

‘Good day and hello, Hadley’s my name.  
I’m what they call a barking owl,  
yet I’m not entirely the same.  
I certainly am an owly fellow  
with owly wings and an owly eye,  
I do owly things and fly an owly fly.

But most of the animals by the river Murray  
are wary of my winking eye.  
If they see me up close, away they scurry  
or fly in a hurry to distant sky.  
But I’m no menace, maybe someday they’ll see,  
I just do things a bit differently.

It agrees with me, this little thing I do.  
It helps me think (and I think *everything* through).  
I need my wink, just like cows need their moo.  
And I’m never not thinking, so I’m never not winking.  
When my eye shuts tightly, closed it likes to stay.  
It has always been this way.  
There’s not a wink in the world I could ever do badly,  
for without my wink, I wouldn’t be Hadley.

My belly thinks too, not just my head  
and it rumbles with news I bring to you sadly:  
there is danger at the farmstead that I fear will spread  
if I don’t perch now, settle proud and tall,  
my old river red gum will surely fall.

I must ruffle my feathers and bark my barky call.  
It feels good in my heart; it’s the right place to start.  
Here in my hollow, I’ll follow my thinking.  
Here in my hollow, just me and my winking:  
my favourite Hadley part.’



# CHAPTER 1



As dusk settled in, the fire-coloured sky was brilliantly ablaze. The cottony clouds looked like pink fairy floss. The sun shied away slowly behind the hills to farewell the day, warming the sky with the last of its golden rays.

Hadley, on the other hand, was just waking from a long and restful afternoon sleep. The calls of the local yellow robins were like his own personal alarm clock, and he was already scanning the forest floor for a delicious scurrying breakfast.

**BOOOOMMMMM!**

Hadley jolted in fright, almost toppling right out of his hollow. Confused, he cocked his head left, right, then side to side, trying to identify the noise and where it was coming from. Hadley was normally top-notch at recognising, even predicting, all sorts of noises, but this one caught him by surprise. It sounded again.

**BOOOOMMMMM!**

It was coming from the farmhouse. Hadley looked straight over at the weathered, timber house on the hill. He was certain the sound was just like the ones he'd heard coming from there yesterday.

HUMMMMM!

Hadley was troubled by the recent movement at the old house and all the new noises from the loud, pulsing engines. There were people there too, using machines that moved the earth, stirring up dust. And this made him nervous.

HUMMMMM!

Before the commotion from the house started, Hadley's home was peaceful and still. He lived by the Murray riverbank in one of the largest and oldest river red gum trees in his patch of forest. Only the sounds of the bush filled the earthy air; the gentle lapping of the Murray water, the hissing-swishing of the eucalyptus leaves, and the noises of the animals shuffling and squawking and foraging. No one had lived in the old farmstead near Hadley's tree for many years.

HUMMMMM!

Just then, the humming clicked to a low, rumbling purr then pattered to a stop. A woman's voice. A man's voice. A few faint tinks and clinks. A thud. Then another.

Hadley decided to delay his hunt for breakfast and stay in the comfort of his hollow until all noises from the house stopped. He stayed there watching, winking, wondering, worrying, until the bush was thoroughly black with night.



The next day, Hadley was woken again, this time by a loud crash that shook his tree. He poked his head out from his hollow, just enough to see two people walking towards him: a pointy-faced woman wearing a shiny red coat and matching boots, and a broad man wearing a cap and a blue flannelette shirt. Hadley had seen them out walking several times recently and, naturally, like any wild animal, he was wary of them.

When the couple stopped at the unusual clearing the woman pointed at his tree. They tilted their heads all the way back until their eyes found the very tops of Hadley's skyscraper tree.

With a trunk the width of seven men, its presence was undeniable. Like a trophy, Hadley's tree stood bold and proud, on display. The neat, circular clearing around its base set it apart from other red gums, adding even more wonder to its charm.

It was earthed to the ground by long roots. Some meandered around its trunk like long tentacles, others were unseen, burrowing straight into the earth beneath it. Some branches looked like long limbs that had been painted with patterns of knots and spirals. Others twisted and turned in all directions. The tree's old, mottled bark was coloured in streaks of browns, blacks, silvers and creams, rich oranges, and deep reds.

Hadley looked on from his hole, curious.

The man kicked the bottom of the trunk with his boot then stomped the ground as if he was testing it for something. The pair walked circles around the thick tree, stroking its roughage with their fingers.

Hadley quickly bounced up onto the branch above him to get a clearer view. His feathers twitched and his eye darted to and fro in search for help of some kind. Something didn't feel right.

'This tree must be 200 years old,' the man said.

'Hmm, you think?' added the woman. 'Well, it'll almost be a shame to see it come down,' she said, inspecting the tree. 'If only it was a few metres to the left. I've looked around and this really *is* the perfect spot for the boathouse, don't you think, Craig?' the woman continued, as Craig fiddled with a ribbon of loose bark he'd peeled from the trunk. 'I don't know what it is,' she said, 'but when I walked past this spot yesterday, I got...' She paused, hugging herself as she tried to find the right word. 'Hmm, I can't quite describe it. It just feels right. Don't you think?'

Craig looked up from the bark in his hand to scan his surroundings.

'Yeah, I think so.' He hesitated. 'I know what you mean when you say it feels right. It does feel pretty great here. Special or something.'

Satisfied with her husband's response, she went on, describing her plans.

'The old dock we'll fix up is just over there,' she said, pointing to the nearby wonky wooden platform at the river's edge.

'And there's already enough clearing around the tree for the build,' she added, walking a few steps along the curve of the tree's clearing. 'You think it's man-made?' she asked Craig, who was back

to inspecting the bark in his hands. 'None of the other trees have this smooth circle around them. Weird,' she added, following the neat, swept-like path around the tree with curious footsteps.

When the woman found no obvious explanation for the peculiar clearing, she came back to her husband. She was happy enough to brush it off as some sort of marking from a large animal. Her thoughts quickly returned to their building plans.

'So, first, we'll make the dock bigger and stronger for the kayaks. They can't stay in the rusty old garden shed up near the house,' she continued, mentally ticking off her long to-do list. 'Which reminds me, that's another thing we must get rid of. I'll organise it,' she said, tapping away at her phone's screen. 'Shed. Gone. I'll make some calls.'

'Well then, Maura,' said Craig, dropping the bark and wiping his hands on his shirt. 'If you've looked everywhere else—'

'Oh, I have,' she interrupted. 'Everywhere else is thick with trees. And best to only remove one tree so it's...' She hesitated. 'You know, less noticeable.' Maura's voice turned whisper quiet. 'We don't want our neighbours dobbling us in to the council, do we? I'm not sure yet if we're allowed to take down an old tree like this one.'

Craig slapped the trunk twice with his palm and looked up at the overhead branches, failing to see Hadley, who was well camouflaged on a high branch.

'She sure is a beauty though. You really sure about this, Maura?'

His wife frowned at him with tightly pursed lips. She looked like

she'd just drunk a glass of vinegar. 'We'll have to make proper use of the wood, then,' Craig added.

'Yes, yes, we will,' Maura said impatiently.

'Wouldn't want to waste any of it, beautiful wood like this,' said Craig as the two started back towards the house.

'Ooh!' squealed Maura. 'I didn't think of that. We could make a small fortune if we sold it. Nice idea, love.'

Now, Hadley was indeed a curious fellow, with his winking and thinking, his ever-churning belly and intelligent heart. He wasn't like other owls (or any other animal, for that matter) that he knew of. Aside from his wink, Hadley looked like any regular old owl, with a white and brown speckled chest of feathers and a hooked, shell-coloured beak. His orange feet and toes were thick and strong, and his eye was big and round and as yellow as buttercups. But it was his unusual, yet crystal-clear sense for things that really set him apart from other owls.

Hadley had a certain knowing about him. He had a razor-sharp understanding of the world on a very deep level, a level much deeper than any animal should be able to reach. Hadley trusted the signs he felt in his body when he needed to, and so far they had been right, every time. Despite this though, he often wished he was more like regular owls. They all seemed to have no problems with making regular friends, finding a regular mate and raising regular chicks.

Hadley had always known he was different; he knew there was something mysterious, something extraordinary about the way he

perceived the world and all that was in it. But he could never quite put his feather-tip on it. And it wasn't until this very day – when the opportunity presented itself – that he realised he possessed a certain ability, a gift if you like, that was perhaps even more extraordinary... You see, somehow, Hadley had heard and understood every word of the people's plan.

Being the modest little owl he was, he was quite surprised by this but even still, he didn't feel the need to question how or why he could understand them. It just made sense. To him, it felt logical and perfectly acceptable for an owl, like himself, who thinks a little differently. What didn't seem acceptable, however, was the people's plan to destroy his tree.

Hadley instantly knew he must stop them. He wasn't sure how. He just knew he had to do *something*. Not only was it Hadley's home, but it was also home to Lady, a superb parrot who would be nesting soon; her mate, Eugene; and old Nedd, the silver-grey koala who climbed up now and then to munch on handfuls of eucalyptus leaves.

Hadley looked again for his neighbours, eventually spotting Lady right up above him on the highest branch, almost hidden by clusters of green leaves and white October flowers.

*Perhaps she'd heard the people too?* Hadley thought. *Maybe she'll know what we can do?*

Hadley paced back and forth on his branch. He felt restless. Jittery. Alone. But then an urge in him took over. It was sudden and



fierce, and he couldn't ignore it. He felt the force pounding in his chest, throbbing in his belly. His whole body was filling up with a sense of urgency.

His thinking got the better of him. *I'm only one. The people are two. And what if, next time, they bring those machines that bang and boom? I must stay here, show them I have no fear, to save my home from impending doom. But would I even stand a chance? Oh, how troubling is this circumstance?*

Always winking and always thinking, Hadley sizzled with umph, plopped himself down to a low branch of his tree and woofed and boofed as loudly as he could.

'Hear my call, hear my call,' he wook-wooked. 'People from the farmstead, look here, overhead.'

He flapped and flittered about on the branch so wildly that fuzzy tufts of his feathers came loose, floating in the air around him. His ruckus had got the people's attention and they stopped walking and turned around. They spotted the flustered owl, all coated in loose feather-fluff and vibrating furiously like an electric toothbrush.

'Ha, look at that funny-looking bird,' said Maura. 'What do you think he's doing?'

They both chuckled at the sight of Hadley's performance.

'Goofy little critter,' Craig replied. 'Sure seems mad about something.'

Hadley persisted. Hadley insisted, 'Hear my call. For 200 years twice, to be precise, this tree has stood tall. It's survived floods,

drought, sleet, lightning strikes and bushfire heat. Like your boathouse, this tree has a purpose, but there must be another way, another place to build your boathouse so this tree can stay.'

As Hadley took some breaths and composed himself, the people watched on, eager to see what he might do next.

'You reckon he lives here? In *this* tree?' Craig asked his wife. The two looked at Hadley, who had hopped back down inside his hollow and onto his favourite lookout sprig. It was in just the right spot to duck and hide if he needed to, take refuge from bad weather, doze away the daylight or just sit and spy.

'Mmmm, maybe,' replied Maura. 'Hard to know. Probably has lots of trees he hides in like that,' she said, giving her husband a quick smile. 'There's plenty of hollows around. He'll be alright. Come on,' she said, clapping her hands. 'The builders will want some lunch soon.'

Maura turned and started walking back towards the house. Craig decided to stay a little longer.

'I'll catch up with you in a tick!' he yelled after her. He took in a few breaths and kept his body still. He listened. Magpies warbled. A distant kookaburra laughed at something. The soft hiss of leaves as they danced with the warm wind. Craig's eyes found Hadley again, who was tucked up inside the tree, only his head poking up.

'What's with the eye, little fella?' Craig asked Hadley, smiling. 'Looks like you're winking at me.'

Hadley purred softly back at him.



‘Beautiful spot you’ve got here, mate,’ Craig continued. ‘It’s peaceful. I can see why Maura’s got her heart set on it for the boathouse.’

Craig turned a circle, searching for another grand old red gum that might be right for Hadley to make his new home, but none caught his eye.

Surrounding him were hundreds of gum trees, alive with new flowers, clusters of seed pods and waxy, emerald-green leaves. Some trees were very old, like Hadley’s. Some were new. There were wonky ones and ones that had black, shedding trunks. Some had freshly broken branches on the ground beside them. Others had thick branches that dipped low over the river, willing the water to quench their dry, thirsty bark-skins. Some of the gums stretched outwards with heavy branches reaching like open arms. The tall, straight ones looked like they were cheering for something with long, bony limbs raised, waving leaf pom-poms up to the sky.

Craig soon realised that no tree on this patch of land came close to competing with the magnificence of Hadley’s. There it stood, wise and worthy. Sacred. Strong. Sturdy. There it stood, noble in its twisted shape that took centuries to craft. It was a sculpture, a living work of art.

Like Hadley, somehow this tree seemed all-knowing, different to the others, maybe even a little bit extraordinary. One might even suppose there was some sort of connection between the tree and Hadley, that spurred the owl to want so desperately to save it.

BOOOMMMM!

The noise from the house startled Craig.

‘Don’t worry, little guy,’ he said, attempting to reassure Hadley. ‘You’ve got a whole forest to find something you like. It’s just one tree, after all.’

And with that, Craig left to catch up with his wife.

## CHAPTER 2



The air was unusually cold for an October evening, especially after the dry, stubborn heat the day had brought. This surprised Craig as he opened the back door of his old, run-down farmhouse. He grabbed his jacket before heading outside for his regular night stroll.

He had been thinking about the owl and how strange it had acted in front of them two days ago. Why had the owl behaved so peculiarly? Craig had even done some reading up on Australian owls to find out more about their behaviour. But nothing he'd read had mentioned anything like the display he had witnessed from this owl.

Since moving into the farmstead a few weeks ago, Craig had enjoyed nightly walks, exploring the bushy parts on their property, rich with nocturnal residents. Each time, he would discover something new. A family of echidnas sleeping in a small dirt bunker, the oom-oom-ooming night call of the tawny frogmouth,

a makeshift teepee of long sticks probably built by children or a previous owner, a rusty bicycle wheel.

Craig walked and thought. When he was out in the bush, breathing in the unspoiled air, his mind felt clean and clear; he was free to let it wander.

With each step, Craig thought back to a few months ago when he'd first come across the property and shown it to Maura. He remembered how shocked she was at the state of the neglected house. But it didn't take her long to see its potential. Craig knew the place needed lots of love and hard work to bring it back to life, but he also knew his wife was the perfect person for the job. Not only did Maura love a challenge, but she was also strong-minded, confident and highly organised, with skills in restoring old homes and shopfronts.

Craig shone his torch at the forest floor as he walked. He had to be careful not to tread on a snake or trip up on the uneven ground. As he neared the giant red gum, he was lighter on his feet. The dried leaves made his steps crunchy, and he didn't want to scare off any creatures of the night, especially that little winking owl.

This made Craig think about how different the nights had been when they lived and worked right in the heart of a brightly lit, bustling city. Like the bush, the city came alive at night, but in a very different way. Crowds of people, honking traffic, flashing lights and signboards, pollution, sirens, street performers. Smells of coffee, bakeries, and street food. Clothing stores bustled with

customers. Construction zones clunked and whirred and throbbed. Nightspots pulsed with loud music. There was never a need to carry a torch in the city, or reason to fear a snake bite. But so far, Craig had no regrets in moving to the bush for a quieter, simpler lifestyle; somewhere nature actually had a chance at restoring him.

The farmstead seemed like the perfect remedy. Craig could leave the stress of the city behind him and learn how to slow down, while Maura could scratch her creative itch and sink her teeth into a new renovation project. It was a win/win situation.

Arriving at the owl's tree, Craig found him straight away. Hadley was on the ground this time, standing at the trunk of the big tree. Hadley, of course, had spotted Craig as soon as he left his house. His round torch-lit eye stared back at the man, willing him to leave him be. Hadley had a large bush rat dangling from under his beak, having just caught the first of his three nightly meals. He didn't care to be pestered while he ate.

'There you are,' whispered Craig, pleased.

Hadley flew swiftly to a high branch on his tree and perched behind a large cluster of leaves to eat his meal, turning his back to Craig's light.

'This must be your home, hey, mate,' Craig said, finding a tree stump to sit on. He kept his torch on Hadley, waiting for him to start bouncing around and making a ruckus like he did the other day. Craig sat patiently and waited, still and silent. Looking. Listening.

The bush truly comes alive at night, he thought, with sounds not heard in the day. Skitter, scutter, swish, swish. Little pads and paws and claws making their way through long grass and shrubs. The scritch scratching of pygmy possums clawing at branches. The throat clicks and croaks from tree frogs, rumbling koala growls, and squeaks and squeals from forest bat colonies. The snap of a twig. The constant pulse of cicadas shrill-shrilling. And more sounds unknown.

Craig felt like he was in another world out there. It was so unfamiliar to him that he felt, right at that moment, he didn't quite belong there. He was overcome with just how much there was to take in. It made him realise how little he actually knew about the Australian bush.

After Hadley had swallowed his meal, he quickly turned to eye Craig again. Naturally, he was suspicious of this man who wanted to destroy his tree. Yet he was curious why the man seemed so interested in him. Hadley reminded himself that he had to be ready for anything. He hopped down the tree, branch by branch – with the torch light following him – until he found his sprig inside the hollow. Hadley sat and stared at Craig. Craig sat and stared at Hadley.

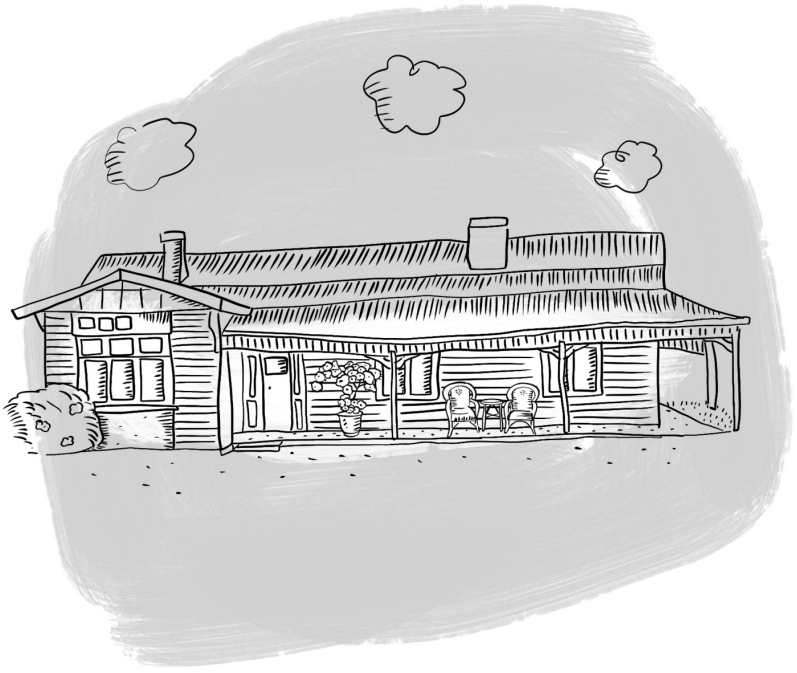
The two were tense. Hadley was nervous in Craig's presence, but at the same time, he was on guard, compelled to protect his home. Craig was busting for Hadley to perform, silently willing him to start flapping around. He was ever careful not to make any sudden



moves or do anything that would startle the owl and scare it away. He stayed as still as could be.

They both sat watching each other. Neither wavered; neither looked away. Their three fixed eyes were locked in a staring contest. No blinking. Who would be the first to look away?

Hadley sat, strong and committed to his cause. Craig sat, gazing in awe of his mysterious owl neighbour. Focused, stubborn, they stayed like this for half an hour before Craig's torch light dimmed from dying batteries, and he headed back home.



*The place needed lots of love and hard work*