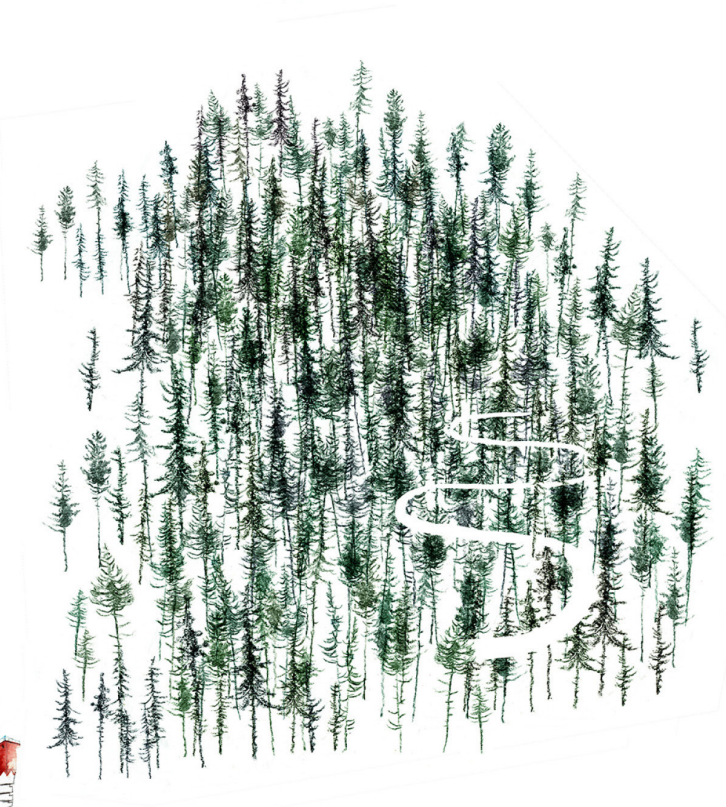


THE NOBLE ADVENTURES

OF



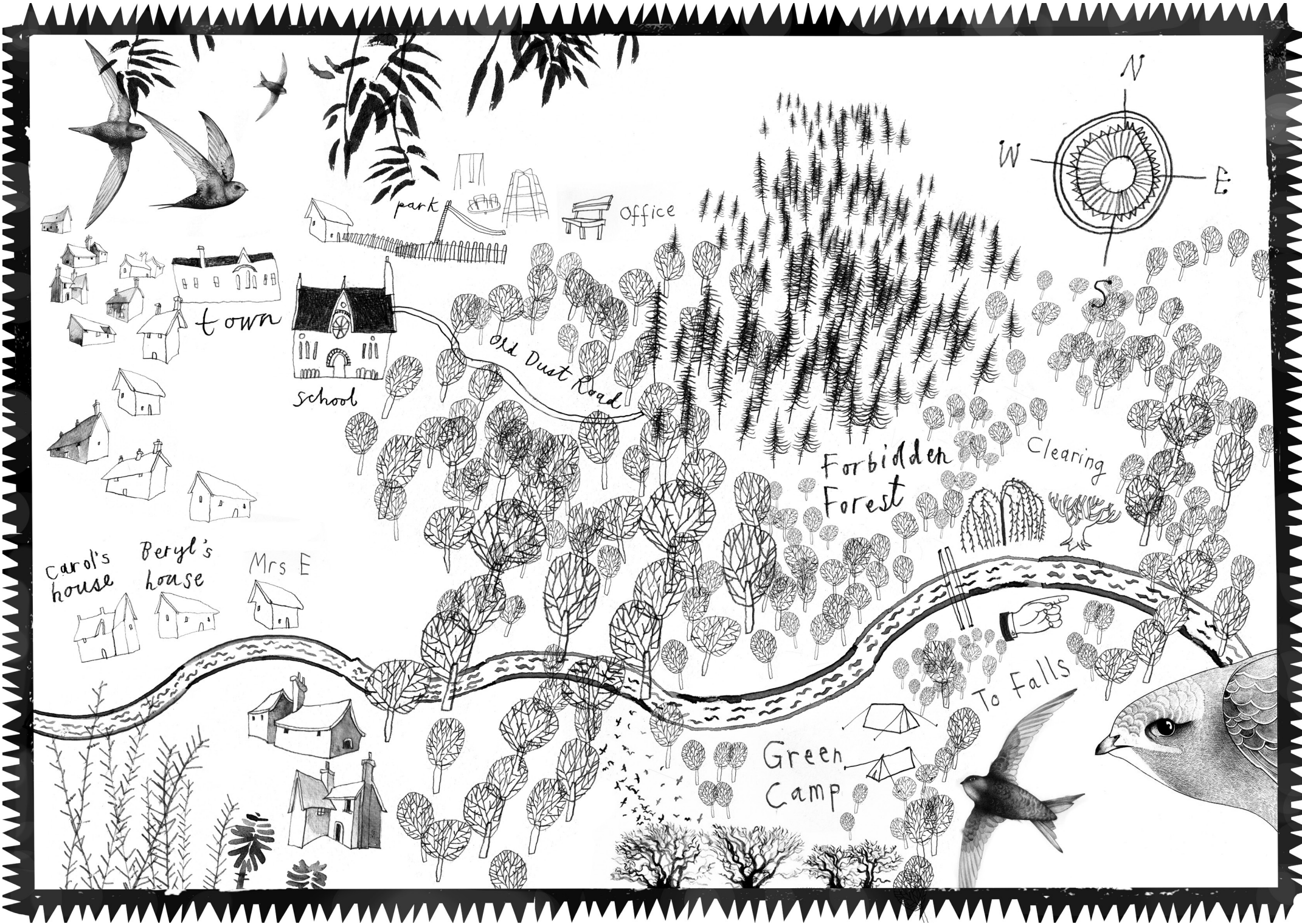
Beryl & Carol

JEREMY SHERR

THE NOBLE ADVENTURES

OF

BERYL AND CAROL



town

School

park Office

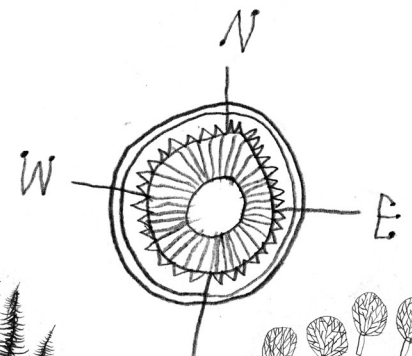
Old Dust Road

Forbidden Forest Clearing

Carol's house Beryl's house Mrs E

Green Camp

To Falls





*To my four Gorgeous Girlies, who inspired this story out
of me and carried me all the way through:
Ella Naomi, Tilly Jane, Noga Lily, and Amy Grace*

THE NOBLE ADVENTURES
OF

Beryl & Carol

JEREMY SHERR

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*“Every act of strength leads to another act of strength
Every act of weakness leads to another act of weakness
Courage begets courage
Fear breeds fear.”
— Carol’s Dad*

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CHAPTER 1



Beryl was not sure they had escaped, so she glanced behind, listening for any sounds. Nothing yet. They had reached the end of the Old Dust Road. Beryl had managed to keep the rusty tin can rolling for the last two miles, but now they were at a dead end. She dished out a final nasty kick, and the can clattered noisily into the gutter. She dragged herself to the edge of the path, feeling like a prisoner on death row.

Carol followed, looking as miserable as the tin can.

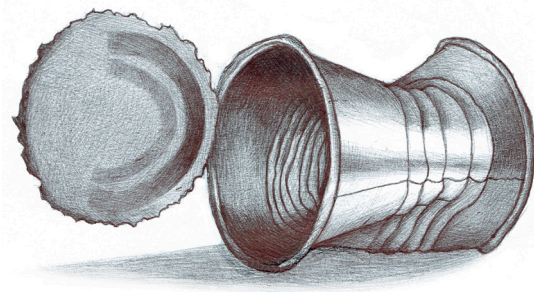
A moment later, the girls heard the awful sound of Earnie's croaky laugh from not far behind. They *were* being followed, and it would not be long before the bullies caught up with them. They looked around, frantically searching for a way out. There was none. On their left were open fields, up ahead the forest, and behind them the road, down which their tormentors were fast approaching. There was no way back, nowhere to hide, and certainly no going into the forest. The girls stood paralysed, their legs trembling like fresh jelly. Beryl could taste the fear in her mouth, and Carol's heart was pounding like a jackhammer. They were caught between being tortured for hours and a dark Forbidden Forest, which was not an option.

Carol scowled at Beryl. She looked upset, angry, and scared, and she was trying to shout and whisper at the same time.

"Look what you've gotten us into, dork! You and your big ideas. If they catch us here, we're totally trapped. We'll spend the rest of

the afternoon having our hair pulled, dirt and stones stuck down our collars, our bags emptied, and all our stuff kicked around in the dust. Only this time, there'll be no one around to help.”

Beryl looked at the ground, feeling as though her aunt had just told her off. It was true that she had suggested escaping from the school's back gate, even though they both knew it was a dead end. But it had only been a week since the boys had snatched Carol's bag and scattered her stuff all over the schoolyard, kicking her private things around like a football. Beryl just couldn't stand being humiliated in front of the whole school again, and escaping through the back gate had seemed like a good idea at the time. The back gate had led to the dust road, the dust road had coughed up the tin can, and the tin can had lured them to the edge of the Forbidden Forest. They knew it would not take long for the boys to work out how they had escaped, and most likely, they would follow them, as they had nothing better to do. Now, Beryl and Carol were stuck and about to get a beating.



The boys' voices were growing louder. They would arrive at any moment.

Suddenly, Beryl grabbed Carol by the sleeve and whispered, “Into the forest. Now!”

“What? You're mad!” Carol pulled her arm away, alarmed by yet another of Beryl's stupid ideas. “You know no one's allowed in the forest.” Carol was almost 12, three months older than Beryl, so

she considered herself to be the ‘responsible adult,’ which is precisely what made Beryl more rebellious.

“Why not?!” Beryl glared at her urgently. “Who's going to know? Unless you tell someone, of course.”

“You know I would never do that.” Carol blushed. “It's just...”

“Just, just, just,” Beryl imitated her. “Come on, let's go.”

Carol rolled her eyes, ready to argue against Beryl's second crazy move of the day. But just then, they heard the boys' laughing and jeering coming from behind the last bend in the road. They had thirty seconds at most.

Beryl had done enough talking. She pulled a rude face, then turned and bolted into the forest, leaving a stunned and reluctant Carol with no choice but to run after her. Carol would rather have faced an afternoon with the bullies than go into the forest, but there was no way she was letting Beryl go in there alone.

This was the first time either of the girls had been beyond the tree line. In fact, it was the first time *anyone* had been beyond the tree line for many, many years. It felt like jumping off the edge of the universe.

At that moment, the two friends never imagined they were walking into the biggest adventure of their lives.

CHAPTER 2



The two girls crouched low behind a thick bush just inside the forest, waiting anxiously and careful not to make the slightest sound. Beyond the last line of trees, they could see the boys arriving at the end of the dust road, nasty grins plastered all over their faces. When they did not find their victims where they had expected them to be, they looked around with dumbfounded expressions, scratching their heads. One of them uttered an unrepeatable word. They were obviously surprised and upset that their afternoon entertainment had escaped.

“Must’ve snuck round the school.” Gimpy looked puzzled.

That didn’t make sense, so the boys suggested a few increasingly far-fetched theories, which finally deteriorated into Earnie’s ‘dug a hole in the ground’ idea and Simon’s ‘kidnapped by flying saucers.’ For a moment, the girls smirked inwardly, realising they had outsmarted their tormentors.

“Never mind, we’ll get them tomorrow,” declared Simon, aimlessly throwing a stone into the woods. The stone whizzed dangerously close to Beryl’s head, forcing the girls to squat even lower, terrified.

Beryl and Carol huddled together as they listened to the bullies devising various plans to ‘get’ them. These involved more grass ambushes, with the delightful addition of mud mixed with thorns and cow dung. Carol shivered, and Beryl’s pale face went red, but

they dared not move.

Beryl and Carol were not quite sure why the bullies always picked on them.

“Maybe they’re in love with us,” Carol had suggested one day, and Beryl had made the face of someone who had just eaten a lemon. But they both knew the sad truth. The three boys, who liked to call themselves the ‘High-Street Gang,’ were two years older and much stronger, so the girls were easy victims. They had been harassing them for the last three years, and Beryl and Carol had been too scared to fight back or tell their parents, so it just got worse every day.

The two friends crouched low, holding hands and waiting for the boys to get tired and go home so they could escape the forest as quickly as possible.

But that didn’t seem to be happening.

“Let’s light a fire,” they heard Earnie suggest. The girls could smell cigarette smoke.

“Cool,” echoed Gimpy and Simon, who usually followed Earnie’s lead.

The boys walked to the other side of the road to find dry wood. Naturally, they were not going to search for wood in the Forbidden Forest.

Beryl realised this was their one and only chance to escape. She tugged Carol by the sleeve and made a Let’s-get-out-of-here gesture with her head.

Carol was about to protest, but this time she knew that her friend was right. It was now or never. If they didn’t move immediately, they would be stuck in the same spot till after dark. That would mean big trouble at home. Beryl signalled to Carol with her hand that they would try to circle round and exit the forest at a different point. Carol nodded reluctantly. It was their only hope.

Just before the boys returned with the firewood, the two friends turned and, crawling on their hands and knees, edged deeper into

the dark forest. The earth was rough. Stones and thorns tore their jeans and scratched their knees and elbows. They had never been so scared in their lives.



CHAPTER 3



Beryl and Carol continued crawling until the boys' voices faded away. But the bullies were no longer their biggest problem. They were deep in the Forbidden Forest, which felt as though all their worst nightmares had merged into one and swallowed them up. The spooky pine trees looked at them sternly as if to say, 'What are you two doing here?!' The shrill, cold March wind whistled through leaves and branches, sending icicles up their spines and goosebumps onto their skin. The girls huddled closer together. This was the last place in the world they wanted to be. Everyone in town knew the forest was a no-go area. Everybody knew why, but nobody dared speak about it anymore.

The two girls looked at each other with terror. There was no doubt they had made a serious blunder. Maybe a fatal one. As bad as facing the boys had seemed, it would have been far better than entering the dreaded forest. At least they would be dealing with familiar enemies rather than deadly robbers and murderers.

They tiptoed through the trees, stepping cautiously, so they did not break a branch or crush a leaf underfoot. Every few moments, they stopped and peered around. The forest was overgrown and unkept. Between the trees were thick clumps of bushes and protruding roots that made walking increasingly difficult. Jagged pine branches reached out, scratching their arms and legs. They could hear the groaning of tree trunks, creaking branches, rustling leaves,

and birds flapping above. Each of these noises was amplified a thousand times in the girls' minds.

Suddenly, they heard a twig snap and something scuttle along the ground. Carol grasped Beryl's arm so tightly that Beryl nearly screamed, but she managed to keep quiet. They stood still, listening. Every crackle became a smuggler; every snap became a murderer, every crunch was a werewolf. As they penetrated deeper into the woods, the trees rose tall and thick around them, so it seemed almost dark, even though it was still early afternoon. The darkness only increased their fear. They had got themselves into an awful situation. Carol imagined a root suddenly curling around her leg and pulling her into the ground.

Beryl pointed to the right, hoping they might find a way out of the forest further along, though this was just a guess. Carol followed. After a few moments of creeping along, the girls came across a small path, so they turned and followed that. Carol wondered who had cleared the trail, but that did not matter now. All that mattered was getting out there. The going on the path was slightly more comfortable, and there was enough distance between them and the boys to walk a bit faster.

When they felt they had gone far enough, the girls stopped to talk for the first time since entering the forest.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid!" Carol glared at Beryl. It was all HER fault. Only five minutes ago, they had been walking down the old dust road kicking a tin can. And now they were at the gates of hell.

Beryl had nothing to say. It had been a crazy move.

"I'm really scared." Carol's voice was trembling. "You know what happened to Tim."

"Of course I know. Everybody knows. But, Carol, it's 1997 now. What happened to Tim is ancient history, way back in 1982." She thought for a second. "That's fifteen years ago!" Beryl tried to sound confident, but Carol knew her friend was just as frightened

as she was.

Escaping the High-Street Gang into the forest was like jumping from a frying pan into a volcano, except they were so frozen with fear even a volcano would not have thawed them.

"Do you think we can find our way back out?" Beryl whispered, trying to sound brave, but there was a clear tremble in her voice.

This was exactly what Carol had been wondering. She did not have an answer.

"How about we leave a trail?" Carol looked around. "Maybe breadcrumbs from our sandwiches?" As soon as she said it, they both knew this was a bad idea.

"Nonco," said Beryl. "You know the story..."

'Nonco' was the fun name the girls teased each other with. It more or less meant, 'You are an idiot, but I love you anyway.' No one was sure where it came from initially, but it always made them smile. Beryl's mum claimed it began when Carol was a toddler; she would say 'no-go,' 'no-go,' when she was visiting Beryl and had to go home. The girls had practically lived together since they could crawl. Even though Beryl was younger, she was taller than Carol. As she often reminded her best friend, three months younger was not going to make her shorter. Half-Finnish Beryl was tall and thin with long blonde hair and blue eyes. Carol had a darker complexion, wavy brown hair and deep green eyes, so it was easy to tell them apart. Although they were hardly ever apart.

"Yes, yes," Carol interrupted, waving her hand awkwardly. "I know the story of 'Hansel and Gretel.' I was just checking if you knew..."

Beryl pulled a face. She knew when her friend was lying, kidding, or pulling her leg.

"I have a better idea." Beryl looked for something sharp on the ground. "Let's make marks on the trees."

That made sense. Beryl picked up a stone with a sharp edge,

and Carol pulled out a coin, and they used these to scratch marks on the trees as they walked down the path, still hoping it would lead them out of the woods. The sinister pines had thankfully given way to more native English trees—birch, elms, ash, and others whose names they did not know. It was a beautiful forest, and though their hearts were still racing, somehow, they could not turn back. It was as if the forest had caught them in its web and was pulling them inwards. They walked on in silence, stopping now and then to mark a tree and look around.

Beryl glanced at her watch. 4:15 PM. It had been about half an hour since they had entered the forest. It was mid-March, and the days were just beginning to lengthen, but they knew it would be dark soon, and their fear grew. Only an hour and a half of daylight left to get out. They were thinking about Tim and were terrified of being lost in the woods after dark. But the unknown dangers surrounding them were not the only reason the girls were anxious. If their parents ever even found out they had entered the forest, it would spell big trouble. The forest was big, dark, and unknown, so they could easily get lost inside. This would result in general panic and police and search parties, helicopters and TV crews, followed by horrible punishments—probably curfew for a year, with washing up.

“Do you think we should turn...?” Beryl seemed scared.

Carol, grateful that it was Beryl who had chickened out first, was just about to pretend to reluctantly agree to go back when they both heard it. From their left came a low rumbling sound, too faint to identify. They stood still, trying to work out what it was, not daring to move but getting ready to run. Perhaps it was an animal snarling or even a person! The growling continued, sometimes louder and sometimes softer. Carol squeezed Beryl’s hand until it hurt, and Beryl looked around for somewhere to hide or a tree to climb.

CHAPTER 4



The noise came and went, sometimes there, other times masked by the wind rustling through the leaves. The two girls listened intently but could not work out what it was or where it was coming from. Suddenly, the wind died down, and they could hear the sound clearly.

“Wait...” Carol put a finger to her lips and cocked her head to one side. Then her eyes lit up, and a grateful smile spread over her face. “Beryl, it’s our river!” she beamed.

Both girls were immediately relieved, as if they had just met an old friend who was going to take them home. The river, their river! The river flowed past their backyards and was their best friend. Ever since they could remember, they had played on its banks, thrown mud balls into the water, tried to catch fish with sticks and string, sailed paper boats and leaves with twig masts under the small bridge. In the summer, they would jump in and swim about, laughing and splashing in the cool water. It was the bubbling song of the river that sang them a lullaby every night, wrapping them with sleepiness before their heads touched the pillow. They loved the river! If the river was close, they could find their way home.

Carol scratched a mark on a nearby tree, and the two girls followed the sound into the woods. The branches were low and thick, and they struggled to get through, often stumbling on roots and getting pricked by thorny bushes. Beryl wished they had a big

machete to hack at the growth.

It took them seven or eight minutes to get close to the river. They could hear its rushing waters nearby, and when they climbed over a final large root, they were finally by its side. "Oh, river," Carol let out a sigh of relief. The girls immediately felt safer.

The river seemed narrower here than where it met their houses, but it was their river, for sure. They had never known where it came from because they were not allowed to follow it into the woods. Now they knew. It felt so comfortable, a world apart from the terror that had grasped them moments ago. The girls sat on the riverbank for a few minutes, watching its tumbling waters toss and turn, swirling around fallen branches and rocks, white eddies decorating the rims like icing on a cake. In any other situation, they would have sat gazing at the water for hours, but they were anxious to get home before dark, or they would be lost in the woods, and their parents would be beside themselves with worry and anger. The girls knew it was at least 45 minutes to the edge of the forest if they returned the way they had come. It would be dark, and they would not be able to see the marks on the trees. And the bullies might still be there.

They were silent for a moment, and then Carol said, "Only one way we can..."

"Yes." Beryl pointed down the riverbank. "Down the river."

"Do you think it will get us home?" Carol was unsure.

"Of course, Nonco." Beryl stood up. "This is our river. It has to take us home."

"Let's follow it downstream." Carol got up from her riverbank seat and wiped the mud off her pants.

"Too slow, Nonco. I'm on my way." Beryl had begun scrambling along the bank.

"You shut up!" Carol followed. It was another of their favourite sayings, and they both smiled.

Progress was not easy. There was no path, just the slippery

riverbank, and the two girls had to hold on to branches to avoid falling in. Nettles, bushes and roots were growing all along the bank, and big trees and rocks blocked their way. The hopes gained from finding the river were now dashed on its banks. Moving forward was slow, and it would take them hours to get home. They would be trapped in the dark forest all night, maybe longer. Carol imagined her parents going frantic at home. All Beryl could think of was being found by a search party and facing horrible TV crews outside her house.

They followed the riverbank but reached a rocky area that they could not pass, forcing them to clamber away from the bank and climb over an old fallen tree.

Then they saw it, and their jaws dropped wide open.