

A girl in a tree, a bird on the ground, a forest full of secrets.

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When Ruby finds herself without her family on New Year's Eve, she sets out with her dog for the one place she feels safe – her treehouse in the forest.

Joined by her best friend Te Ariki (aka 'Spider'), the pair soon make a surprising discovery – there's a kiwi living in a burrow nearby, caring for a newborn chick. A special *white* kiwi chick.

It's time for Ruby and Spider to step up to become true forest guardians, risking their lives to stop dangerous wildlife smugglers from stealing this rare native treasure.

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*The kiwi gripped a feather and was dragging it lazily through his beak when he heard the egg ‘pip’. At first the movement was intermittent – a jiggle here, a wobble there – but now it was kicking like a pig. He ceased grooming and stepped away, careful to keep his giant feet in check as a tiny beak broke through the shell then immediately fell back, as if startled by its own success.*

*He tried to climb back on top of the egg, not sure his job was done, but as soon as he did the wrestling started up again. Stomping out of the burrow, he shivered as the cool night air riffled through his feathers. Then, proudly standing guard, he stretched his neck skyward and screeched, again and again, until not a breath of air was left in his hungry belly.*



# The Forest

**IT WAS NEW YEAR'S EVE** when Ruby decided to skip town. She trudged along the edge of the road, the air around her restless and itchy-feeling, like it was holding back a sneeze. Having spent the day trying to stay out of sight, she now did the opposite: zig-zagging up the winding hill and crossing over on the bends to make sure she'd be seen by oncoming cars. There was little point in running away, she reasoned, if you got run over instead. Luckily for her, the road was quiet and a stocky, sunburnt girl in pink gumboots with a giant dog was a sight not easily missed.

A single logging truck slammed past, the driver casually raising two fingers from the wheel in greeting, and no vehicles passed at all once the tarmac turned to dirt. Pausing under the yellow road sign of the kiwi with its bullet hole for an eye, she extracted the last biscuit from her backpack. The dog stared at it longingly.

“Okay,” she said, tossing him a piece, his gums making a *‘thuk’* sound as he caught it mid-air. Unhooking his leash, she let her thoughts run ahead with the dog and wondered how her grandad was doing in hospital. Just the night before she’d messaged him, saying:

Gone to the beach with Tui and family

I’ll ring when I’m back if  
there’s no signal

Love you heaps!

Get better fast xxx

She wrapped her fingers around the stolen charging cable in her shorts pocket and sighed, knowing

they'd be the last messages he'd read before his phone died for good. While her betrayals were adding up, at least this one wasn't a complete lie. Her own phone had lost signal way back at the Morrises' woolshed so was now turned off and buried at the bottom of her pack.

She marched across the old swing bridge and paused to peer over the railing into the churning river. On the other side, she flung herself down in the long grass and stared at the darkening sky. The dog rolled over and licked her face.

"No, Surprise – get off!" she growled, pushing him away and heaving herself up to carry on.

When they finally reached the Drop, Ruby pointed down to the steep and skinny track. "Go, boy!" she commanded.

Surprise took off and Ruby clambered through the scrub to the fallen macrocarpa tree that spanned the deep ravine. While it would take Surprise half an hour to run down to the bottom and up again, she could cross from one side to the other in a matter of minutes. She'd first shuffled out on the trunk a few years back, heart pounding with fear. But the thrill was sharp, and each time after that she'd shuffled a little further, then crawled on all

fours – never looking down but focusing instead on the rough bark under her hands and knees until she made it to the other side. With subsequent crossings her confidence had grown and last year she stood up and walked it.

This time, she took off her gumboots and socks and, holding them in her hands, stretched out her arms and ran.



The evening air sizzled with cicadas, and a distant rumble of thunder threatened as she stowed her supplies in the treehouse then retired to the clearing. A light rain was starting to fall, but Ruby wasn't concerned. She knew that beneath the treetops, the forest made its own weather and was presently turning the rain into a gentle, curling mist. Out of habit, she'd grabbed the phone from her backpack and was now sitting on a log, mindlessly staring at the black screen. There was no point in turning it on, but it was a comfort to hold. She stood up, and shoved the phone in her pocket.

Right now, she had to get rid of the doll.

It wasn't that she was ungrateful, but her grandfather, Rex, had really aced the inappropriate Christmas present this year. Ruby knew from the minute she ripped open the wrapping and saw the tuft of orange hair that it was Fundoll – a gangly white ragdoll that she once loved so much it hurt. Weirder by far than any other doll Ruby had ever seen, Fundoll's biggest point of difference was that she had a voice box and if you squeezed her chest, she could say things like *"Be my friend!"* and *"Let's play!"* But she'd gone missing ages ago when the boxes of old toys her mum had filled the house with were taken away.

Yet here was Fundoll, raised from the dead for Christmas, with one eye stuck sideways and still wearing the white dungarees that Ruby had glued over with glitter.

Rex explained that she'd not been in a good state when he found her at the recycle shop, so he'd washed her soft body, sewed on a new leg and a new paua-shell button eye *and* – the cherry on top – re-recorded her voice cartridge. He smiled like a walrus when Ruby squeezed Fundoll and she said – in Rex's voice – *"You got this, girl!"* and *"Uh-uh, no you don't!"*

Perfect. Now that she was far too old for dolls, she had a zombie one that talked like an old man. But she'd smiled and hugged Rex, and as soon as she had a chance she'd stuffed the stupid thing in her backpack in the corner and forgotten about it until now.

Holding the doll out like a dead rat, she made her way back to the macrocarpa bridge, so set in her mission that she failed to notice the cicadas and birds had fallen silent.

“Take that, Dumbdoll!” she yelled, and flung her into the Drop.

Suddenly, there was an almighty crack, knocking Ruby to her knees. The forest splintered with a rip of light and thunder detonated overhead.

“*Surprise!*” she yelled. Surprise hated thunder. “Surprise, I’m coming!” She scrambled up and ran along the edge of the Drop crying out his name as the deafening roar bellowed above.

After a final rumbling belch, the thunder lurched away like a giant over the treetops, leaving nothing in its wake but an eerie, echoing silence. And then it *really* rained, big fat drops smacking down like tears. At last, she saw the dog, a blurry smudge of wet fur flying at her with legs outstretched.

“Hey, it’s all right!” she cried, wrapping herself around him and burying her head in his neck. Side by side they ran back through the forest to the treehouse, Surprise leaping into the washing basket on the ground while Ruby clambered up the ladder. Once inside, she swung down hard on the rope and winched him up to join her.

## 2

# Surprise

**IT WAS REX** who'd built the treehouse for Ruby when she was little, adding the 'bush elevator' the previous summer when Surprise became the third member of their camping group.

Being more fur than muscle, he was unexpectedly light when they pulled him in his washing basket up to the treehouse. Never waiting for it to dock, he would instead catapult in through the window, land in a heap, then pick himself up with a vigorous shake. At first, he'd refused to have anything to do with the pulley system at all, so Rex had made Ruby sit in the basket while he hoisted her up and

down to demonstrate. When the dog had finally learned to climb in of his own accord, Rex claimed the basket was safe for ‘mutts and materials only,’ so one day, with the two of them cheering him on from above, Surprise braved the journey to the top.

“Atta boy, Surprise!” said Ruby as he tumbled into the treehouse.

“Stupid bloody name,” muttered Rex.

His name was Lola’s fault. Ruby had always called her mum Lola, just like she’d always called her grandad Rex – something to do with Lola’s idea that a name conveyed respect. She knew she was called Ruby because in her mother’s eyes she was strong, precious and fiery, just like the stone. “And imperfect,” Lola would add with a grin. “A genuine ruby always has flaws.”

Anyhow, one day Lola had opened the kitchen door to find the enormous hairy dog sitting there, smiling at her. “Well,” she said, “this is a nice surprise!” She’d rubbed him behind the ears and found him a leftover sausage. After that, he’d turned up every morning and, having found no one else in the town to claim him, Ruby and her mum slowly let the dog claim them. For a long time, they just called him ‘Surprise Dog’, and by the

time they realised he was there for good, he would only respond to ‘Surprise’. At first, this made his presence embarrassing for Ruby, chasing him out of the bush into Morrison’s Park yelling “Surprise!” or once shouting “Surprise!” as he galloped through a burial service in the old cemetery, hurdling the grave in a single, startling leap.

But stupid bloody name or not, Ruby and Surprise had found each other, and neither was letting go.



Fortunately, the treehouse was a comfortable size for two. It was bigger than the inside of a van, with a thin front door hidden between a split in the trunk that Ruby could only squeeze through sideways. The interior was an unexpected rainbow, with boards of every colour holding up a tin roof that sang in the rain and two generous windows that afforded one view out towards the clearing, and one across to the neighbouring tree – the tree that shared the very same branch on which her treehouse sat.

Rex called them ‘gemel’ trees. He said that the

two trees had once held hands as saplings, then grew up without ever letting go, which explained the single branch slung between them, joining them forever like an old married couple. One without the other would likely fall but together they held strong.

The treehouse was furnished with a cupboard for food, an upside-down wooden crate that served as a dining table, a sawn-off stump for a chair and a camping mattress in the corner, upon which Ruby was presently lying, gazing up at her Dreamcatcher. She was naming its feathers in a familiar incantation – *pūwakawaka, magpie, riroriro, ruru, kererū, kiwi, karearea, thrush* – wondering what kind of feathers she would grow if she were a bird. Being a plain girl, they wouldn't be colourful. Being a big girl, they'd have to be strong. She was picturing a pair of big brown sturdy wings, lifting her up like a log grappler when she was yanked back to earth by Surprise planting two paws firmly on her chest.

“Ooof!” she grunted. “Dinner time?”

Surprise grinned.



They ate their treehouse dinner by torchlight. Surprise downed a whole can of Jellimeat in two ravenous gulps and Ruby ate a slab of Christmas cake topped with squashed banana. She added a can of flavoured tuna for dessert, and two small chocolate fish for second dessert, regretting that the Cameo Crèmes hadn't made it past the swing bridge. With the rubbish shoved in a plastic bag and her utensils set aside for washing in the morning, Ruby was at last crawling into her sleeping bag when a loud shriek pierced the darkness.

Again, and again, the whistle-like cry of the kiwi rose in waves. Ruby scrambled to the window and looked down but a moonlit veil of mist obscured everything beyond the reach of her arm. She slumped back on her bed, patting Surprise and whispering goodnight to Lola, wherever she may be.

It didn't take long for the dog's rumbling snores and the insistent *quork-quork* of a ruru to lull her to sleep, her dreams set loose in a steaming forest as the New Year silently crept in.



*He wasn't ignorant, he knew she was up there. But he also knew the giant girl was no trouble. She'd been in the forest before, and even though she was noisier than a magpie, she'd let him go about his business without interruption. The dog was another matter, but it stayed in the tree with the girl and had so far left him alone. His thoughts returned to his belly.*

*He hadn't gone out to feed for the last few nights. Having spent many hours kicking her way into the world, his chick had lain exhausted at his feet, so still he'd wondered if she was alive. He'd busied himself gathering up the shattered pieces of shell and swallowing them down, tidying the nest and gently prodding his baby with the tip of his beak, sensing her size, her shape, and – with relief – her heartbeat. But now she was thrumming with life and eager to move. He felt around her puff-ball belly, the yolk sac so big that her feet wouldn't reach the ground for at least a few more sleeps.*

*All of this was ka pai. He was now free to forage and roam, knowing the yolk would feed his baby until she was strong enough to venture out on her own.*

*He couldn't help screeching his happiness.*



### 3

# Dumbdoll

**RUBY SAT** at the table eating a packet of chicken chips for breakfast, watching a lazy rabbit graze the small island of grass in the clearing. Surprise licked the last morsels from a can of creamy rice pudding, pushing it around the floor in circles.

“At least junk food doesn’t go off in a treehouse,” she said, tossing the chip packet into her bag of rubbish before wrestling him onto her lap so she could pull the biddy-bids out of his long and tangled coat. This was never a straightforward task because Surprise, being a happy dog by nature, always mistook grooming for affection. He abandoned

the can and rolled on his back, paws floundering, mouthing Ruby's wrist with his teeth as he tried to engage her in a full-body tussle.

Ruby pulled back. "Sit, Surprise. Stay!" she commanded.

Surprise hated her girl-boss voice. He reluctantly sat upright, shoulders stiff, head down as if having his nits combed out.

When Ruby had finished, she lifted his paws one by one to check for biddy-bids between his toes and wondered again how he'd lost the claw on his front right foot, hoping he hadn't chewed it off with his constant gnawing. Letting the paw down, she said, "There you go, job done," but Surprise refused to look at her, instead moving away and sitting with his back turned, staring into the corner.

She swept around him, tossing her sleeping bag over the windowsill to air before organising the food cupboard, ignoring the wētā waving his hind legs at her in warning. She collected a bucket of water from the stream and decanted it into plastic bottles, then grabbed Rex's tool bag from its nook at the bottom of the tree and headed out to check the nearby traps.

The spoils were few. She scraped a single mummified mouse out of one trap and removed a more recent stoat from another. Hanging the stoat upside down by the tail, she ran a finger down its soft, sinewy belly and inspected its razor-sharp fangs, still finding it cute regardless of its awesome power to kill. Stoats were smart, she knew from Rex, and one as big as this would happily sink its canines into a kiwi's throat. Even a juvenile stoat with its baby fangs would camp out near a burrow if it knew a kiwi dad was brooding, and while the egg was too big and an adult too strong for its tiny teeth to latch onto, a newborn kiwi was the perfect chicken nugget.

All of which meant that a forest guardian couldn't afford to be soft. She baited the trap with dog food, carefully pulled back the metal plate and secured it, then reattached the lid. As a finishing touch, she draped the lifeless stoat down at the entrance, knowing its buddies wouldn't be choosy if they caught a whiff of fresh meat.

Continuing on with her chores, she repaired a broken rung on the ladder, above which the remaining climb required skilled knowledge of the exact footholds and the broad, twisting curves of

the trunk to make it to the treehouse door. While the broken rung didn't bother her, she knew Rex would want it fixed, so she dutifully completed her task then put away the tools.



After a lunch of yet more Christmas cake, Ruby carried her tiny bluetooth speaker to the clearing. Having saved some battery for exactly this moment, she turned on her phone and rolled her shoulders back. Surprise woofed and leapt around her in anticipation.

Birds scattered as music exploded into the forest.

*Three left, side curl, three right, side curl. Hands up, love heart, criss-cross, spin.*

Eyes shut, Ruby imagined herself in pyjamas, laughing and dancing with Lola in the kitchen. She played the song over and over till the moves blended like syrup.

When she'd danced so much she'd got the stitch, Ruby slumped down under the cool rock overhang and noticed a small reflection, like a bright pebble shining out from a cleft at the bottom. Lying down on her stomach, she poked a long stick into the

shadows and hit something soft. It didn't move, so she hooked it with the stick and reached her hand in to grab it.

*"Squeeze me!"* said Rex's voice.

Ruby scrambled back as if bitten by a snake. "Dumbdoll!"

Surprise yelped, then growled and perched himself stiffly beside her.

The paua-shell eye glared crookedly at Ruby from Dumbdoll's long smiley face as she pulled it from the crevice. "How'd you get under there?" Ruby asked out loud, then turned to Surprise. "You did this?"

Surprise held her stare, cocking his head to one side and raising an ear.

"Can't you just find a bone like a normal dog?" she scowled.

Once again she stomped to the Drop, the stick extended with Dumbdoll hanging limply over the end. She drew her arm back and flung the doll as hard as she could.

"And this time, don't come back!"



*The thumping music did not impress the kiwi, who was trying to catch up on sleep. His tiny chick was restless, with no respect yet for the rules of night and day. Right now, she was curled on her back, leaning against his legs, inspecting her large feet with her still-soft beak as if they belonged to another creature. Rolling forward she pushed them out and tried to stand – a futile attempt but a good sign. He tapped her gently, in approval, then once again tucked his beak under his stubby wing and tried to go back to sleep.*



## 4

# Improbable Creatures

**SOON AFTER DARK**, zipped in her sleeping bag, Ruby leaned out over the window ledge searching for the kiwi. Once again, he'd let go his volley of shrieks from directly below and sure enough, a faraway female – sounding like a rusty car engine refusing to turn over – had called back.

Finally, in the fractured light of the moon she saw him, running between rock and tree, pausing to prod his long beak into the bark of a decaying log, then on again, his movements surprisingly agile and loose for such a round, ground-dwelling bird. She could almost swear that the feathers on top of

his head were white, so easy was he to follow as he bobbed around in the undergrowth. He hopped on one foot, twirling his head up and around as if sensing she was there, then turned and pushed forward on his powerful legs, pile-driving his beak into the soil. He was busily probing the dirt by her neighbouring tree when he suddenly heaved forward and disappeared into its bark. Ruby held her breath. Within moments, he popped out again.

“Look ... Matua Kiwi’s got a burrow under the other gemell!” she whispered excitedly to Surprise, who replied with a whistling snore. In a fit of neighbourliness, she shuffled over to the food cupboard and carefully removed the wētā, its long feelers swaying as it clambered onto her toothbrush for a ride back to the window.

“Eat it or lose it!” she whispered, flicking it into the night.

The kiwi turned his head in the direction of her offering, paused, then ran towards it. He jabbed his beak down, rummaged, then stretched and pointed it up to the treetops, busily jerking and shaking the wētā into his gullet. Then, standing on the doorstep of his burrow, he threw his head back and called, pumping his chest up and down

like a piston – in welcome or in warning, Ruby wasn't sure.



She was awoken late the next morning by the sound of something hitting her treehouse wall. Sitting up, she ducked as a pine cone shot through the window, missing her head by a millimetre.

“I know you're up there, Bee,” called a voice from below.

Ruby tried to stay still but Surprise was whining with excitement. “B for Beyoncé?” she yelled back.

“B for Birdbrain,” the voice shouted.

“That's not why you call me Bee,” she said, peering down at the sweaty, mussed-up boy.

“Okay ... B for Big Trouble coz that's what you're gonna be in if anyone finds out you're here. You coming down or am I coming up?”

The boy's name was Te Ariki Small. Ariki meant ‘chief’, so the older kids started calling him ‘Big’ (which was part of the joke because he was wiry, thin and short), then ‘Biggie Smalls’ after a dead rapper. But luckily, Te Ariki could shimmy his way up a wall or tree like a spider. The only person who

could match him, to everyone's surprise, was Ruby, climbing being something they'd done since they were toddlers, in order to see each other over the fence that divided their houses. In the end, 'Spider' was the name that stuck.

Spider scrambled up the tree and jumped through the door, fist-bumping Ruby as he emptied out his backpack. "Merry Christmas Ru-Bee," he said, grinning. "I dunno what you're eating, but this should help." On the floor before her lay a slab of cold corned beef wrapped in tinfoil, a loaf of sliced bread, a sachet of orange Refresh, a bar of chocolate, a bunch of glowsticks and several strands of knotted tinsel.

"Happy New Year!" she replied, getting in late with a pinch and a punch. "When'd you get back? And how'd you know I was here?"

"Where else would you be?" said Spider, rubbing his arm. "We heard about Rex being in hospital, but then I went looking for Surprise and he wasn't there ... so I figured he'd have to be with you somewhere. You're such a weirdo," he added.

"Wow. Sleuth."

Spider continued. "I had to get up at *six o'clock* this morning – do you know how hard that is?"

Especially after we went out shooting last night.” And with that, he dug into his pack again and pulled out a saggy plastic bag full of raw meat. “A surprise for Surprise. Freshly gutted and skinned.”

“Thanks,” she said, smiling.

“You can’t stay here forever, y’know,” he said, slicing the corned beef thinly onto the bread with his 10-in-1 knife. “When d’ya think Rex’ll be home?”

Ruby frowned. “Dunno,” she mumbled. “I hope he’s doing okay.”