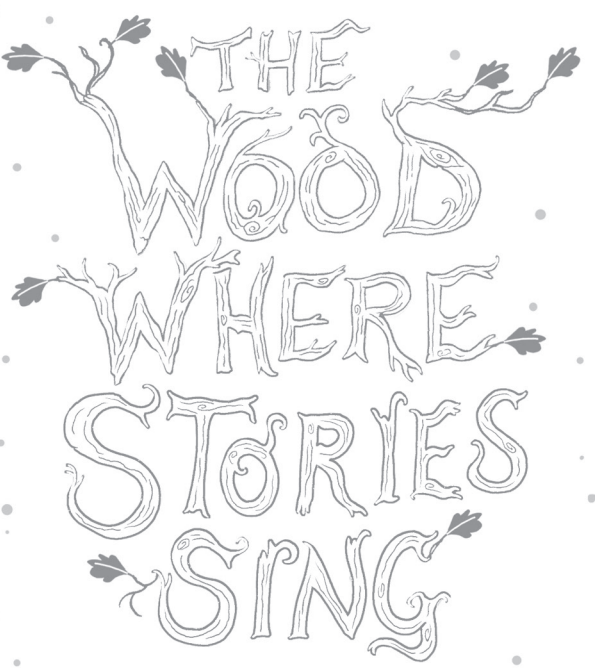

THE
WOOD
WHERE
STORIES
SING

Also by Andy Shepherd

The Wood Where Magic Grows

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

THE WOOD WHERE STORIES SING

Illustrated by
Ellie Snowdon



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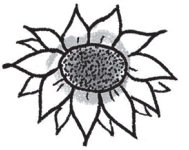


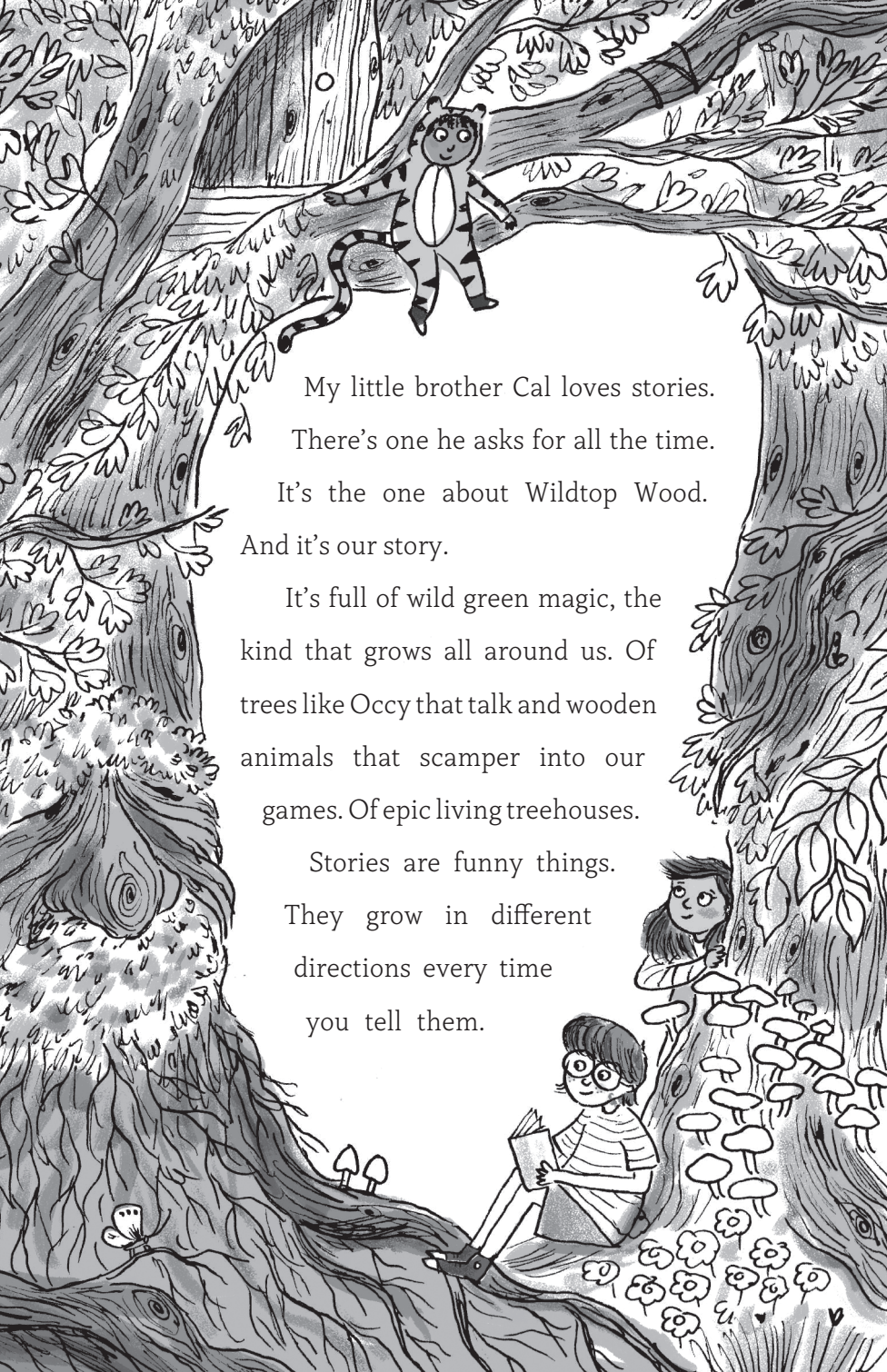
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For David and every teacher like you who listens
and plants the seed of belief in their pupils.
Your words matter more than you know.

And for Georgia, my wonderful editor, with
love and thanks for growing that belief.

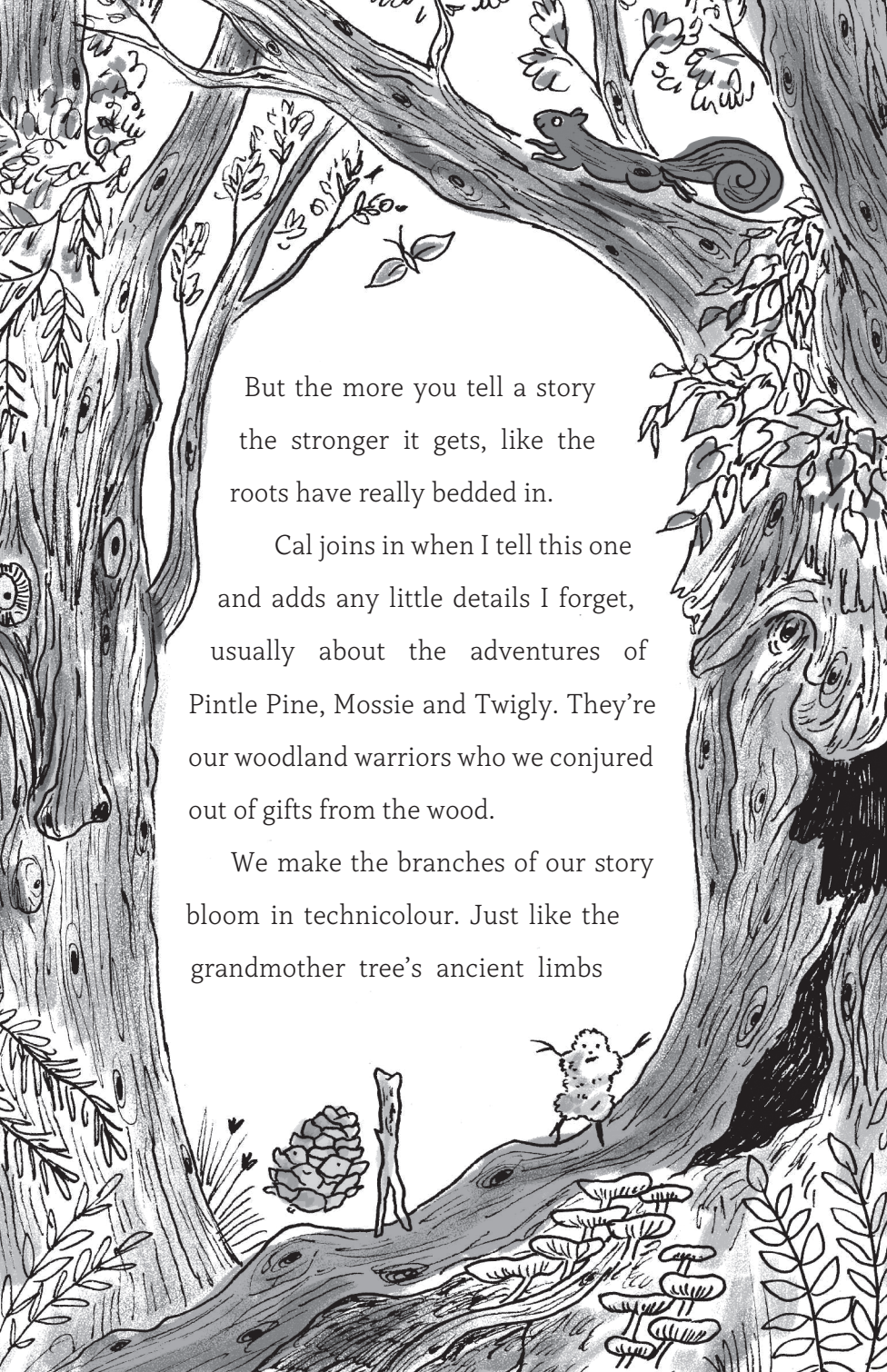




My little brother Cal loves stories. There's one he asks for all the time. It's the one about Wildtop Wood. And it's our story.

It's full of wild green magic, the kind that grows all around us. Of trees like Occy that talk and wooden animals that scamper into our games. Of epic living treehouses.

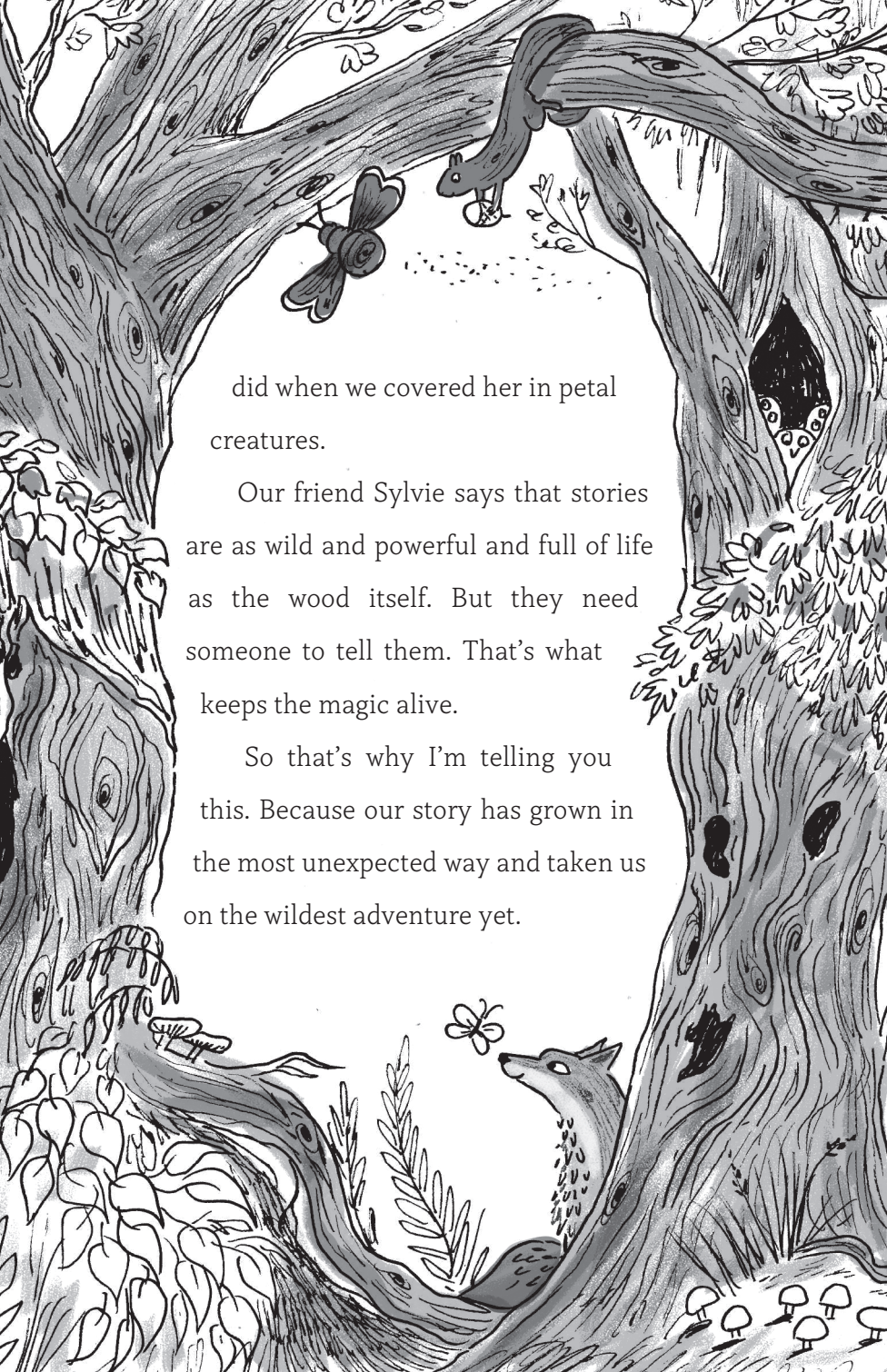
Stories are funny things. They grow in different directions every time you tell them.



But the more you tell a story the stronger it gets, like the roots have really bedded in.

Cal joins in when I tell this one and adds any little details I forget, usually about the adventures of Pintle Pine, Mossie and Twigly. They're our woodland warriors who we conjured out of gifts from the wood.

We make the branches of our story bloom in technicolour. Just like the grandmother tree's ancient limbs



did when we covered her in petal creatures.

Our friend Sylvie says that stories are as wild and powerful and full of life as the wood itself. But they need someone to tell them. That's what keeps the magic alive.

So that's why I'm telling you this. Because our story has grown in the most unexpected way and taken us on the wildest adventure yet.



1
The Green is Waiting

'Hurry up, Iggy! Why are you being so slow? I've been waiting ages for you to wake up.'

Cal was jiggling impatiently and had already thrown my socks in my face as if that would help speed things up. He'd also brought me a slab of bread roughly folded over with jam oozing out of it. He clearly didn't want to have to wait for me to eat breakfast!

It had been nearly a month since me, Mum, Cal and Mitchell had moved into the cottage and started our life together in the countryside. I was still getting used to sharing a room with my new little brother. Especially

when he basically woke up before the sun and expected me to do the same. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and pulled on my hoodie, settling my glasses in place.

The early summer air felt fresh through the open window. The breeze ruffled Occy's leaves as the rowan tree that grew outside the cottage nosily sent in leafy green tendrils to check on us.

Cal giggled as Occy tousled his hair with one branch and tickled him under the arm with another.



I paused to listen. Because that's one thing I've learned in our time at Greenacre. You have to really listen with all your senses if you want to hear what a tree has to say. Today there was a light rustle of leaves, a warm earthy smell and a branch that was jiggling almost as much as Cal.

This was a tree that wanted us to hurry up and get outside into the Green, where magic was waiting.

The room filled with a deep low creak and we glanced at each other, excited to hear what Occy had to say.

Now, just so you know, when trees talk, they do it very *very* slowly.

But syllable by syllable a word began to grow.

'WAITING'

Cal let out a giggle.

'What's so funny?' I said.

'For a tree that wants us to hurry up and get outside Occy takes a reeeaaaaaaally long time to tell us!'

Occy reached out a branch and a fan of leaves flapped in Cal's face, making him giggle even more.

'Where's Pintle Pine?' he spluttered through the greenery. 'Do you think he's already there?'



I laughed and pointed towards the bedpost where a little round pine cone was perched. The smile Cal had scribbled on Pintle beamed out as his woody flaps waved excitedly.



A second later Twigly appeared. Neither of us had spotted him, but then being a stick he was particularly good at hiding among Occy's branches. There was no sign of Mossie, the moss creature Mae had made, but he would be in the wood. Probably waiting to ambush us, sending sticky buds flying with his catapult.

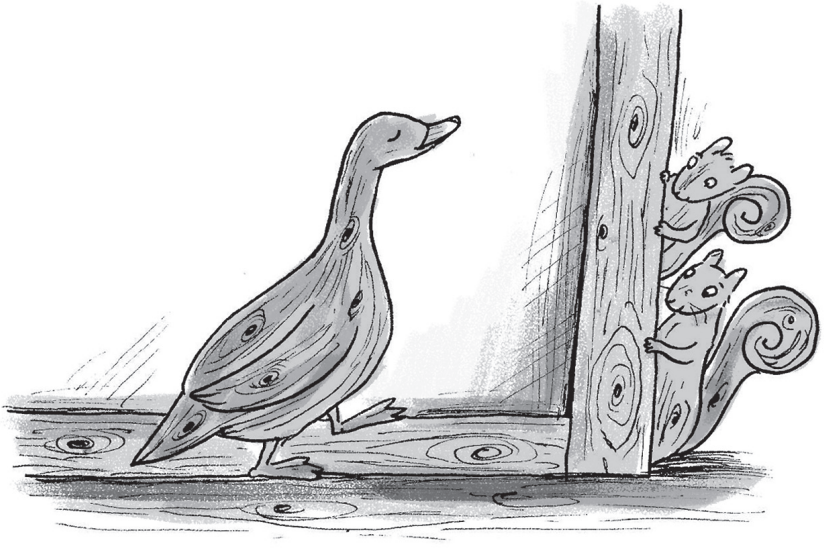
'Come on then,' I said. 'I bet Mae'll be waiting.'

Mum and Mitchell were still fast asleep, so we crept past their door and hurried downstairs. I nearly tripped over the wooden duck who helpfully stepped out in front of me as I got to the bottom step.

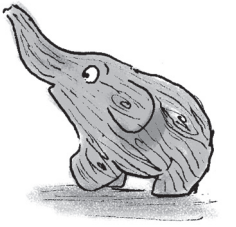
Every time I saw the upright duck waddling into everyone's business it made me smile. Sylvie, who owned our cottage, had filled it with a menagerie of wooden

animals, all of them made from fallen branches she'd found in Wildtop Wood. But the duck had been one of the first to stop moving when the tree it was made from had started to die. Ever since we'd helped Ealdemodor, the grandmother tree, and the wood had burst back into life, the duck had shown its true character. A comical, nosy bird who loved nothing more than following us around, beak held high, webbed feet flip-flapping across the tiles.

It followed us down the hall now and into the kitchen where we were met by Higgy and Flick, the wooden bookend squirrels, their bushy tails flicking in excitement.



On the kitchen table we found two lunch boxes and a flask. There was also a little carved elephant standing guard over a note from Mum. Cal scooped up Tiny and she paraded back and forth proudly on his hand while I read the note.



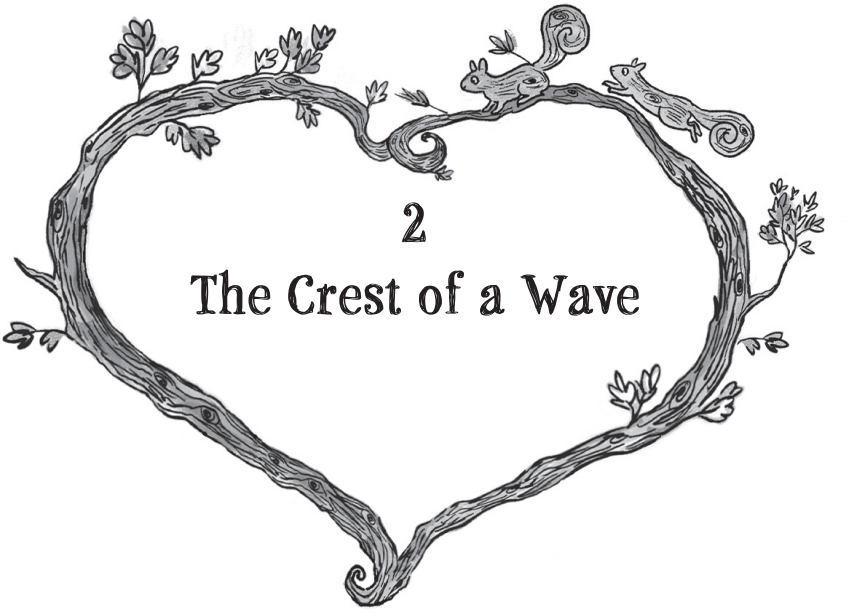
Let me know if you want a change from honey sandwiches! Have fun, look after each other and say hi to Sylvie. Spag bol for tea so don't be late.

Love you, Mum xxxx

Mum and Mitchell had got used to us being up and out at the crack of dawn, and it helped that Sylvie had told them that she was an early bird too. Since she lived in the cabin at the bottom of the garden, she would be on hand if we needed anything. We had the whole day stretching ahead of us.

Suddenly the kitchen door creaked open and Mae's head peered round. It was mostly covered by green as Occy rested a fan of frilled leaves on top of her dark brown hair.

'Finally!' she said with a grin. 'I thought I was going to have to ask Occy to drag you out of bed. Hurry up, I've got a surprise!'



2
The Crest of a Wave

The three of us raced down the garden.

'So what's this surprise?' I asked Mae.

'No spoilers till we get there,' she replied as we passed the bustling fruit trees, surrounded by nodding flowers.

In the last few weeks the garden had exploded into a riot of colour. Pink and blue sweet peas rambled up poles and wrapped themselves around branches like bunting, while red, yellow and white roses held their faces to the sunshine. Everywhere we looked flowers were blooming.

The grass was also up to our knees as Sylvie had insisted on 'No Mow May', to let the bees and insects and

plants have plenty of time to enjoy themselves. It hadn't been hard to convince Mum and Mitchell to let the garden do its own thing. They had plenty on without trying to tame the wildness of the greenery on our doorstep. And no one had seemed to mind that it had spilled over into June.



We skidded to a halt by Sylvie's cabin. Crabby, the willow tree that trailed its branches protectively over it, lifted a limb and shook it so that its silvery leaves sparkled at us in welcome.

But there was no sign of Sylvie. She must be out in the wood already.

We hurried on towards the field beyond the garden that was definitely living up to its name of Scrubby End. Things had grown *really* wild here, with nettles and bramble bushes forcing us to zigzag our way across. Until finally there we were, standing in front of Wildtop Wood.

I spotted a movement between the trees, and the next second something bolted out towards us. Cal gave a squeal of excitement as the massive shape of a horse

galloped past. But this was no ordinary horse.

It slowed and circled back and came to stand between us. I ran a hand across the bleached wood of its flank as Mae put both of hers on its coiling mane. It always took my breath away, this majestic beast that Sylvie had made from carefully gathered driftwood found along the beach.

'I've been wondering about a name for her,' Mae said. 'How about Crest?'

She finger spelled the letters one by one. Then she made a mountain shape with her hands, fingertips touching. And then moved one hand to point at the top of it, making the sign for the horse's new name.

'Like the crest of a wave?' I asked.

'Exactly. I just thought it was perfect, since it was the sea that brought her to Sylvie. Each piece of driftwood carried on the crest of a wave.'

'That's brilliant!' said Cal and I grinned and nodded.

We both practised the sign. Mae watched us, smiling, and then turned to Crest and stroked her



muzzle. 'So, what do *you* think of it?' The horse stamped the ground and tossed her head.

I laughed. 'I think that's a yes!'

Over the past few weeks, Crest had greeted us at the edge of the wood and we had walked either side of the great horse through the trees. But today she bent one front leg and lowered herself.

Cal looked at me, a flash of excitement bursting across his face. 'Does she want us to ride?'

Crest flicked up her head and then turned and nuzzled at my side, giving me a slight push towards her.

'I think she might,' I replied.

But I didn't move any nearer. I'd never been this close to a horse, let alone ridden one. The most I'd done was sit on a plastic one on a carousel at the beach. And, honestly, I found that going up and down in one place was about as much as I fancied.

'I've never ridden a horse,' Cal said.

'I have,' Mae replied.

'I bet I'm brilliant at it,' Cal added.

'We haven't got any of the stuff you need though,' I said quickly. 'What if you fall off? Don't you need a helmet?'

Mae looked across at me and smiled. I think she could see that I wasn't just feeling nervous about Cal getting up there.

Cal looked a bit crestfallen, like I'd just ruined the magic of the moment. But as big brother I felt like I should probably be a bit sensible, magic or no magic.



As we stood there, I heard a rustle in one of the trees. Higgy and Flick came scampering along a branch and when they reached the end they leaped off into the green embrace of the next tree. They started circling the trunk, tapping at it excitedly with their tails.

We watched in amazement as the trunk began to bulge in places. A bulbous lump started to grow as the

bark swelled. Soon there were three domes, like someone had blown through a straw into the tree and made bubbles. And then with a *pop* the dome dropped off the tree and bounced onto the ground below.

Mae raced forward and grabbed the first one. She held it up. It looked like a bark bowl. She grinned and put it on her head, giving it a shake. It fit her perfectly.

Cal scooped up the next one and threw it back to me before putting the last one on himself. My bark helmet wobbled; it was far too big. I was about to protest that it wouldn't stay on, when I felt something tickling my hair. Little downy patches on the underside of the bark began to plump up, forming a cushioned lining. It made the helmet fit snugly and stopped it scratching.



Higgy did a somersault and Flick ran in an excited

zigzag along the branch. They were clearly very pleased with themselves.



'Thanks, you two,' Cal called.

I watched as Mae clambered up on to Crest's back, using a tree stump to get a leg up.

'Come on, then,' she said.

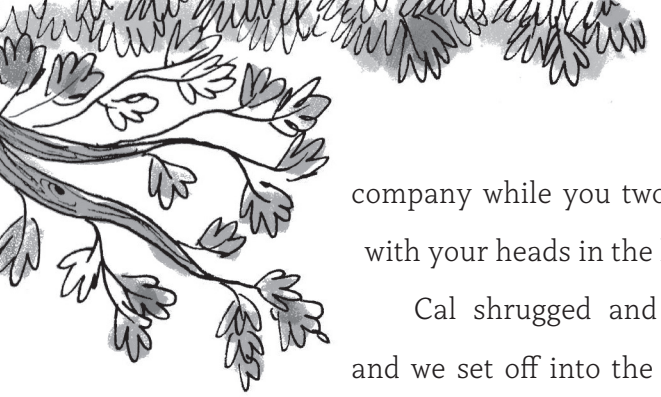
Being smaller, Cal needed the tree stump, a pull up from Mae and a shove from me, but he was soon sitting astride Crest and urging me to jump up too.

'Do you think she can manage all of us?' I asked nervously. 'I don't mind walking.'

'Of course she can,' Mae said confidently. 'She wouldn't have offered otherwise.'

Crest took a step towards me and leaned her head against my shoulder. She didn't push or anything, she just stood there, leaning. Waiting. There was something really calming about her doing that and I knew that if I wanted to walk, she'd walk with me. It was up to me.

'I think I'm fine walking today,' I said. 'I'll keep Crest



company while you two are up there with your heads in the leaves.'

Cal shrugged and Mae nodded and we set off into the wood. After a few minutes Cal said cheekily, 'How about you run together?'

Crest started up into a gentle trot and I jogged beside her. And then it was like we were in a silent race and as I sped up she matched me, until I was running full pelt and she was cantering alongside. Then she was off, weaving through the trees with Cal and Mae clinging on, their squeals of laughter sending birds flapping into the canopy.

I arrived in the clearing a few moments behind them, breathless from the chase so that the shout of shock I let loose came out as nothing more than a squeak.

'What. Is. That?' I said eventually between pants.

'That,' Mae said, 'is the surprise!'