

The adventures of the Nature Keepers

Woodland Magic

OPERATION
OWL



JULIE SYKES

illustrated by KATY RIDDELL

Woodland
Magic

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THE WOODLAND MAGIC SERIES

Fox Club Rescue

Deer in Danger

The Stranded Otter

Operation Owl

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For Naomi, James, Sam and Will.

J.S.

For India, Tom and baby Frank.

K.R.



Chapter One

‘That’s it. Time to go.’ Cora emptied the leaves from her net into her woodland bag.

‘But we’ve only cleared the floating leaves,’ said Jax. ‘There are still loads around the pond’s edge.’

‘Clearing the pond and the ground around it is a big task. Scarlet said we could have longer if we needed it.’ Cora glanced at the sky as she added the net to her bag. The dark was melting away. Soon the sun would be up and with it the

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Ruffins, stomping around on their huge pongy feet. She shivered, remembering how only a few weeks ago a Ruffin child had caught and trapped her. Luckily for Cora, her friends had found her and helped her to escape, but it wasn't an experience she wanted to repeat.

Cora fixed Jax with a look. 'If we don't leave now, we might not make it back to the Bramble Door before sunrise. We'll be locked out of the Hidden Middle in daylight!'

Cora and Jax had been working on Downy Common, the furthest they'd ever been from the Whispering Woods. Scarlet had sent them there because she'd finally promoted Cora and Jax from trainees to fully trained Keepers.

Jax gave in. He put his net and rake in his woodland bag then slung it on his back. 'Race you home. Hi, lo, GO!'

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They ran across the common and sprinted through a corn field. The corn had been harvested and the field ploughed. Cora and Jax jumped over the furrows as they ran towards a derelict barn at the field's edge. As they approached, a shape appeared in the barn doorway.

'Ruffin!' Cora dived, flattening herself in the middle of a furrow and hoping that the earthy ridges would be tall enough to hide her.

Jax landed a little way ahead of her. He wriggled back. 'I thought you were tricking,' he panted, 'cos I was winning.'

'Shhh!' said Cora, wondering if the Ruffin would hear them. Ruffins had funny rounded ears that didn't work as well as her own pointed ones, but even so! She forced herself to breathe slowly and more quietly. 'What's he doing here?' she



whispered. ‘Scarlet said the barn wasn’t used any more.’

Jax raised his head a pip. ‘No idea. Unless he’s up early to watch the sun rise. Trix and Nis saw some Ruffins up on Downy Hill when they were working there a while ago.’

‘They should stay in their houses until daylight!’ grumbled Cora. Luckily, the Ruffin was going in a different direction to the Keepers, heading away from the Whispering Woods. Cora stood up. Now the danger had passed, she noticed something else. ‘Corn on the cob with husks! Scarlet will love these.’ Cora snatched up the left-behind pieces of corn complete with long whiskery outer leaves. She handed some to Jax and stowed the rest in her woodland bag.

‘Let’s have a look in the barn,’ said Jax. ‘See if we can work out what the Ruffin was doing there.’

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'Jax, no!'

Jax ignored Cora and sprinted over.

The barn door was open a little and he slid inside. Cora's chest tightened until she could hardly breathe. Ruffins spelled trouble but Jax was her best friend. She couldn't let him investigate alone. Forcing her legs to work, she followed him inside. The barn was dusty and dark. It smelt of rotten wood, old straw and something else . . .

Cora's stomach turned over. Ruffins!

A whole family, camping in the barn.

'Jax!' Cora's trembling legs could hardly hold her up. The Ruffins were in the middle of the barn, not far from a huge ladder that reached up to a platform in the roof. Three Ruffins – one woman and two children – plus the one that had gone for a night-time wander. They were cocooned in long bags with hoods and, to Cora's relief,

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they were all sound asleep. An empty bag, unzipped and rumpled, completed the line. Cora grabbed Jax by the arm and pointed back to the door. Jax nodded and they silently tiptoed outside.

‘Run!’ said Cora.

‘Running,’ said Jax.

In the distance a low horn sounded.

‘Tyr!’ Cora gasped. The ancient Viking horn was a warning to the Keepers to hurry home before the Bramble Door was shut and locked.

Cora and Jax ran faster, keeping up the pace until they reached a group of other Keepers with bulging woodland bags, also returning to the Whispering Woods. They tagged behind them.

‘Fully trained Keepers,’ Jax said proudly.

‘That we are!’ Cora agreed. ‘No more school for us.’

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They queued in a long line of Keepers waiting to file through the Bramble Door. Once inside the Hidden Middle they went straight to the store where they waited again, this time for Scarlet and Haru to empty their woodland bags.

Scarlet beamed when she saw the corn on the cob. Pulling away the outer husks, she pushed them back over the counter. 'Take these along to the school, please. Signor Dragonfly will want them to make corn Keeper dolls for the Harvest Celebration.'

Every year, in autumn, the Keepers celebrated the countryside and all it provided with a huge feast held by the brook in the very centre of the Hidden Middle. The food was carried to the feast in grass baskets made especially for the occasion. After the parade and before

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the feast, Grandmother Sky, the Queen of the Hidden Middle, awarded a prize for the best basket.

‘I’ll take the husks to Signor Dragonfly. You go and bag us a table at the Crow’s Nest,’ Cora said to Jax as they left the stores.

‘No need. We were back before you. We went to the Crow’s Nest and got some snacks to share,’ said Trix, appearing at Cora’s side. Nis was with her and they were both carrying trays laden with food and drink. ‘Blackcurrant smoothies, acorn crisps and cupcakes topped with whipped nettle cream. Fresh today,’ added Nis.

‘Yum,’ said Cora.

‘Let’s have a picnic by the brook. Then afterwards we can get started on our basket,’ said Trix. ‘I’ve been thinking about how to make it extra special.’

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The school was just along from the brook. As Cora and her friends walked together, Trix, who loved designing and making things, talked about her ideas. Everyone's favourite was her suggestion to make a basket on wheels so that they could push it along.

'That's brilliant, Trix!' said Cora.

'Definitely a winner,' said Nis.

Trix rolled her eyes. 'It doesn't have to win. It just has to work.'

'Winning is good too!' said Jax, nudging her.

'What are we going to fill it with?'

Cora asked Nis.

Nis, who loved cooking, lit up. By the time they reached the brook, he was still describing all the different and lovely foods they might take to the feast. Reluctantly, Cora peeled off towards the school,

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running over the wooden bridge that spanned the brook. Her stomach did a fluttery dance as she approached the five-storey building with twisty staircases and many balconies that was built among the branches of an ancient sycamore.

School seemed a little smaller now she was a fully trained Keeper. Cora climbed up the outer staircase and entered the main door at first-branch level. Lessons had started and Cora found Signor Dragonfly and his class of seniors in the nursery, helping the little ones to make corn Keeper dollies for the Harvest Celebration.

Her old teacher was thrilled with the corn husks. ‘Thank you, Cora. It’s good to see you working so hard these days. Perhaps you learned more than I thought when you were here.’



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Cora fought back a giggle as she remembered the last Harvest Celebration when she and Jax had still been at school. Had Signor Dragonfly also remembered the incident with the exploding marrow? She hadn't meant to drop it and Jax hadn't meant to kick it either. The whole thing was a genuine accident.

She was about to leave when she suddenly recognised a figure sitting at a desk, patiently helping a little one to shape a bundle of damp cornhusks with a length of grass string.

Cora's mouth fell open.
'Penelope!' she exclaimed.
'What are you doing here?'

