

1

THE DOG TREE

Mitch was a quiet boy in a loud family.

When he'd said, 'Back soon,' and slipped outside, no one even noticed he was gone.

He opened the gate in Gran's side fence and hurried along the cobbled bluestone laneway that led to the park. From inside the park, the laneway entrance was hidden by a bank of tall rhododendrons, so he stopped for a moment to make sure he could find his way back. He could just see the little tower that popped out of Gran's roof.

Mitch chucked a stick on the ground at exactly the place he'd need to enter the shrubbery on his return.

He began to search and was soon standing under the tree for the first time in three years.

It was one of the giant oaks that edged both sides of a long path, but this one was different. The base of its trunk twisted around itself, building mass, warped and gnarled and shaped – as he

remembered – like a dog.

Mitch hadn't imagined it.

He figured he had ten minutes before he'd be missed – no time for a proper climb. *I'll be back soon*, he promised, putting a hand on the tree trunk.

He jumped, hearing a murmuring noise, as though in answer to his thought.

Mitch looked around. He was alone except for two boys about his age on the basketball court on the other side of the path.

He leant closer to the tree and heard the sound again. A low rumble, like distant thunder, but the sky was clear.

Mitch walked to the next tree and listened. Nothing.

Back to the dog tree, and there was the sound again. It was faint, but definitely coming from the tree.

Mitch walked back and forth from the dog tree a few times, listening. If he'd left tracks there'd be zigzags everywhere.

Each time he returned, pressing his ear to the bark, the sound was at its clearest.

Sometimes it was a rumble, at other times it was almost like a growl.

He'd given the two boys on the basketball court a good laugh. He saw the tall one imitating his walking.



Yeah, it must have looked strange.

He didn't care.

He wanted to know what was going on with the tree.

Was there underground construction nearby?

Could it be a small seismic event?

Or had his lifelong quest to get a dog finally come to this? He'd convinced himself that a tree looked – and now sounded – like a dog?

Was he hoping for a story that started: *Once upon a time, a dog came out of a tree?*

He really needed to get a grip.

As he dashed along the path back to Gran's, he couldn't resist taking a final look over his shoulder at the dog tree.

2

NEW SCHOOL JITTERS

Returning to the house, Mitch could hear his little sister, Regi, and Gran having a shouted conversation from one room to another.

‘GRAN, I DON’T THINK I PACKED UNDIES.’

‘NONE IN YOUR BACKPACK?’

‘I’LL GO CHECK.’ Regi raced upstairs.

‘Oh, Mitch, dinner’s nearly ready,’ said Gran.

‘Just need to wash my hands,’ said Mitch as he also headed upstairs, brimming with questions about the dog tree and its growl. That couldn’t have actually happened, could it?

Was his current life upheaval throwing his imagination into overdrive?

Or was there some simple explanation that he couldn’t see?

That had to be it.

Right now he had more pressing worries, like school tomorrow.

He looked in the mirror as he pumped soap into his palm, wishing his hair didn't lick up from the left side of his forehead in that weird way, wishing he were a bit taller, a bit louder ... a bit *more*.

He and Regi were sometimes mistaken for twins, though she was eighteen months younger than Mitch. They both had straight dark-brown hair, like their mum, and olive skin and grey eyes, like their dad.

Regi didn't have a cowlick, like Mitch.

Mitch didn't have confidence, like Regi.

Confidence would be helpful for tomorrow.

His first day at the new school was also three weeks before the end of term three, in Grade Five. The worst time of year to be the new kid, when everyone is firmly settled into friend groups. That's how it was at his old school, anyway.

He was dreading being the conspicuous new boy.

'MI-ITCH! WE'RE WAITING FOR YOU!' bellowed Regi.

Gran put a salad on the table. She wore her usual crimson lipstick and round, black-framed glasses. When she turned her head, her straight grey bob swung after her, as though trying to keep up with her brisk movements.

Dinner was bean burritos with guacamole and salsa at the big kitchen table. It smelt delicious and Mitch realised he was starving.

He thought Gran being such a good cook had something to do with her real job of being a scientist. Wasn't a recipe just another type of formula?

'Any advice for tomorrow?' he asked, feeling glum.

'Take it easy and be yourself,' said Gran.

'I've got advice,' said Regi.

Of course she did.

Regi had opinions about everything. And she was popular – a friendship expert.

On their last day at Porter Street Primary School, Regi's friends had gathered petals to throw at her in farewell. The petals had shrivelled by the end of the day and Regi said it was like being pelted with herbal tea. But she appreciated the gesture.

Mitch's best friend, Samir, had said, 'Oh man, I thought it was next week. I was going to make you a cake and everything.' Mitch had to settle for a rib-cracking bear hug. Sami took pride in his hugs, but hardly knew his own strength.

'Mitch, tune in!' said Regi. 'Okay, sit on a friendship bench if they've got one, but beware anyone who acts *too friendly*.'

'No friendly friends. Got it.'

'Because maybe there's a good reason they don't have their own friends. Stay loose.'

'Smiling is good,' said Gran. 'It makes you approachable.'

‘And you do have a naturally sad face,’ said Regi, impersonating Mitch’s habitual serious expression.

Mitch gave them a maniacal smile, which made Gran laugh.

‘So creepy,’ said Regi. ‘Also, you have to remember to speak up. And show kids who you are – stuff you like, things you’re good at.’

Drawing, tree climbing, dog knowledge, brooding, holding a grudge.

‘What are you going to show people?’ Mitch asked.

Regi could cartwheel into her classroom singing in tune and threading a friendship band, if she wanted to.

She shrugged. ‘I’m good at making friends, so I’m not worried.’

Of course she wasn’t.

Nothing fazed Regi, even the absence of parents at a stressful time.

Their mum was a director and their dad a production designer. They mostly worked making TV shows and that could happen anywhere in the world.

Right now they were stuck in Budapest. The shoot for the pilot episode of a new detective show had been delayed because the lead actor got sick right when they were supposed to start filming.

So instead of the whole family moving from Sydney into their new house in Melbourne – *the*

plan – it was just Mitch and Regi staying at Gran's for a while – *the reality*.

Mitch understood that his parents had to say yes to work. 'In this business you've got to make hay while the sun shines,' Mum said, boringly often.

But he wished they were here right now.

'I'm so excited to see who's in my class,' said Regi.

Of course she was.

When Gran started clearing plates, they got up and helped. Each step towards bedtime made tomorrow loom closer. Mitch was starting to feel sick.

'Just remember, give yourself time to settle in,' said Gran.

Maybe their advice would have worked okay if it hadn't been for Seb Anders.