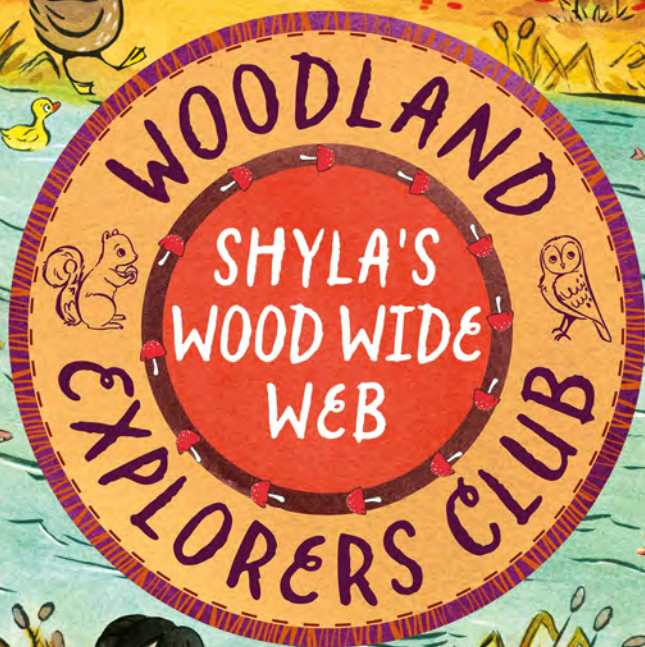


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This is a Zephyr book, first published in the UK in 2024
by Head of Zeus Ltd, part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

ISBN (PBO): 9781035902774
ISBN (E): 9781035912780

Designed by Margaret Hope

Cover artwork by Gillian Flint

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



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5-8 Hardwick Street
London EC1R 4RG

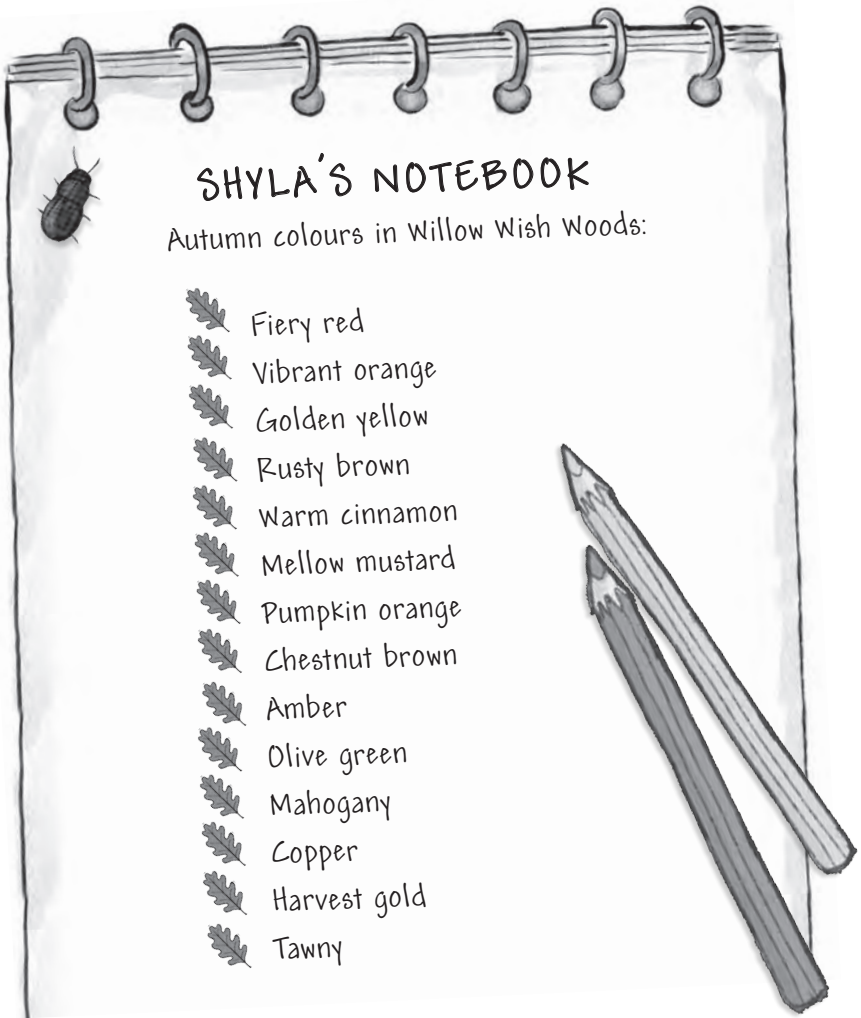
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CHAPTER 1 A MAGICAL PRESENT



Shyla opened her eyes. A beam of sunlight streamed through the window after almost a week of rain. Just in time for her birthday!

She was sitting in her shed where she loved to paint. It was her special place – at the end of the garden, right next to Willow Wish Woods. From here she could see how the forest had changed. It had a magical way of doing that in the autumn.



SHYLA'S NOTEBOOK

Autumn colours in Willow Wish Woods:

-  Fiery red
-  Vibrant orange
-  Golden yellow
-  Rusty brown
-  Warm cinnamon
-  Mellow mustard
-  Pumpkin orange
-  Chestnut brown
-  Amber
-  Olive green
-  Mahogany
-  Copper
-  Harvest gold
-  Tawny

Shyla was itching to draw the beech tree on the edge of the forest. Its leaves had turned from a warm yellow to a deep copper. She was taking out her favourite colouring pencils when her mum opened the shed door.

‘Happy birthday!’ she cried. She was carrying a tray filled with tasty treats. Raisin pancakes, crunchy pears cut into half-moons, just how Shyla liked them, and hot chocolate with marshmallows (Shyla’s favourite lemon-flavoured ones). Her mum ran a bakery in town and there was always something yummy in the kitchen.

She handed Shyla her present. It was big, square, and rattled promisingly. Shyla held it to her ear, hoping it was what she thought it was – a set of coloured inks from the art shop in town. There was a brilliant shade of electric blue. It would be perfect for painting the kingfisher she had once seen near the Tadpole Run.





Shyla unwrapped the box and there it was! Colours shimmered at her – glowing gold, emerald green, ruby red.

‘You’re the most awesome mum in the world!’ said Shyla, throwing her arms around her. ‘I’ll save them for my best pictures.’

‘Don’t do that.’ Mum smiled. ‘Use them every day to bring the birds to life!’

That was exactly what the Woodland Explorers tried to do – restore life to the beautiful forest on their doorstep. Shyla, her cousin Ajay, and her friends, Benji, Eric, Trix and Fujiko, had formed the club after hearing the music of an ancient oak hidden in the woods. They named the tree the Emerald King, and he’d helped them rescue a stag who was in danger. But they knew Braveheart, the stag, was only the beginning. Many animals had left the forest, and it was up to the Woodland Explorers to bring them back.

At 8.31 a.m. exactly, the doorbell rang and Shyla ran inside to open it. Ajay and his mum,

Shyla's Aunty Kali, picked her up for school every day with Benji and Eric. They'd worked everything out so nobody was ever late. Today they were a whole six minutes early because it was Shyla's special day.

'Happy birthday!' the three friends yelled, and Ajay did a funny robot dance.



'We have a present for you from the Woodland Explorers,' said Benji. 'But you'll have to wait until we're together at breaktime to open it.'

'Ooooh, but I *can't* wait,' said Shyla.

'You'll have to,' said Eric, laughing.

‘I have something for you, too,’ said Aunty Kali. ‘We discovered this in your grandmother’s bedroom. She would have wanted you to have it.’

‘Wow, something from Nani?’ Shyla had loved her grandma’s house. It was full of treasures – from her childhood in India and her time spent in South America. She had died three years ago, and Shyla still missed her.

Shyla grasped the small package wrapped in silver paper.

‘Shall I open it now?’ she asked.

‘Go for it,’ said Mum.

Shyla sat on the stairs and felt the parcel. It was surprisingly heavy. She wondered if it was one of Nani’s carved statues from

Brazil? Or maybe the little vase with painted mermaids she had brought back from Australia? But when the last bit of sticky tape came undone, she saw it was a pair of black binoculars.

‘Do you remember when Nani used them to watch birds from her bedroom window?’ asked Ajay.



Shyla used to sit on the windowsill next to Nani who would whisper the names of the birds and point them out to Shyla. It felt so precious to hold the binoculars now.

‘You’ll see the birds more clearly when you’re drawing,’ said Aunty Kali.

‘Take them to school!’ said Ajay. ‘Let’s see what we can spot in the woods.’

Shyla ran to get a scarf so the binoculars wouldn’t get damaged in her bag, and the gang set off.

In the playground, they met Fujiko and Trix who were excited to give Shyla their present. Fujiko had wrapped it carefully and carried it all the way to school so the paper wouldn’t tear.

‘We worked on it with my sister,’ she said proudly. Fujiko’s older sister wanted to be an artist, just like Shyla. But instead of painting, she loved making sculptures from different materials.

‘Rip it open!’ shouted Ajay. Shyla tore the tissue paper and found a wooden picture frame carved with the Woodland Explorers’ initials.

Shyla gasped. ‘It’s beautiful!’

‘What will you put in it?’ asked Fujiko.

‘My painting of the kingfisher. One of these

days I'll see him again.'

'You could look kingfishers up on your tablet,' suggested Eric. 'There'll be loads of photos.'



‘It’s not the same as watching them in real life,’ Shyla explained. ‘You have to see how they move and how their bodies catch the light.’



Pine Class gathered in Swallow Clearing as usual. The day was cold and crisp. The air smelled of fallen leaves, and Shyla craned her neck to search for birds that hadn’t yet migrated.

There were still a few swallows and house martins, and Shyla’s second favourite bird – the chiffchaff. They were tiny, but some flew all the way to Tunisia, Libya and Algeria in North Africa for the winter!

Shyla hoped Mr Mattison might tell them more about birds, but that day Pine Class were learning about mushrooms. Shyla didn’t think mushrooms were that interesting. The only ones she’d seen in Willow Wish Woods were orange and grew on the sides of trees, which she found yucky.

But then Mr Mattison told them something that made her ears prick up. He introduced them all to the Wood Wide Web.