

**Graded reading: A walk in the forest (level 3) – text**

**Walking her dog in the forest, Grace has a chance encounter that will present her with a dilemma.**

**Tuesday**

Going through the forest is my favourite part of the walk. Benji loves it too. There are rabbits to chase and old leaves to smell. Benji's my dog, by the way, and I'm Grace. I live on a farm with my parents and take Benji for a walk most days after school. Dad doesn't approve of me walking through the forest. 'Don't talk to strangers,' he says. Though the truth is that there's never anyone here. Just me, Benji and lots of rabbits and birds.

While Benji runs ahead, I stop and take a photo of a butterfly that's resting on a flower. A new Facebook photo? Maybe, but my friends at school already tease me with the nickname 'Nature Girl', so perhaps not. As I put my phone away, I hear Benji barking along the path. Benji barks to say hello, he's scared of cats and wouldn't hurt anyone, but, of course, other people don't know that. Benji's barking and jumping round a boy. The boy's about my age. He's holding some wood in his arms and looks worried.

'Benji, stop! Come here!' I yell. I reach into my pocket for Benji's ball. I'm about to apologise to the boy, but he's gone, vanished between the trees.

**Wednesday**

I'm out with Benji again. It's cold and rainy today and I've got a mountain of homework to do, so we're going at a brisk pace. No admiring butterflies or photos today. As I'm coming through the forest, I feel the first drops of rain so I start to run. Suddenly, I'm slipping and falling and, before I know it, I'm flat on my back. Ouch! That hurt. Then there's someone there and a voice says, 'Are you all right? That was a bad fall.' I look up and see the boy from yesterday.

'I'm OK, I think,' I say uncertainly. The boy helps me up slowly and then Benji arrives to check on me. The boy pats Benji on the head.

'I haven't seen you at school. Do you live near here?' I ask.

'No, I'm from Manchester,' he says. 'Listen! I have to go. Are you OK to walk home? Do you need help?'

'No, I'm fine. Thanks!' I say, as the boy sets off.

'Hey, I'm Grace. What's your name?' I call, but he's already out of sight.

Back home, Mum's watching the news on TV.

'Hi Grace. Have you heard about this boy, Mark?' she asks.

'No, what boy?' I say.

'A boy from Manchester. He's run away from home. Look! This is his dad.'

I look at the TV and there's a man in tears sitting next to a policeman as cameras flash around him. A man who clearly hasn't slept for days and is worried out of his mind. Then they show a photo of the missing boy. I know him. It's the boy from the forest. He's Mark. Should I say something? Should I tell Mum?

'Poor man,' says Mum. 'I just hope they find his son soon.'

No, I can't say anything. If I tell Mum now, the police will come and find Mark in the forest. What if he's run away for a good reason? I have to talk to him first.

'Mum, I'm going to do my homework,' I say, counting the hours till I can go back to the forest.

**Thursday**

I've looked and looked but I can't find Mark in the forest. If I'm not home soon, my parents will worry. So I take a chance and shout, 'Mark, Mark, where are you?'

Nothing, no answer, just birds singing.

'Mark,' I yell again, 'I know about you.'

After a moment, I hear his voice behind me.

'What do you know? How do you know my name?'

I turn and there he is. 'Your dad was on TV last night. Half the police in the country are out looking for you.'

He looks shocked and asks, 'Did you say anything? Have you told them?'

'No,' I say. 'I wanted to talk to you first. What's happened? Why have you run away?'

He looks at the ground, then up at me. 'I had an argument with my dad. A bad one.'

'What about?' I ask. It's not my business, but the question just comes out.

Mark gestures to a fallen tree and we sit down. He's quiet for a while, then he takes a deep breath.

'My mum died four years ago. It was very tough. Tough for me and for Dad. He was sad for a long time, but then he met someone new at work. Mel's her name.'

'Oh, and don't you like her?' I ask.

'No, not really. She's not a bad person, but, well, we just don't connect. She wants my dad for herself and isn't interested in me. I don't think she wants me around.'

'But, what about your dad? Have you talked to him?'

'He keeps telling me to make an effort with her, but I just can't. She's not my mum. The night I ran away, he came to my room and said that we're all moving to London. Mel's from London, you see. And then he told me that he and Mel want to get married and have a baby. We both got angry and I told him I'm not moving to London. I took my tent and a bit of food and left in the middle of the night.'

'But what will you do? You can't live in the forest,' I tell him.

'I know, but my school and my friends are in Manchester. My grandad's there too. I don't want to move to London. I'll lose all my friends.'

'You might make new friends,' I say.

Mark sighs, 'That's what my dad says too.'

I feel sorry for Mark, but I think of his dad crying on TV and feel sorry for him too.

'What are you going to do?' I ask.

'I don't know. I need time to think. Grace, can you bring me some food tomorrow? I'm starving.'

## Friday

Mark's waiting for me in the forest. I've only got a couple of apples and some biscuits for him. My parents were in the kitchen at home so I couldn't bring much. I've also got some news.

'Mark, Mum says the police came to the farm this morning. They're going to search the forest tomorrow.'

Mark puts his head in his hands, 'I didn't want this. My dad on TV and the police and everything. I don't know what to do.'

'I've got an idea. Why don't you live with your grandad in Manchester? Let your dad and Mel move to London and visit them in the holidays.'

Mark doesn't answer for a while, then he nods his head and smiles.

'Can I use your phone?' he asks. 'I need to call my dad.'

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