

WOODLAND
BENJI'S
EMERALD
KING
EXPLORERS CLUB



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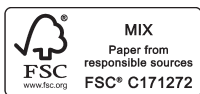
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CHAPTER 1 THE GREENWOOD



In Willow Wish Woods, the world had come to life after a long, dark winter. Sunlight glinted on the grass, a smell of fresh leaves hung in the air and birds sang from the trees above.

It was the first day back after the holidays and Benji, Trix and Shyla were chasing each other along the woodland path.

‘Something awesome is going to happen today, I can feel it!’ Benji said, watching a blackbird fly into its nest.

‘Well, we’re together again. *That’s awesome,*’ said Trix. She tried lifting Benji in one of her new karate moves.

‘Something even better than that!’ he laughed, wriggling from her grasp.

Gramp had told Benji a story that morning about the Greenwood.

‘It’s a place of magic,’ he’d said, his eyes sparkling. ‘The woods come alive in mysterious ways. Some people say it’s the fairy folk and nature spirits. You just need to know where to look.’

Benji couldn’t wait to see everyone at Willow Wish School and he was even *more* excited to find the Greenwood.

Trix was Benji’s best friend. She wore glasses with colourful rims. Her curly red hair was wild – just like her. She loved karate and



wasn't scared of anything – apart from worms (that's why Benji called her Squirmy).

Shyla lived down the road. Benji had known her since before they could talk. She loved art and could draw every bird in the woods! Her mum ran the local bakery, so Shyla always had tasty cakes to share.



Ajay was Shyla's cousin.

He was small, fast and funny. Ajay loved history and wanted to be an archaeologist when he grew up, searching for treasure left by people long ago.



For Benji, there was nothing better than being in the woods. It had been his home now for more than a year, but there was still so *much* to explore!

Each weekend Benji and Gramp visited a different part of the forest and made notes of what they saw. Benji then added their discoveries to the map of Willow Wish Woods, which took up most of the kitchen wall.

The gang ran to catch up with Gramp and Nelson, the world's goofiest dog. He was yelping happily and leaping after leaves.

'Gramp, let me take the lead to give your arm a rest,' said Benji.

'I saw a kingfisher by the Tadpole Run,' said Shyla, falling into step with Benji. 'That's pretty awesome. It's the brightest blue in the whole world! I'm going to draw it when I get home.'

Benji nodded. It wasn't what he'd meant, but he couldn't help searching for a flash of blue. Kingfishers were shy, so it would be super cool to see one.





There was colour everywhere in springtime – more than a hundred shades of green!



Pine



Olive



Jade



Moss



Basil (also the name of Ajay's pet mouse)



Shamrock



Crocodile

There were no crocodiles in Willow Wish Woods, but there were tawny owls. Nestboxes had been fixed to the trees last year and Benji and Gramp were watching them for owlets.



BENJI'S NOTEBOOK

Favourite things . . .

- 1) Climbing trees (especially oaks!)
- 2) Watching woodland animals
- 3) Making dens
- 4) Learning bird calls

At the school gates, the gang said goodbye to Gramp and Nelson and ran to meet Pine Class.

The day always began with an outdoor lesson. Mr Mattison took them to Swallow Clearing, where he'd set up colourful cushions around the Learning Tree. Leon and Cora raced ahead as usual to get the best spots.

'Leon thinks he can boss everyone around. Just because he's the oldest,' Trix hissed to Benji.

'Hey Leon, you sat there every day before the holidays. Give someone else a chance!' she said,

pushing her glasses up her nose.

'That's a fair point, Trix,' said Mr Mattison. 'Let's swap places. It's good to have a change of view.'

Leon scowled, but Cora pulled him to his feet.

'Benji, Shyla! Over here!' Trix raced to a pile of comfy-looking beanbags. Eric, the boy who'd started last term, glanced over. He looked worried and Benji couldn't help but remember what it felt like to be new.



‘Hey, come sit with us,’ Benji called. Eric shook his head and took the cushion furthest away.

A knot twisted in Benji’s tummy. He’d tried to be friendly so why didn’t Eric like him? Before he could think about it anymore, a blur of arms and legs landed in a heap on the fourth beanbag.

‘Ajay! Be careful!’ Shyla protested, rolling her eyes, but Benji laughed. Ajay always made an entrance.

‘OK, OK. Calm down, everyone! I have a special task for you. As we know, Willow Wish Woods is an ancient forest. It’s stood for hundreds of years and it’s named after the willow trees growing near the Tadpole Run. It’s also home to other kinds of trees – firs, pines, birches and oaks. Today, we’re learning about how they change in springtime. I want everyone to get into pairs and draw what you see around you.’

‘Does our Learning Tree count?’ Benji asked.

‘Good question, Benji. This is a small birch and it definitely does count.’ Mr Mattison used it to display useful facts when the class discovered something new.

Benji paired up with Ajay and they looked at



the pictures hanging from the Learning Tree's branches. It was difficult to name some of the trees as they'd changed so much since they were last at school.

'Woah, look at that wild cherry,' said Benji, pointing to the edge of Swallow Clearing. 'We've caught it at just the right time.'

'You're right,' said Ajay. 'It only blooms for a few weeks!'

SUPER WOODLAND FACT:

After wild cherry trees shed their blossom, they begin to grow cherries.



They're not so tasty for humans, but woodland creatures love them! Birds, like blackbirds, thrushes and wood pigeons, small squirrels and even deer enjoy eating them.



‘Let’s start with the pines,’ said Benji. ‘They’ll be easier to draw.’

Mr Mattison lowered a branch. ‘You might think pines don’t change with the seasons, but they do. They grow brand new tips that are lighter in colour. They’re called candles. If you squint, it’s as if there’s a bright green flame on top.’

Benji and Ajay sat down and got to work. Ajay’s drawing wasn’t brilliant, but he labelled it carefully.

‘It helps me remember,’ he explained. ‘You never know when something might come in handy.’

At first they didn’t notice the unusual sound. It started as a hum, like a bee buzzing on a flower. Then it got louder and louder still, until the music bounced on the wind.

‘What is *that*?’ Ajay whispered.

Shyla and Trix were on the bank of the stream, drawing a weeping willow. They looked over at Benji and Ajay – they’d heard it too.

The music changed. It reminded Benji of a leaf turning in the air, of a rabbit jumping, of a swallow diving. It was a nature orchestra!

Gramp’s words came back to him – about the



forest coming alive in mysterious ways – and he felt a shudder of excitement. *Could it be... the Greenwood?*

Gramp had lived near Willow Wish Woods his whole life and always said his heart beat in time with the forest. He knew so many of its secrets - where the wild garlic grew and where the jays built their nests. Benji wanted to bottle up Gramp's stories so he would never forget a single one. He wished Gramp was there to explain what the music might mean.

'It's coming from behind the pines,' said Ajay, his eyes wide. 'I don't think anyone can hear it. Only us.'

He was right. Their classmates hadn't even looked up.

Benji waved to Trix and Shyla.

'Let's find out what it is!' he said quietly.

'I don't know,' said Shyla, twirling a strand of hair round her finger. 'We shouldn't go anywhere without Mr Mattison.'

'But, Shyla, this could be the greatest discovery ever!' Trix whispered. 'We'll only be gone a minute. Nobody will notice!'

'Not even Leon?'

They looked over to where he sat crouched, poking an ant-hole with a stick.

'Especially not him,' said Trix crossly. 'He's usually too busy doing something stupid! Come on,' she said, 'there's a hidden path between those two pines.' And before Shyla could say anything else, Trix led her by the hand.

'Careful,' Trix called. 'You'll have to duck.'

As the branches brushed against Benji, the music got louder and faster. He waited for the class to come running, but when he looked back, no one had moved at all.

Suddenly Trix froze and Benji crashed into her.

'What is it, Squirmy?'

'Shhhh...'

Benji prodded her forward and as they crept into a clearing, he gasped.





It was the biggest tree he had ever seen, its branches stretching out like a huge umbrella. Benji touched the bark. It felt rough and deeply grooved.

Large, three-fingered leaves sparkled in



the sunlight. And the music... That strange and beautiful sound seemed to come from within.

Benji walked closer and put his ear to the trunk. He heard something deep inside. It was a steady rhythm, like the beating of a heart.