

Chapter 1

An Amazing Discovery



Katie's long blonde hair billowed out as she spun round her bedroom. She was showing her two best friends the new ballet dance she'd learnt that week.

Eva and Alex sat on Katie's bed, clapping as Katie finished and did a curtsy. Eva's emerald-green eyes returned to her sketchpad, where she was halfway

through a drawing of a rabbit eating a banana.

Alex peered over at Eva's drawing. The rabbit was so lifelike, it looked as if it might jump off the page. "You're brilliant at drawing," she said. "I wish I was that good. But ... you know rabbits don't eat bananas."

"Really? Oops." Eva turned to Katie,



who was now upside down, doing handstands against her bedroom door.

“Can I borrow a rubber?”

Katie flung her long legs back to the floor. “If I can find—” She stopped mid-sentence and put her ear to the door. “It’s Alfie,” she mouthed silently.

The girls froze and listened. *BANG*,



BANG, BANG went the door.

“I wish he’d just play by himself,” whispered Katie. Her younger brother was always pestering them.

Alex bit her lip. “Maybe we should let him in?”

Katie groaned. “I do loads of stuff with him when you’re not here. Remember what happened last time? He broke the bead necklaces Eva made for us!”

“So what should we do?” Eva adjusted the loom-band butterfly clip in her bobbed brown hair. “We can’t go to mine – no one’s there.”

Alex lowered her eyes. “Nor mine. Sorry.”

The girls lived next door to each other in a quiet countryside village. To the right of Katie’s ivy-covered house stood a red-brick bungalow where Alex

lived. On the left was Eva's ramshackle thatched cottage. The two girls often came over to Katie's after school, while their parents were still at work. They'd been friends for as long as they could remember.

“Well, I don't want to be stuck hiding in *here* all day.” Katie put her hands on her hips.

Alex pressed her head to the door.
“Wait – I think Alfie's gone.”



Eva frowned in concentration. “I think I can hear the TV in the living room.”

“You’re right!” Katie said, her mouth stretching into a beam. “Let’s sneak outside...” She twisted the doorknob silently, and tiptoed out to the landing. She could hear the loud laughter of a cartoon.

The three girls tottered over to the stairs. Katie pointed at a step in the middle. “Watch that one,” she mouthed. “It creaks.”

They stepped down carefully, but somehow in the middle Eva stumbled on a stair and slid to the bottom. She clamped her mouth shut, careful not to make a sound, while Alex and Katie stifled giggles at their clumsy friend. The three girls darted through the hallway, past Katie’s dad at his laptop in the kitchen, and out

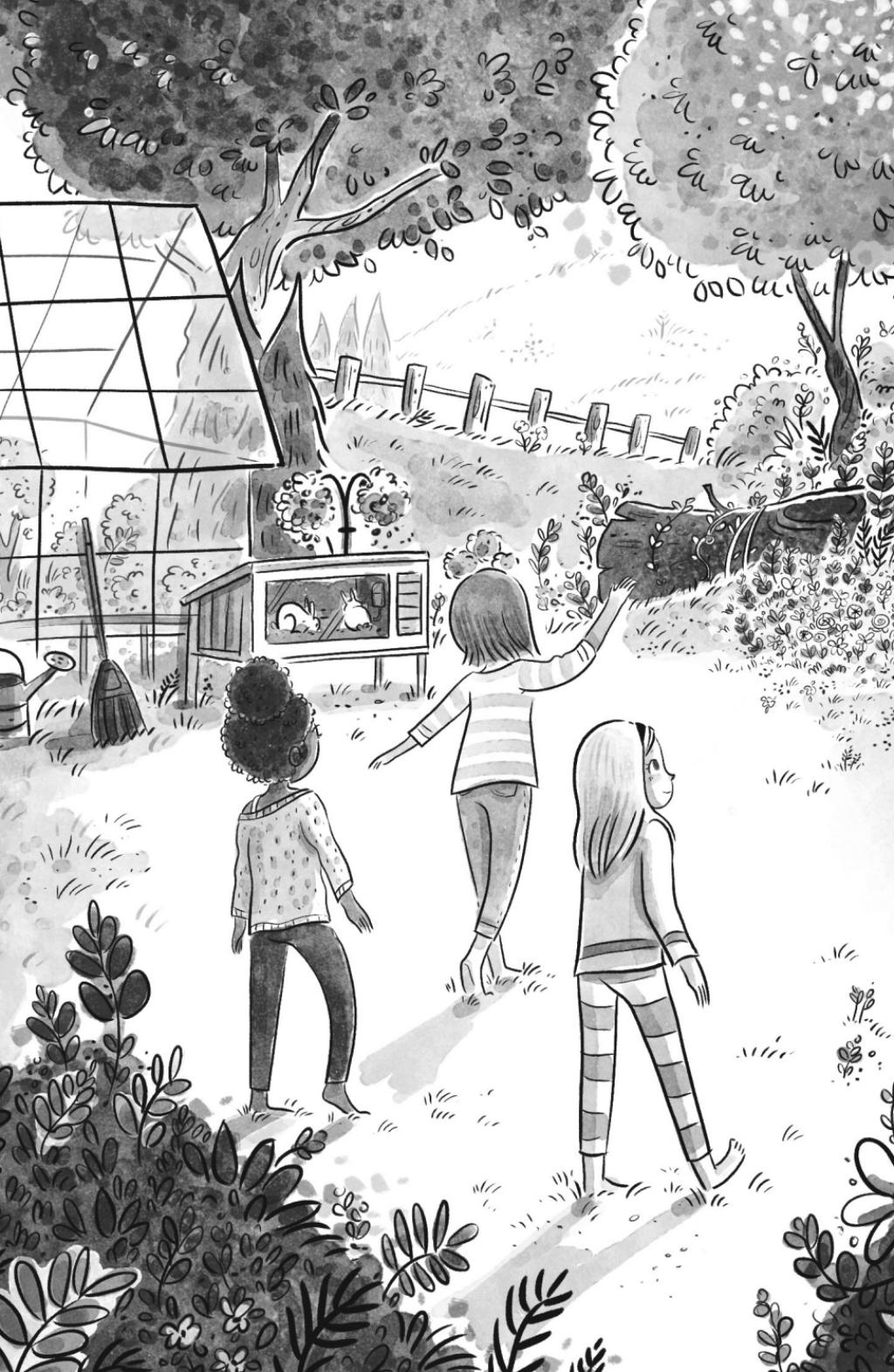
into the garden. Yellow afternoon sunshine flooded the lawn, and the grass felt warm and springy under their bare feet.

“Can we sit in the hammocks?” Eva darted towards the cherry trees where Katie’s mum had tied up hammocks. But a tug on her T-shirt jolted her back and she swung round. Katie was shaking her head and pointing at the living-room window. The hammocks were right in front of it! “Sorry,” Eva whispered.

“What’s that over there?” Alex’s big brown eyes had turned to something lying far away at the end of the garden.

“It’s an old chestnut tree that fell down ages ago,” Katie explained. “Mum keeps saying she should get rid of it, but she never has.”

Eva was already skipping towards the abandoned tree. “This is the perfect



place – Alfie can't see us at all from here.”

Katie sprinted to catch Eva up, with Alex not far behind. Katie's garden was enormous, and they passed the washing line, rabbit hutch, rose bed and greenhouse before reaching the tree trunk. It lay amongst tangles of long grass and wild flowers – pretty poppies, bluebells, daisies and violets.

Eva plonked herself on one end of the trunk and ran her hands across the peeling bark. “I wonder how old the tree was.”

“You can tell the age of a tree by the number of rings inside the trunk,” said Alex, who loved wildlife and nature. She wandered through the long grasses to the end of the trunk – and gasped, “Huh?”

“What's up?” Katie ran to join Alex.

“Wow – it’s hollow!” Katie began crawling into the trunk. “It’s huge in here.” Her voice echoed, as if she were in a cave.

As Katie’s feet disappeared inside, Eva poked her head in. She started climbing in, then glanced back over her shoulder at Alex. “Come on – it’ll be fun!”

Alex wasn’t so sure – but at that moment she heard a loud shout from the top of the garden. Alfie! She dived into the trunk before he could see her.

Inside, the gnarled old tree trunk seemed even bigger than it looked from the outside, and the girls could move along it easily. Katie sat at one end, cross-legged and grinning from ear to ear, while Eva crouched in the middle. Alex scrambled in close to them.

“We’ll be safe in here.” Katie’s blue eyes

twinkled like diamonds in the dark.

Eva grabbed both her friends' hands.

"This is brilliant. Our very own secret den!"

Alex looked around as her eyes adjusted to the shadows. She spotted a large, pure-white feather nestling on the side of the trunk. With her free hand she plucked it up. "Where did this come from?"



“It looks like a—” But before Katie could finish, the tree shuddered. The girls squeezed each other’s hands.

“Um, what’s happening?” asked Eva. “Is that Alfie?”

They quickly realized it wasn’t when the trunk seemed to start turning, as if they were on a roundabout. Air blasted around their heads as though a train were rushing past. What was going on?

Alex let out a squeal, Eva screamed and Katie laughed nervously. “Is this some kind of joke?” she gulped, though she couldn’t think how anyone could do this.

The trunk spun and spun and spun some more, and the wind buffeted them around. The friends clamped their eyes shut, hoping that it would soon stop. Round and round they went. Eva felt as if she were inside one of her baby sister’s rattles.



Alex felt her toes tingling, like really bad pins and needles. But at least the spinning seemed to be getting slower. Then her ears started to itch, and her hands felt ... well ... *weird*. Softer.

“Is it over?” Katie’s usually loud voice was a whisper.

The spinning had stopped completely now, but Alex didn’t dare open her eyes.