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*For I. and S.,
with all my love*

'Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.'

Edmund Spenser

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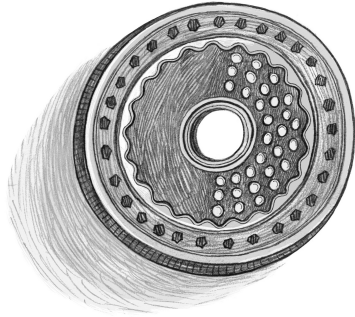
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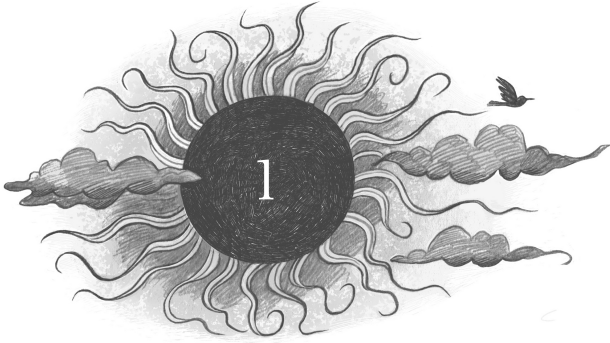
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I

THE RIVER GIRL





Bo Delafort had just turned twelve when she pulled the moon from the mud of the Thames. She hadn't been looking for it, and that made all the difference. *You don't find treasure, it finds you* – that's what riverfolk liked to say. *All you do is keep your heart open.*

It was August, early Saturday morning: lowest tide at Battersea Bridge. The exposed riverbed was gleaming in the sun, surprisingly empty of other people. High up against the cloudless sky, seagulls searched for fish guts. Bo saw a low arrow of geese, and felt the day's heat on the rise, the river gentle at its edge. The Delaforts had been born by this river, and the Delaforts never left. She loved it down here. It made her feel peaceful and whole. The river was a vein in her body. Her other home.

Bo was a schoolgirl, but she was also a mudlark, sifting the riverbed for things to sell. The instant she had seen the glint in the mud, she'd known it was different. No tip of a sugar spoon, no edge of a threepence coin. The sun was beating through the flimsy boater her mother had insisted she wear, but she felt so cold. A breeze got up from nowhere, blowing her hair in her eyes, and slow waves of water sloshed the stones.

Now! the river suddenly said to her, in a deep and greenish voice, winnowing around the wind. *Put your hands in now!*

Goosebumps rose on Bo's arms. She'd never heard the river speak. It felt like a blessing, the sign she'd been needing but hadn't dared ask for. Older mudlarks along the banks had told her how one mudlark in a lifetime might hear the river – it was so rare and so strange that if it happened to her she might not believe her ears.

Some said it was foolish talk, that the river would never speak to the humans who trod its shores. Why would it? It had business of its own.

But Bo had always believed that beneath its shifting surface a strong power lay in wait, ready to talk. She had always hoped that one day it might let her know its secrets. So when it happened, this August morning by Battersea

Bridge – the river’s words surging through her mind, making her heart beat harder – it didn’t feel as strange as perhaps it should.

Bo crouched down, her boots and the hem of her pinafore sinking into the mud. As the river had asked, gently she reached her trembling fingers through the cool of the clay.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood up. She’d touched something – the solid shape of an unknown object. It seemed to want to drag her into its own orbit, and she gasped but didn’t let go, feeling certain that she mustn’t leave this treasure in the dark.

It was stuck fast, but Bo held on, a sense of power beginning to bubble through her fingertips, up her arm, spreading like cold light into her entire body.

Don't let go! said the river, its deep, green voice flooding her mind once more.

‘What the—?’ Bo managed to utter, as above her head the seagulls fell silent and the geese dipped out of sight. The morning sky turned dark and the city vanished.

A spiralling feeling began in her stomach, and she shut her eyes tight. No one had ever told her the river could do *this*. It was as if she were vanishing too, and she couldn’t stop. Bo’s body felt weightless, and somehow she was no longer on the foreshore but high above it, the wind in her

hair, and she was flying like the flow of the river which was snaking far beneath.

Barely able to catch her breath, her eyes still closed, Bo could see a small room – winter it was, by the ice on the window and the fire in the hearth, full of the scents of herbs and spices.

How's it winter? Bo wondered. *Where have I gone?*

Her attention was caught by an old man, standing in front of a table, upon which something was beaming silver and gold.

'What's that?' Bo asked aloud – but the old man did not seem to hear.

'Will they work?' a voice said, from a corner out of Bo's sight. It was a woman's voice, desperate, insistent.

'Tell me truly,' the woman went on. 'If I put them together, will they work?'

'Lady, I make no promises,' the old man replied, his voice tired. 'I've done all I can.'

At these words, the vision began to vanish.

'No!' Bo cried, screwing her eyes tighter to keep the room there – but the vision was fading, the crackles of the fire dying to silent ash. The trapped wisps of warm sweet herbs evaporated. Bo heard the rush of the river, and the room disappeared. Once again she felt her stomach

spiralling, the flow of the river coursing through her, the wind in her hair.

With a sudden sigh, the riverbed released the object from its mud and into Bo's hand. She opened her eyes, staggering back. The dark sky was gone. The sun was up in the blue: the wharves and warehouses, the carriages and motor cars were all there on the opposite Chelsea bank, as if they'd never gone away.

It was an August morning again by Battersea Bridge. No winter, no room, no beams of gold and silver. She hadn't moved.

'What on *earth*?' she whispered.

A deep wave of fatigue washed over her, and she tried to steady herself, gripping the unknown object tight, not daring to look at what was in her hand. The spiralling inside her stopped, but her head was really aching. Her arms and legs tingled with pins and needles. Perhaps it was the vision that had made her feel like this? Or maybe it was just being out so long in the morning sun? Either way, she wanted her mum to put a cold compress on her temples, and her mum felt far away.

'Who were those people?' Bo called out to the river, rubbing her arms back to life. 'What was it on that table?'

But the river was silent. Only the returning gulls mewled

to one another, as if laughing at a private joke.

‘Fine,’ Bo said, slowly opening her palm to look at the muddied thing. ‘Guess I’ll start here then.’

Whatever she had seen in that room, this mysterious object surely had something to do with it. Although the river’s clay had kept it perfect, it looked *old*. Weighty, thicker than any coin, slotting in her palm like it had been made for her to hold. Gently Bo rubbed off all the streaks of mud, and what she saw there nearly stopped her breath.

‘Oh my goodness,’ she murmured. ‘Oh my days!’

The river had given her a jewel: a perfect, miniature full moon.

Covering one side of this extraordinary object were small, creamy-coloured pearls, shimmering as Bo tipped them under the daylight. The edge of the moon was embellished all the way round with tiny, deep-red rubies. Curiously, there was a small hole right in the jewel’s centre, through which Bo could see the skin of her palm.

She turned the moon over. The other side was plain silver, except for some tiny words, engraved in a spiral around the hole in the middle. Bo squinted, smearing the last of the mud away. But try as she might, they were impossible to read. She moved the moon this way and that, but the lines glinted, winked, and hid their truth.

Bo tried to gather her thoughts. She massaged the pain in her temples and inhaled the air around her. There was no scent of thyme, no lingering woodsmoke from a winter fire. Just river smells: the familiar brine and coal and salt. The ground beneath her boots felt firm. But still, it seemed out of a fairytale. The moon was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

The wonder of it struck her and she couldn't help laughing out loud. Had the river *ever* given a mudlark from Battersea such a gift? It was all her Christmases come at once. She needed to get home to number 4 Gladstone Street, to show this moon to Harry. Bo wanted her brother to be the first to know – today of all days, the day he was going off to the war. It was the blessing Bo had asked for, this treasure which meant that she and her mum would be all right. It meant roast beef for dinner for a whole year, a lifetime's supply of cocoa, a hundred bags of sherbet lemons. It could, Bo suspected, be worth much more than that.

She bit her lip, excitement bubbling. Rubies and pearls by Battersea Bridge!

But.

Bo hesitated. The river had spoken to her, as it rarely spoke to anyone. It had told her to reach into the mud, and

it had given her this most unusual treasure. A gift or a warning – or maybe a clue? There was so much she didn't understand. Why her? Why this treasure? Why now? If only she could be back in that room again, and hear the woman speak further, to find out more.

One thing was certain. She'd never get back there if she went and sold the moon for a bag of sweets.

'I'd get a good price for you,' she mused to the moon. 'But then I'd never know what happens next.'

Once in a lifetime, the old mudlarks said.

The river had chosen her.

Finding out exactly why the river had given her this moon, and what exactly it was, was worth more to Bo Delafort than a lifetime's supply of cocoa.

Across the river, she realised that someone was watching her. She gripped the moon tight, unable to tell who it was from such a wide distance – but she could make out the shape of a little kid, standing completely still, watching her through a pair of binoculars. Her first thought was how on earth a mudlark like him could afford a pair of binoculars. Her second thought was to yell at him to watch his manners, but as soon as he realised Bo was watching, he scooted up the embankment, away towards Chelsea.

Being watched – especially by a north shore kid – was

unnerving. The kids on both sides of the river had always been rivals, and rumour ran fast along both. Thieves were everywhere. Bo needed to go straight home: today was not a normal day.

Huge stacks of cloud crossed the sun, and the exposed riverbed stopped glistening. In the dull light, Bo saw someone else moving straight towards her, this time along her side of the river. She steeled herself, but as the figure came nearer, she realised he wasn't even looking at her.

He was a boy in a plain white shirt and dark navy trousers, worn and patched at the knees. Bo thought he was older than her – something about the way he held himself – but he was on the skinny side. Hatless, with dark hair sticking up wildly on his head, his boots looking like he slept in them. His gaze was on the water's edge, reading the clay, and it looked like he could understand the language of the river.

Come on, girl, she told herself. *Have your wits about you.*

The boy caught her watching, and he narrowed his eyes, almost as if she had interrupted him. Bo turned her own gaze to the water and slipped the moon into her pinafore pocket. The cloud passed over the sun and the day turned bright again.

Now the boy moved with more intention.

'Nice day for it,' he called.

'For what?' said Bo.

The boy came a little closer, and stood with a hand on his hip, one boot perched on a small piece of old ship timber. He grinned. 'Ah, come on. You're searching for treasure.'

He had a musical way of landing his syllables. Bo scowled. 'Never mind what *I'm* doin'. What are *you* doin'?' She thought about her brother, Harry, how later this afternoon he would be heading to the war. 'There's a war on, you know,' she said. 'Ain't you old enough to be a soldier?'

The boy raised one dark eyebrow. 'I'm twelve,' he said.

Bo couldn't hide her surprise. She felt the pain in her head receding, the tingling in her limbs fading away. His eyes were like dark green stones, containing flecks of gold, lit by the sun reflecting off the water.

'She's not giving up much today,' he said, as if trying to keep the peace.

'You mean me or the river?' Bo replied.

The boy threw back his head and laughed an amazing laugh, like sunlight coming through mist. She couldn't help grinning.

'Let's say the river,' the boy said. 'You just have to let it give you what it wants.'

So find the other half! came the river's voice again, swirling deeply inside Bo's mind.

She froze. 'What other half?' she said out loud, without thinking.

The boy looked at her curiously. 'Are you all right? Only ... you seem to be talking to someone else.'

Bo shook her head, as if dislodging the river's words from her ears. They'd been so clear, she couldn't believe they hadn't been spoken aloud.

She blinked at him. 'I was talkin' to you. You know the mudlark rule,' she said, feeling flustered.

'What's the mudlark rule?'

'Don't tell me you ain't heard of the mudlark rule! Somethin' taken, somethin' given?'

Seemingly from nowhere, Bo felt an overwhelming urge to pull the moon out of her pocket, to show him what the river had given her.

Don't be ridiculous, she told herself. *You don't know him!*

'Well, I don't know what you've taken,' the boy said, looking even more puzzled. 'But why don't you give me your name?'

'Bo Delafort,' she said, before she could think better of it. 'Pleased to meet you.'

He put his hand out. 'Billy River.'

'Billy River?'

He smiled sadly. 'My mother chose it before she died.'

'Oh! I'm sorry. About your mum, I mean—'

'It's all right,' he said.

Bo took his hand. The very moment their fingers touched, she felt it: a flow between them, a startling thing, as if they had stepped into a current meant only for the two of them, as if the river were carrying them both along.

Billy's eyes widened, and Bo knew he felt it too. They stared at each other. His hand was cool. There was clay under Billy's fingernails and salt in his hair, a scent too strange to ever capture in a bottle.

'Will you walk with me?' he asked.

Bo thought of how her family would be waiting for her at number 4 Gladstone Street, and how much she wanted to share her discovery with Harry. But the ache in her head was gone, and she had never met anyone like Billy River, turning up the same day she'd pulled the moon from the clay. The part of her that could hear the river talking knew this boy was important. And more to the point, she was beginning to like him.

Billy was still looking at her, his face a question.

Bo wrinkled her nose. She took her hand away. 'For a bit then, Billy River,' she said. 'Just for a bit.'

They walked along the foreshore, a little apart, skittering over stones, jumping over rock pools. The sun was fully up by now, and the foreshore had come to life. Watermen and lightermen, guiding their vessels upriver, downriver, bank to bank. Saturday holidaymakers, disembarking on the Battersea shore for a weekend amble in the manicured park above. Stevedores, men whose job it was to roll out cargo or drop it off by the factories towards Vauxhall, were calling to each other, and some smaller kids had turned up to lift the stones in search of loose coals. This was everything Bo had ever known. The same as always. Yet the moon was waiting in her pocket, and Billy was beside her: now everything was beginning to feel different.

‘Do you live near here?’ Billy asked.

‘I might.’

‘You’re like a frog on your lily pad.’ He smiled. ‘What did you find?’

‘You askin’ a question like that, you definitely ain’t local.’

‘Correct. I’m from over there,’ Billy said, pointing vaguely across the river, towards the city. ‘I wash pots in the kitchen of Muncaster Hall.’

Bo sniffed. She had never heard of Muncaster Hall, but she wasn’t going to let Billy know that. ‘So what you over

here for?' she said. 'Heard you lot grow scales.'

Billy let out another laugh, the sound landing in the seat of Bo's stomach, where it glowed warm and fierce.

'It's all the same river, Bo Delafort,' he said. 'I've no more got scales than you've got webbed feet.'

'But if you ain't got a mum, who are your people, Billy River?'

A cloud crossed his face. 'No one.'

'No dad either? No brothers or sisters? Friends ... ?'

Bo trailed off in the face of his silence. She felt her cheeks flare, embarrassed by her own clumsiness.

'I have the river,' Billy said. 'And that'll do.'

'My dad died when I was three,' she said.

Billy frowned. 'I'm sorry. Do you remember him?'

'No.' Bo sighed, puffing out her cheeks. 'Too young. D'you remember your mum?'

Billy stopped walking and looked out at the river. 'No,' he said. His pale face looked suddenly flushed. 'I was too young as well. All I know is that she died, and I ended up at Muncaster Hall.'

'What was your mum called?'

'Isobel.'

'Isobel's a pretty name,' said Bo.

Billy smiled, and began wading out towards an empty

waterman's boat, bobbing in the shallows. 'It is. Listen, I'd better get back to work.'

'Wait!' she said. 'Are you comin' back? You never told me if you found anythin'!

'Neither did you,' Billy said, lowering himself into the boat. 'Did you?'

'Course.' Bo again felt the desire to show him the moon battling with her common sense. 'I found you.'

Billy grinned. 'Maybe it was the other way round?'

'Washed up on the shore,' Bo went on, teasing. 'Like a bit of old wood.'

'You've got a sharp eye,' Billy replied, taking up the oars and beginning to row with practised ease towards the middle of the water.

'I'm known for it,' Bo called back.

'So maybe you can help me find what I'm looking for.'

'What is it?' she shouted. 'What are you looking for?'

But the wind on the water got up again, and the clouds above them scudded fast as Billy moved with skill towards the north shore. If he spoke, Bo did not hear him. Soon he was just a small figure, reaching the other side of the river.

Bo pulled the tip of the moon out of her pocket. Even this tiny bit was glinting and shimmering, saturated with the day's brightness, drinking up the light. The gulls seemed

alarmed, crying out to each other. Was another vision coming? Bo wanted it so much. She closed her eyes, longing for the strange sensation of flying above the river with the wind in her hair, to see again that little room, the man and the woman and the crackling fire ...

But nothing happened.

She opened her eyes. The boat on the north shore was empty. Billy was gone.