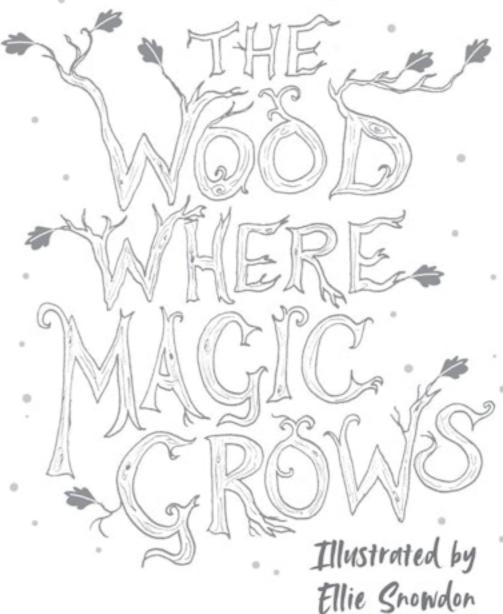


Also by Andy Shepherd

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

Andy Shepherd







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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'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.

Тар. Тар. Тар.

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!





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

started snuffling, the tree started tapping again.

Тар. Тар. Тар.

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.



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

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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

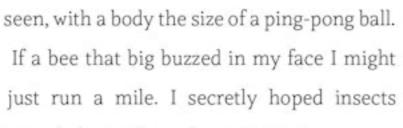


also a bushy-tailed fox with a coat of reddish wood and a paler grain running down its belly, and a

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



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

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several had tumbled to the floor.

Cal settled down on my bed with Tiny, the pocketsized 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.

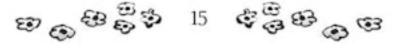
'I'm staaaarving,' Cal growled. 'Can we have pancakes?'

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.

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'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

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.



'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 sently 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

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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 waggled 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?'

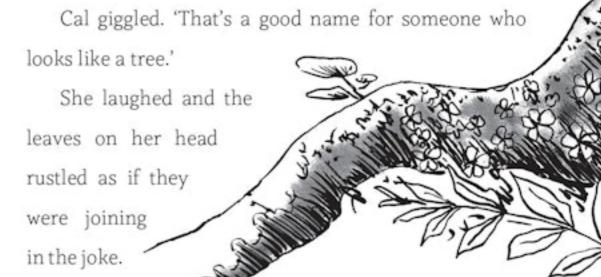
She peered a bit closer at us.

'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.'



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'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.



And they seem to like my singing, which not everyone appreciates,' she added with a wink.

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.

'Tell the trees I said hi,' Sylvie said, casting a last grin in our direction as she led Wellington away. And she ambled off towards the field, rustling happily and humming her song.



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 and caught hold of our hands. Cal giggled as we pushed past the tickly octopus arms, which swished our faces with fans of wiggly-edged leaves.

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.





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. 'Pleeeease.'

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.



'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.'

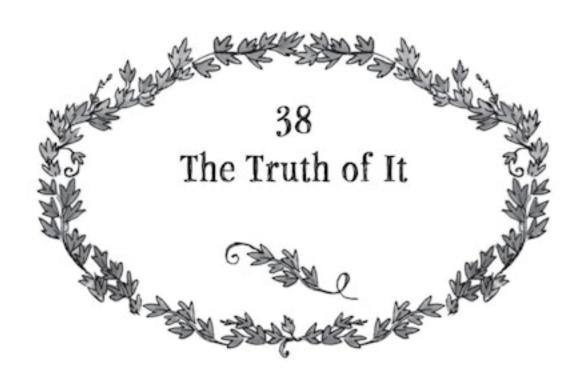
Mitchell pulled on the sleeve of the football shirt I was wearing with my pyjama bottoms.

'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.



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



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

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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.'



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. 16
'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





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





'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!'

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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

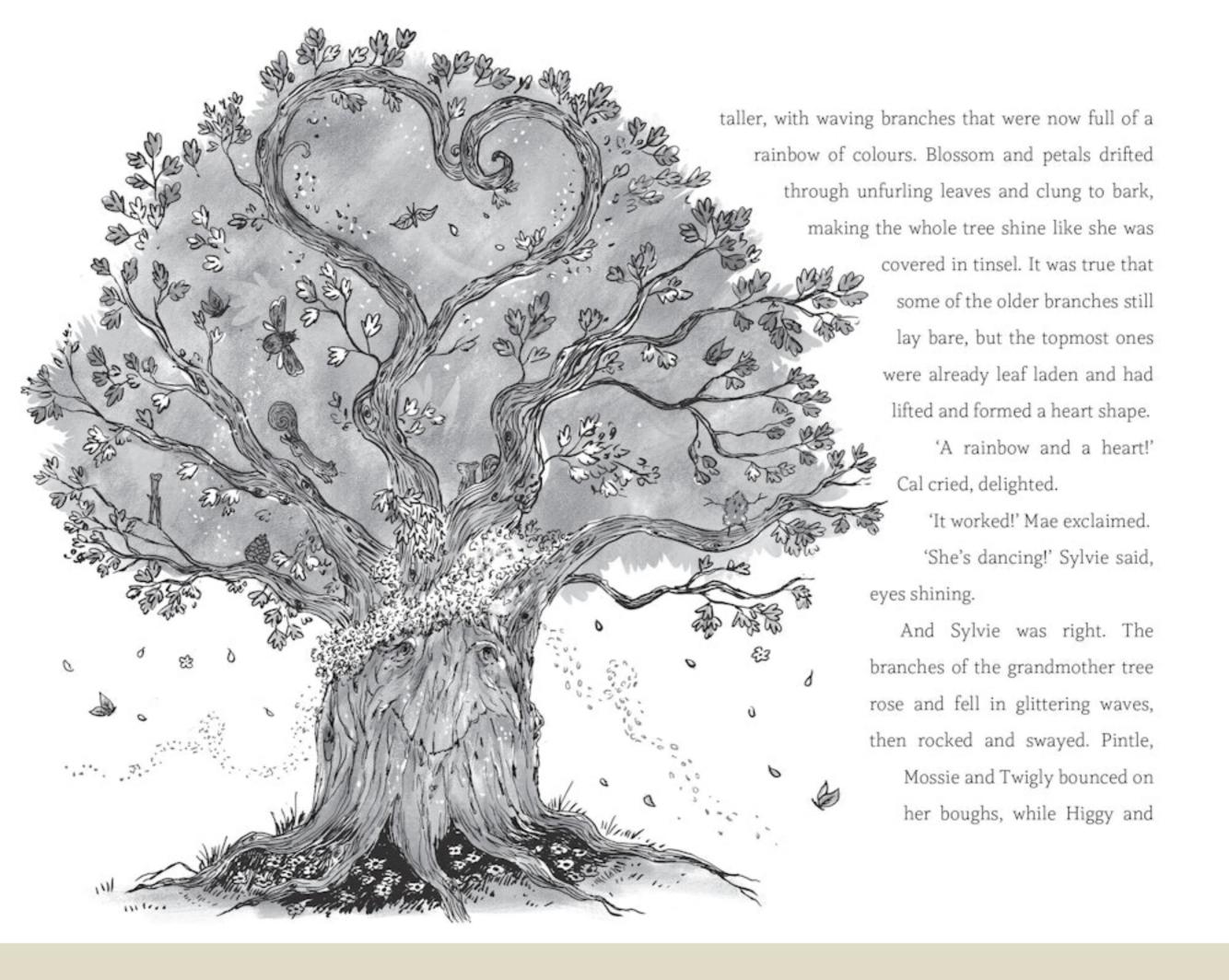
out of the clearing. No one spoke as we made our way through the trees, but I knew that in our heads we were already starting to imagine new ideas and plans.

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





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.

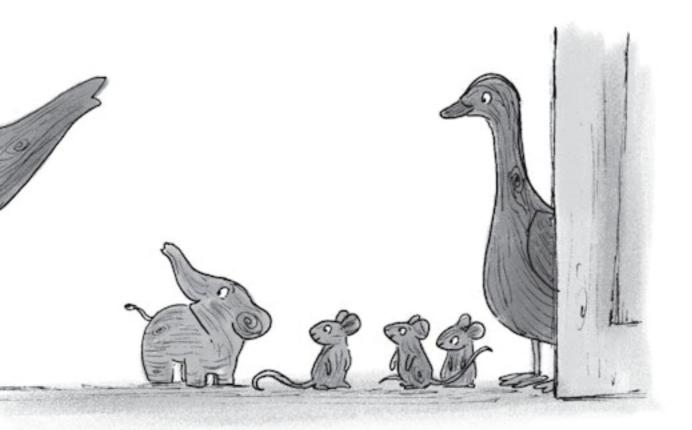
And then all three of us reached up our hands and let ourselves be swept off the ground.



'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





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 twiggy 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



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.

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



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.



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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.

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Don't miss Andy Shepherd's bestselling THE BOY WHO GREW DRAGONS

series!

