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# The Mooncatcher's Rescue

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# The Mooncatcher's Rescue



KAREN LAMB

*Illustrated by Lia Visirin*



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BOOKS

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*For Alexian, Melissa, Keyla and Evie.  
Mooncatchers, all.*

*K.L.*

*For Marc*

*L.V.*



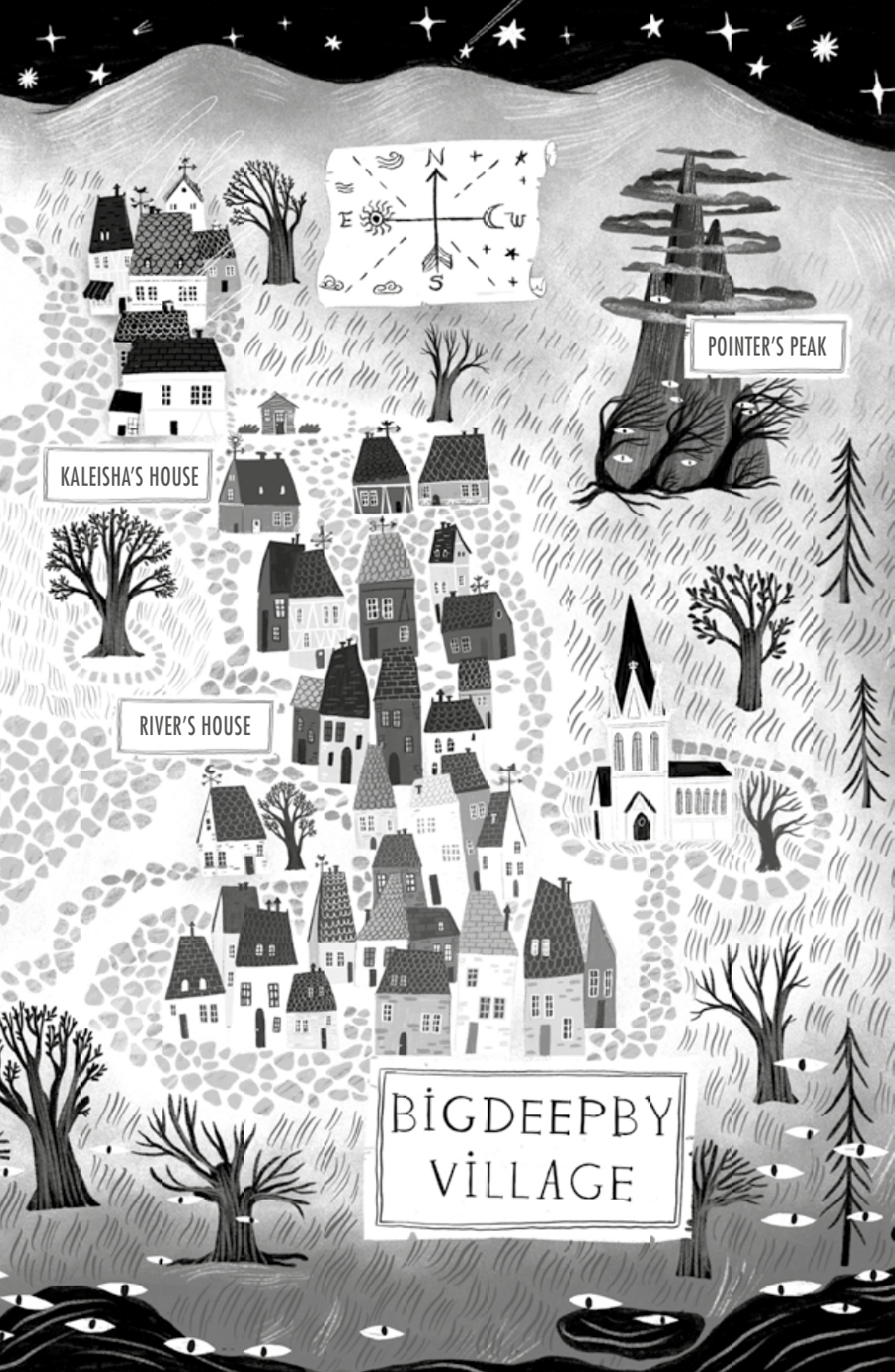
BETTINA'S HOUSE



BIGDEEPLY POND







BIGDEEPLY  
VILLAGE

POINTER'S PEAK

KALEISHA'S HOUSE

RIVER'S HOUSE





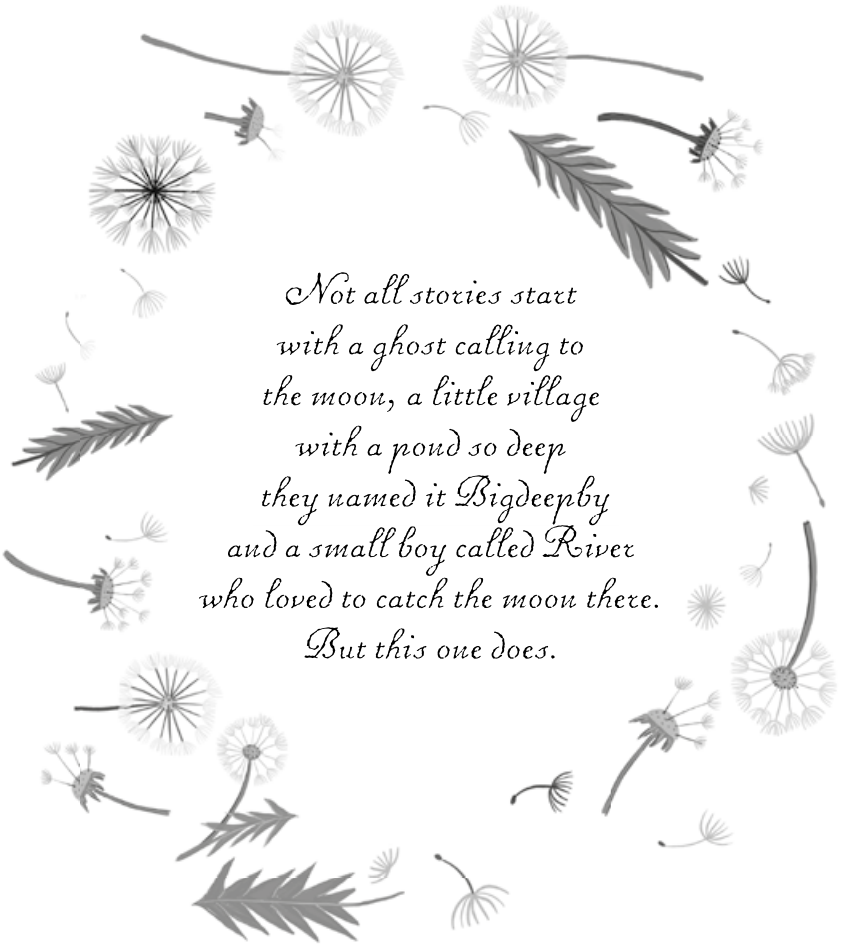


## Prologue

**T**he ghost floating beside the pond looked up at the moon by Pointer's Peak and let out a moaning, groaning wail.

*Sometimes, all it takes for  
a big dream to happen is  
something small.*

(This wasn't the ghost's exact wail, but this is what the stars heard.)



*Not all stories start  
with a ghost calling to  
the moon, a little village  
with a pond so deep  
they named it Bigdeepby  
and a small boy called River  
who loved to catch the moon there.  
But this one does.*

# Chapter 1

**A**n almost full moon hung over the street as River ran. He stuck to the shadows and cut through glints of light on cobblestones across the square. At the edge of the village, where the bulrushes began, he stopped to catch his breath.

A sleepy spring mist circled the clock tower as it struck the hour. His green eyes reflected the orange glow of cottages as he pushed back a flop of dark hair from his face. Behind the hush of reeds, frogs hiccupped, grasshoppers creaked, and a breeze came up from nowhere, parting the rushes, just a little.

River smiled. He was here.

Bigdeepby Pond gleamed before him like a new promise, as it did every night. There were the usual night sounds – the rustle of ducks settling in their nests, the soft click of rushes as water voles weaved through them, and far away, on Pointer’s Peak, an owl hooted. River called back and the owl stopped mid-cry as if he’d fallen out of his tree. River wondered if he’d said something stupid in Owlsh. Like owls are just tree chickens or something.

Shrugging, River kneeled beside the water, took off his backpack and opened it. He pulled out his fishing rod and laid it beside his net on the grass. As he reached for his bait box, a tangle of green and white fell out, stopping a snail in its tracks.

“Happy Spring Equinox,” said River as he put on the leaf and snowdrop head-wreath. Everyone had made one at school. It had been the only good part of the day. He could smell the flowers, the scent stronger now they were dying.

A flash of blue and orange hovered before him: a dragonfly breathing tiny flimmers of fire.

“Hello,” said River, calmly. It circled his head then darted off, skimming the water before disappearing above the reeds.

River sighed and laid the wreath gently on the surface of the pond. It drifted away as he looked for bait in his box. Shuffling through the compartments, his fingers came across three pennies. “For luck,” he told a passing frog and threw them, one by one, into the floating wreath. Ripples grew as the greenery bubbled and sank.

Then came the sounds...

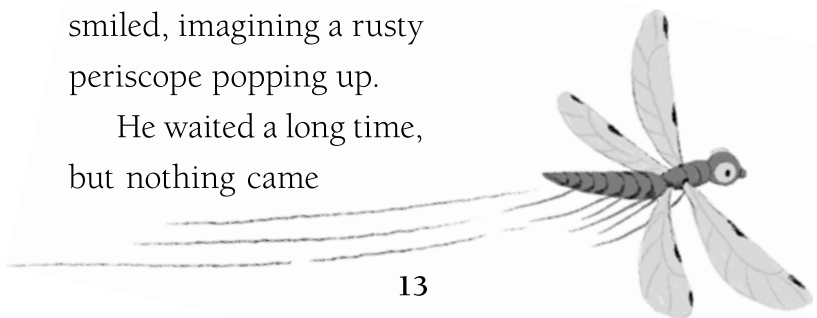
*Cluy-uy-yung!*

*Cluy-uy-yung!*

*Cluy-uy-yung!*

The pond wasn't called the Big Deep for nothing. The coins had struck something far below on the pond bed. River scratched his head and wondered if there was a cymbal or bell down there. He half-hoped for a submarine, and smiled, imagining a rusty periscope popping up.

He waited a long time, but nothing came



out of the water, not even flakes of rust. Whatever it was must be stuck in the mud, River thought, looking down at the pond. The moon was partly in shadow but appeared full in the pond's reflection. It had a blue glow about it tonight. River knew there would be plenty of fish with the moon so bright. And plenty of mooncatching.

After baiting his hook, River cast his line with a *swish* into the water, slicing the moon in two for a moment. He rested the rod on a rock then dipped his green net into the silver water.





Catching the moon was what he loved doing best. He skimmed the net along the shining surface, gathering the hills of lunar highlands and the valley of Mare Tranquillitatis, all within his small net. And when he lifted it, a shimmering catch of diamond droplets showered out of it like a starburst across a frozen sea. Mooncatching... Just when you thought you had it, you lost it.

“You can’t catch the moon, you know. I’ve tried,” came a voice from the bulrushes.

River swerved round. There was no one there. Only a soft wind swayed the feathery rush tops.

“I know that,” he said to the nowhere person, trying to keep his voice steady. It was one thing expecting something to come out of the water and quite another to find something already out and behind you. He searched the shadows nervously.

“I love the moon, don’t you?” said the voice.

It was closer now and River jumped to find a woman sitting on the bank beside him. She hadn’t been there a moment ago. She was pale and greyish and she was smiling at the moon’s reflection. Her legs waggled to and fro in the

water. She wore a long, tattered dress that floated on the silver surface. Tangles of pondweed peeped through its holes.

“I...” River couldn’t find another word. He was too surprised.

The woman turned to face him. “Oh!” she said, seeming a little surprised herself. Her watery blue eyes looked kind but otherworldly, as if she came from the moon herself. Strands of her dark hair blew about, though there was no wind. “You can hear me? Hear me words, not just me moanin’?”

River nodded, a bit puzzled by her question. Why wouldn’t he be able to hear her?

“Well, that’s never happened before. Must have been magic you threw into the pond that made the chimin’ sound.” She smiled at him. “Always knew you were special. You came with the first snow of winter. To the cottage where music plays. Been lovely, watchin’ you fish and grow.” She moved her hand gently over his forehead as if to lift his hair. She didn’t touch him, but River could feel the cold coming from her fingers. It was a bit odd, but River didn’t like to show his discomfort,

because of the kind way she looked at him.

"I ... I like the moon too," he said, thinking it impolite not to speak.

"I knows you do." She smiled again, this time right into his eyes, then flicked back her head and laughed. "Here! Me pa were always singin' about the moon... *Hey, diddle, diddle, the cat and the fiddle, the cow jumped over the moon!* Know what's up there?" She pointed to the moon. "A cow!" she said and laughed again.

"I don't think so," said River. "They'd have found it, or at least its bones when they were up there."

"When who were up there?"

"The astronauts. You know, the men that went to the moon."

"Strastronauts!" she said. "That be silly as my tomfoolery!"

"No, it's true. Men did go to the moon." River looked at her, puzzled. "Didn't you know?"

"Went to the moon!" said the woman, her eyes like saucers. "How did that happen? Hardly ever took my eyes off it."

How could she not know about the moon landings? He wondered if she came from a travelling theatre and never read the news, or something. Her hooded cloak and puffed sleeves certainly looked theatrical. “Do you live near by?” he asked.

“I live here by,” she replied, spinning her finger and leaving a trail of mist. “Used to live o’er yonder at Azakeyle’s Inn, but can’t get back there, these days.”

“You live here, by the pond?” River asked. He’d never heard of anyone living by Bigdeepby Pond. A lot of the villagers were a bit scared of it because it was so deep, and some said it was full of strange creatures. Some even said it was haunted. River hadn’t believed the rumours before, but he shivered now and glanced at the woman again.

“I do. Me, three hundred tadpoles, two thousand frogspawn, twelve ducks and a partridge in a pear tree! We all lives here.” Her curly smile returned and she



splashed a foot in the water. “Not so lucky with the fish tonight,” she added, nodding at the fishing line. “You only ever keep the one, don’t you? And throw all the others back.”

River felt a little uneasy. She must have really been watching him to know that. But she seemed so gentle, so unusual, it didn’t bother him as much as it might have done. “We can’t eat more than one,” he said.

The woman nodded, then pointed to the sky. “Look!” she said, nudging him. A falling star fizzled into the velvet darkness. “Quick, make a wish!”

“A wish...” River’s mind went blank. He could only think about how odd she was. Maybe he should ask her straight out who she was and why she was there, but it didn’t feel right somehow. She might think it was rude. “I wish...” He sighed and shrugged his shoulders. What he really wanted was for Bettina and the others to stop picking on him, but he wasn’t sure this star was big enough for that. He’d need a whole galaxy of wishes.

“Tis all right,” she said. “You can throw the

wish back like fish and it'll come to you later when you needs it. Now, here we go... My wish!" She waved her arms grandly. River gasped as sparks flew from her sleeves but they were only moths that fluttered away. "I wish I could go home to me Raphty, buried under our tree! I'd be with him now if it weren't for that GOOD FER NOTHIN' PIRATE!"

Her voice was so loud that River jumped. She didn't seem quite so kind and friendly any more but angry and a little bit scary.



## Chapter 2

**F**or a second, River wanted to get his things and go. Then the woman breathed in deep and seemed calm as ripples again.

“Why can’t you go home?” he asked after a moment.

“Because I drow—” She clutched her stomach and jiggled about on her skirts. “Cause I drowned right here,” she said finally.

The hair on the back of River’s neck prickled. “So, you’re a ... ghost?”

“Am I?” She thought for a moment. “Suppose I am.” A cloud raced over the moon and darkness crept in around them.

River gulped. The legends about Bigdeepby Pond were true, after all. He always thought he'd be scared of a ghost. But here he was sitting beside one. Not a moan, not a groan, not a *whoo*, not a *whaa*. And as the moon returned, he realized he wasn't afraid. Not really. Maybe it was only floating sheets with cut-out holes he was scared of. He looked at her pale fingers and noticed for the first time that he could see the grass right through them. She had kind hands, though. He watched her face a moment. She had kind eyes too – when she wasn't shouting about pirates.

Suddenly, the woman shuddered. River's mouth fell open as a fluffy duckling waddled through the side of her skirts. "Ere! No passin' through! That tickles. Get home to your mother with thee!" She giggled as the squeaking duckling flurried across the pond in zigzags and into the bulrushes.

River bit his lip, then laughed. Scared? No, he had nothing to be scared of. *OK, she's a ghost*, he thought, watching her, *but weren't ghosts people too?* Yes, he decided. She was just a person of the see-through kind, that's all. He smiled to himself.

He'd never known a night like it or anyone like her.

"It's special here," said River, feeling more confident now.

The pale woman nodded and smiled. "Aye, that it be. The story goes this village were once a fairy hill. And see that there Pointer's Peak? They say a giant leaped from it – thinking this 'ere pond were a puddle – and the fairy hill got flattened... Squashing the magic out of it. *Woomph!*"

River laughed.

"Nowadays, only bits and starts of magic pop up 'ere and there," said the woman, sighing. "Reckon that's what happened tonight when you threw those coins in the pond. You woke the magic so you could hear and see me. Not that magic's helped me much. I keeps a-wishin' I could go home to me Raphty. But me bones are still down there. All me treasures and all me bones."



“But why can’t you just float, or fly – or whatever ghosts do to move about – to find Raphty?”

She didn’t answer for a second. River threw a dandelion into the water and they watched it glide. “Usually you gets to be together again with those you love. No matter how or where you said goodbyes, you can always find a way to them. Together always and evermore, whatever star you follow. ’Tis just me, I can’t move on.”

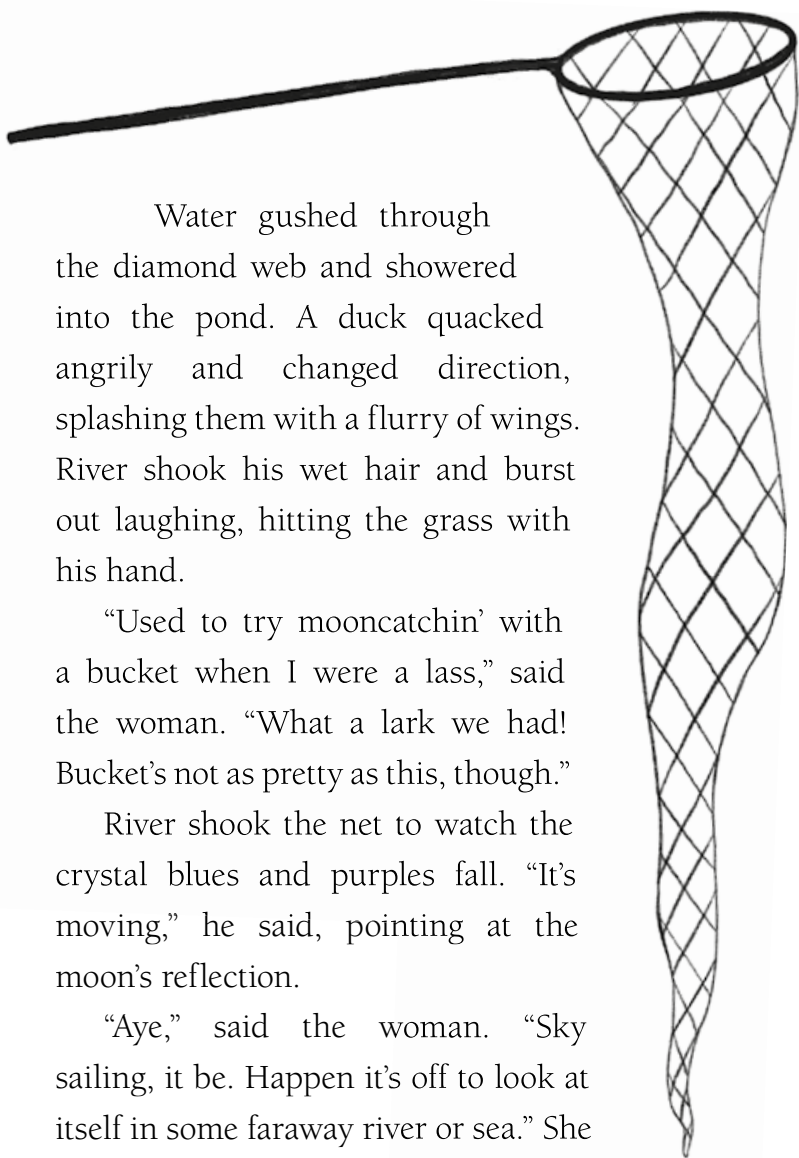
River wanted to ask what she meant, but then he saw her glistening eyes and wanted to cheer her up instead. “Would you like to try mooncatching?” He handed her the net but her fingers passed right through it.

“T’always looks beautiful when you do it,” said the woman, shaking her head. “You do it for me.”

River nodded and dipped the net into the curve of the mirrored moon. He heard her sigh as she grinned ear to ear. It felt good to see her smile again.

“That’s the Crater of Copernicus,” he whispered as he scooped its reflection and held it there.

“Caught you, old Copper Knickers!” she cried out, as River swung the net in the air.



Water gushed through the diamond web and showered into the pond. A duck quacked angrily and changed direction, splashing them with a flurry of wings. River shook his wet hair and burst out laughing, hitting the grass with his hand.

“Used to try mooncatchin’ with a bucket when I were a lass,” said the woman. “What a lark we had! Bucket’s not as pretty as this, though.”

River shook the net to watch the crystal blues and purples fall. “It’s moving,” he said, pointing at the moon’s reflection.

“Aye,” said the woman. “Sky sailing, it be. Happen it’s off to look at itself in some faraway river or sea.” She tipped her head. “Your name’s River, be it not?”

“How did you know that?”

“Aah.” She winked. “A little Boot told me.”

“Boot?”

The woman smiled. “Always look for the hidden. I reckons if you try fishin’ again, you might find somethin’” – she nodded at the sparkling surface – “special.”

Curious, River plunged his net into the pond.

What he pulled out shouldn’t have been alive. Glassy eyes and tatty fake fur. Its claws seemed made of wood and the nose looked like velvet. But the moment River laid the little toy badger on the grass, took the hook from its fur and looked into those black eyes, he knew...

It was alive.

“H-hello, you,” said River.

The small creature sat up and coughed. Water fizzed through its teeth and it held a paw in the air, as if to tell River to wait. When it had finished coughing up water, it looked River up and down and nodded at him.

River smiled back.

“Hello, Boot,” said the woman.



The badger shook itself dry then snuggled up beside her.

“How did you know it was there?” River asked the woman.

“Boot be an old friend.” She hovered her hands over the badger’s ears a moment. River could see the badger’s matted fur through her transparent fingers. Boot looked cross and wiggled to get her hands away. She smiled at him and said quickly, “He drowned-ed not long after me. Reckon some pirate kicked him in.” Boot finally shook her hands away, gave her a don’t-do-that-again look, then had a good scratch. “He needs a bit of love, is all.” She stroked his ears without touching them, as she had River’s head, and sighed. “Someone should take him home for keeps.”

River looked at her funny smile and then at Boot. Reaching out, he patted the little badger. He was warm despite the pond water and the cold night. “You want to come home with me?” he whispered. Boot wriggled his neck under River’s hand for more stroking, and River took that as a yes. River’s eyes stung suddenly – he’d wanted

a friend for a long time. "Thank you," he said.

The woman smiled. "Time for you to be a-headin' home. Your ma will be wonderin' where you's got to. And happen you've got schoolin' tomorrow. There be other times for a-talkin'."

"Yeah," said River, knowing it was almost bedtime. "I should go now." Back home he could think things through. Maybe by morning he'd realize it had all been a dream, he thought, and felt a little sad.

Getting up to gather his things he looked back at the strange woman with the kind eyes, smiling at him. He stopped a moment then asked, "Will you be here tomorrow night?"

"I be 'ere every night. Only usually no one knows it," said the woman. She looked into the little badger's eyes and told him, "Take good care of River now and bring him back tomorrow night."

River took the little badger carefully and smiled. "We'll see you tomorrow."

"Good," said the woman. "Now be off with you. I got some moanin' to do. 'Tis hard work bein' a spook."

River walked towards the cottages with Boot on his shoulder. At the edge of the rushes, he turned back to wave at the ghost and realized he didn't even know her name.

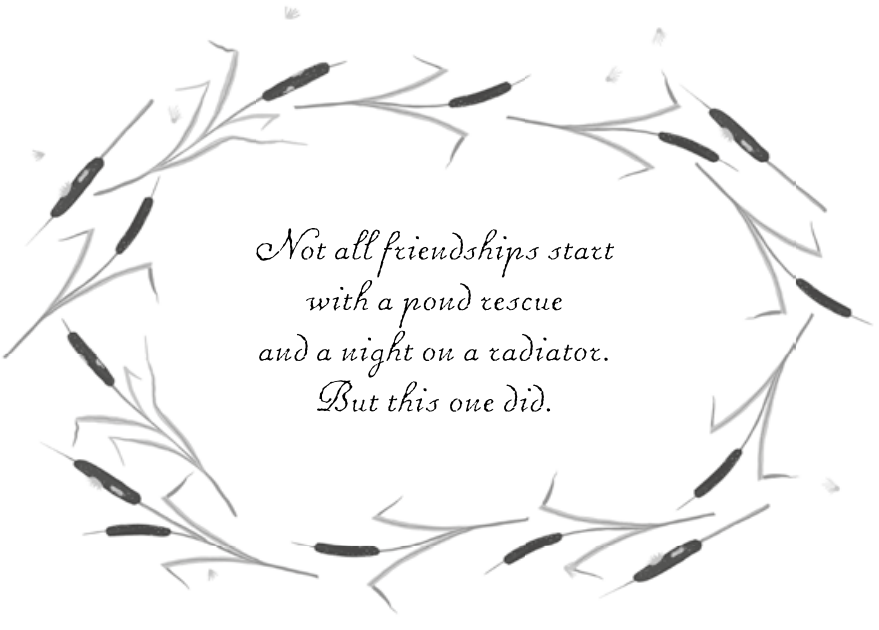


River and Boot talked all the way home. A short walk across the square to the second lane on the right. They had so much in common. They both loved the night; they both loved the quiet when the world was sleeping; and they both loved the moon. River told Boot how he liked to fish but mostly he loved mooncatching when the moon was full, when the biggest fish were dizzy from its beauty and came out of their deepest hiding places.

Boot knew all about this – Boot knew many things – and had sometimes caught fish snacks this way himself as they leaped out of the water, moonstruck.

When they reached River's cottage on the corner, the moon shone on the thatched roof. River scraped his trainers on the doorstep and

took pondweed from Boot's fur before stepping through the back door. Puddles of mud and pond water followed the little badger across the kitchen floor anyway. After reassuring Boot that a fluffy towel was your friend and not a flying otter, River put him to dry on the kitchen radiator and said goodnight.



*Not all friendships start  
with a pond rescue  
and a night on a radiator.  
But this one did.*