



To J, WHO TAUGHT ME THAT EVEN THE SIMPLEST OF THINGS CAN BE A TREASURE RCK

TO MY ADVENTURE PARTNER, DIEGO L C



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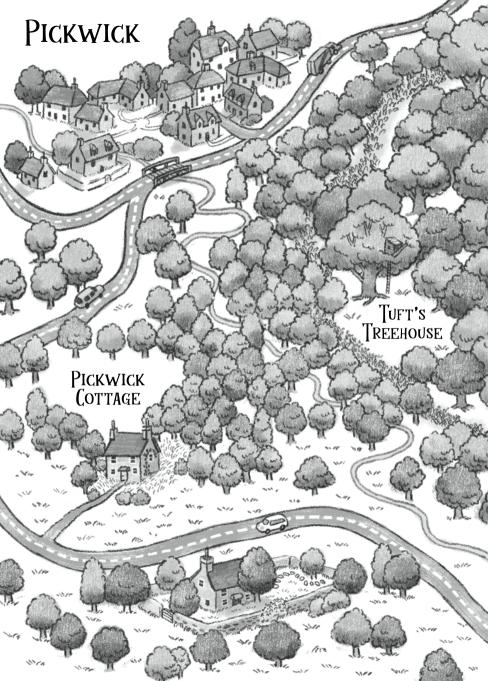




RACHEL CHIVERS KHOO

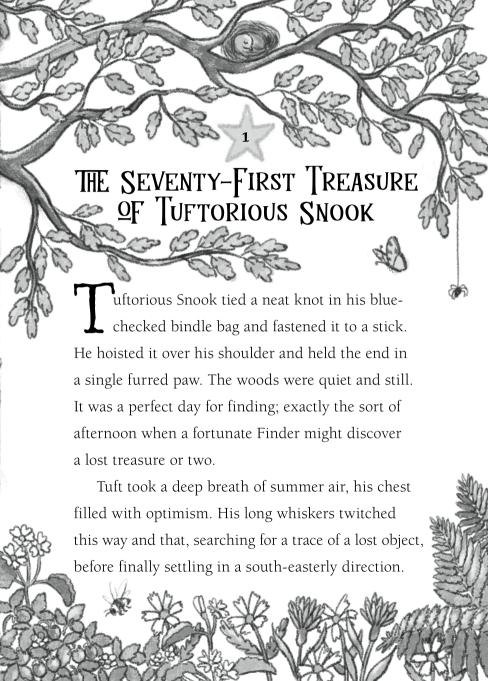
Illustrated by Laura Catalán











The small Finder walked briskly but with a lolloping gait, due in no small part to his mismatched shoes. On his left foot was a red wellington. It was far too big, but had been comprehensively stuffed with moss. On his right foot he wore a small blue slipper, which was rather damp and worse for wear. Tuft hoped to find a better shoe soon; one that was more befitting an explorer, such as himself.

He rummaged in the front pocket of his dungarees and pulled out a fruit pastel. He'd found a half-full packet last month. Tuft gently tucked the sweet into the pouch of his cheek; the trick was to make one sweet last the whole journey, however long that might be. But, of course, that was nearly impossible, since Tuft could never tell how near or far he was from a lost treasure. His whiskers could only tell him that he was headed in the right direction.

* X DOWN

Tuft walked for the best part of an hour, noticing everything along the way (as Finders always do). His whiskers were pulled taut, like kite strings. They steered him through the bramble trench to the outskirts of the woods, far from the Finders' main settlement. At first, Tuft thought he was headed to the picnic clearing by the roadside, where busy families often discarded umbrellas, cutlery or old tennis balls. That was where Tuft had found his much-prized fruit pastels. But instead he was pulled towards the stream. Tuft tried his best to hop over to the other side, but he lost his footing and ended up with both feet in the water.

"Botheration," he muttered as he scrambled up the bank. "Botheration, botheration, botheration!" He pulled off his saturated slipper and wrung it out as best he could.

Deciding he had no choice but to make do with one shoe, Tuft soldiered on. Soon the undergrowth around him was gone and he emerged onto hard ground. Tuft looked down. He saw tarmac and a yellow line of warning under his bare foot.

It was the road.

The roar of an engine was upon him. Tuft sprang back as a horn blared. The car swerved. Tuft fell, snapping the stick of his bindle bag and almost choking on the fruit pastel. Instinctively, he curled into a ball.

There was the sound of a car door opening and closing. Then footsteps approaching. Tuft forced his eyes open and peered through the leaves that surrounded him. The car was only metres away. It was too late to run. Instead, he burrowed down into the earth, tucking his head as low as he could.



There was a cluster of nettles between him and the car. Old Grey Snook had once told him that humans were afraid of nettles.

A boy with chestnut hair walked along the roadside. He was short, maybe only two-thirds of the height of a full-grown human, but he was still easily twice the height of Tuft. His eyes were fixed on the edge of the woods.

"Where did you see it, Mum?" the boy called out.

The woman in the driving seat opened her window and pointed in Tuft's direction.

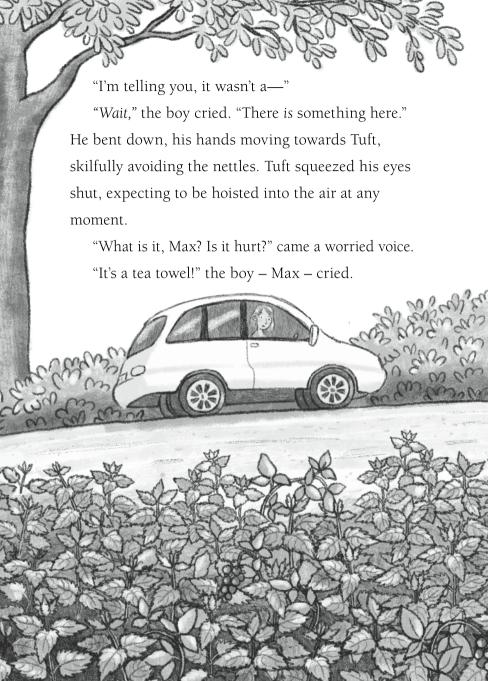
The boy stepped closer and peered into the nettles. His eyes moved over the place where Tuft was hiding.

"I can't see anything!" he shouted. "Are you sure it was a dog?"

"It was quite small for a dog. It could have been a cat," she replied.

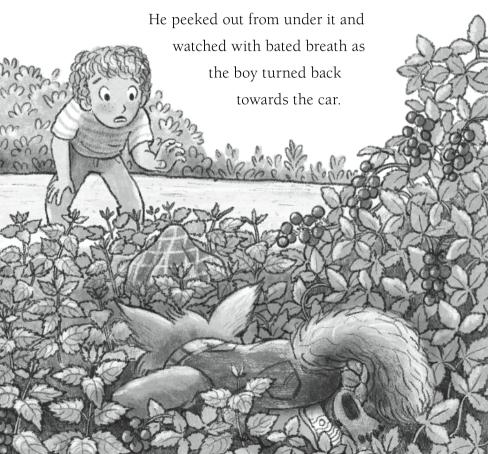
"It must have been a squirrel, Mum."





Tuft opened his eyes and glanced up. The boy was waving the checked cloth from Tuft's bindle bag. "I can't *believe* you almost crashed the car over a tea towel!" The boy laughed as he dropped the cloth.

Tuft found himself suddenly engulfed in darkness, as the tea towel landed on his head.





noticed something small and round drop from the boy's back pocket. It rolled along the road, glinting in the sunlight. The small Finder didn't dare move a muscle until the car had rumbled away and the noise of the engine had faded into silence.

Never in his whole life had Tuft seen a human up close. The boy had been barely a whisker's length away. Of all the creatures in the world, Tuft had been raised to fear humans the most. Humans with their thunderous cars, and their roads which sliced forests and woodlands in half. Humans who didn't understand the ways of Finders. Humans who wouldn't hesitate to plunder the Treasure Burrow, should they ever discover it.

Tuft sat in half-darkness under the checked cloth, feeling relief and puzzlement in equal measure. He recalled his aunt, Timodora Snook's, most ruinous misadventure. It had happened before



Tuft was born, but he'd heard the solemn tale many a time under the Umbrella Tree. Aunt Timodora had been missing for a month before her anorak was found by the side of a road not far from here. That was all that was left of her. Whether she'd been taken by a human or flattened by a car, no one knew. But she had never returned. Tuft swallowed hard as he realized he'd almost met the same fate.

The boy hadn't appeared quite as dangerous as Tuft had imagined a human would. Even more unexpectedly, he hadn't taken the bindle bag cloth. Or the *tea towel*, as he had called it.

"Why on earth would tea ever need a towel?"

Tuft muttered to himself, as he emerged from under the cloth.

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What a tale this would be, to tell under the Umbrella Tree later on. Tuft had brushed with a human and walked away unscathed. And what's more: the human had left something behind.



The fur on Tuft's back prickled with excitement as he approached the strange object that had fallen from the boy's pocket. He carried it hastily back to the cover of the woods and inspected it closely.

The object was circular and decorated with colourful swirls. Only a moment ago, this strange wheel had belonged to the human boy, and now it was rightly Tuft's. Lost and then found in a matter of minutes. Tuft rolled it along the mossy ground and to his utter amazement, it produced a length of white string. He gathered up the string and hurried home, hugging his bounty to his chest. Who knew what lost object his whiskers had originally been leading him towards. It didn't matter now. By sheer luck he had stumbled upon something even better. Tuft smiled. The Golden Rule always applied: Finders Keepers.



Once back at his treehouse, Tuft climbed the rope ladder and closed the trapdoor. He sat on the smooth floorboards of the small, lamplit room and rolled his newest treasure to and fro. Then he wiped the painted wheel clean of mud and polished it thoroughly. Next Tuft cleared a space on his shelf of treasures; a small gap between a chipped teacup and a pair of earmuffs. Now all he needed was a label. Tuft sat at his desk and dipped a sharpened twig into a rusty paint tin, biting on his tongue in concentration as he penned a description in his neatest handwriting:

The Seventy-First Treasure of Tuftorious Snook: String Maker





DIGGING

ax leaned on his grandma's spade and stared up into the darkening sky, feeling defeated. His flushed cheeks were speckled with mud. A dozen deep trenches surrounded him. He'd been digging all evening, and so far he'd found nothing but rocks. The wind rustled the trees in the woods at the end of his grandma's garden. Suddenly Max was aware of the sound of footsteps behind him. A hand touched Max's shoulder and he whipped around.

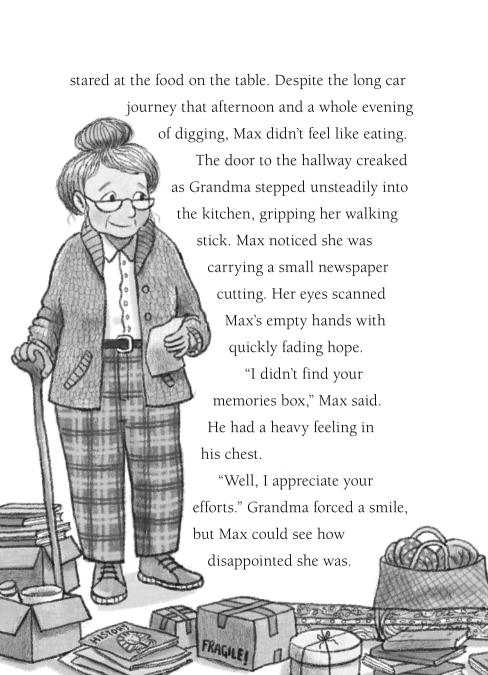
"Mum! You nearly gave me a heart attack!" Max stumbled backwards, tripping over the spade and landing in a trench.

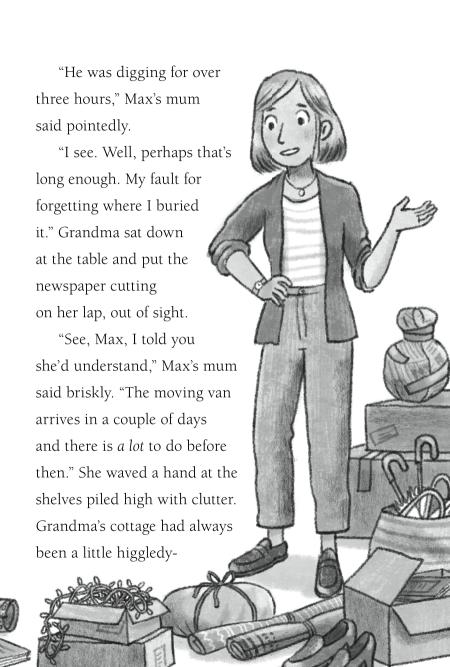
"Digging in half-darkness can do funny things to your nerves," his mum said, offering him a hand up. "Come back inside, Max. You've been looking for long enough now."

Max gave her a pleading look. His arms ached from the weight of the spade, but he didn't want to give up.

"What will I tell Grandma? It means so much to her that we find it."

"Oh, Max. It's going to be pitch-dark soon," his mum replied, already looking back towards the cottage. "Besides, you need to eat something. It's nearly nine p.m. and you haven't had any dinner." Max followed her reluctantly through the open kitchen door and found she'd set out some hot milk and scones for him. He sat down and





piggledy, but it was worse than ever now. Even Max, who wasn't particularly tidy himself, had been a bit taken aback when they'd arrived that afternoon. The front garden was so overgrown that it had been a struggle to get their overnight bags up the path. "No point in dilly-dallying," his mum continued. "I'm going to make a start upstairs and see how much I can get done before bedtime."

Max looked from Grandma to his mum.

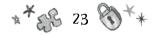
"I don't think it's fair that Grandma has to move out," he said in as firm a voice as he could muster. "All her memories are here."

"But you've been really looking forward to her moving in with us," Max's mum protested. "You've been saying so for months. It's going to be great. Let's keep focused on the positives."

It was true. Max had been over the moon when Grandma told him of her plan to move in with them. The two of them had always been close, despite Grandma living over five hours' drive away. Max was excited to finally see more of her – and to have company at home when Mum was busy with work. But now, for the first time, he saw the other side of it. Grandma had lived in this house in Pickwick for her entire life. She was going to be leaving behind everything she knew to move to a city on the other side of the country.

"It's OK, Max," Grandma said, placing a hand on his, as if she had read his thoughts. "It's all decided. Of course I'm sad to leave this house, but I'm getting too old and doddery to live here alone. And it will be wonderful to see more of you! Memories don't live in bricks and mortar anyway, you know."

Max's mum gave a nod of approval and closed the door firmly as she left. Max inspected Grandma's face closely. She was gazing out of the window. He guessed she was thinking of her memories box. The box Max had spent hours



looking for. The box they almost certainly weren't going to be able to find in time. There were only two days left before Grandma was due to move out of the cottage for ever.

"What's that in your hands?" Max asked.

Grandma pursed her lips for a moment and then brought the piece of paper out from under the table.

"I found it this afternoon, when I was clearing out my dressing table," she said. "It's the newspaper article about my memories box. But it doesn't matter now."

Max took the delicate cutting from her hands. It showed a photo of a girl around his age, kneeling on the ground with a spade and a tin box in her hands. The headline read:

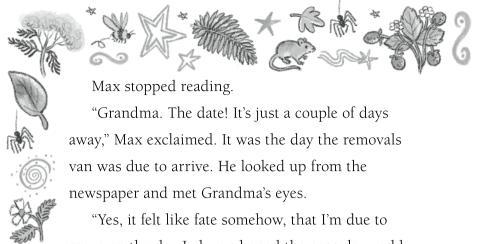
BURIES TIME CAPSULE FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

"Is this you, Grandma?" Max asked, studying the photo. She nodded. Max didn't recognize the name Davis but he realized it must have been Grandma's maiden name.

Budding astronomer
ten-year-old Emma
Marie Davis is keenly
awaiting this week's
solar eclipse. She hopes
to view the entire
spectacle from her back
garden using a makeshift
device to protect her eyes.
Not only that, but she's



put together a time capsule, full of special memories, which she plans to bury for future generations. She hopes that the capsule will remain buried until the next total solar eclipse, in seventy years' time on 19 July 2024.



"Yes, it felt like fate somehow, that I'm due to move on the day I always hoped the capsule would be opened," Grandma said. "But now it turns out I've entirely misremembered where I buried it. I really was certain it was beneath the rosebush." For a moment she looked uncharacteristically irritable, as if she was very cross with herself. "I should have dug it up years ago, before my memory started failing me."

"Oh, Grandma, we should keep looking!"
Max said.

"No, no. It could be anywhere. Sure, you've already dug up half the garden trying to find it."

"I hope the new owners of the cottage don't





mind too much about the holes," Max said. He'd been in such a hurry to find the box that he hadn't considered the state of the lawn.

"Trust me, they won't," Grandma replied definitively before lowering her eyes. It wasn't the answer Max had expected.

"Maybe we could tell the new owner about the time capsule, and ask them to get in touch if they find it? Who is the new owner anyway?" he asked, realizing Grandma hadn't mentioned a thing about them.

"Oh, just some Londoner," Grandma replied, looking reluctant to talk about it. She got to her feet uncomfortably. "I'm going to get an early night."

"But what about the box?" Max said. "I could get up early tomorrow, before Mum wakes! I could do a bit more digging. It's got to be worth a try."

Grandma hesitated, as if she was in two minds about it.



"Oh, Max. I doubt you'll find it. Unless..." Her voice trailed off. "Well, there is one other place it could be."

"Where?"

"I might have buried it somewhere in the woods," Grandma said. "Perhaps that's where it will be. Under the old oak tree. That was my favourite spot as a child." She gazed into the distance for a moment before looking Max in the eyes. "Yes," she said with a voice full of conviction. "I'm certain that's where it must be."





INTO THE WOODS

arly the next morning, Max tiptoed into his grandma's bedroom. She was already awake, propped up in her bed with pillows. The newspaper cutting was beside her and she was drawing something in a notebook.

"Oh, good, you're up," she said as she scribbled.
"I've been working on a map for you. This should lead you to the spot. I used to have a treehouse in the old oak tree right here." She jabbed a pencil at the centre of her hand-drawn map. "The treehouse is probably long gone, but you'll find the tree easily. It's huge. It was always the most magical, ancient



tree in the woods." Max nodded and took the page from her. "If I buried the time capsule in the woods then that's definitely where it will be," she told him

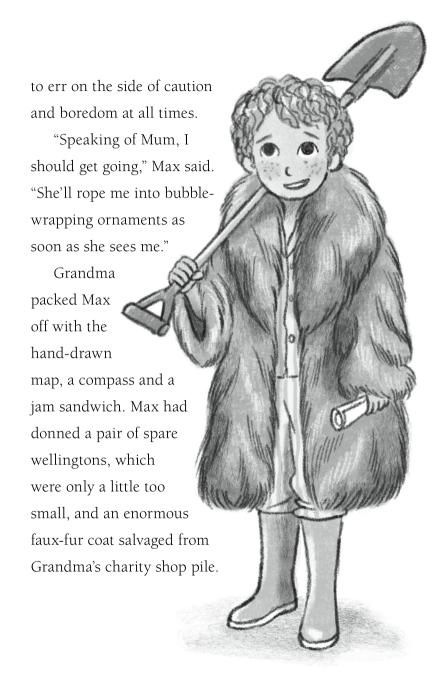
"Grandma," Max began, feeling a little apprehensive. "Is it OK for me to go into the woods? I mean – it's not trespassing, is it?"

"No," Grandma told him. "The woods are my land. At least, until tomorrow, that is."

"Oh." A few seconds passed as Max took this in. "I hadn't realized... You never said they were your woods."

"Ah, yes. Well, I've let the woods become rather overgrown, you see. There's no clear path any more, I'm afraid, and plenty of streams to fall into. Your mum didn't like the idea of you getting lost or hurt. I think you're old enough to go exploring now, though! You just need to watch your step."

Max tightened his lips. It was just like his mum



Despite the early-morning sunshine, there was a chill in the air. Max slung a spade over his shoulder so that he could dig.

As soon as he was under the shadow of the trees, Max found himself having second thoughts. He'd only ever been in forest parks marked with coloured arrows and bicycle tracks. By comparison, this place felt completely wild. There were rabbit holes everywhere and not a single trace of a path.

Grandma had assured him the woods were small and you couldn't really get lost so long as you kept an eye on the compass. He followed the wavering pointer in a north-easterly direction and tried his best not to worry. It felt good to be outside in the fresh air, crunching leaves as he walked. No doubt



he'd be spending the rest of the day stuffing boxes.

Max marched past an old tyre swing which was marked on Grandma's map, and trudged through a stream barely deep enough to merit wellies. But then, just as he thought he might be getting close to the oak, he reached a ditch full of nettles and brambles. It was easily half a metre deep, as if it had been dug on purpose to keep people out. Max frowned and looked at Grandma's scrawled directions. There was no mention at all of a ditch. It stretched as far as he could see. He considered trying to find a way around it, but it didn't seem wise to leave the route marked on the map. So, after a few minutes of to-ing and fro-ing, he braced himself and marched straight through.



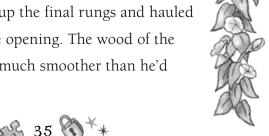
Max emerged intact, except for a nettle sting and a few small tears in his pyjama trousers. He nursed his stinging hand and pressed onwards through a thick cluster of trees.

The woods felt different on this side of the ditch. The trees were taller and nobler here. Max looked up at the vivid green canopy above his head as he walked. The trees' branches swayed in the wind with a soft creaking sound. Dappled sunlight trickled through the gaps between the leaves. When he looked down again, Max found he was at the foot of a majestic oak with a treehouse nestled in its boughs. He froze in his tracks, before staggering backwards to take it all in. This was the place. He'd found Grandma's oak. And, astonishingly, the treehouse seemed to be perfectly preserved. Somehow it had survived seventy years' worth of rain and damp and rot.

Max stepped closer, examining the rope ladder which hung down from the branches. The cords

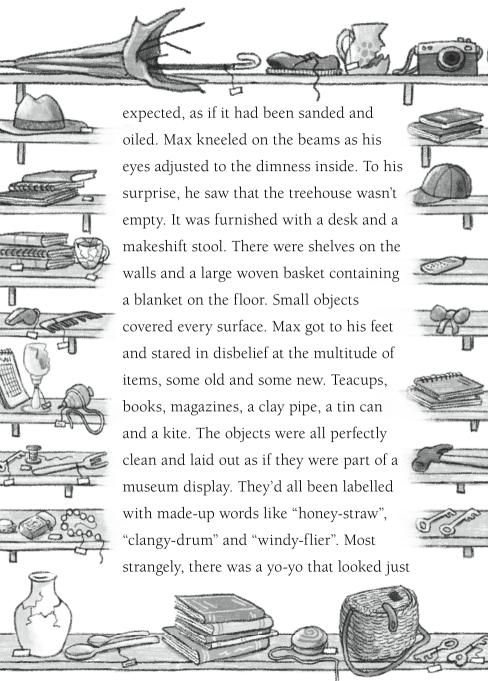
were tied neatly and there was no sign of fraying. It had a waxy coating, as if something waterproof had been applied. Max gave it a pull; it was strong. He set his spade down and placed a foot on the first rung, bracing himself for a fall. But the rope held his weight. The ladder swung slightly as Max lifted his other foot from the ground. He inched a little higher, and then a little higher again. Rung by rung he climbed, until his feet were over three metres off the ground. If he went any higher it would be at the risk of a broken arm. But something told him the rope ladder wouldn't break. Max took a deep breath and fixed his eyes on the open trapdoor above. What would Grandma say when he told her this was all still here? Her special childhood den, completely unspoiled.

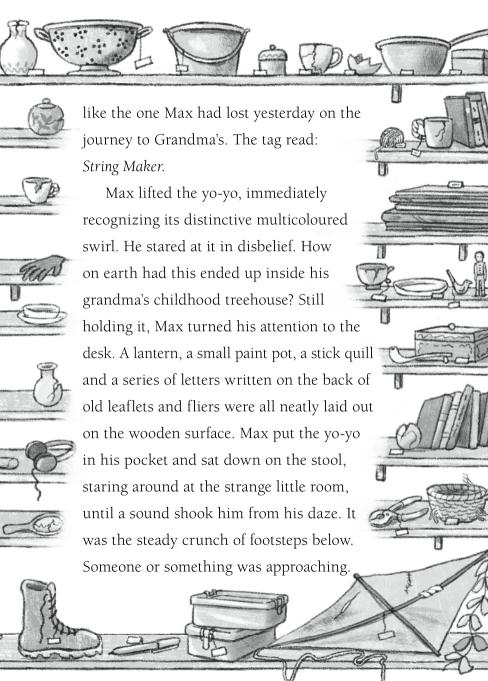
Max scrambled up the final rungs and hauled himself through the opening. The wood of the treehouse floor felt much smoother than he'd













THROUGH THE TRAPDOOR

"Lallo!" came a strange voice from directly below the treehouse. In a blind panic, Max darted to the trapdoor and heaved it shut, without even looking to see who was speaking. He stood on top of the now closed hatch, using his weight to bar himself inside the treehouse.

"Old Grey, is that you?" came the voice again.
"I saw you at the window. You've left your spade
down here. What are you doing in my treehouse?"
The voice sounded male, but wasn't particularly
deep. Max couldn't tell if it belonged to a child
or an adult. He stayed silent. "Old Grey, I know

it's you," said the voice accusingly.

"It's not," Max replied tentatively.

"It is!"

"It's really not," Max said, wondering who on earth this person could be. Whoever it was, they were on his grandma's land. Yet this person claimed to own the treehouse.

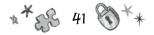
"Who else in Silverthorn Forest has grey fur?"

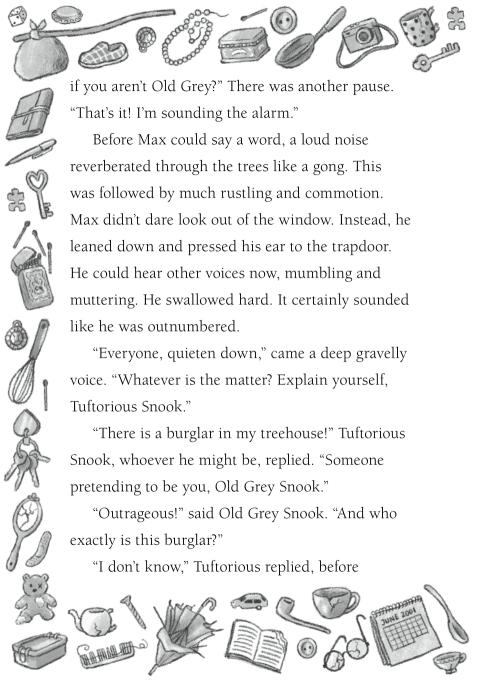
Max looked down at the fur coat he was wearing, repeating the words in his head. Who else had *grey fur*? None of this made sense. And where on earth was Silverthorn Forest?

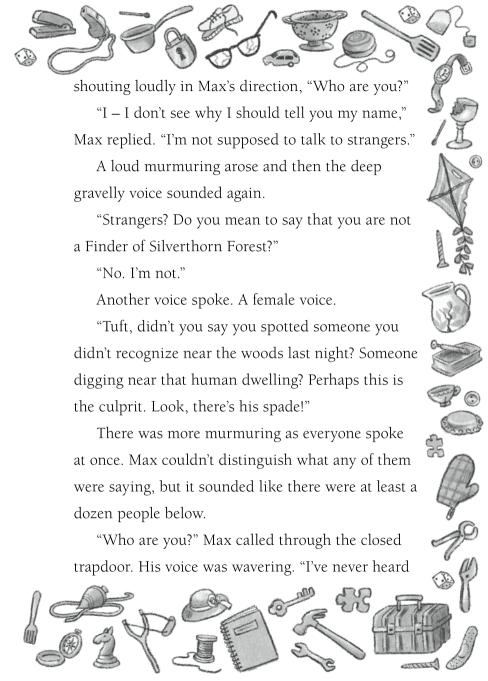
"Listen!" Max shouted in the deepest, most grown-up voice he could muster. "This is private land. You have no right to be here."

There was a moment of silence before the stranger spoke again.

"No right to be here? This is our patch." The tone was suddenly hostile. "Who on earth are you,







of the Finders of Silverthorn..."

Max heard a series of gasps, before the original voice answered him again.

"I am Tuftorious Snook, son of Rosewild and Greyorg, and grandson of Old Grey Snook, who is the chief in these woods. Who are *you*?"

Max paused. None of these names sounded real. But he wasn't in a position to be calling anyone's bluff.

"I'm Maximilian," he replied, feeling his full name would sound best. "How many of you are there?"

"There are a dozen families of Finders in these woods," Tuftorious replied. "And it appears you are not one of us... So, the question is, why have you been digging on *our* patch? And why have you barricaded yourself inside *my* treehouse? Come down and explain yourself!"

Max was so confused. How could a dozen

