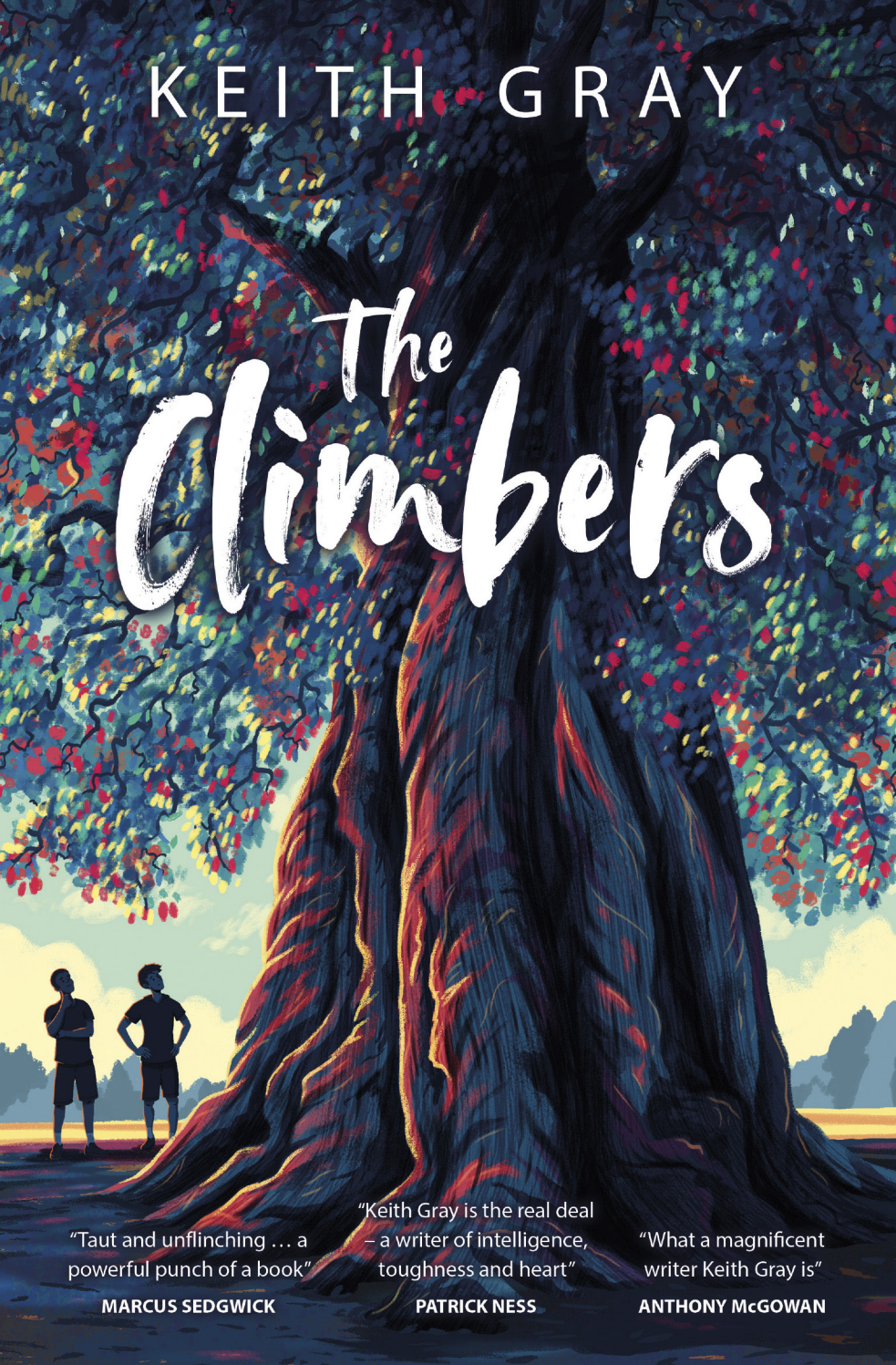
KEITH GRAY

The Climbers



"Taut and unflinching … a powerful punch of a book"
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The Climbers

KEITH GRAY

Barrington Stoke

For Clara, Marc and Ludwig –
cousins and friends

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PART 1

Twisted Sister

Corkscrew Willow (*Salix matsudana*)

Deciduous – China – 16 metres

CHAPTER 1

The sun was in my eyes. I had to squint to see the new kid clinging on. He was high up among the branches of the tree we called *Twisted Sister*. It was a corkscrew willow tree and its name had been well chosen. It was a crooked and tangled maze of brown and green above me. The new kid had his arms wrapped around its trunk over halfway up.

Down on the ground, five of us had our necks cricked back to watch him climb. I stood next to Mish. She was wearing the leaf earrings I'd got her last Christmas and her favourite black T-shirt. She pushed up the fringe of her curly hair and held her hand like she was giving a salute, shading her eyes to see.

"I told you he was a good climber," Mish said. She'd been the one to call me and I'd raced to the park on my bike.

It was Friday afternoon. Zoe was there too, standing on the other side of the tree with her boyfriend Marvin and his twin brother Harvey. Zoe had told Mish at school that there was a new climber hanging around.

The five of us stared up at the new kid. He was at least seven metres above us. He sat on a branch with his legs dangling down each side. He looked out of breath to me. He looked stuck too. I didn't think he was going to make it any further.

"What's his name?" I asked Zoe.

"He said to call him *Nottingham*," she told me. "He said it's where he comes from and that's what everybody calls him."

Zoe was in the same class as me and Mish. Marvin and Harvey were in the year above us. Zoe was lanky, skinny and fearless. She was a better climber than her boyfriend and his brother put together. She was the only one out of those three who'd ever made it to the top of *Twisted Sister* before.

"How long's he been up there?" I asked.

"Not even ten minutes," Zoe replied. "He climbed two of the smaller trees first."

"He's fast," Marvin said.

"Real fast," Harvey agreed.

They might have been twins, but they were opposites in loads of ways. Harvey's brain was bigger than his muscles. He was the only person I'd ever met who got excited about taking exams and he often went into a sulk if he didn't get top marks. Marvin's muscles were bigger than his brain. He never got top marks in class but didn't really care. He was a short, chunky rugby player. When he held hands with Zoe, he looked like a brick that was in love with a golf club.

"Maybe this new kid's faster than you," Zoe said to me.

Mish glanced at me out of the corner of her eye.

I shrugged, not wanting to admit just how fast Nottingham must be if he'd already made it halfway up *Twisted Sister*. It wasn't the tallest tree in the park, but that didn't mean it was an easy climb. There were plenty of us who had tried and failed, tried and failed, tried and failed. And failing mostly meant falling.

We watched as Nottingham searched for a way up in the brown and green maze. He shuffled his backside this way and that. The branch beneath him shuddered. Flutters of leaves fell.

Nottingham was wearing a black baseball cap and a green sweatshirt. Both of these things were good for climbing. The cap helped keep flies out of your eyes – or falling bits of twig and bark dust. Green clothing stopped too many leaf stains from showing, and that meant parents wouldn't always spot how filthy you were when you went home. But Nottingham was also wearing cargo shorts and that was a big mistake. His shins and ankles could get ripped to shreds by thorns and jagged branches. Hungry insects could chow down like he was KFC. I wished I could see what kind of trainers he had on.

"I bet you he makes it," Marvin said. "All the way up."

Harvey nodded.

Mish looked at me to see if I agreed.

"He's the wrong side of the trunk," I said to Mish. But I spoke loudly so Zoe and the twins would hear too. "If he was on the other side of the trunk, he could go for better branches." I pointed

to show where I meant. "See there? The branches on this side are too tight to climb in between."

I was the youngest climber ever to make it to the top of *Twisted Sister*. I'd done it last summer when I was fourteen. But I'd fallen seven times before I'd made it. Could New Kid Nottingham really reach the top in one go?

I hoped he fell.