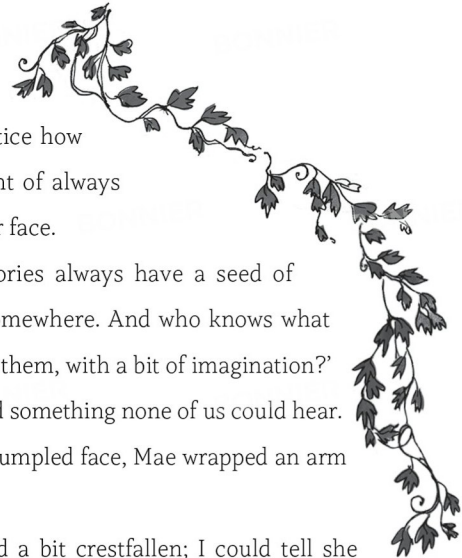
Sylvie looked a bit crestfallen; I could tell she hadn't wanted to disappoint us. In fact I had the feeling she would have loved to see her sticky deer leaping about.

'Why do you go into the wood at night?' I asked.

She looked surprised.

'We saw a light coming out of your cabin and disappearing into the wood,' I explained. 'And I noticed it again last night.'

She smiled. 'It's good you notice things,' she said. 'I try to do the same. Lots of the animals I keep an eye on only come out at night. I've been checking on the bats





and the badgers. There's not much use trying to do that in the day.'

Then she added, 'I'm doing my best to look after Wildtop Wood and everything that calls it home. But it's hard when there's only me. It's been rather forgotten about, you see. And now some of the trees aren't doing so well.' She glanced over and added, 'I know everyone thinks I'm barmy, talking to my oak saplings, but the thing is, trees do talk. With each other anyway.'

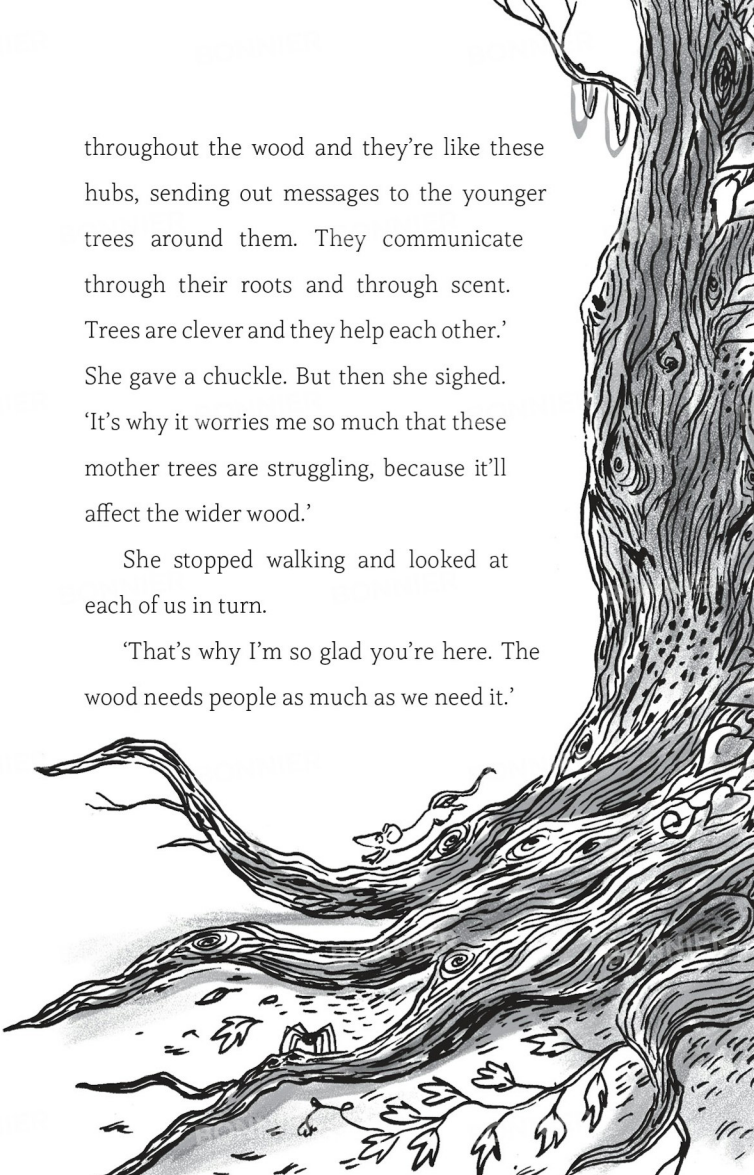
'Trees talk?' Mae asked.

'In their own way, yes,' continued Sylvie. 'There are mother trees dotted

throughout the wood and they're like these hubs, sending out messages to the younger trees around them. They communicate through their roots and through scent. Trees are clever and they help each other.' She gave a chuckle. But then she sighed. 'It's why it worries me so much that these mother trees are struggling, because it'll affect the wider wood.'

She stopped walking and looked at each of us in turn.

'That's why I'm so glad you're here. The wood needs people as much as we need it.'





We came home to find Mitchell standing in the kitchen, staring at sprouts of green and white that were tumbling over his hands down to the floor.

‘What’s that?’ I asked.

‘You know that cress head you grew at school, Cal? Well, it seems to like the fresh country air! I think we should call this one Rapunzel – what do you think?’

We laughed, and then Mum, spotting Mae standing in the doorway, said, ‘Hello, who’s this?’

‘I’m Mae,’ she said cheerily. ‘From next door.’

‘Oh yes, I met your dad at the post office. He said

you’d just moved in like us. Come on in, it’s lovely to meet you. Mitchell and I are just going out to do some work in the garden, but I’ve made some sandwiches; there’s plenty for you all.’

As they headed outside, Cal leaned towards me and said, ‘If Sylvie doesn’t know about the animals, when she lives here and knows the wood and even talks to trees, then how are we supposed to find out what’s going on?’

I shrugged, because honestly I had no idea.

‘I wish she’d seen the deer,’ he said grumpily.

‘We’ll just have to find a way to show her it’s real,’ Mae said.

She looked up and spotted Higgy and Flick.

‘They’re really pretty, aren’t they?’

I nodded. ‘Have you seen Buzby?’

I motioned to the jug where the gold-winged bee was resting. ‘It’s so cool that Sylvie makes them all from wood that comes from Wildtop Wood.’





'I wish we could get that door open,' Cal broke in. 'I want to see what's up those steps!'

'How are we going to do that though?' Mae asked. 'Even if there was a key, there's no keyhole.'

We all sat in silence, lost in thought. Until after a minute or two I had an idea.

'What if the key is a gift?'

'You mean we have to buy our way in?' Mae asked, sounding unimpressed. 'I don't think that sounds very magical.'

'No, we don't have to buy anything. I was just thinking about what Sylvie said earlier, about her leaving little gifts for the wood. What if we need to find treasures of our own to put by the door?'

'To show we're friendly, you mean?' she asked.

'Exactly! I can't help wondering how we missed that opening into the wood earlier. What if we didn't miss it at all? Maybe it wasn't there until I laid that acorn down. I left a gift, and then the wood let us in.'



Cal's eyes lit up. Now we were all feeling excited.

But then Mae groaned. 'The trouble is, I'm rubbish at choosing presents.'

I wasn't sure I was great either, but then I remembered my football shirt. Even though I'd stuffed it behind my bed, I liked the fact that Mitchell had given it to me. It wasn't even my birthday or anything. He'd just wanted to do something nice.

'I don't think it matters what it is, I think it matters that we think of doing it,' I said. As the others nodded, I secretly decided to fish out the football shirt. If nothing else, I could wear it as a pyjama top.



The next day Mae appeared before we'd even finished breakfast. She happily joined us for syrupy pancakes – which Mitchell had made after a lot of nagging from Cal. Little brothers had their uses, it seemed.

She was clearly bursting to show us something, and as soon as we'd finished and bundled out the door,



she rootled around in her dungarees pocket.

'I've got the perfect gift for the wood,' she said, and opened a drawstring bag to reveal pink and white petals.

'Apple blossom,' she said happily as the octopus tree tousled her hair. 'What have you got?'

'I found this,' Cal said. And proudly held up half of an eggshell. It was a bright bluey-green with brown speckles and he had declared it the best find ever when he'd spotted it.

I showed her the tiny pebble I'd chosen. The white stone had caught my eye nestled in the green spring grass. It was so smooth that it had made me wonder how long it had taken for the sea to wear it away like that.



Suddenly though it didn't feel like very much. But then I remembered – hadn't Sylvie said it was good to notice things? Maybe even the littlest things. Perhaps that could be a gift in itself?

As the others raced off, I hung back to deal with one of the octopus tree's leafy fingers that had wriggled into my pocket. I gently lifted it out and grinned up at the tree.

'Wish us luck!' I cried, before hurrying off after them.



This time there was no doubt that the tree in the field wanted us to climb it – it was almost as eager for us to get to the top as we were! Our feet easily found footholds, and at times it felt more like the huge tree was lifting us up.

Once in the tree house we paused, breathless, in front of the eye-shaped door. Buzby had stowed away in my hood again and he bumbled out and flew in circles a few times before settling on the mushroom doorknob.

Mae lifted out a handful of petals and made a nest and we laid our treasures on top.

Would this even work? And what would we find if it did?

We waited, breath held. Every leaf around us grew still as if the tree was holding its breath too. And then the smooth surface of the eye slowly began to open.



As the eye opened in front of us, a gleaming green glow filled the tree house. The tree seemed to quiver with excitement as Higgy and Flick scampered back and forth and Buzby zoomed across and landed on my head.



We leaned forward, peering through the green haze. The opening eye revealed the steps we'd seen inside the massive trunk. But just then the movement stopped, leaving the eye only partly open, squinting back at us.

'What's happening?' Cal cried.

'I don't know,' I replied.

'We can't fit through that gap,' Mae said. 'It's not big enough.'

'Why has it stopped?' Cal wailed in frustration.

I felt something catch at my hoodie and saw I'd been snagged on one of the little branches that wound across the tree house. A thin twiggy finger had found its way into my pocket. As I unhooked myself, something fluttered out. A fanned leaf with serrated leaflets.

I suddenly remembered the octopus tree earlier, how interested those twiggy fingers had been in my pocket. The tree must have left one of its leaves in there for me to find. But why?

And then what I'd read in the little green book popped into my mind: *'There are those who believe the rowan tree may act as a portal.'*

Excitement whooshing through me, I quickly laid the rowan's leaf alongside our treasures.



Mae and Cal looked at me for explanation, but I just stared at the eye, willing it to open wide. And a moment later it did just that!

'How did you do that?' Cal asked.

'With a bit of help from the trees,' I said, and grinned.

We all peered into the now wide eye, and then turned our gaze upwards.

'Where do you think it goes?' Cal said.

I laughed. 'Up, I guess.'

Cal rolled his eyes. 'No, I mean Dad read me this story about a magic tree, and when the children climbed up it there were all these different lands. And it changed every time they went up.'

I glanced at Mae, but she just shrugged. It was clear I wasn't the only one who hadn't heard of that book. I was about to tell Cal that it was just a silly story, when I remembered what Sylvie had said about stories not being silly. After all, wasn't I just about to step through a magic door into the trunk of a tree? Who knew what we would find up there?

Suddenly I wasn't quite so sure about
clambering up into the unknown.



'I don't think they ever found any monsters,' Cal said
quietly, although he didn't sound completely convinced.
He chewed his lip and took a little step back.



I thought about the feeling of being lifted up by the
tree and how it had caught me when I'd slipped.

'This tree has been nothing but friendly,' I said. 'It
wouldn't be showing us the way to somewhere scary.
Besides, there are no monsters, remember?'

But I could tell he didn't believe me when I said that.
I'd have to show him.

I ducked into the hollow and began to climb, using
the ridges that lined the inside of the trunk as steps and
handholds. The tree smelled sweet and musty, and little
bugs scurried around my hands as I clung to
each rung.

Eventually I reached another opening
and crawled out, emerging onto a
leafy ledge almost at the tree's top.



I found myself face to face with a bird with bright blue
feathers. I even knew what it was called, thanks to Mum
setting me a challenge one holiday to learn the names of
ten birds. The jay watched me quizzically as I looked
down, taking in the dizzying height. Honestly, my
heart nearly leaped off without me!



'No monsters,' I called back. 'But I don't think you
should come up,' I added even louder, hoping Mae could
hear. 'There's not much room and it's really high.'

But Cal was already climbing up, closely
followed by Mae.



They emerged from the tree a few seconds later and I
grabbed hold of Cal's onesie.

'I said, don't come up,' I huffed, already seeing Mum's
dismayed face if she ever found out I'd led Cal to such a
precarious spot.

But I needn't have worried because a leafy branch
had looped around his waist, holding onto him and
keeping him safe.

'Thank you,' I said quietly, and gently squeezed the

branch I was holding. The tree gave a little rustle in return.

‘Look,’ Cal said. ‘I told you that one was close enough to jump to.’

He pointed to the silvery tree he’d spotted earlier, the even taller one that stood out of line from the others at the edge of the wood, and that was now leaning towards this one. Before, Cal would’ve needed to be an Olympic long jumper to get between them, but now the tree we were in was stretching across to meet it.

I watched, amazed, as the branches around us started growing. They twisted their way around the branches of the other tree. And the other one reached back, winding leafy limbs through our tree’s foliage.

‘Are they hugging?’ Cal whispered.

I shook my head in disbelief. A green walkway was slowly forming. Leaves and twigs wove together to form a hanging net that stretched from the tree we were in to the one that peered down at us. It was as if they had

linked arms for us to pass between them.

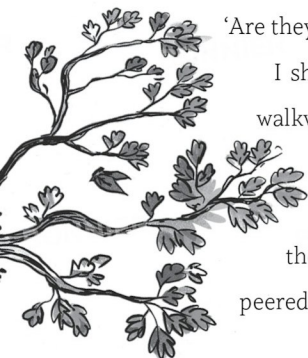
‘I think the trees were listening. They’re giving us another way into the wood,’ I cried.

‘That’s awesome!’ Mae said, and Cal let out a whoop.

I felt something prod me from behind and turned to see a bunch of leaves like a hand at my back. It gently pressed me forward until I placed a foot onto the walkway. It was so tightly webbed with leaves that I wasn’t even worried about stepping onto it. Holding on to the sides, I moved along, and although the walkway wobbled, I carried on. I knew without any doubts that it had been made for us and that the trees would not let us fall.

When I reached the trunk of the silvery tree, I turned and waved for Cal and Mae to follow. I was grinning so widely my face hurt. I pointed to the trees ahead, which were already weaving their branches together, ready to carry us further.

‘Time to explore!’ I called back.





By the time we reached the fourth tree we were feeling sure-footed enough to run along the leafy walkways, laughing as they swung and wobbled beneath our feet. If one of us stumbled, a helping branch would simply shoot out and steady us. The ivy that wrapped itself along the woody handrails we clung to grew so fast that it felt like it was racing us, egging us on to an imaginary finish line.

As we lagged behind it, glossy green tendrils tumbled around in great heaps like a celebratory dance of victory.

At last we bent double, breathless and laughing.

‘The trees win!’ Cal cried. ‘But next time I’ll be even faster!’

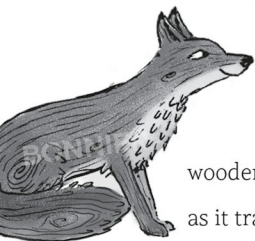
‘Now we really are the Treetoppers!’ Mae said delightedly.



22

The Treetoppers

It was brilliant moving from tree to tree through the wood, high up in the canopy of leaves where no one could see us. I grinned, thinking of spiky Thornwood stomping her way along the edge of the wood while we raced through the treetops.



Around us birds chattered and called to each other and Buzby buzzed happily above our heads. Below, almost hidden in the bracken, I spotted the bushy-tailed wooden fox, snout raised and eyes fixed on us as it traced our path along the ground.



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‘Can we stop?’ Cal said eventually, resting a hand on the trunk of a huge tree. ‘I’m starving.’

‘Me too,’ Mae agreed. ‘I’ve got some chocolate in here somewhere.’

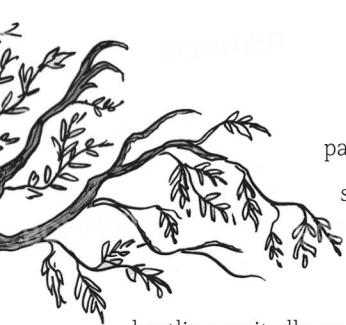
She rootled in her bag and fished out a water bottle and a bar of chunky chocolate. She broke a couple of pieces off and handed them to me and Cal. We all sat on the walkway, leaning back against the cushion of ivy. It tickled our necks and grew around our shoulders and over our chests, finally curling up in coils in our laps. It was like a playful and very curious green snake.

‘Have you got provisions too?’ Cal asked, looking at me expectantly. I shook my head apologetically. And added it to my list of ‘things a big brother is supposed to do’.

We all sat cocooned in green, listening to the gentle creaking and sighing from the tree, the walkway swaying gently as if we were in a hammock. I looked up at the tree we’d rested against. It had sturdy branches and thick foliage. Its leaves were serrated a bit like the octopus tree’s but they were a different shape and didn’t grow in



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pairs along a stem. Instead they spread out like outstretched fingers. The tree also had cones of pinky-white flowers bustling excitedly on its boughs.

'This tree smells so nice,' Cal said, sticking his nose into the blossom. The little flowers wriggled their petals, tickling him.

'I still don't really get how any of this is happening,' Mae said.

'It's the wild green magic,' Cal said, as if it was obvious. 'Sylvie told us that.'

'But what is that exactly?' Mae asked. 'How does it work? And what else can it do?'

She had a lot of good questions, but I had zero answers. All I knew was that the trees were doing things I'd never seen a tree do before, and we had animals made from the wood leaping around us.

It didn't seem to bother Cal that we didn't know much. After a few minutes, licking his fingers, he jumped

up. Having regained his bounce, he said, 'What's next?'

I laughed. 'You mean secret doors and trees growing walkways isn't enough?'

'I just mean, what are we going to do now?' he said. 'Can we make a den? Like you promised.'

'It would be good to have a base in the wood as well,' Mae agreed.

'We've got a pretty good den right here,' I said.

Cal leaped on this idea. 'Another tree house! And can we have trapdoors in this one and different levels and turrets? I love turrets! It could be a tree fort!'

'That sounds epic,' I said, not wanting to squash his bubbling excitement. 'But my building skills aren't really up to that.'

I pictured the junk model Viking boat I'd made that had sunk without trace in the school pond.

He looked crestfallen, but suddenly the branches of the tree began to move and stretch. I watched in awe as it lowered some and raised others, winding twiggy fingers together. Before our eyes another walkway grew, leading

upwards. At the end of it, a crisscross of wider branches meshed together into a floor, and green leafy walls began to take shape, stretching higher and higher until they began to bend inwards. Creaking and cracking sounds filled the air as with a final flourish a green turret sprouted with a sticky flagpole and a fan of leaves fluttering in the breeze like a flag.

Cal gave a shout of delight and ran up the leafy walkway to poke his head inside.

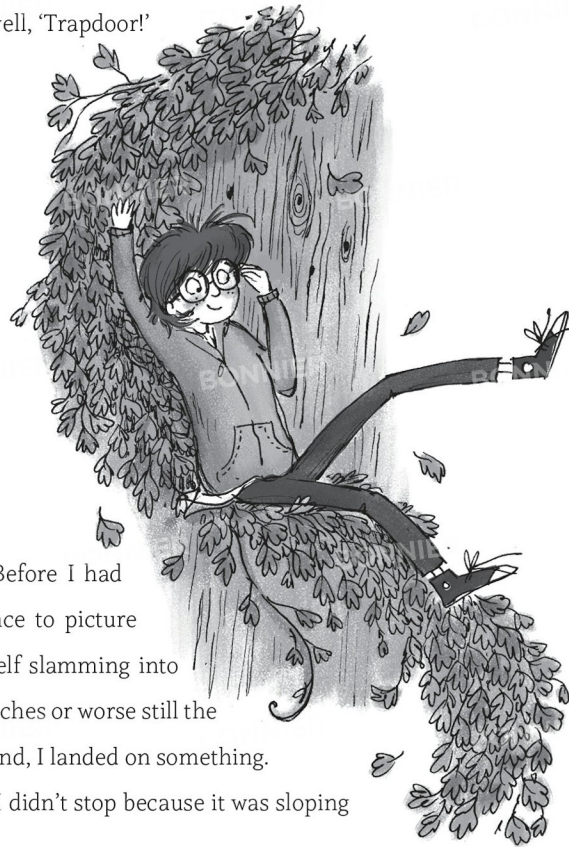
But the tree hadn't finished. As we watched, amazed, it grew two more turreted rooms, each one higher up than the last. The topmost one was so high that from there we could see over the treetops to the sea.

You definitely got a better sense of the place we'd just moved to from a treetop view. The wood itself bordered the beach and stretched away much further to our left. We were only on the edge of it really.

'There's still so much to explore,' Mae said.

'And we have the perfect base now.' I patted the nearest branch.

And then I felt the floor drop away and I fell, leaving my stomach snatching at air. I heard Cal's voice above me yell, 'Trapdoor!'



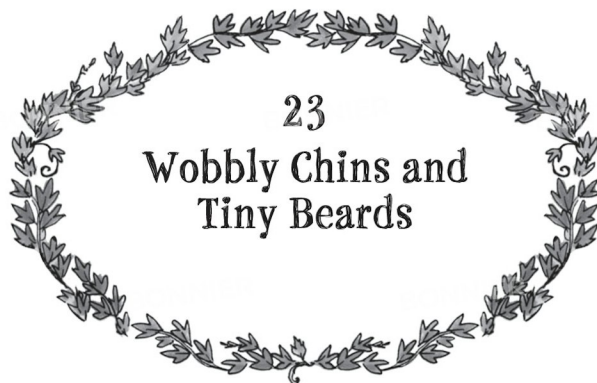
Before I had chance to picture myself slamming into branches or worse still the ground, I landed on something. But I didn't stop because it was sloping

down. I slid and tumbled over slippery shiny leaves, getting faster and faster as the tree-made slide I was on corkscrewed round the trunk. Finally, I tumbled off the bottom into a heap of cushiony grass and moss.

I looked up to see Cal and Mae's worried faces peering down.

I was about to yell up at them that I was OK, when something grabbed me round the waist and hoisted me into the air. The green ivy shot me back up into the canopy. Having left part of my stomach up in the trees, I now left the rest of it on the ground as I whooshed skyward, like I was on an elastic bungee rope.

I saw a blur of faces as I was flung up higher than the highest tree and then, as I started to fall again, I was caught in a tangle of green that hung underneath me like a safety net. I landed with a bounce just in time to hear Cal shriek, 'Me next! Me next!'



This tree had some serious moves. In fact, it was a one-tree adventure playground!

While Cal boinged happily on the bungee vine, I soared back and forth on an ivy swing and Mae rocketed her way down the corkscrew slide. By the fourth attempt she'd perfected her forward roll into the long grass, leaping to her feet to take a bow.



The next second I saw her dive back down and start scouring the ground on her hands and knees, hands sifting through the grass she'd just tumbled into.

‘Everything OK?’ I called, but she ignored me and kept searching.

I jumped off the swing and called out again, but she didn’t look up until I was standing right in front of her. A worried frown creased her forehead.



‘What’s wrong?’ I asked.

She stood up and, as she did, I noticed her hearing aids weren’t tucked behind her ears.

I quickly signed the words for, ‘Are you OK?’

Immediately her face brightened. ‘I’ve lost my hearing aids. Can you help me find them?’

I nodded and then, remembering the sign for ‘Yes’, I made a fist and bobbed it so it was like a nodding head.

Mae signed something which I knew was, ‘Thanks.’

‘How do you know how to sign?’ she asked.

‘School,’ I signed back, moving my flat hand side to side in front of my face. I didn’t have the signs to tell her our deputy head was partially deaf and had taught us all some. I was already reaching the limit of my conversation.



But Mae was smiling, clearly pleased I knew even the little I did.

She started hunting again and I joined her, combing the ground, eyes peeled for the little blue hearing aids.

‘Actually,’ she said, ‘I’m still learning British Sign Language. I lived in America until a year ago so I learned ASL – that’s American Sign Language. It’s really quite different.’

I’d always thought there was just one sign language.



She looked up at me as I paused in the hunt and she must have noticed my surprise because she said, 'There are hundreds of different sign languages.'

She turned back to the straggly grass.

'They must be here somewhere. I definitely still had them on when I came off the slide, but then I did this epic roll.'

I was worried that it would be like trying to find needles in a haystack, but luckily we had help. Buzby was on the case and flew busily around us, skimming the ground, and the fox that had trailed us appeared and joined in the search. It burrowed through the grass, bushy tail aloft. And then it did a playful pounce and spun round to look at us. Mae hurried over and whooped as she picked up one of the hearing aids. She ran a hand over the fox's back in thanks.

We carried on the search and this time it was the tree that came to the rescue. After a few minutes, one of the roots began to push itself up out of the ground. I saw that

nestled on a mossy bed hidden in the crook of the root was the other hearing aid.

Delighted, Mae took it, laying a hand on the root as it wriggled back into its earthy bed. She quickly fitted them back in place.

'I had something called meningitis when I was five,' she said. 'I was really ill and I lost most of my hearing. Sometimes kids can be weird about it. And nosy.' She put on a goofy voice and said, 'What's wrong with your ears? Why've you got that lump of plastic stuck to them?'

Her voice returned to normal as she went on: 'But you weren't weird or nosy. I liked that.'

'I just thought if you wanted to tell us about it you probably would, and if you didn't then you probably didn't.'

My hand went to the side of my neck and tickled the dragon birthmark. 'You never mentioned this.'

Mae shrugged. 'It wasn't the most interesting thing about you.'

Which was about the best thing she could have said,



because the truth is, sometimes people can make me feel like it is. Whenever I meet anyone new, that's usually the first thing they ask about or comment on, just like Mae said happened to her. People just sort of blurt stuff out without thinking how it might make you feel.

I put on the same goofy voice she had and said, 'What's that on your face? What's wrong with your neck? Does it hurt?' I sighed and added, 'I mean, not everyone is mean about it, some of them are just curious, I guess, but they all stand there like I owe them some kind of explanation for my face. I don't ask them to explain their pointy nose or wobbly chin or tiny beard.'

Mae giggled. 'Maybe you should.' Then she shook her head and said, 'But we wouldn't, because we know what it feels like, right?'

I nodded. 'Right.'

'Hey,' Cal said, jumping between us. 'Bet you can't catch me!' And he darted away, giggling, and disappeared into a mound of bracken.

By the time we'd burrowed our way through to him

and finally caught him in a pincer attack, we could have all joined Sylvie as hedge monsters, we were so covered in bits of debris. We clambered back up the leafy ladder the tree had grown for us and I collapsed onto the springy floor of one of the green rooms. Although I did do a quick check for any trapdoors in this one!

Cal peered through the green leaves and I heard him whisper, 'Do you think it would be good to have a little window here?'

The tree gave a low creak and promptly obliged. With a shiver of leaves an opening appeared.

Cal leaned out, grinning. 'Best. Tree. House. Ever!' he cried.

And the wood creaked back its agreement as the neighbouring trees swayed and waved their branches.





24

Treetoppers to the Rescue

After boinging and sliding and whooshing with the tree for another few hours, it was hunger that finally made us think of going home.

But as we picked the leaves and twigs from our hair and started to head back over the walkway, we found our way was blocked.

The wooden fox stood there, eyes shining. And either side of it were Higgy and Flick. We stepped closer, assuming the animals would scamper along with us as they had been doing all morning. But they didn't move. They continued to fix us with their gaze until I



thought I was going to have to step over them.

'Why are they staring at us like that?' Mae said.

'They probably want to keep playing,' Cal replied.

'We'll come back soon, I promise,' he added.

The next second a knobbly branch wound around my ankle, dragged me off the walkway and hoicked me into the air.

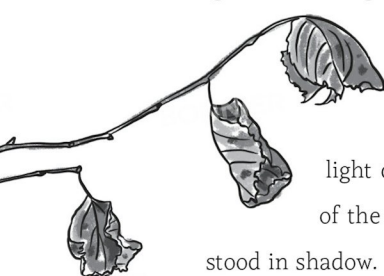
'Hey, we need to go,' I said, laughing as the tree dangled me there.

But the tree was already including Cal and Mae in the game and we were soon all scooped up and being swung from branch to branch, carried further into the wood, like we were batons in a relay race.

We giggled and shrieked as we soared past each other in turns, our hunger forgotten in the thrill of the swing.

And then with a whoosh we were swung forwards and no leafy limbs reached out to catch us. Luckily the tree

that held us hadn't let go, or goodness knows where we'd have ended up. I might have got the chance to see what flying really felt like!



We hung there, looking about as we tried to get our bearings. From the direction we'd come, I could see bright green light dancing through the leaves of the trees. But ahead, the wood stood in shadow. The thick trunk of a tree in front meant I couldn't see far, and there were no branches at all on this side of the tree, so it almost looked like it had its back turned to us. All its leafy limbs stretched out in front, entwining so tightly it was impossible to see further into the wood. And the trees on either side of it were doing the same thing. They definitely didn't look like they wanted to play.

After a minute of dangling us there, the tree that held us rustled and shook and then carefully passed us back the way we'd come.



When we were finally deposited back on the walkway there was no sign of the animals.

'That was weird,' Mae said. 'It was like those trees didn't want us there.'

'You don't think that woman might be right?' said Cal. 'What if there are parts of the wood that aren't safe?'

I shook my head. I didn't want to think Councillor Thornwood was right about anything.

'Did you notice how that one tree had those red patches and its leaves were all shrivelled?' Mae said.

I nodded.

'It looked sore,' Cal added.

He was right. It had reminded me of a grazed knee after a nasty tumble.

'Maybe we can help Sylvie,' I suggested. 'She told us



that some of the trees were in trouble. How about we make a map of the wood? Then we can show her if there are any more trees like that.'

'Like explorers?' Cal asked, warming to the idea.

'Exactly,' Mae said. And then she cried, 'Treetoppers to the rescue!'



Next morning the animals woke us even earlier. Higgy and Flick leaped from bed to bed and Tiny stampeded across Cal's quilt, her mum plodding slowly behind. The fox helpfully nudged our shoes closer just to make the point.

'I've borrowed my mum's binoculars,' Mae said when we met her squeezing through the hedge between our gardens. 'And she's let me have loads of provisions so we won't go hungry.'

'I've got some too,' I said, waving a rucksack crammed with water, packed lunches and snacks. Buzby buzzed

back and forth in front of my face then flew over to Mae and shot inside her unzipped bag. He reappeared a moment later and bumbled back towards me. He landed on the tip of my nose and marched up my face to finally settle on top of my head.

‘Don’t mind him,’ I said. ‘He’s just nosy!’

The fox bumped my leg with his snout.

I laughed. ‘They’re all as excited as we are to get back to the wood.’



And they weren’t the only ones excited we were back. As we started to climb to the tree house, branches reached down and lifted us up, too impatient to wait for us to clamber on our own. When we went inside, we found the ivy had formed loops and garlands all along the walls and clusters of purple flowers hung from the ceiling like decorations. I could almost sense the tree saying, ‘Ta-da!’ to us.

‘Brilliant!’ Cal cried.



Mae laughed as the ivy tumbled onto her shoulders. ‘Let’s get this map started,’ she said.

She began drawing a tree with a thick trunk and wide spreading branches. She studied one of the leaves next to her and then made a sketch of that.

‘This is an oak tree,’ she said as she added a little acorn to her picture. ‘It’s the same as the one in my old garden.’



When she’d finished, she tapped the end of the pencil against her cheek and looked thoughtful. ‘But there’ll be other oak trees in the wood. And the one that made us the slide is a horse chestnut. I looked it up last night. But there are bound to be lots of those too. What we need is to give each tree its own name, so we can tell which one we’re talking about.’

‘It needs to be a really good name for this one,’ Cal said, running his hand along a branch. ‘Something friendly and brilliant, because it showed us the way into



the wood.' He giggled as a branch tickled his face with its leaves.

There was a moment of silence while we all thought.

'How about Groak? Short for the Great Oak,' I suggested.

The tree started rustling, as if each lobed leaf was waving its approval, and the branch that held us bounced us gently up and down.

'Groak it is,' Mae cried, delighted.

When we moved on, Groak passed us to Silver, the tall tree that had leaned down to get a better look at us when we'd first climbed up and that had woven the first walkway. Silver seemed the perfect name for this tree, with its silvery bark and slender draping branches.

I noticed Cal cradling one of the yellow catkins that hung from it.

'They look like furry yellow caterpillars,' he said with a laugh. He let go and it wriggled in the breeze above him.

We continued along the walkways into the wood, pausing every so often to add to the map.



'Can I name the turrety tree?' Cal begged after a while. 'You keep coming up with good ones before I can think of anything.'

I had to admit it was fun coming up with names for the trees and spotting things to navigate by. I watched Mae add a drawing of the 'wizard tree'. It had dark red leaves and was bent and crooked and held a staff of a branch in front of it. It was surprising how when you really looked, there were all sorts of landmarks in the wood. It was just as well too, because the trees had taken us a different way this time, and if that always happened we'd need them.

'We will find the turrety tree again, won't we?' Cal asked.

'I'm sure we will,' I said. 'The trees are just showing us around.'

'And giving you time to come up with the perfect name,' added Mae.

For the next ten minutes he didn't say a word as we walked and paused and pondered over the map and scribbled things down.

'I'm rubbish at this,' he said eventually, looking miserable. 'The turrety tree is brilliantly brilliant and I can't think of a good name.'

'Names are hard,' Mae said.

'Not for you,' he replied grumpily.

'What's wrong with Turrety?' I said.

'That's just the first thing that came into my head,' he replied.

'So?' I said. 'It's the perfect name.'

'Do you really think so?' He brightened a bit.

He looked up at me and then across at Mae and she nodded.

'Turrety. The more you say it, the friendlier it sounds,' I said. 'Turrety, Turrety, Turrety. It's just right!'

He broke into a massive grin and started yelling 'Turrety' at the top of his lungs, startling some birds into the air.

And the next second tendrily arms grabbed him, lifted him off the walkway and started swinging him away through the trees. Mae and I looked at each other and then yelled, 'Turrety!'






Turrety was very pleased to see us. I could tell by the waving branches and the excited rustling of leaves that greeted us. There were also some new additions to the turrets and leaf slide waiting for us to explore: more vines to swing on, two rope ladders hanging down and three hammocks that swayed gently to and fro. And when we poked our heads into the turret rooms we found branches had woven together to make little stools and even a table, with leaves and ivy draped over to cushion them.


As I got ready to launch myself down the slide, something ricocheted off my head and pinged into

Turrety's trunk. When I spun round, I saw Mae ducking low, shielding her head as little sticky buds arced through the air.

She shrugged when she caught my eye and then ducked again as more flew past. 'Where are they coming from?' =

Cal pointed. 'Up there, I think.'

Higgy scampered behind Turrety's trunk. I looked about to see if Flick was nearby. Sure enough, I saw a tail flicking back and forth higher up in one of the trees. Flick was launching the buds straight at us. 

'Hey, not fair,' Cal cried, laughing and pulling them out of his hair. 'We need defences!' 

He searched around and, spotting a pine cone, propped it on the ivy that snaked along the handrail of the walkway. Then he plucked the pencil out of Mae's hand and carefully drew something on it. He spun it round to show us two little eyes and a smiley face.

'Let's see them face Pintle Pine the Protector!'



Delighted, Mae hunted around and found a clump of moss. She fashioned it into a figure, adding little sticky arms and legs poking out. Cal even handed her a tiny twiggy catapult for it.



'Mossie's ready to join the battle,' she said with a grin.



She brought her hands in front of her, thumbs to the top of her chest, and then with fingers almost touching, bounced them together. Then repeated, 'Ready'.

Now it was my turn. To be honest, I wasn't great at making things. Whenever they asked for models at school or ideas for crafty projects, my brain went blank. I usually ended up going along with whatever Rafi suggested.

I looked around, grasping for inspiration.

Buzby buzzed over and perched on top of my head. I could feel him moving in an excited figure of eight up there, doing his little waggly bee dance. It felt like he was cheering me on.



I closed my eyes and tried to think what Rafi said whenever we were given a project to do together and I found it hard to begin.

'It doesn't have to be perfect, Igs. It's supposed to be fun.'

Rafi would definitely think this was fun. And I suddenly hoped he'd come and visit soon so he could see the wood for himself.

In the end I found a stick. A split at one end formed two slightly knobbly legs and the knotty bulb at the other end had a groove on it that looked like a wonky smile. The dark spots along one side could even have been a camouflage jacket. Twigly towered over Pintle Pine and Mossie and was likely to be the first target in any squirrel attack.



But actually, when the next sticky bud flew through the air, it was poor Pintle who was sent flying. Cal lunged to catch him, landing in a splatted heap on the walkway. As he rolled over he squealed, and I rushed over,



wondering what bit of him was broken. But he was fine.

In fact, he was beaming.

‘He’s alive!’ he cried and held Pintle out to me. Just as I was about to laugh, because obviously he had to be joking, three things happened all at once.



Pintle Pine rolled off Cal’s hand, Mossie leaped onto his head and Twigly tumbled to the floor.

I didn’t know where to look first. I mean, Twigly could have just been blown by the wind and Cal could have dropped Pintle, but no one had been anywhere near Mossie. And he had leaped. Properly leaped onto Cal’s hair.

And then Mossie raised his catapult and took aim at Higgy just as Pintle rolled onto an outstretched leaf and Turrety scooped him up.

My eyes flicked down to stare at Twigly. He was the only one not moving.

The other two woodland warriors, ignoring us,

resumed their battle stations.

‘I made him,’ Cal said. ‘And he came alive. Am I magic?’

I looked in amazement at him.

Was he?

Was all this coming from my little brother?



Cal hollered in delight and, dragging Mae along, they rejoined the fight, hurling their own sticky buds back at Higgy and Flick. They giggled as Mossie shook his catapult at them, demanding more ammunition.

But I crouched down by Twigly, who was lying at my feet. Why wasn't he leaping about like Mossie?

I suddenly remembered something Sylvie had said: 'Who knows what might grow with a bit of imagination?' I thought about Mae, who'd shaped moss and twigs to create this little figure. And Cal, who'd given him a catapult and who'd imagined Pintle as our protector and

drawn a face on him. If the wild green magic needed imagination to work, did that mean I just wasn't as imaginative as Cal or Mae?

Buzby left my shoulder, where he'd been resting, and flew down and settled on the stick's knobbly head. He began his waggle dance. I watched as the bee completed his figure of eight again and again.

Suddenly there was a little twitch in Twigly's right leg and a buzz of hope began to grow inside me. A moment later the stick was standing there in front of me, wonky smile wide. He turned and slowly marched to join the battle. And with a whoosh of relief I gave him a mighty cheer. He wasn't leaping about like Mossie or flinging himself into the fray like Pintle, but he was upright and he had moved!

It wasn't entirely clear who won the battle in the end.

Higgy and Flick chased each other along a branch and sprang off to land in another tree. Pintle, who'd been resting in a leaf cradle fashioned by Turrety, was sent

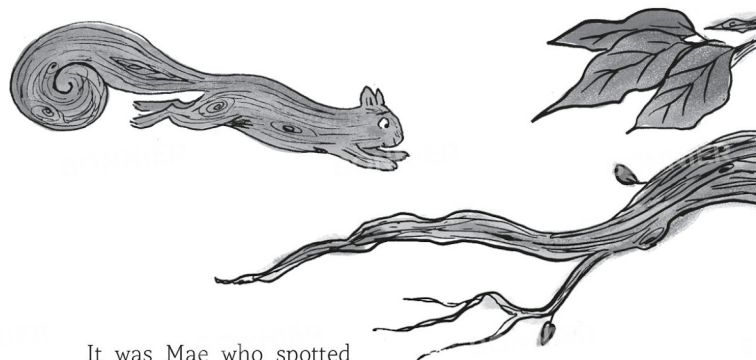


flying after them. And Mossie, with a quick glance and a final wave of his catapult, raced away too. Even Twigly hitched a ride, thanks to Turrety.

We all watched them disappear into the green, grinning.

We were in a wood that was already alive with animals, birds and insects and now it had welcomed our woodland creatures. Even though they hadn't stayed for long, I knew they were all still there. Mossie, Pintle and Twigly were part of the wood. And we were starting to feel a part of it too. Our hearts brimmed with wild green magic.

'I can't wait to show Sylvie,' Cal said. 'She'll have to believe us now!'



It was Mae who spotted something moving through the trees a bit later and realised it was Sylvie. Which was pretty impressive given how camouflaged Sylvie was, in her greens and browns. We called out, but she didn't hear, and fearing that we might lose her by the time we'd got down and chased after her, we hurried back along the walkway and into Groak's arms, hoping to catch her when she appeared in the field.

We soon saw her, carrying an armful of sticks and muttering to Wellington, who'd also come to greet her.

'We've got something to show you,' Cal cried breathlessly as we ran over.

'That sounds exciting,' she said, eyes twinkling.

And then Cal realised none of us actually had anything to hand.

‘Can I have one of these?’ he asked, pointing at the wood she was carrying.

‘Well, not really. You see, I’ve just collected these to study. I was hoping to get to the bottom of what’s wrong with the trees. There’s some sort of terrible blight and dieback affecting them. It’s getting worse,’ she said. ‘I just don’t know why.’

‘We saw some trees that didn’t look very well,’ Mae piped up. ‘We can show you where they are, if you like.’ And she handed Sylvie the map we’d made.

Her eyes widened. ‘This is wonderful!’ she said. ‘Thank you for doing this. It’s so important to keep an eye on the wood and make a note of any new problems. I’m certainly going to raise all this at that meeting Councillor Thornwood has organised. I’ll be there to speak up for the wood come hell or high water.’

She passed the map back to Mae.

‘I thought I was the only one who liked naming trees,’

she said with a smile. ‘People think I’m daft for talking to them. But sometimes I feel as if they’re better listeners than some folk.’

‘We don’t think it’s daft at all,’ I said. ‘And I’m pretty sure the trees don’t either.’

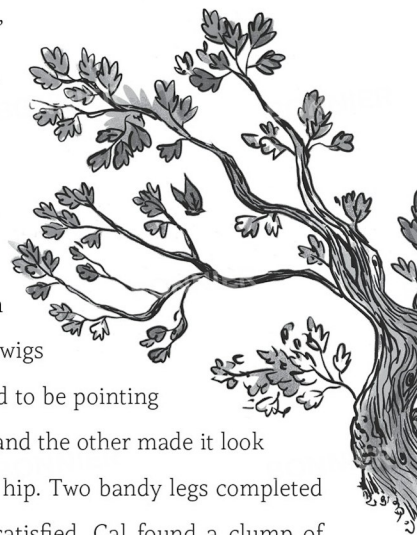
Cal had been jiggling impatiently throughout this.

‘Please,’ he burst out, ‘I only need one stick. And you can have it back after.’ Then he added, ‘If it doesn’t run off into the wood, that is.’

She looked at him quizzically.

‘Please,’ I urged.

She nodded and he rifled through the sticks. Eventually he settled on one which had little twigs sticking out. One seemed to be pointing at something in the sky and the other made it look like it had a hand on its hip. Two bandy legs completed the character. But not satisfied, Cal found a clump of

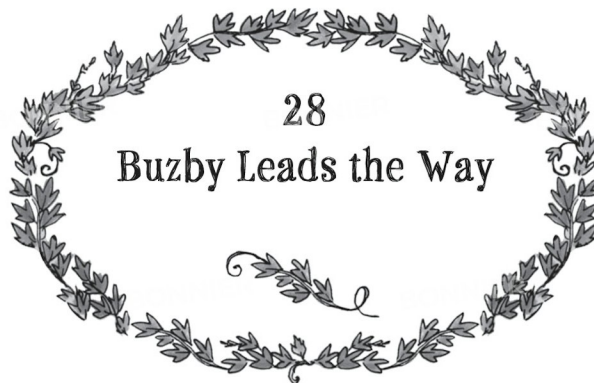


grass that the snuffling Wellington had unearthed and used the sticky soil to attach the sprouting hair in place. He propped the stick up against a large stone and we all stared at it.

I'm not quite sure how long we stood there. It felt like an hour, but it was probably only minutes before Sylvie gave a slightly apologetic smile and said, 'I don't see it, I'm sorry. I wish I did. But I'm glad you see the magic of this place. I really am.' And then she added, 'This wood needs you to.'

I could see that she really wanted to believe us; she'd watched the stick with almost as much longing as Cal. But with the stick lying there refusing to move, she just hadn't been able to.

We followed her back home, Cal's eyes wet with tears of frustration. I knew the three of us were all thinking the same thing. Why hadn't the magic worked this time?



After Sylvie left us to head into her cabin, we carried on back to the house.

'Why didn't it work?' Cal wailed.

'What was different about what we did in the wood and what we did with Sylvie?' Mae said, just as exasperated.

'Nothing was different,' Cal insisted. 'I used a stick just like Iggy did.'

And he stomped ahead, huffing loudly. Mae and I followed, wracking our brains for answers.

When we got inside, I could hear Mum and Mitchell

chatting in the other room. Buzby began attacking my head, bumping into me again and again.

‘What on earth’s got into you?’ I asked. ‘And ouch – by the way, that actually hurts.’



The gold-winged bee slowed mid strike, then hovered just in front of my nose before zipping away.

He waited by the door to the hall until we began to follow.

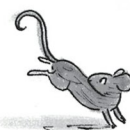
He led us upstairs into our bedroom, where we found a crowd of wooden mice gathered around the upright duck. When they saw me, they started scurrying back and forth.



One ran over, did a frenzied loop round me and then dashed back to the duck. The duck looked unbothered. It didn’t move out of their way or shoo them off. But it hadn’t joined in their antics the other night either. It had just watched, turning its head slowly like an umpire.

‘Tiny!’ Cal cried. He hurried past me and scooped up the little elephant he’d just spotted. Tiny trumpeted silently and shook her ears wildly as if imploring him to put her down again. He quickly did, and she ran off behind a large plant pot.

All the mice followed Tiny and we followed too, only to see Tiny’s mum. She didn’t greet Tiny with a swing of her head or amble towards her. She took a very slow step and then another even slower one. Like a clockwork toy that was winding down.



I realised then that the duck hadn't turned to see what all the fuss was about. It wasn't watching at all. The wooden creature had stopped completely.

'What's wrong with Tiny's mum?' Cal said quietly. 'Why is she all slow?'

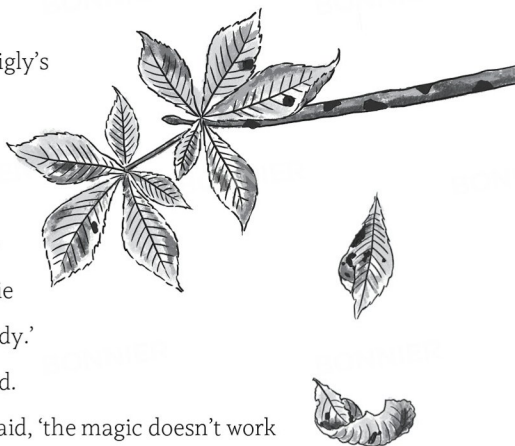
I bent down and looked more closely at her and then back at the duck. What was happening to the magic in them?

I thought again of Twigly, moving so much slower than Pintle and Mossie, and then of Cal's stick that hadn't moved at all.

'A bit of Twigly's bark had dark spots on it,' I said. 'It actually looked just like the sticks Sylvie collected to study.'

'So?' Cal said.

'What if,' I said, 'the magic doesn't work



– or doesn't work as well – if the wood is damaged?'

'But none of the animals are damaged,' Cal insisted. 'They don't have marks like Twigly.'

'No, but they are all made of different types of wood, aren't they?' I said. 'The fox is a sort of reddish-brown, and the mice are all slightly different colours. Which means that they all come from different trees. Sylvie told us she uses bits the wood has gifted her, pieces that have fallen. That means the trees that the animals are made from are still out there in the wood.'



As I said it, my stomach slammed into the tiles with a hard cold thud, and I saw Mae's face fall as the same realisation hit her.

Cal was looking between us in confusion.

'If Iggy's right,' Mae said slowly, 'and the magic doesn't work if the wood is damaged, then what happens if the tree the animals are made from gets sick?'

Suddenly understanding, Cal's hand shot to his mouth to hold in the gasp.

‘That’s why the animals were so desperate for us to get into the wood,’ I said. ‘It wasn’t just to play. They need us to find out what’s going on. Because if their trees die, so will they.’



At teatime, I didn’t feel like eating and neither did Cal. We stared glumly at our plates of spaghetti and I noticed Mum and Mitchell exchanging worried glances. In the end they sent us both upstairs for an early night, deciding it must be all the fresh air that had worn us out.

I went over to the window. Outside, the octopus tree swayed gently, leaning closer as I approached. For the first time I noticed the ridges like eyebrows wrinkling across the bark and, lower down, a sort of bulbous mottled lump almost like a ragged beard. The tree looked deep in thought.



‘Don’t worry, Occy. We’re going to help,’ I whispered. I reached out and gently brushed his leaves, and a single twiggy finger wound around my hand, wrapping it in a frill of green.



Mum had obviously decided that we needed keeping an eye on and refused all our pleas to return to the wood the next morning. Instead, she declared that we would all go

along to the grand opening of the new playground.

‘It’ll show Councillor Thornwood we mean well,’ she said. ‘And afterwards we can go down to the beach. Mae can come too.’

So that’s how we found ourselves standing in the shiny new ‘supervised play area’, along with half the village. To be fair, it was a good playground. There was a cool spider-web climbing frame and a really fast zip wire.

At Mum’s urging, we crawled through tunnels, climbed up the bit that was made to look like a ship’s prow, and slid down the twisty slide. Children clambered around us, squealing excitedly, leaping down onto the springy ground below.

‘Bet they’d think Turrety was cooler,’ Cal said.

‘Not that they’ll get a chance to discover that,’ Mae pointed out. ‘Not with Thornwood on the war path and all her *keep out* signs. Besides, they look pretty happy with this.’

Councillor Thornwood stood beaming at the vision before her. She’d managed to get the local football mascot

– a white horse with a blue Mohican mane – to officially open the playground. The horse was cantering up and down, delighting the snaking line of toddlers who were chasing it.

‘So what do you think?’ someone asked.

I turned and Lavender’s head swung into view. She was dangling upside down, her legs hooked over a bar above us. And, like a curtain, she had to part the long witch’s cloak she was wearing to see out.

I shrugged. ‘It’s OK, I guess.’

I looked around. After Turretty and the magic of the wood, I think the three of us were itching to get away from the neatly manicured grass here. The flowers had been ordered to stand quietly in regimented rows. And even the newly planted tree saplings had wire mesh round them.



I suspected it was to stop things eating them, but it gave the impression of fencing them in. I imagined their roots bursting free and the trees striding off to a wilder home.

‘I prefer the wood,’ I said.

Thornwood, seeing her daughter hanging there, curtly instructed her to be more careful and glared until Lavender had pulled herself up and swung down. She summoned her over.

Lavender muttered something as she passed me. It sounded like, ‘Shame.’



Later, we had fish and chips for tea on the beach, salty and crisp and piping hot. I washed down the sharp tang of vinegar with gulps of lemonade as we looked out over the sea.

‘Can’t get much fresher than this,’ Mitchell said, sucking the salt off his fingers. ‘Caught this morning.’

‘So what happened at the meeting?’ Mum asked.

I stopped munching to listen.

While we'd carried on playing at the playground, Mitchell had gone to the meeting about the so-called dangers of Wildtop Wood. I'd asked if we could go too but had been told it was adults only.

'Not a lot really,' Mitchell said. 'Councillor Thornwood stood up and told everyone how the wood was getting worse. She insisted it's not safe, and said half of it is dying from blight and half is full of litter from people dumping their rubbish illegally.'

'But that's terrible,' Mae said.

He shrugged. 'Sad but true, I'm afraid. People chuck all sorts in the countryside rather than taking it to the dump or paying for a collection.'

'What did Sylvie say?' I asked.

'She wasn't there,' Mitchell replied, before taking a swig from his water bottle.

'Not there?'

He shook his head. 'There were only a handful of us. It wasn't exactly a packed meeting.'

I felt relieved.

'At least Thornwood's scary stories about the wood won't spread further,' I said to Mae and Cal.

'True,' replied Mae. 'But didn't Sylvie want to rally people's support to save the wood? People not being interested won't help her at all.'

She had a point.

'Why wasn't she there?' Cal said. 'She said she'd go "come hell or high water".'

He was right. Something had stopped Sylvie showing up. I hoped it wasn't more trouble in the wood.

While Mum and Mitchell sat on the steps, we decided to explore. We wandered past the line of colourful beach huts towards a sandy dune dotted with clumps of grass that bordered the edge of the wood. A family were playing

rounders, and several walkers

threw balls for their

excited dogs while

seagulls wheeled

overhead. As

we scaled



the dune, I spotted something standing on the sand in front of the trees.

It was a horse. Huge and wild. And it stared defiantly at me as though it was about to gallop away into the waves.

But this was no ordinary horse.

Just like with the deer, I could see through the gaps where the driftwood it was made from bent and arced along its flanks. The wood of its face was a twisting blend of perfectly found pieces. Two ears stuck up, alert, and it held its tail proudly. Its woody mane curled and swept away as if whipped by the breeze.

This must have been what Sylvie meant about going bigger with the things she was making.

It was incredible. And the sight of it sucked all the words and air out of me.

Sylvie might not have seen the wild green magic yet, but there was certainly magic in what she was making.





‘I don’t think Sylvie came home last night,’ I said to the others the next morning. ‘There were no lights on in her cabin when we went to bed, and I woke up really early so I went down there to see if she was back, and there was still no sign of her.’

‘She said she had loads to do,’ Mae said. ‘Maybe she got back really late and left even earlier.’

‘But that doesn’t explain why she didn’t go to the meeting,’ I said.

‘We should carry on with our map,’ Mae went on. ‘She told us that was really helpful. If we can identify which

trees need help the most, that’s a start. And there’s other stuff we can do too – I’ve found this really good website all about woodlands and how to look after them. I’ve made a list.’

She waved a bit of paper at me. Our action plan.

‘That sounds good,’ I said. ‘At least we’ll be doing something.’

‘But what if it’s not enough?’ Cal asked, cradling Tiny who was flumped in his hand. ‘Tiny’s not her usual bouncy self and I don’t think it’s just because she’s worried about her mum. What if she stops moving?’

We all looked at the little elephant. I didn’t reply and neither did Mae. After all, it was what we were all thinking.



Groak and Silver welcomed us into the wood with waving branches and we raced our way along the walkways, eager to start exploring further. When we reached Turretty we tumbled down the corkscrew slide to the bracken floor below.



One of the things I was finding out about being a big brother was that I was expected to know stuff. Like which direction to go.

I started off feeling pretty confident, tracking the landmarks we already had on our map and scribbling down details we spotted along the way. At least the trees in this part of the wood looked healthy.

But it wasn't long before I realised the limits of our mapmaking skills. Everything looked so different on the ground. I wondered about returning to the treetops, but we needed to be down here to see the smaller trees and check if they were OK. The only trouble was, I was beginning to feel more and more lost.

'What's that saying about not being able to see the wood for the trees?' Mae grimaced.

After a while Cal asked a little nervously, 'You don't think this wood is like the Tardis, do you? Bigger on the inside.'

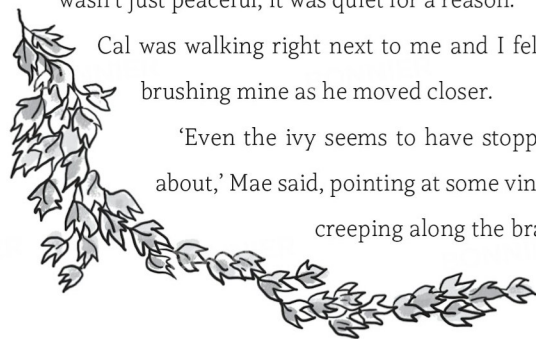
'I think it just feels that way,' I said. I hoped so anyway. Although it did seem like we'd been walking

forever and we still hadn't come out the other side.

I couldn't help noticing that the trees in this part of the wood were closer together, like they were crowding in on us somehow, trying to get a better look. I could hardly see the sky in places because the canopy of leaves had grown so thick. The rabbits that had been scampering alongside us had also disappeared. It was definitely quieter here, but in a slightly uncomfortable way. Like it wasn't just peaceful, it was quiet for a reason.

Cal was walking right next to me and I felt his arm brushing mine as he moved closer.

'Even the ivy seems to have stopped joking about,' Mae said, pointing at some vines quietly creeping along the branch next to her.



I remembered the line of trees with their backs to us that we'd seen on that first day swinging through the wood, and I wondered if we'd come to a part of the wood where we weren't quite so welcome.

‘These trees don’t feel very friendly,’ Cal said, sounding worried. ‘Remember that crabby one by Sylvie’s cabin. I don’t think that tree wanted us anywhere near it. What if these trees don’t like us either?’

It had been alarming to face one tree that poked and prodded us and shoved us away – what would it be like with this many?

I peered ahead and thought I glimpsed a clearing through the crowding trees. But with Cal now grabbing my sleeve, I turned and said, ‘Maybe we should go the other way.’

He nodded, looking relieved.

But as I took a step in the opposite direction, something caught my foot. I looked down and saw a gnarly root grappling my shoe as it writhed on the ground.

I gave a yelp and soon the others were shrieking too as more roots grabbed our feet.

And then the vines started to grow towards us, reaching out until they found our wrists and arms and wound around them. Clutching us tight. The more we wriggled to get free, the more firmly they gripped.

Suddenly the ferns that lived under the shade of the trees began unfurling more and more of their frilly leaves. And the leaves grew bigger and bigger.

‘Iggy!’ Cal wailed as he watched the massive ferns wrapping around his legs. ‘Make it stop!’



But I was just as helpless. The ferns were covering us all in their bright green leaves. Another few seconds and we'd be like caterpillars in a cocoon.

With a strength I thought only existed in comic books, I yanked my foot free and then my hands, tearing myself away. I knelt down beside Cal and pulled him out of the growing cocoon. Opposite me I saw Mae stepping clear too, as the ferns retreated into the shade.

'Let's go,' Cal shouted, pulling at my sleeve.

Mae cast a glance behind her and for a second I wondered if she'd seen something. But then Cal grabbed her too, and dragging us, he stumbled back the way we'd come.



We were all relieved when our stumbling feet finally took us past a landmark we recognised – the wizard tree, with its head of dark red leaves. We thanked it gratefully for pointing the way home. From there we could use our map and would soon be out in the field.

Cal actually shuddered with relief as the sun hit our heads.

But as I looked back at the wood, I pictured the clearing I'd glimpsed. I'd almost felt like we were being shepherded by the trees, as if they had been leading us somewhere. But where? And why?



Back at home, Mum and Mitchell tried to start a game of Snakes and Ladders, but neither of us was really in the mood. Not after Cal found Tiny's mum standing still in a corner. Poor Tiny paced around her, nudging her with her trunk as if she could bump her into activity. But even Tiny was moving more slowly now. Cal took them both upstairs and I tried to reassure myself that Buzby wasn't spending longer in my hood than bumbling about. But when he was still there at bedtime, I felt the weight of my fear lying in my stomach like a heavy rock.



The thought of all the animals slowing down and maybe even stopping altogether was too awful to think about.

I stared out at Occy's wrinkled face.

'What is happening, Occy? Why are the trees getting sick? I wish I knew what we could do,' I said desperately.

Occy leaned in through the window, his leaves swishing my face. He gave a deep creak and curled a



slender branch across my shoulder. When I lay down in bed, I left the window open just to hear the shoosh and whisper of his leaves.



In my dream I was climbing, Occy helping my feet and hands by offering them branches to grip and rest on. There was no excited rustling though. The air was still and sombre and shadows slunk around me.

When I finally emerged at the top of the tree and gazed out, I saw the sea of trees again. But this time there was an island jutting out of the rolling waves of bright green foliage. An island of bare branches and thick shadows. And as I watched, it grew larger. And then more shadowy islands started to appear, each one swallowing the green as they spread outwards. The trees nearest me reached out their branches, imploring me. I felt Occy tremble and shake. Leaning forward, I wrapped my arms around his nearest branch.



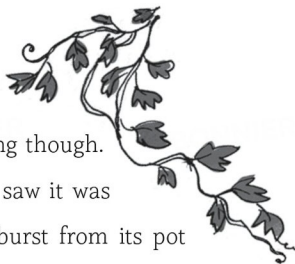
I woke with a tug. It was still dark outside, not yet dawn.

This time it wasn't Cal tugging though.

I stared down at my leg and saw it was brilliant green. A plant had burst from its pot and was scrambling up the side of my bed and tumbling over me. Around the room, other plants waved and spread out tendrils towards me that grew even longer as I watched. One of these wrapped around my hand and pulled me towards the window.

Occy was leaning away, every limb pointing down the garden, entreating me. There was no light coming from Sylvie's cabin. She still hadn't returned. I looked over and saw Tiny, her trunk raised, and I thought of her mum and how long it would be until she slowed to a complete stop. And maybe Tiny too.

If the wild green magic was fading and if Sylvie was in trouble, what was I doing here? I needed to get out there and help.



32

The Heart of the Secret



I quickly pulled on my joggers and jumper. Cal's eyes flew open.

'What are you doing?' he said.

I put my finger to my lips and motioned to the open door.

Without a second thought he scrambled out of bed and stood before me.

'I can't believe you were going to go without me,' he huffed.

'I didn't know if you'd want to come,' I said. 'After earlier.'

He scowled at me. 'I'm fine,' he insisted.



Tiptoeing into the kitchen, we found the wooden animals waiting for us. The mice skittered around our feet as I grabbed a torch and slipped on my trainers, and when I opened the door, Higgy and Flick scampered out and the bushy-tailed fox followed. I felt Buzby resting in my hood where I'd put him and his comforting presence buzzed right through me.



'I'm glad you're coming,' I whispered to them. The thought of going into the wood in the dark was already making me want to run back to bed. Cal had left Tiny with her mum and seemed equally relieved we'd have company.



We hurried down the garden and we both nearly screamed when a shape suddenly emerged from the hedge.

'You made me jump,' Cal said crossly as Mae hurried over to us.

'Sorry,' she said. 'I've been watching out for Sylvie.'



'She's still not back, is she?' I said.

Mae shook her head. 'What if she's in trouble? She might know the wood, but we saw today how easy it is to get lost. She could be hurt.'

We raced across the field together and arrived breathless at the edge of the wood.

'Which way?' Cal asked.

And then the gappy deer appeared from behind a tree. It looked at us for a second and bounded away. It had led us to Sylvie before. We didn't need telling twice to chase after it.

In the dark, the wood was a different place again. There was a stillness that wrapped itself around us. Every crack and crunch of our steps sounded too loud. It felt like we'd walked into the heart of a secret and I wasn't yet sure if the wood wanted to share it. Bright eyes watched us from between fern fronds, then disappeared. A fox on the prowl. Our wooden bushy-tailed friend sprang away after it. Then we jumped a mile when there was a growl from beyond some bracken. And breathed a sigh of relief



when we saw the retreating
back of a badger.

Suddenly the tree we were under lowered its twiggy arms and wound them tightly around our waists. Like an elephant lifting a log, it scooped us up, only to pass us on, higher and higher. Until the tree had lifted us clear of the canopy, holding us up so that our feet dangled among the topmost leaves and our faces felt the cold breath of the sea's breeze. Just like in my dream.

I stared out over the canopy and shrank inside to see what we hadn't noticed from below, the islands of shadow creeping out further through the wood.

Up here the air was filled with a cacophony of sounds.

Rustle, creak, crack and groan

Whisper, shoosh, whistle and moan

The tree held us there.

And then threw us into the air.

We flew, arcing over the green, over the shadows and through the clamour of sounds carried on the breeze. Until a tree with fanned serrated leaves, like Occy's,



reached up and snatched us as we fell, wrapping its frilled limbs gently around our hammering hearts.

The tree lowered us through swishing green and placed us back on the ground.

We found we were in a clearing where a ring of trees stood in a silent circle. And I knew at once it was the clearing I'd glimpsed yesterday. The trees around us were tall and straight without helpful stepping branches, just like the ones that had shepherded us past the ferns. I wondered if they had been trying to lead us to this place all along. And whether the ferns had simply not wanted us to turn and flee.

Standing there, it felt like we were looking up at the guards we'd seen on a trip to Buckingham Palace, who weren't allowed to talk or even look at you properly. They just stared ahead, rigid and alert, doing their job. And their job, it seemed, was to surround the tree growing at the very centre of the clearing.

It was a vast tree with branches that spread out wide and open.



This tree looked old, much older than Turrety and even older than Groak. The word that popped into my head was 'ancient'. From where I stood I could see the deep grooves in its bark and the many lumps and bumps on its trunk and limbs.

As Mae took in the huge tree she said quietly, 'It hasn't got any leaves.'

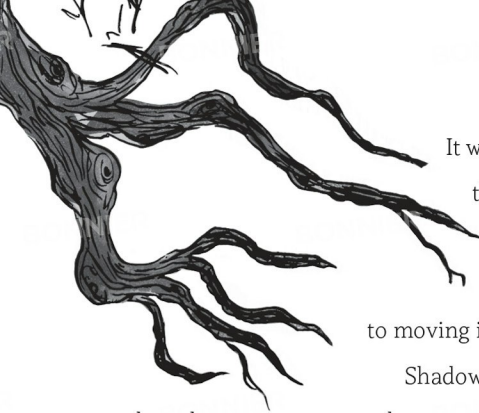
The branches were completely bare and twisted. Whereas the other trees in the wood had all embraced the spring, this one looked like it was in deepest winter.

I heard a whimper and saw Cal pulling up the leg of his onesie. Blood trickled down from a scratch along his shin.

Before I could ask if he was OK, his eyes grew wide and he let out a shriek. I spun round to see what had startled him. And I gasped.

The lower branches of the ancient tree had started to move. A deep creak of wood reverberated round us. One twisted branch slammed into the ground and another rose up behind it. Each movement jarred and juddered.





It was like we'd woken
the tree from a
deep sleep and it
was getting used
to moving its limbs again.

Shadows crept behind its
trunk and sprang out at each new movement. Another
branch slammed down and dragged along the ground,
the tree barely able to lift this one. Above us, the creaking
grew louder. And I watched as the tree arched over,
weighted down by the heft of its own massive limbs. It
loomed over us.

Cal looked utterly terrified and started backing away
from a branch that was stretching towards him. The
gnarly fingers plucked at his onesie and with a squeal he
turned and fled out of the clearing, lurching awkwardly
as he tried to hold the weight off his injured leg.

I glanced at Mae and then at the tree, which was
pulling its branches back as if retreating.

'Cal, wait up!' I called.

I chased after him, but he'd already been swallowed
by a thick tangle of bracken.

Panic swept through me as I realised I'd lost my little
brother in a dark wood in the middle of the night.



33 Sylvie of the Green

I stumbled around with Mae, each of us calling out his name. And then finally I heard something. I grabbed Mae's arm and motioned in the direction of the sound that had been too faint for her to hear.

'This way,' I said, and hurried on, still calling Cal's name so he knew I was coming.

He came rushing through the trees towards us, nearly sending me flying as he barrelled into me. His face was wet from tears and his breaths were still all juddery. I hugged him until he wriggled away, complaining that he might pop if I squeezed any harder.



'Look who found me too,' he said, calmer now. He turned to point at the little sticky deer.

She looked at us, bobbed her head and then ran off.

'Sylvie!' we all said at once.

I took Cal's hand to make sure we didn't get split up and followed the deer as she bounded excitedly away.

She led us further through the trees and finally stopped next to one that had shrivelled leaves and dark patches across its trunk. Checking we were still following, the deer disappeared behind it. We hurried on, eyes scanning the shadows.

And then I saw her.



Sylvie was almost hidden by ferns and the low branch of a small tree that trailed its leaves across her body.

We rushed forward, Cal limping along as best he could. The tree dipped lower and shook its boughs, covering Sylvie in more leaves and holding us at bay.

'We just want to help her,' I said, keeping a wary eye





on the thorny branches shielding her.

The tree stilled. Sylvie's eyes were closed and she was very still too.

'Sylvie,' I urged, 'Are you OK?'

At first she didn't stir, but then the roots she lay nestled in began to lift her head and shoulders, like protective hands cradling her. She opened her eyes and a faint smile fluttered across her face as she saw us.

'What happened? Are you hurt?' Mae asked, reaching out to help her sit up.

Sylvie nodded. 'It's my ankle,' she said, wincing. 'My foot went into a hole and I didn't stop to let it catch up. I've been here ever since, waiting till I could bear to put some weight on it. But what are you doing out here before the sun is even up?'

'We've been looking for you of course!' I said with a relieved laugh. 'You missed the meeting

about the wood – we were worried. Have you really been here all this time?'

Sylvie looked between us, eyes shiny. 'Didn't I tell you noticing things makes a difference? Thank you so much for thinking of me. Luckily the wood has been looking after me. See, the leaves have kept me warm and I had water and a few snacks to keep me going. I even started to make a splint.' And she motioned to her leg where she'd bound a stick to it. 'But I really am very glad you came. I need to get home.'

She looked about her and then sighed. 'There's something different about this part of the wood. The key to what's wrong with the trees is right here, I'm sure of it. I just can't put my finger on what it is.'

We looked at each other, and I knew I wasn't the only one thinking of the ancient tree we'd just seen. But before any of us had a chance to say anything, Sylvie spoke again.

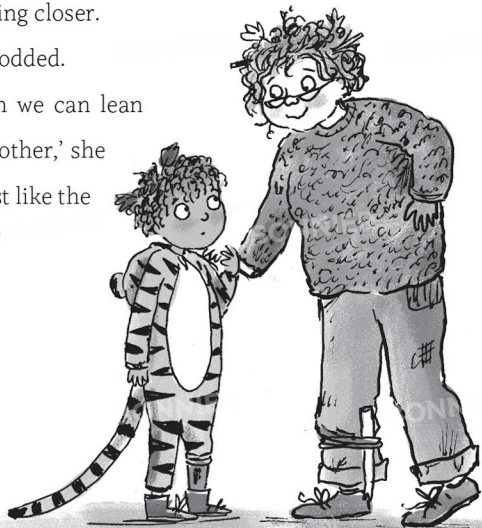
'Can you help me back to my cabin?'

'Of course,' Mae said, crouching to help her stand.

‘Goodness, are you hurt too?’ Sylvie asked as she saw Cal limping closer.

He nodded.

‘Then we can lean on each other,’ she said. ‘Just like the trees do.’



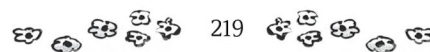
When I opened the back door I found Mum sitting at the kitchen table, hands wrapped around a mug. She did quite an impressive double take, seeing us appear there on the doorstep.

‘Iggy, what on earth ...?’ she began, but was distracted by Cal’s muddy face and limp.

‘He’s hurt his leg,’ I said.

The next second, Mitchell appeared from the hall, rubbing sleep from his eyes. ‘I thought I was an early bird, but you’ve beaten me and the whole dawn chorus!’

At the sight of his dad, Cal rushed towards him.



Mitchell swept him up into a huge hug and it immediately released the tears Cal had obviously been holding back.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, realising again how upset and scared Cal had been. ‘It was my fault. We went for a walk and then he . . .’ I trailed off, unable to admit I’d actually lost him for a time.

Mitchell waved my words away as if the details didn’t really matter and took Cal off to calm down.

Mum gave me a squeeze. ‘Don’t worry, love, he’ll be fine.’

But I was kicking myself. I should have been keeping a better eye on him and I shouldn’t have dragged him somewhere that would probably give him nightmares for months. Great big brother I was shaping up to be.

After Mitchell had patched up Cal’s leg, Mum insisted we both try and get some more sleep. I looked over to see Cal curled up in his quilt with just his eyes peeping out.

‘I don’t want to sleep,’ he said. ‘I’m scared of the dream I might get.’

It looked like I was right to worry about giving him nightmares.

Mitchell kissed him on the forehead and Mum crouched down by his side.

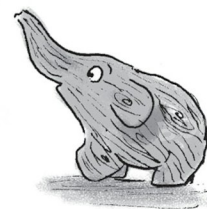
‘You know you have a superpower, right?’

He stared at her. And when he didn’t say anything she went on. ‘Your imagination. You make up brilliant stories all the time,’ she said. ‘If when you’re asleep it makes up something scary, just remember to activate that superpower of yours. Imagining a monster in a tutu as it roller-skates along eating a doughnut makes it much less scary. Don’t you think?’

I remembered her saying the same thing to me when I was his age. He looked like he was thinking about this, but he still didn’t reply.

After they’d left, I heard their murmuring voices disappearing down the hall.

‘It does work,’ I whispered.
‘And here’s Tiny to stand guard,’



I added, wriggling out of bed and lowering the little elephant onto his bedside table. She raised her trunk proudly and started marching slowly back and forth.

'I don't think I want to go back to that part of the wood again,' he said quietly.

'That's OK,' I said.

He gave a little nod and then closed his eyes tight like that might help block out any monsters.



I woke to find Cal's bed empty, and when I went downstairs Mum explained that he and Mitchell had already gone out.

'He's fine,' Mum said. 'His leg is all better. It wasn't a deep scratch.'

I trickled honey onto the porridge she'd made me and stared at the patterns.

Mum poured a cup of tea and then sat down next to me.

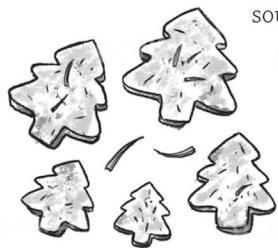


'I don't think I'm doing such a brilliant job of big-brothering,' I said.

'I'm sorry, love. I know it's a lot to get used to. We're

all finding our way a bit. But you're doing better than you think.' She squeezed my hand. 'How about we make some dandelion biscuits? We can have them ready for when they get back.'

Personally, I wasn't sure biscuits made of weeds



sounded much of a treat, but she insisted they'd be delicious.

While I shaped the dough into tree shapes with a cutter Mum had found, I remembered my dream and the shadows

billowing out from the island of bare branches. Those wide spreading branches, bare and twisted, reminded me of the huge ancient tree. Sylvie was right – the key to everything was in that part of the wood. It was that tree, I was sure of it. I needed to ask Sylvie what she knew about it. Had she found it too, before she'd hurt herself?



Mae had a habit of popping up just when I needed her. I was beginning to wonder if she actually spent all her time waiting in that hedge!

'Is Cal OK?' she asked when she joined me by the apple trees.

'I don't know,' I said sadly. 'I hope so. He went off with Mitchell while I was still asleep. He got really upset when we got home. I think he'd been holding it in.'

'He'll be OK,' she replied. 'You had the same idea to check on Sylvie then?'

I nodded.

'I wanted to talk to her about that tree we found,' I said, then added, 'Maybe missing out the part where it tried to grab hold of Cal!'

'Yeah, I don't think Sylvie would believe that anyway. It did though, didn't it? I didn't just imagine it?'

'It's no wonder Cal ran a mile,' I said.

'I know, but the thing is, I don't think it was trying to hurt him,' she said.

'No, nor do I,' I agreed. 'I even wonder if it was trying

to help him because he'd hurt himself.'

When we knocked on the cabin door, Sylvie called us in. She was sitting in the big leather chair, an open book on her lap. She smiled when she saw us.

'How's your ankle?' Mae asked.

'It's all strapped up,' Sylvie said cheerfully.

'And my friend the willow has given me a helping hand. The bark is wonderful, for helping with swelling. I'll soon be right as rain.'



We both smiled, relieved it wasn't more serious.

'Sylvie,' I began, 'you said that you thought the key to everything was in that part of the wood. Well, we saw something – this tree. It was huge and it had no leaves at all. It looked so ill.'

'And it was properly old,' Mae added. 'Really, really ancient. It felt like we were standing in front of the oldest tree in the wood.'

Sylvie drew in a breath.

'Ealdemodor,' she whispered quickly. 'The grandmother tree.'

Mae gave a little frown and pointed to her lips. Sylvie apologised and repeated what she'd said, more clearly and slowly. Then, seeing that I was frowning too in confusion, she went on.

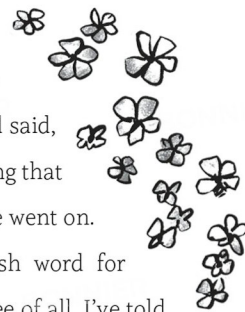
'Ealdemodor is the Old English word for "grandmother". She is the oldest tree of all. I've told you about the mother trees that send out messages, but there are even more ancient trees, ones that came at the very beginning and that the wood grew around. I hadn't found Ealdemodor yet.'

She paused and then added, 'Sometimes I almost felt like the wood was keeping her from me. Who knows, perhaps she was waiting for you.'

'She needs our help,' I said quickly, thinking again of Buzby and Tiny and her mum and all the other animals. 'We have to do something.'

'You must show me the way to her when I can walk again properly,' said Sylvie, 'so I can see her for myself.'

'We have the map,' Mae said, quickly fishing it out.



Sylvie studied it, tracing her finger past the landmarks to the grandmother tree that Mae had drawn. Then she gave a wry laugh.

‘Maybe if I really could speak treeish, the trees could tell me why they’re getting sick and how to help.’

Sylvie began to stand and then, wobbling, slumped back into the chair. She looked really pale and I felt Mae tug at my sleeve.

‘We should let you get some rest,’ she said. ‘Come on, Iggy.’

And from the look she gave me, I knew there was something she needed to say.



‘Do you think she’s right?’ Mae asked as soon as we were outside the cabin.

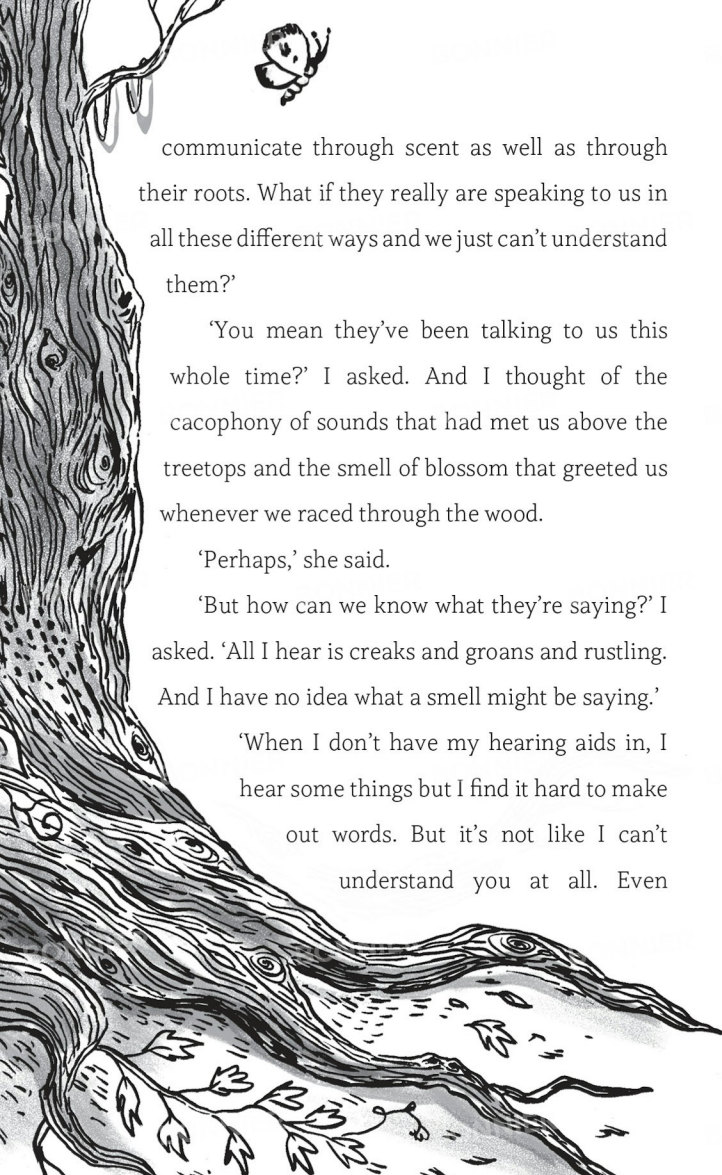
‘About what?’ I said.

‘About trees being able to talk?’

I wasn’t sure what to say. I mean we’d seen some pretty mind-boggling things in the last week. But actual talking trees? I glanced nervously at the one next to me, wondering if it might shout ‘Boo!’ at any moment.

‘It’s just,’ she went on, ‘have you noticed how they make different sounds? And there are so many smells in the wood. Remember that Sylvie told us the trees





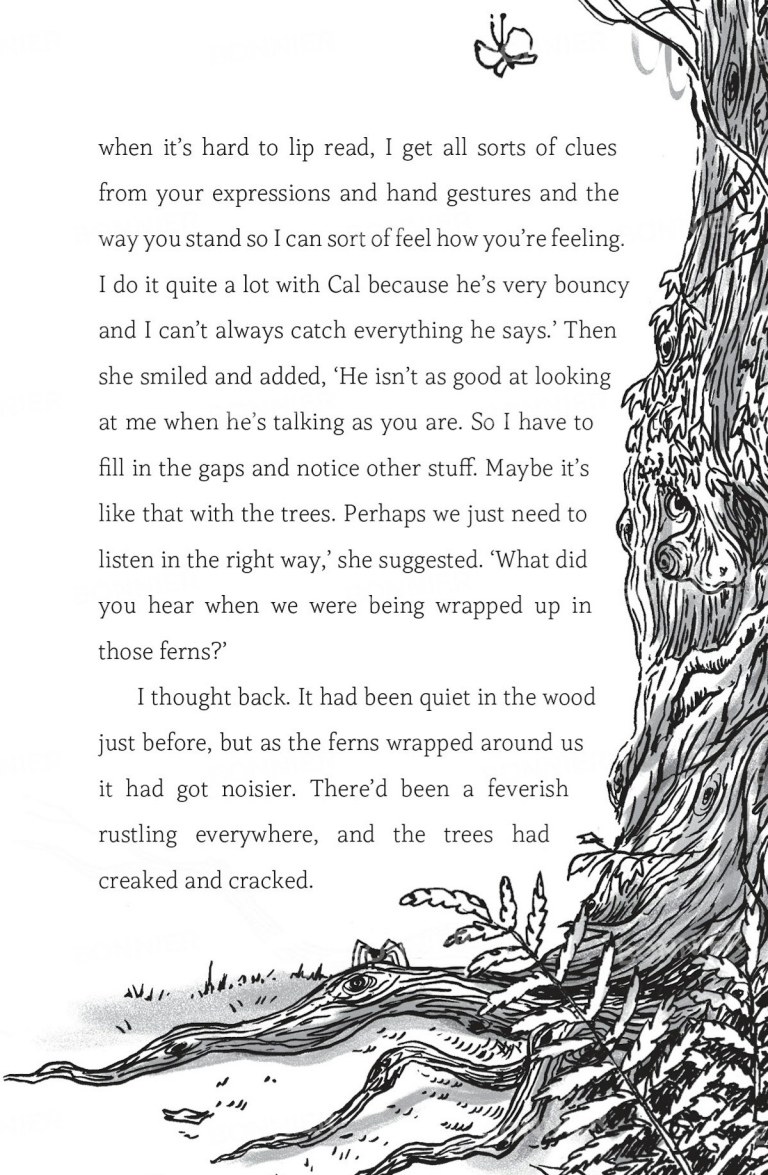
communicate through scent as well as through their roots. What if they really are speaking to us in all these different ways and we just can't understand them?'

'You mean they've been talking to us this whole time?' I asked. And I thought of the cacophony of sounds that had met us above the treetops and the smell of blossom that greeted us whenever we raced through the wood.

'Perhaps,' she said.

'But how can we know what they're saying?' I asked. 'All I hear is creaks and groans and rustling. And I have no idea what a smell might be saying.'

'When I don't have my hearing aids in, I hear some things but I find it hard to make out words. But it's not like I can't understand you at all. Even



when it's hard to lip read, I get all sorts of clues from your expressions and hand gestures and the way you stand so I can sort of feel how you're feeling. I do it quite a lot with Cal because he's very bouncy and I can't always catch everything he says.' Then she smiled and added, 'He isn't as good at looking at me when he's talking as you are. So I have to fill in the gaps and notice other stuff. Maybe it's like that with the trees. Perhaps we just need to listen in the right way,' she suggested. 'What did you hear when we were being wrapped up in those ferns?'

I thought back. It had been quiet in the wood just before, but as the ferns wrapped around us it had got noisier. There'd been a feverish rustling everywhere, and the trees had creaked and cracked.

‘I heard all sorts,’ I said. ‘I felt like the wood was desperate to cling onto me. I got a bit panicky.’

Mae nodded. ‘I did too at first. And I know what you mean about it feeling desperate. But I don’t know – I felt it was eager as well.’

She was right. I’d felt that too. Like it was excited we were there and had simply got a bit carried away.

I thought of the happy rustles of Occy, and then glanced at the tree by the cabin, the one Cal said was crabby. I remembered the impatient swooshing sound of its trailing leaves as it huffily shooed us away. We’d already noticed how some trees were definitely friendlier than others. What we hadn’t really done was wonder why. Maybe us elbowing our way through the tree by the cabin had made it want to elbow us right back? Maybe Crabby wasn’t so crabby after all.

We stood for a moment and I tried to listen with my whole body, not just my ears. Above me, a trail of ivy tumbled from a branch and looped itself over my shoulders.



‘If I had to describe the sound of this I’d say it’s rustling and crackling. But when I really think about it, there’s something beyond those sounds.

If I imagine it as a voice, I’d say it sounds excited and playful and teasing.’

‘That’s what I think too,’ Mae said eagerly.

I stared through the green curtain of Crabby’s leaves, tuning into the sounds the tree was starting to make. A lighter, gentler swishing. I watched the sunlight dappling the floor and I caught the smell and tang of earth and wood and blossom that drifted across to us from the fruit trees just beyond. Sights and sounds and smells. Conjuring a feeling deep inside me. I couldn’t understand everything the trees were saying, but at least I’d started listening properly now.

‘And the grandmother tree,’ Mae whispered beside me, ‘Ealdemodor – she sounded . . .’ She trailed off and I jumped in.

‘Sad,’ I said.

Mae nodded. ‘Really, really sad.’



37

Big Brothers and Bear Hugs

It was almost lunchtime when Cal burst through the door with Mitchell; they'd been laughing about something and Cal's eyes sparkled. I felt relieved to see his bounce had well and truly returned.

'Can I give it to him now?' he asked Mitchell. 'Pleeease.'

Mitchell grinned. 'I don't see why not.'

Cal delved into the backpack he was carrying and pulled something out.

'Sorry we've been so long,' Mitchell explained. 'Someone had a plan.'



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Cal was jiggling up and down. 'I made it,' he declared and thrust a lump of wood into my hand.

It was in the shape of a star.

'Dad did the cutting,' he admitted, 'but I sanded it smooth. And . . .' he said, reaching back into my hand and turning the wooden star over, 'I used this really hot pen to engrave it.'



I stared down at the wiggly *B.B.B* across the face of the star.

'That's for "Best. Big. Brother",' he said happily. 'Because that's what you are!'

I ran my finger over the grooves of the letters.

'Do you like it?' he asked.

I nodded, stunned.

'A *lot*. Thanks, Cal.'

'Brilliant,' he said, and then, turning to Mum, asked, 'Are those biscuits all for me?'

While Mum helped Cal get plates, Mitchell sat down next to me.

'All right, best big brother?' he said with a grin.



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'I don't really deserve this,' I said quietly, turning the star over in my hand. 'It's really nice, but I don't think I've been the best big brother at all.'

Mitchell looked at me, surprised.

'I don't actually know the first thing about how to be a best big brother. I didn't know about bringing snacks, I'm not brave, and when he's with me he gets scratched and bumped and chased by pigs. I don't keep a close enough eye on him.'

Mitchell laughed. 'You'd need eyes in the back of your head and in your knees and your elbows to keep an eye on that one all the time. Believe me, I should know! And that's not what I've been hearing anyway. He's been telling me all about how you always have snacks up your sleeve and how you worked out what Wellington liked and how you're brave and protect him from monsters and are the best at games and plans. The list went on and on.'

It was my turn to look surprised.

'But it's not those things that make you a good big brother, Iggy – brilliant though they are. It's that you cared enough to do them,' said Mitchell. 'You made a choice to be the best big brother you could be right from the start. We've both seen that. You got this – ' he tapped the star – 'for caring and paying attention. Everything kicked off from there.'

Mitchell pulled on the sleeve of the football shirt I was wearing with my pyjama bottoms.

'We won't always get it right,' he said. 'We're all new to this. But we're doing our best to try to listen.'

I grinned at him and he leaned across and gave me a bear-hug squeeze that nearly pulled me off my chair.





38

The Truth of It

As soon as we'd eaten, Cal and I headed back outside to find Mae. For once she didn't emerge from the hedge.

But Flick scampered up to me. She held a small piece of paper in her mouth which she dropped into my hand. I opened it to read:



'Waiting with Groak. Meet you there!'

I grinned and thanked Flick.

As soon as we appeared in the tree house, Mae exclaimed, 'Where on earth have you been?'

'I was making something for Iggy and then we had

to finish all the biscuits,' Cal said brightly. 'I saved you one though.'

He fished around in his pocket and pulled out a handful of crumbs.

She smiled and rolled her eyes. 'Don't worry about it. Anyway, we need to focus. We need to go and see the grandmother tree! Isn't that right, Iggy?'

I nodded. 'We should go back right now. Even if we can't understand exactly what she's saying, there might be clues,' I said.

Cal looked between the two of us. 'Which tree are you talking about?' Then, seeing the look that passed between us, he looked worried. 'You mean the scary one?'

'She's the oldest tree in the wood, Cal,' I said gently. 'And the thing is, we don't think she was scary.'

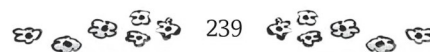
He huffed crossly. 'That's because you're both brave.'

'We don't believe she was trying to hurt us,' Mae said. 'We think she needs our help.'

'And anyway,' I spluttered, 'I'm really not brave. I've lost count of the times I've been scared since we've been



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here. I was scared of Wellington, and when we were being shoved about by that tree near the cabin, and going into the wood, and even of that spiky woman.'

'But you still did all those things,' Cal protested.

'Exactly,' agreed Mae. 'I think that's what being brave is. Doing things even when you're scared.' She pointed at Cal and puffed up her chest, then, with her hand in a claw shape in front of her face, pulled it back into a fist. 'Brave,' she said as she signed the word once more.

'I'm scared of going back to that tree,' Cal admitted.

'But you definitely want to come anyway?' I asked.

He nodded.

'Then you're the bravest one here,' I said. And I signed the word 'Brave' just like Mae had done.



The trees quickly wove their walkways for us and we hurried through the treetops. Soon we spotted the sentry trees that circled the clearing. With a lurch I noticed that several of them were stooped and their leaves had begun

to wither. Other trees had reached out branches to prop them up, but the tips of those trees' twiggy fingers had started to wrinkle and turn brown too. I thought of my dream again and the shadows spreading out.

I clambered down the last few branches. Mae had already jumped to the ground, but Cal was sitting in the crook of the tree, cradling wriggly catkins.

'You can stay there and be our lookout if you want,' I said.

He shook his head and gently let the catkins go. Swinging down, he landed between us.

'Tiny wanted to come,' he said, and I saw a little trunk peeking out of his onesie.





As we made our way past
the sentry trees into the clearing,
Buzby bumbled slowly along beside
me. He was resting more and more often on my shoulder
or dropping down into my hood.

Mae let out a gasp when she saw the grandmother
tree. Her branches were sagging and she looked more
hunched over than ever.

‘She looks even sadder today,’ she said. ‘I just wish we
knew how to help.’

‘Have you noticed how quiet it is here?’ I asked.
‘There are no birds at all.’

The others nodded.

‘And where are all the rabbits we usually send
scampering into their burrows?’ Mae said. ‘And the
butterflies?’

‘Whenever we sit on branches I’m usually covered in
wrigglies and crawlies,’ Cal said, ‘but I didn’t even have
ants in my pants here.’

‘Is this what it’ll be like if we don’t save Ealdemodor?’

Mae asked quietly. ‘All the trees will die, and the animals
will slowly disappear too.’

I felt my insides start to wither like the leaves as
realisation dawned on me.

‘It’s not just the wooden animals who are in trouble,’ I
said. ‘It’s all of them. If we don’t do something, everything
in the wood will be gone.’

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Return of the Woodland Warriors

Cal peered round me, and when he saw the tree properly he gave a little gasp.

‘Being on my own would make *me* feel sad,’ he said quietly.

He took a few steps towards the tree before turning back to me. ‘When I’m sad, Dad gives me a hug. Do you think she would like a hug?’

I looked at Mae, who shrugged.

We didn’t exactly have any other ideas, and it was good to see that Cal wasn’t scared any more.

We all stood around the trunk and wrapped our arms



around it. It was so wide that our fingertips didn’t touch even when we stretched. But we leaned our faces against the rough bark and I heard Mae whisper something. The tree creaked. And then I felt her sway and lift her topmost branches, as if she was standing a little taller.

We stepped back and looked up hopefully.

‘Do you think it helped?’ Cal asked eagerly.

'Maybe,' I said. 'I don't know if it'll be enough though.'

'I need food to think up good ideas,' Cal said, glumly slumping onto the ground.

I absently rummaged in my pocket and found the cereal bar I'd picked up.

He grinned gratefully as I threw it over to him. 'I told Dad you always have snacks up your sleeves.'

His words stopped my spinning thoughts for a split second. Just long enough for me to pause and remember Mitchell earlier. I'd been convinced I didn't know the first thing about being a big brother, but it turned out I was doing OK. I remembered him leaning in to give me a bear hug and thought about what he'd said. How what mattered was that I'd listened and paid attention. And cared.



What if that was what the tree needed us to do?

While Cal chewed and
Mae strode back and forth
around the clearing, I stood

gazing up at the grandmother tree.

How could we show her how much she mattered to us? How much the whole wood mattered.

'Think. Think,' I murmured.
'There must be something we can do.'



I felt Buzby lift off from my shoulder and I watched him bumble away into the trees. The empty space he left weighed heavy on me. I'd got so used to feeling the buzz of his presence.

A few minutes later though I saw Mossie leaping from twig to twig, doing fancy somersaults on one of the sentry trees.

'You're back!' Mae cried, delighted, as Mossie's acrobatics sent a flutter of leaves cascading to the ground.

And then Pintle rolled off another branch and dropped into Cal's open hands. Cal sat there giggling as the pine cone wobbled back and forth.

Buzby flew back, hovered in front of my face, and then started knocking against my head like he was trying

to dislodge an idea wedged up there. And then suddenly there was Twigly. Standing proudly on a branch. He bent his knobbly head in a slow bow. And I grinned and bowed back.

Buzby's last bumbling bump finally set the idea buzzing round my brain. The wood had breathed life into art, making us all laugh and want to join in the game. Maybe we could do the same in return!

Mae had stopped pacing and was staring at me. 'Why are you smiling?' she asked.

Seeing my face, Cal jumped up. 'He's got an idea,' he cried. 'I knew Iggy would come up with one!'

I took a breath, hoping they would think there was something in what I was going to suggest.

'We have to show that we care and we're here and the wood isn't forgotten. The wild green magic has faded, but I think I know how to bring it back.'



'What if we made our own butterflies and birds?' I said. 'All the animals that should be here. We can return them to the tree. Didn't you feel the magic fizzing inside you when we made Twigly and Mossie and Pintle? It's been there waiting for us all along. Now we've found it, we can help, I know we can. I think if we do this, Ealdemodor will feel better because she'll feel the wild green magic growing all around her.'

'And the celebration will spread and spread,' Cal said excitedly. 'Because the grandmother tree will tell them all. She'll tell all the mother trees, won't she, and they'll

tell all the rest. And we can save Tiny's mum's tree and *all* of them.'

'And the animals that live in the wood and call it home,' I added. 'They'll come back too.'

He clapped his hands, delighted. 'We can all grow magic!'

'Well, that's the plan. What do you think, Mae?'

She grinned. 'I think it's time we stopped talking and got making!'



It took us a long time to gather everything we needed. Buzby seemed to have got a burst of buzz and was a big help, flying back and forth searching for things and hovering over them when he found something particularly useful. Mossie leaped around and waved the catapult to steer us in the direction of each new treasure and Pintle happily perched on a log, woody scales flapping up and down in excitement at it all.

Eventually we had an array of treasures. We'd



scavenged different-coloured leaves and petals, twigs, clumps of moss and heather, seeds, grasses, catkins, feathers, strips of fallen bark, pebbles and even bits of broken eggshells.



'What a collection!' Mae said, grinning.

'I already know what I'm doing,' Cal said excitedly. 'A tiger and a wolf because they're my favourite animals.'

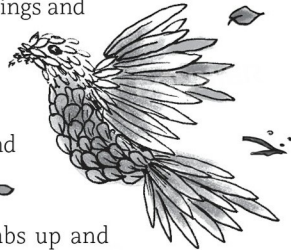
Mae grinned and said, 'I think I'll stick to birds and butterflies.'





She got to work straight away.
First she placed a narrow oval leaf and two broad ones side by side. Then she found two tiny fallen leaf stems and carefully added those to the oval leaf as little antennae. She laid smaller reddish leaves over the broad ones so the butterfly's wings had a different coloured pattern.

After that she made a green bird, gently arranging a fan of long narrow leaves for its wings and tail, and choosing a curled pine needle for its beak. She added blossom to give it a white chest and a little seed for its eye.



Watching, I gave her a thumbs up and then glanced over at Cal, who was concentrating on the sticks and leaves in front of him. All I had to do was think of something to make myself.

Just then, I noticed a blue feather caught in one of the furrows of the grandmother tree's bark. I remembered the bright-eyed bird watching me from Groak's branches



when the tree had made the first walkway for us. The grandmother tree had the same lobed leaves as Groak, which meant she was an oak too. It looked like oaks and jays were old friends. In a flash I knew what I would make.

We all worked quietly, stopping every so often to ask if anyone could spare a frilly leaf or another seed or the right colour blossom.

Cal had soon made his wolf – which actually looked more like a ferret although I didn't tell him that – and a tiger which was more successful even though it was smaller than the ferret-wolf.



Mae managed to make six butterflies, two birds and a brilliant owl by the time I laid the final blue feather on my bird. Seeing how long it had taken me to make the jay, I decided to add to the butterfly collection.



'We'll have a herd of butterflies at this rate,' Cal said after a bit, admiring them.



'It's a kaleidoscope of butterflies,' Mae told us, popping a final petal on one of the wings.

'Really?' I asked.

'Yup. Cool, isn't it?' she said. 'I love the names of groups of things,' she went on. 'My favourites are a glaring of cats, a glint of goldfish and a mischief of mice.'



'That's brilliant,' Cal said. 'What do you call a load of trees?'

'A wood?' Mae answered with a laugh.

'I bet we could come up with something better,' I suggested.

'How about a welcome of trees?' Mae said.

'Or a whisper,' I replied. And then, getting into it, added, 'Or a gathering, or a knobble or a gnarl.'

'Or a wisdom, or a blossom,' she suggested, laughing.

We looked at Cal, who was deep in thought.

The sentry tree rocked the branch he was sitting on

and he bobbed up and down gently. He grinned and swung his legs back and forth.

'A brilliance of trees?' he said at last.

Mae and I looked at each other and both said, 'Brilliant!'



At last we all stood back to admire the petal creatures, which were a bright burst of colour on the grass in front of us. Above us, the grandmother tree creaked and sighed in the breeze.

'Why aren't they moving?' Cal asked sadly.

Secretly I'd expected them to soar up into the air as soon as we'd made each one. When the first one had stayed stubbornly on the ground, I'd focused on imagining the next and the next and just hoping. I knew it was one thing drawing Pintle's face and finding a stick like Twigly, but this was far wilder. Would our petal creatures really come to life in the same way?

'Maybe they're waiting until we finish, so they can

make a grand entrance altogether,' I said, still hopeful. I looked down at my blue-winged bird, willing myself to believe that was true.

Then through a gap in the trees I spotted Sylvie. She was swinging a pair of makeshift crutches and a few moments later stepped into the clearing.



'You're supposed to be resting!' Mae said, rushing over to Sylvie.

She held up our map. 'I couldn't sit still when there was a chance of finally meeting Ealdemodor. Do you know, I've seen all sorts of things I haven't noticed before, thanks to this map.' She grinned. 'I even met the wizard tree – he was very helpful. It felt as if the wood couldn't wait to show me the way here.'

Although it was a relief to see her up and about, I secretly wondered if her arrival had stopped the animals coming alive.



After all, she had never actually seen the magic herself.

Sylvie looked up at the grandmother tree, taking her in properly. And suddenly her shoulders sagged almost as low as the grandmother tree's branches.

'I'm so sorry, Ealdemodor,' she said, walking forward to lay a hand on the deeply grooved trunk. 'I'm sorry for not finding you sooner.'

Where the bark puckered, it almost looked like two eyes staring back at Sylvie, the deep furrows running above making the tree appear wearier than ever.

'Look what we've made to make her feel better,' Cal said. 'So she knows we care.'



Sylvie turned and her eyes lit up as she saw the petal creatures gathered on the grass. 'These are wonderful!' she said. 'You really made them?'

'We chose things that ought to be here,' Mae added. 'See, Iggy made a jay because oaks love jays, and I made all these butterflies.'

Cal looked a bit sheepishly at his ferret-wolf. 'I bet there used to be wolves here ages and ages ago,' he said.


'We wanted the tree to remember,' I said. 'And know that we remember too.'

Sylvie held a hand over her heart and breathed in the deep earthy smell of the wood. It was a moment before she spoke again.

'People often say "I'll believe it when I see it," but I'm starting to wonder if that's not quite right. I think sometimes you have to believe it to see it. Well, I believe in this wood. And I believe in you.'

'So do we!' Cal cried, and he ran over to wrap his arms round her, almost sending her flying.

And it was at that very moment that one of the



petal butterflies flexed its wings and a second later the air really was a kaleidoscope of colour and fluttering as they all took flight.

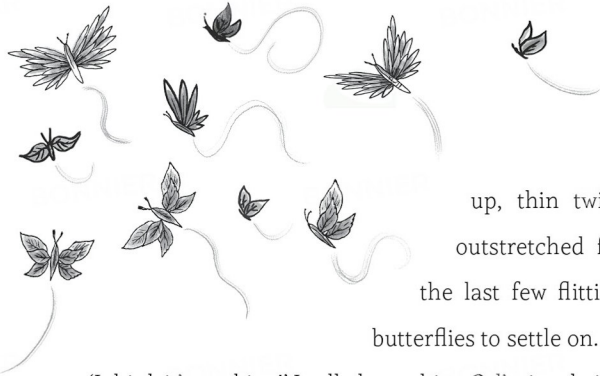
Sylvie stared, open-mouthed, too amazed to speak. When Mae's owl launched itself and swooped above our heads, she finally let out a delighted cry.

We watched the owl diving down to get a better look at the ferret-wolf, and the tiny tiger stalking through the grass. And then my jay joined them, a flash of blue darting around us. We laughed and cheered as the petal creatures landed on the grandmother tree's branches like glittering ornaments.

Cal hollered and started running circles around Ealdemodor.

'See what we made for you,' he cried.

One of the grandmother tree's branches that was dragging on the ground began to move. It hefted itself



up, thin twigs outstretched for the last few flitting butterflies to settle on.

'I think it's working!' I called, watching Cal's tiger being scooped up by another one of the inquisitive branches.

Mae punched the air as the tree moved again.

But then I heard a rustle of leaves above me and felt the blustery breath of the wind on my skin. My heart sank as another gust blew through the clearing. I shot a glance at Mae, who'd also noticed and was looking over, worried.

One of the butterflies fluttered to the ground and its petals drifted into the grass.

'No!' I cried. 'They can't just blow away.'

But there was nothing we could do to stop it. We rushed back and forth, desperately trying to shelter them with our jackets, but the wind just found a way through. We watched in horror as one by one the petal creatures quietly

disappeared, leaving flecks of colour dimpling the green.

‘What now?’ Cal groaned. ‘That was my best tiger – I can’t make it all over again.’ He sank down onto the grass, utterly defeated.

‘It’s no good, Iggy,’ Mae said. ‘We’ve done our best, but we can’t keep making them only for the wind to blow them away. I should have thought of that.’

‘It’s not your fault,’ I said quickly. ‘I didn’t either.’

A minute ago the world had been a dizzy flurry of colour and magic, and now we had nothing.

I wanted to hug the tree again and tell her how sorry we were that we hadn’t been able to help. But I could hardly bear to look up at her furrowed face.

Sylvie, who had been watching the petals scatter in dismay, now rallied.

‘Just look at the wild green magic. It really does exist! This is just the beginning.’ She wrapped an arm around Cal, who burrowed into her side to stop the tears falling.

‘It’s hard feeling like all your efforts have been for nothing. Believe me, I know. When it comes to looking

after this place, sometimes you can feel like the tiniest beetle pushing a huge boulder up a hill. But you mustn’t let that stop you. Remember, we of the Green will grow!’

I looked at the others. ‘She’s right,’ I said.

‘Of course she is,’ Mae said quickly.

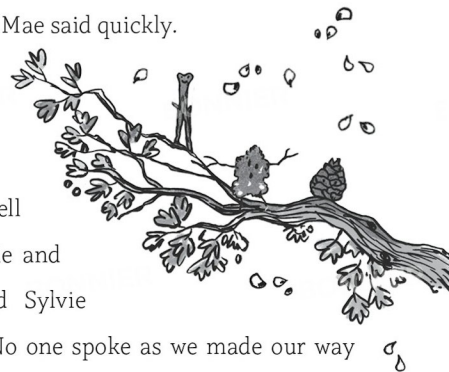
Cal peeked out and nodded heartily.

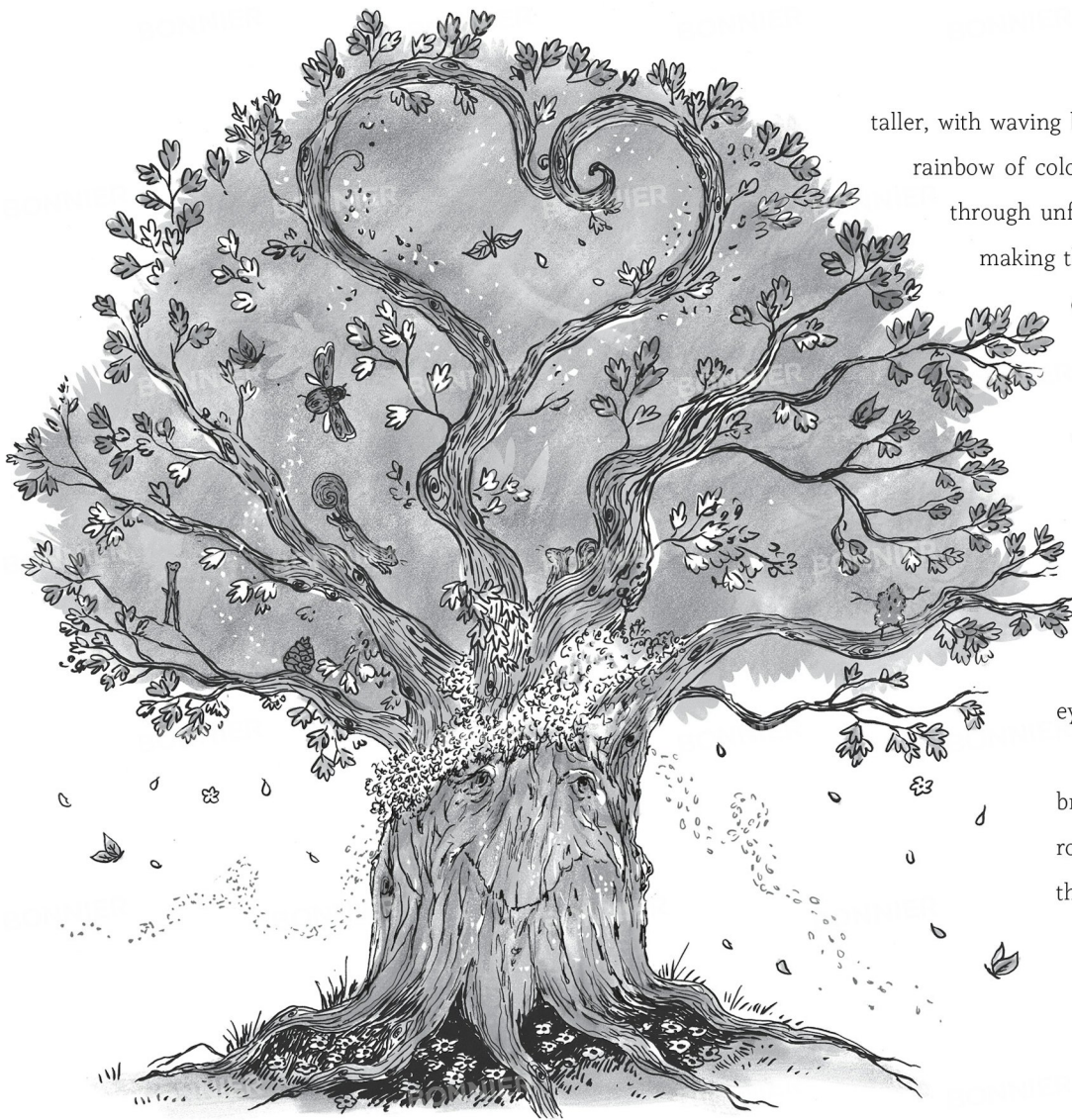
We gave a farewell wave to Twigly, Pintle and Mossie and followed Sylvie out of the clearing. No one spoke as we made our way through the trees, but I knew that in our heads we were already starting to imagine new ideas and plans.

And then suddenly, behind us, we heard the creak and crack of ancient wood.

Afraid the great tree might be cracking in two, we raced back to the clearing. Our breath left us as we stared up at the grandmother tree.

She was not broken in the least. She was standing





taller, with waving branches that were now full of a rainbow of colours. Blossom and petals drifted through unfurling leaves and clung to bark, making the whole tree shine like she was covered in tinsel. It was true that some of the older branches still lay bare, but the topmost ones were already leaf laden and had lifted and formed a heart shape.

‘A rainbow and a heart!’ Cal cried, delighted.

‘It worked!’ Mae exclaimed.
‘She’s dancing!’ Sylvie said, eyes shining.

And Sylvie was right. The branches of the grandmother tree rose and fell in glittering waves, then rocked and swayed. Pintle, Mossie and Twigly bounced on her boughs, while Higgy and

Flick scampered back and forth and Buzby zipped happily over their heads.

The tree was singing too, a sighing, swishing, swoosh of a song. It made me feel happy just to hear it. I listened as it passed on to the trees nearby. They rustled and raised their branches in reply.

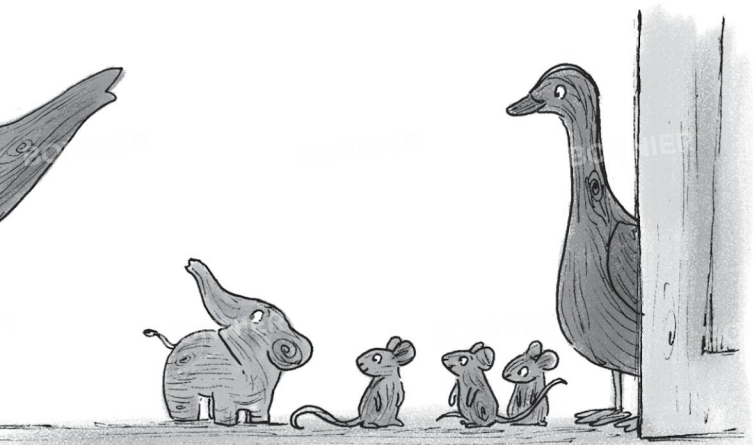
'Treetoppers forever!' Cal hollered as we hurried to join Ealdemodor.

And then all three of us reached up our hands and let ourselves be swept off the ground.



'What on earth have you been up to?' Mum said with a laugh when we appeared in the kitchen later, covered in grass, bits of leaf and petals tangled in our hair.

Over her shoulder I saw Buzby zoom up to the top of the dresser where Higgy was perched, staring down at us. An acorn arced over our heads and clattered onto the tiles. As Mum turned to look at what had made the noise, I spotted Tiny, full of bounce again, racing towards her mum who was standing just inside the walk-in cupboard, her trunk swinging happily from side to side. Several mice joined in the game and the upright duck popped its



head out from behind the door. Clearly the trees had wasted no time spreading the news about Ealdemodor. And if the animals were moving again, it meant their trees were healing too.

Seeing our beaming faces, Mum didn't even wait for an answer to her question, she just grinned and pulled us both in for a hug.

After a mug of milk and some toast slathered in honey though, she declared that an early night was on the cards for us all.

'Dad's doing a story – do you want to listen too?' Cal asked as he bounded onto his bed. 'He does all the voices. It's really funny.'

'Sure,' I said.

Mum grabbed a pillow and sat leaning against the bed while Cal wriggled next to me and Mitchell perched on a stool.

Lying there in a room of colourful plants, the faces of the wooden animals peeking out gleefully between the pots, with Occy waving from outside the window and Mum, Mitchell and Cal around me, I found myself grinning. And it wasn't just Mitchell's silly voices.

I gave a yawn as the story came to a close, but Cal wasn't done yet.

'Your turn, Iggy,' he said.

At first I shook my head. I read really slowly and I definitely didn't like reading aloud to an audience.

'Please,' he insisted.

I was about to say no for the second time when I suddenly thought of Sylvie. And the way she'd talked

of stories. I sat up further in my bed.

'It won't be from a book,' I said. 'But I can tell you our own story about Wildtop Wood.'

Cal beamed.

'And I'm going to tell it, because it matters what stories are told. Because some people tell stories just to scare you.'

I turned to look at Mum and I could tell she knew I was talking about spiky Thornwood and her fearful tales of danger.

'Sounds intriguing,' Mitchell said, settling down with Mum, who wrapped an arm round him.

And so I began.

'Have you ever looked at a tree and seen a face staring back?'



I woke up with something tugging my foot. My room was a jungle. Plants gathered around my bed, their colourful



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faces peering down. Tendrils pulled at me as Buzby zoomed across the room and hovered over my head. This time I jumped out of bed, eager to meet the green that filled my room.

The ivy was tumbling in through the window as if it couldn't wait to tell me something. I spotted Twigly. He vaulted from the cascade of green and landed on the sill. I grinned as he raised a twiggly arm. Then he turned and leaped into Occy's leafy hug.

Cal appeared next to me, cradling Tiny, his eyes bright. 'The ivy pulled me out of bed,' he said.

We ran over to the window and gazed out. In the distance we could see Groak and Silver and knew that Turrety would be waving to us from his place in the wood, along with the wizard tree and all the other trees we couldn't wait to meet.

Occy stretched next to the window, swaying branches



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laden with blossom. They filled the room with their deep low creaks. And they were creaks I heard and finally understood. A single word grew in my mind. It was like listening to the sounds in super-slow motion, every syllable uttered over what felt like an age. But I waited patiently until the word had taken root. Until the tree had finished speaking.

‘W a k i n g.’

I stared at Cal and knew that he had heard it too.
Waking. The wood was waking!

And then on the edge of the wood we saw a shape. It moved at speed across the field in galloping strides. When it reached the garden, the fruit trees waved it forward, ushering it on in excitement, until moments later we looked down at the mighty driftwood horse we’d seen at the beach. It looked even wilder here in the garden, the bleached wood of its flanks shining under the moon as it pawed at the ground.

It stared up at us and we stared back.

‘What does it want?’ Cal said.

The horse reared up briefly, tossed its head, then stamped the ground again. And again. Over and over. Until finally it paused to look back at the wood.

‘It’s calling us,’ I said. ‘It wants us to go with it. I think there’s more we have to do.’ And as soon as I said it, I knew that was true. I could see a light in Mae’s house and knew that the Green had invited her as well.

‘But what?’ Cal asked. ‘What more can we do?’

‘I don’t know yet,’ I replied. ‘But we’re awake and so is the wood.’

I grabbed his hand.

‘Let’s go. The Green is waiting for us!’



The adventure continues in



THE
WOOD
WHERE
STORIES
SING

The title is rendered in a dark grey, stylized font. The words are stacked vertically. The letters are decorated with intricate, leafy branch-like patterns that extend from the text, giving it a whimsical, forest-like appearance. The overall shape of the title is roughly rectangular with rounded corners.

Coming soon . . .

Acknowledgements



Stories have roots, just like trees, and the roots of this one spread deep into my childhood. I grew up with a tree in front of our house and although I changed and things in my life changed, my tree was always there, tall and strong. From my bedroom window, I whispered secrets to my tree. Wherever I've lived I have met different trees, full of character, and I'm so happy that I've finally written a story for them. To celebrate them, but also hopefully to encourage us all to remember that they need us too.



There are lots of organisations that protect trees locally and globally and I hope this story encourages you to reach out and support them.



My thanks go to my lovely agent Jo Williamson who saw the tiniest seed of this idea and encouraged me to nurture it. Without you it may well have been trampled into the dirt! To my editor Georgia Murray, I am so lucky to work with you. You tend seedling stories (and authors) with such insight, patience and kindness. Under your care stories bloom. To Talya Baker and Hannah Featherstone, thank you for your amazing editorial attention to detail; and to the whole team at Piccadilly Press, my thanks for allowing me to write the stories that make me happy, and for helping them take root around the world.



I am so grateful to Ellie Snowden for agreeing to illustrate the story. Your amazing artwork is everything I could have hoped for and more, full of charm and warmth and character. I'd also like to thank Nick Stearn and Michelle Brackenborough for their incredible design work on the book. You've all made it grow into something magical.

Thanks to Fiona Barker for patiently fielding my questions and for putting me in touch with Nazeerah Ramdhian-Demery at Berkshire Deaf Children's Society who has been so helpful; and especially to Dylan, Joey and Charlotte and all the wonderful families who agreed to read and offer feedback on the story. Also, thanks to Sophie Terry for her helpful advice and comments in her sensitivity read and to Andrea and George Hopkins for their early read and Sam Egerton-Kemp (@deafchefofficial) for kindly answering my questions. I hope that Mae resonates with readers.



My huge thanks to every one of the amazing teachers, librarians and book bloggers who have supported me and my books over the past few years. I really hope that this new story will find a home with you, and encourage readers to grow a bit of magic on their doorsteps.



I've been inspired by artists like Heather Jansch, Hannah Bullen Ryner and Andy Goldsworthy and I'd urge you to explore their wonderful work and create your own nature art.

I'm lucky to have a fantastic root system of friends and family who keep me growing tall and strong even when I'm buffeted by the elements. Thank you everyone for being there.



Finally, to my husband Ian for his unwavering support and love and growing with me over the past thirty-five years, and to my boys, Ben and Jonas, who grow more magic every single day.



Don't miss
Andy Shepherd's bestselling
THE BOY WHO GREW DRAGONS
series!

