Andy Shepherd

The Boy Who Flew With Dragons

Illustrated by Sara Ogilvie

Piccadilly
PRESS

We grow dragons. Dragons that flicker, that frost, and some that fill the sky with fire.

We sit cross-legged round our dragon-fruit tree, watching and waiting. Dragons perch on our shoulders, their tails curled around our necks. Diamond eyes glitter. Claws tread. Sparks crackle. And hot smoky breath warms us to our hearts. All of us are waiting for the moment when the red ripe dragon fruit starts to glow. When it drops from the vivid tendril. When a new tiny dragon is ready to hatch. All of us are wondering what kind of dragon it will be.

Will it glow and glimmer like Flicker, shimmering through every colour from ruby red to turquoise? Will it cover us in icicles like Crystal does, leaving us to tinkle like a frozen xylophone? Will it disappear before our eyes, a master of camouflage like Dodger, or pulse with golden light as Sunny does?

Who knows? Maybe it will do all this and more. But one thing's for sure – hearing this, I bet you want one too, right? A dragon of your own. Of course you do.

But first there's something I need to tell you.

So keep listening, because you haven't heard the whole story yet. And once you have, you might not be quite so quick to rush out and grow yourself a dragon.

Because it's not just the mess, the flames, the claw marks, the smouldering sparks. It's not even the pyrotechnic poo. It's something even more devastating.

One day you will have to let your dragon go – and that, my friends, is the hardest thing of all.

1
Starlight Flicker Bright

The first thing I noticed was that Flicker wasn't there. The comforting glow of his little body had gone. I'd fallen asleep with him nestled against me as always, but I woke up with a shiver, missing his warming breath across my chest.

I rubbed my eyes, blinking the sleep away, reliving the dream I'd been having – a familiar dream that if I'd been a cat would have left me purring. Snatches of it glittered before me. Green light across the sky. A vast mountain. A rocky land below. And then it was gone.

Sitting up in bed, I saw Flicker. He was perched on the windowsill of my bedroom and it was so bright with stars and moonlight that it almost looked like morning had come. I clambered out of bed and pulled the curtains all the way back, feeling the rush of cold night air from the open window. Flicker fluttered out onto the ledge and lifted his head. He sent out a spray of sparks that fizzled in the air. They left the trace of a ring, like the fiery after-glow from a sparkler on Bonfire Night. And glittering inside the ring was the North Star. It wasn't the first time I'd found Flicker staring out of the window but it was happening more often. I watched the glow fade, then reached out and touched his back. A ripple of gold shimmered under my fingers as his scales changed colour.

I stared out of the window and pictured Ted, Kat and Kai curled up with their dragons. And I couldn't help smiling. Together we were the superhero squad and there wasn't much we couldn't do with dragons by our side.

And then Liam, our nemesis, muscled his way into the picture and stomped all over it, messing it right up, reminding me that things might not be quite that simple.

You see at the beginning of the summer he had sneaked into Grandad's garden and got himself a dragon. I know, sneaky or what! Not only that, but when his dragon breathed on stuff it made things grow really fast – and really big! After super-sizing his sunflower to try to win the school competition, Liam had quickly moved on to super-sizing a dragon fruit. The dragon that hatched out of the giant fruit went from turkey to *Tyrannosaurus* in about ten minutes.

That was definitely one you wouldn't want to curl up with! Thanks to Flicker lighting up like a beacon, Tyrannodragon had been led up into the sky and towards what we hoped was home. Although where home was for the dragons we still had no idea.

Wondering how we were going to find that out was just one of the things constantly swimming laps

round my head – along with trying to guess what Liam might get up to next with the dragon he still had. The one that could make pumpkins grow to the size of Cinderella's carriage.

I was about to lean over and close the window when the bedroom door creaked open. I grabbed the curtain and yanked it across, hoping Flicker would stay behind it and out of sight. I was on constant red alert for Mum or Dad – especially these days. Mum is always juggling vet work, stray animals and my sister Lolli, like an octopus with serious circus skills, and Dad is usually locked inside his headphones-bubble of music. But even they had started to notice things. There are only so many scorch marks and claw scratches it's possible to hide. Or blame on your cat.

A little messy head appeared and I sighed with relief.

'What are you doing, Lolli?' I whispered. 'You should be asleep. Big day tomorrow.'

Lolli grinned. 'Me up now.'

I glanced at the clock next to my bed. It was three o'clock in the morning. Officially it was her birthday, but I doubted Mum and Dad would appreciate starting the celebration this early. I shook my head.

'Not time yet, Lollibob. Much too early.'

She rumpled her face into a frown. But it quickly vanished when the curtain started bulging and Flicker found his way out through the gap.

He zipped over and started circling her head, letting out little smoky puffs. She giggled, delighted, eyes twinkling as brightly as Grandad's did. I couldn't help grinning. Especially when I thought of my secret. You see, ever since she'd tried to hatch a dragon from a pineapple and turned our lounge into a swamp in the process, I'd known that more than anything Lolli wanted a dragon. And so with the latest crop of dragon fruits red and ripe, I knew I could give her the best birthday present ever.

It was time for Lolli to have a dragon of her own.