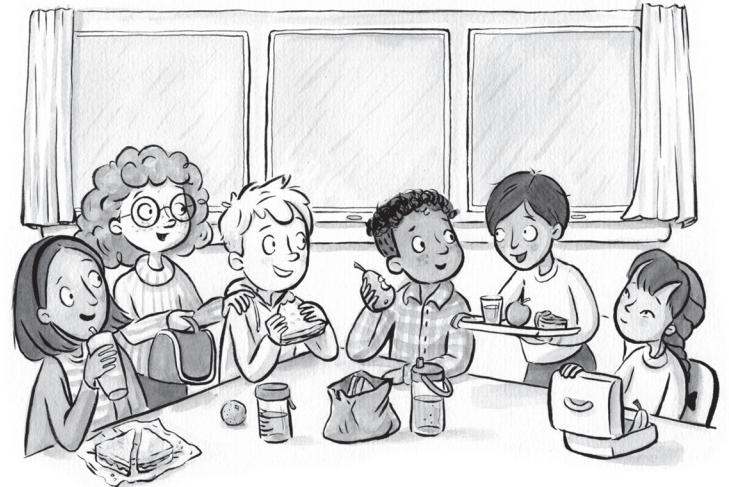


CHAPTER 1 A MAP FROM LONG AGO



‘I have something amazing to tell you all,’ said Ajay as the Woodland Explorers sat down together on a rainy Monday lunchtime. ‘I’ve been keeping it a secret for ages.’

‘I love secrets,’ said Trix, putting down her sandwich and clapping her hands.

‘It’s about Willow Wish Woods. I’ve been doing some research on it,’ said Ajay.

'I remember you telling us about that book you'd found,' said Shyla.

'I know. It's a really thick book all about the history of the forest. It got me so interested that I went back to the library and found old newspaper articles and even a photo album. I also did loads of research on Dad's tablet.'

'So what did you find out?' asked Eric.

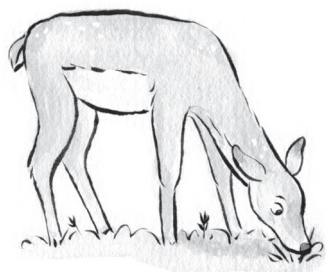
'Well,' said Ajay dramatically, doing a drum roll with his hands.

'Did you know that our woods used to be part of a huge ancient



forest? It stretched for hundreds of kilometres. It was home to deer and wild boar and even red squirrels, which have now gone extinct in many parts of the world.

And guess what? I have a map of what it used to look like. Move your lunch! I'll show you.'



Ajay took out a huge, folded piece of paper and carefully opened it up.

And there it was – a map of Willow Wish Woods from 1377. Only it wasn't called Willow Wish Woods then. It was part of the Shadowgrove Forest.





‘Woah, that’s amazing,’ said Fujiko. ‘It must be rare for maps to survive from this long ago.’

‘It is,’ said Ajay, nodding seriously. ‘Look, this is where our school is now. And this is where my house would be, and Benji’s and Shyla’s and Eric’s over there.’

‘There are no roads or anything,’ said Eric, looking confused.

‘I know. Six hundred and fifty years ago this place was quite different.’



‘But look,’ said Benji, pointing to a big tree in the middle of the map. Could that be...?’

‘No way!’

‘I know what you’re thinking. And I’m thinking the same,’ said Ajay. ‘It’s the Emerald King.’



AJAY’S NOTEBOOK

The Emerald King

- 1) The biggest tree in Willow Wish Woods.
A grand old oak tree, with a huge trunk.
We measured it and it was 1,781 cm.
- 2) It turned out that our woodland king was
712 years old!
- 3) The tree has magical properties and its
own music which gives away what it’s feeling.

‘Wow,’ said Benji. ‘It must be him.’

‘Do you know who drew the map, Ajay?’
asked Eric.

‘Yes. It was a man called Benedict Snowdon, who owned this section of the woods. People called him the Red-winged Prince because he wore a red cloak. Apparently, he was very kind and generous, and used to look out for poor people, just like Robin Hood! And whenever someone did something good for him, he would pay it back many, many times.’

‘Amazing,’ said Shyla. ‘What else did you find out?’

‘I’ll tell you everything at break,’ Ajay promised. ‘Because look, everyone’s lining up for our lesson.’

This year, the gang had moved from Pine Class to Oak Class and their new teacher was Miss Swift, who was a bird lover, just like Shyla. She was tall and her hair often changed colour. Sometimes, the Woodland Explorers liked to take bets on what colour it might be after the weekend. Lately it had been brown with a streak of brilliant red, the same shade Ajay imagined the prince’s cloak would have been.



The class’s meeting spot was at the fallen logs, one of Ajay’s favourite parts of the woods. In the spring, it was an island in a bright yellow sea of primroses.







As everyone made their way to the cushions in front of the logs, Leon kicked at a clump of flowers by his feet. He wasn't a fan of the Woodland Explorers and loved to annoy them or get them into trouble.

'Hey!' said Trix. 'What d'you think you're doing?'

'Leon, please calm down,' said Miss Swift. 'I know you're excited, but we all need to be respectful of the nature around us.'

Leon muttered 'Sorry' under his breath, but rolled his eyes as soon as Miss Swift turned around.

'Today we're going to look out for something special that happens at this time of year,' said Miss Swift, clicking her fingers to get everyone's attention. 'Guess what I saw this morning?'

'Some frogs?' asked Trix hopefully. She had been on the lookout for frogs, ever since the gang had discovered two of them by the Tadpole Run last autumn. They'd been doing their best to make sure that the stream was clear of rubbish – and since then, Trix's greatest discovery was a cluster of frogspawn near the roots of a willow tree growing by the bank.

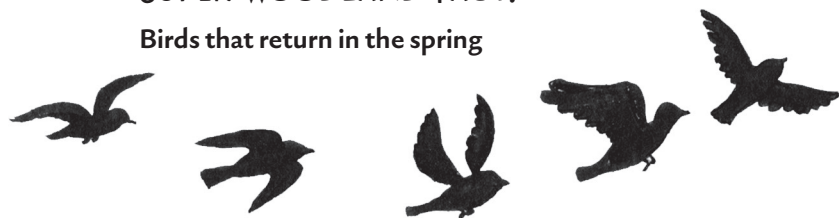


‘Not frogs, but a willow warbler. If you’re quiet, you might be able to hear its song too. It looks similar to a chiffchaff, but they have different calls that give them their names. There are quite a few of both birds in the woods. Today I’d like you to see how many different birds you can spot that are returning from their winter migration.’

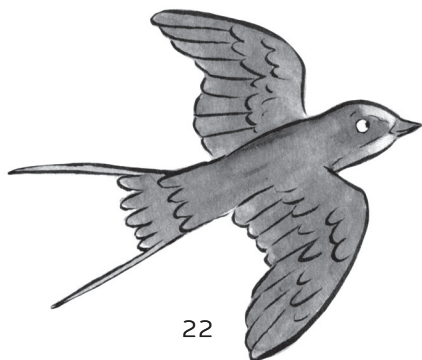
She handed out information sheets with what each bird looked like.

SUPER WOODLAND FACT:

Birds that return in the spring



Swallow – The swallow swoops gracefully through the skies, feeding on small insects as it does. It has a very long forked tail.



Cuckoo – The blue-grey cuckoo leaves Africa to lay its eggs in other birds’ nests. The ‘cuck coo’ sound of its call gives the bird its name.



Swift – The swift is a speedy traveller. It flies almost constantly on its long journey from hotter countries, sleeping, eating and bathing while in the air.



Chiffchaff – The chiffchaff is one of the earliest birds to return from its migration. When you can hear it singing its name in the woods, you know that spring has arrived.



‘I’m going to split you into pairs to make sure you’re working with someone different to your usual partner.’

There was a groan. Everyone knew that it was most fun to work with your friends.

Trix got paired with Miltos, the best football player in their year, and she didn’t seem to mind.

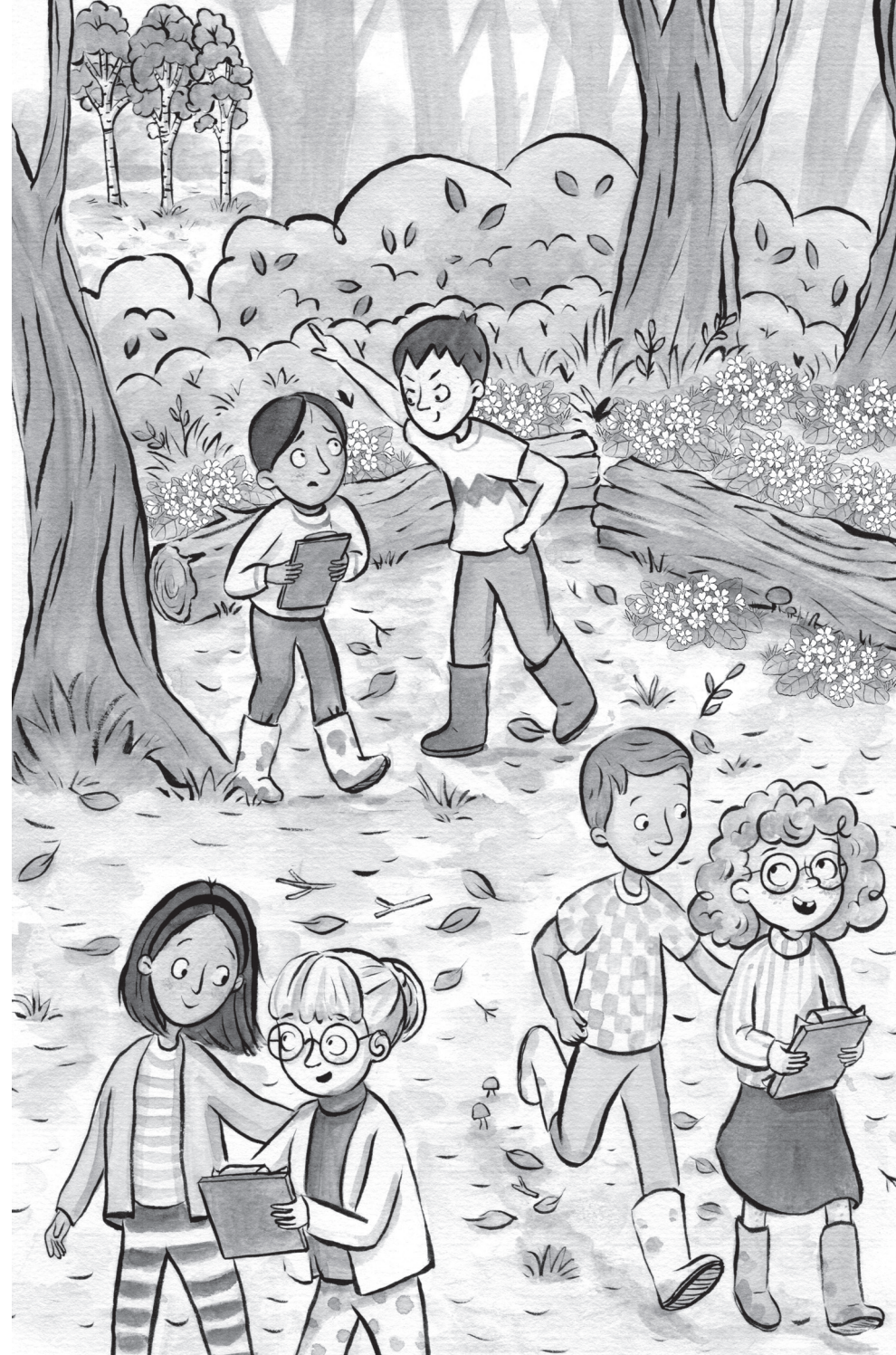
Shyla was going to work with Nina, who was quiet, kind and always had her nose stuck in a book.

Then the worst thing happened – Ajay was paired with Leon.

Leon sniffed and walked over to him. At first, he looked annoyed, but then he whispered, ‘It’s all right. We’ll have a bit of fun. We don’t have to look for boring birds. Let’s go over here.’ He pointed through the trees in the direction of Ajay’s house.

‘We can’t go so far away,’ said Ajay. ‘Remember – you told the teacher on us last time we did it.’

‘Come on, don’t be a scaredy cat,’ said Leon, ignoring what Ajay had said. ‘I saw something awesome when I was last here with Cora. Come on, I’ll show you.’



Ajay's stomach felt as though it was full of stones. But Leon was already running towards a cluster of birch trees, so he decided to follow. Jogging to catch up, Ajay pushed his way through the dense branches, with his arms up to shield his face. Leon was nowhere to be seen.

'Hey!' Ajay shouted. 'Good joke! You can come out now!'

And then he heard rustling from somewhere above his head.

'Stop shouting, doofus,' said Leon in a loud whisper. He was sitting on a branch which didn't seem thick enough to support his weight. In fact, the end of it was bending so much, Ajay thought it would snap at any moment.

'Come down now! You're going to fall.'

'Stop worrying. I'm a master at tree climbing. That's why I know where all the best treasures are hidden. Look what we have here,' announced Leon.

'What is it?' asked Ajay, swallowing hard.

'Eggs!' said Leon, his eyes glistening. 'But not just any eggs. Tiny blue ones with black specks!'

Now Ajay knew something bad was about to happen.



'Yuck, you wouldn't believe what this nest is made of.'

'What are you going to do with the eggs?' asked Ajay, worried.

'Take them to the wildlife museum. They can blow out the insides and create a display with the eggshells. My brother says that they pay you for interesting stuff that you bring in.'

'You can't steal eggs from a nest! Chicks are going to hatch from those.'

There was a flutter of wings and a flash of red, brown and cream among the silvery green leaves.

'That's a redwing thrush's nest!' Ajay cried, remembering what Shyla had taught him.

AJAY'S NOTEBOOK

The redwing thrush

- 1) Size: UK's smallest thrush, 21 cm in length
- 2) Diet: Worms and berries
- 3) Unique Feature: Striking red-orange underwings
- 4) Markings: Creamy-white chest with dark brown streaks, white stripe above the eye
- 5) Nest: Cup-shaped and made of moss, grass, lichen and twigs. Often low to the ground in dense vegetation.
- 6) Eggs: Light blue with black markings.
4-6 eggs laid.

Ajay thought it was unusual for the nest to be high up in tree branches, but the red underwing had been unmistakable.

'So what? The stupid bird can always lay some more.'

'Leon, please don't do it.'

'Try to stop me.'

Ajay clenched his fists as he heard Leon laugh. He knew what he had to do. It was time to use the Woodland Explorers' emergency call. He put his hands to his mouth and hooted.

It was the loudest and best owl hoot he'd ever made. When there was no response, Ajay hooted again and again.

Finally, Eric's voice reached him.

'Trix, over here. Come on!'

He heard footsteps, and one by one, the Woodland Explorers appeared among the birch trees.

'Ajay! Was it you calling? What's happening? Are you OK?'





Before Ajay managed to say anything, Leon landed in front of him with a thump. Ajay was relieved to see that he didn't have anything in his hands.

'All right, you massive snitch,' he said, his eyes narrowed. 'You got away with it this time, but I'm telling my brother what you're like.'

'Hey, stop...' Benji began, but Leon had already pushed past them and was running back to the fallen logs.

'He was trying to steal eggs from a redwing's nest,' said Ajay.

'No way!' said Trix. 'Let's go and tell Miss Swift.'

'It won't make much difference,' said Ajay glumly. 'I reckon he'd do it anyway if he thought nobody was looking.'

Still, Trix insisted and Leon got a big telling off – so big that he was sent to the headteacher's office.

The stony feeling in Ajay's stomach got worse. He knew that Leon was the kind of person who wouldn't let this drop.

