

Chapter 2 - Freddy and Wil's Secret Handshake

'Over, over, do you read me, over, over, over...'

Freddy took the radio from his belt.

'Speak to me, friend', he said.

* * * * * 'Water, microscope, bugs', stuttered Freddy into the radio, struggling to make himself understood through the crackling and hissing of the primitive walkie-talkie.

'Whoa, calm down mate,' was the reassuring voice on the other end, *'I'll be round in two minutes'.*

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They stood there facing each other, about a metre apart. There was complete silence apart from a vague crackling from their radios, and the heavy sound of their breathing. They had done this so many times before, but it was always a ritual that they both enjoyed.

'Secret handshake?'

'Secret handshake?' came the reply in agreement, and they started. The way they always started when they had things to do, or plans to make. Today they would have plans to understand the mysteries lurking in their tap water.

First, Freddy took a purposeful step forward with his left foot. He stamped it hard down on the ground as they had discussed. Bits of dust from the cracks in the old wooden floor flew up from around his sole. Wil took the same big step forward, so that their feet were overlapping slightly. Freddy then took his right hand, and stooping slightly, slid it behind his left knee, bent his wrist a little, so that his legs formed the two long sides of a triangle and his arm went across the middle – like a letter A.

They reached forward, each trying to grasp the other's hand. If you've ever tried to put one hand on the outside of your left leg whilst leaning forward, you must know how difficult it can be. You feel unstable, and unsafe, and you might well fall over (try it sometime).

Anyway, in grasping each others' hands, as they always did, and in a way which seemed to provide endless amusement, they fell over.

Into a big heap, a tangle of arms and legs. A giggling mass.

'Secret handshake concluded', giggled Freddy. As he always did. Wil just carried on laughing.

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They headed out towards the woods. Although they had been there a million times, it was several weeks since they had been to the base they had constructed the previous summer. That was

where they had their best thoughts, their most audacious plans, and where they solved the problems of their day.

They went by their usual route, down the lane by the mill pond, through the big field, up the hill towards the entrance. They jogged down through the bushes where the adults picked blackberries in the autumn-time, and into the thicker trees and the fallen logs.

As they rounded a corner, they saw it.

What looked like a hand was dangling down from the branch of a tree. They stopped in their tracks, and peered around an imaginary corner the way you do if you are confronted by something unusual and surprising. On closer inspection, the hand belonged to a brownish creature. The body was human, but the hair and face was wild and dangerous-looking. It looked very much at home hanging from the tree.

‘Hello Mate’, said the creature, with a broad smile and a friendly wave. Not what you would normally expect from brownish creatures dangling from trees.

‘I’m Boggy’.

Nervousness at the meeting meant that they both shouted ‘BOGGY!’, almost in unison, without thinking that they had just bumped into this guy. Neither of them really thought about who or what he was, and whether he was friend or foe.

‘Er, what are you doing here?’

‘I live here’, Boggy replied. ‘I’ve been here for months. I live under the ground mostly, out in that big hole.

He was pointing to a big tear in the ground where a tree had been uprooted some years earlier, but which had left a large cave-like hole and a network of uprooted roots and dark corners. It was the hole that (the last time they were there) had been their favourite place for a base. There was now a sign on the side of this entrance, which they couldn’t read from where they were standing, but it looked as if Boggy probably used it as home. And right in the far distance, deep into the hole, a light was shining, perhaps from a torch, maybe from a fire. Boggy continued with his cheerful explanation of why he was in the forest.

‘I came here nearly five years ago, when this forest was rarely visited. Then some guys came along with saws and axes and started working on the forest and I just thought it was wrong and so I came and I started off living up in the trees with the snakes and monkeys and then I decided that I would try to live with the underground creatures so I found this big hole and started living in that and and and...

Boggy spoke very quickly without taking any breath. Miss Crotty at school always told them that they should use punctuation when they read and talk. This Boggy just talked. No full stops or commas in his conversation. But they liked him, despite frustrations at his lack of grammar.

‘Boggy’, said Wil with a hint of trepidation in his voice, ‘do you really mean there are snakes in these trees?’

‘OK, I haven’t seen any snakes yet, and although I heard a squeal the other day, it may not have been a monkey. I did see a squirrel though’, he added as if this would make up for the lack of serpents and squealing primates.

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‘Why don’t you come down into Death Valley with me – I’ll show you around.

‘Deaf Alley?’, said Freddy inquisitively, assuming a narrow road full of people who couldn’t hear very well.

‘I said DEATH Valley’, repeated Boggy. Louder this time, and with a little frustration in his voice. He didn’t seem in the mood for jokes.

They looked at each other a little nervously, but they remembered the handshake and what it meant. The handshake meant they would always be friends, no matter what difficulties or adventures they faced. They both instinctively knew what the other was thinking, that this odd Boggy might scare them a little, but he might lead them on a voyage of discovery and adventure.

Boggy half walked, half swung on tree branches to the entrance to the hole in the ground.

I wish Nicholai was here, thought Wil, and he knew Freddy was thinking the same thing. Nicholai was their best friend and also their strangest. They had many friends, but apart from their mate Hardy (who was also the toughest guy in the village), Nicholai was the one person they felt that they could always trust. Actually they could have done with both of them at that moment.

But they weren’t there, they were on their own with Boggy, who was now leading them to the opening to the hole.

‘I’ve set up this as a quick way into my cave’, he said, pointing upwards with his right hand, to a long rope stretching from one of the biggest trees in the woods, high above them, down towards the hole.

They could see the rope above them, with two handles hanging down from either side. Boggy was pointing up at the handles, and was motioning for one of them to hang on.

Wil looked at Freddy, who nodded back to him. Wil moved towards the a large rock which seemed to have been put there for the purpose of getting high enough to hang on to the handles. He climbed up as instructed and each grabbed the handle either side of the rope.

It was clear that the device that he was hanging on to was attached to the rope. Freddy stood below and waited for something to happen.

Then Boggy did something very unexpected...