THE DAWN SEAL

For Pat
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For Mum and Dad
DD

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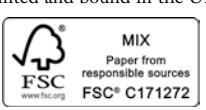
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Holly Webb
Illustrated by David Dean

LITTLE TIGER
LONDON





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"Oh, Dad! It's beautiful!" Lissa stood on the riverbank, looking at the line of boats and the sun glittering on the water.

Dad grinned at her. "Good, isn't it? Even if it is a pain having to carry everything along the path." He hefted Lissa's huge backpack further up on to his shoulder. "How much stuff did you bring, Liss…"

"I'm here the whole summer!" Lissa pointed out. "I need clothes. And Mum said she wasn't sure how easy it is to do washing on a boat."

"I do have a washing machine," Dad said.

"Everything you'd find in a normal house, actually. Just smaller. But there's not much space inside for hanging anything out to dry."

"Which boat is yours?" Lissa asked eagerly. Dad had sent her photos of his new home, but she was finding it hard to work out which one it was. There were so many boats moored along the riverbank, of all shapes and sizes. One of them looked like a battleship, only smaller. And there was even one with a tall mast and furled sails. Lissa had never thought she'd see huge sailing ships on the river.

It seemed so strange that her dad was actually living here now. The river was about as different from Lissa's street back home as she could imagine.

At first, she'd thought it was going to be weird spending her summer holidays with Dad

on a barge, but now she was realizing just how exciting it could be. Still … she wished Mum was here to see the beautiful boats too. And Zoe. Zoe would love them – except she'd be bouncing around all over the place and Mum and her partner Mickey would be panicking about her falling in the river. *It probably wouldn't be a good idea to have a two-year-old on a boat,* Lissa thought.

Dad smiled. "Over there. She's called *Rose Dawn*, can you see her? The name's painted on the front."

"She?" Lissa frowned.

"All boats are called she," Dad explained. "It's traditional, I think. Even if they're called something like, I don't know, *Trevor*. Still a she."

"That's weird… Oh yes! I can see her. The blue one? Dad, she's huge!"



"What, did you think you were going to spend the summer living on a tiny rowing boat?" Dad was laughing but he sounded proud.

He loves the boat already, Lissa thought, and something tugged inside her. *Rose Dawn* was Dad's home – but perhaps that meant Lissa could belong here on the river too?

Lissa's parents had split up a few years before, but Dad had always been close by and Lissa had been able to see him almost every day, even though she was living with her mum. Now Dad had moved to this houseboat on the river, an hour's drive away. He'd explained it was something he'd wanted to do for a long time – and it would be good for him to be closer to London for work. He'd promised that they'd still see each other as much as before – more even, because Lissa would come and stay and it would be special.

But Lissa wasn't convinced, even though Dad kept saying how exciting it would be to stay

with him on a boat. How could she spend as much time with her dad when she couldn't just run round the corner and knock on the door of his flat? Already she hadn't seen him for over a month, while he'd been moving in and sorting out everything on the boat… When he'd arrived to pick her up, he'd looked almost strange. It was just for a moment, while Lissa got used to his hair being longer, but it had been a bit of a shock.

Still. They were going to make up for lost time now.

"*Rose Dawn*'s a Dutch barge." Dad interrupted Lissa's thoughts, still sounding so pleased and proud. "A long time ago they were built of wood, and they were sailing boats that carried cargo around the canals in Holland. But most of the newer ones like *Rose Dawn* are

metal, and they have engines instead of sails. Although she's nearly a hundred years old, so not that new!"

Dad set off down the path along the side of the river and Lissa hurried after him. A couple of the boats they passed had people sitting out on the little decks at each end, and one man was sunbathing in a chair on the path – they all waved at her and Dad, and Lissa smiled shyly back.

"Are they your neighbours?" she whispered to Dad. "Does everyone stay here all the time, or do the boats move?"

"A bit of both," Dad explained. "*Rose Dawn* has an engine, so I can move her, but I've paid for the spot where she's moored. It's a bit like renting a house, I suppose. But I could take my own house on holiday with me! I'd just set off

up the river without having to do any packing. Isn't that brilliant?"

"I suppose…" Lissa agreed a bit doubtfully. She couldn't quite imagine it. Her house belonged in her street – with her friend Grace next door but one, and school just round the corner, and all the dogs and cats she liked to wave to in their different windows. It wasn't just the *house* that was home, it was the place too.

Dad juggled the bags about a bit so he could put his arm round Lissa's shoulders. "Everything's going to be OK, don't worry."

"I'm not worried *really*…"

"It must feel strange though, the thought of being away from your mum the whole summer. But we'll have fun, I promise."

Lissa nodded. She loved spending time with Dad, that wasn't the problem. But he was right,

six weeks away from home was a big change.

"Here you go." Dad lifted Lissa's backpack over the side of the boat and then held out a hand to help her climb on board. Lissa stood under a sort of canopy roof and felt the boat shift beneath her feet slightly. There was water underneath her, which made her tummy feel a little odd – but Lissa didn't mind it.

"This bit's called the wheelhouse," Dad said, clambering on behind her and pointing to a polished wooden steering wheel, surrounded by complicated-looking dials and gauges. "And we go down these steps and along here into the saloon." He led Lissa down into a cosy living room, with a sofa built into the side of the boat, and a couple of armchairs. "Then this end is the kitchen – except on a boat you call it the galley."

"It's bigger than the living room in your old flat, I think," Lissa said, looking around.

Dad snorted with laughter. "I know. I really love it, Lissa. I think you will too. Want to see your cabin? We have to go back the other way – I wanted to show you the main saloon first." He beckoned her out into the narrow passageway and waved at the wooden doors. "Bathroom's over here – and that's just for you, there's another one off my cabin at the other end of the barge." Then he opened the door opposite, glancing hopefully at Lissa. "Here you go. This is one of the reasons I liked *Rose Dawn* so much. There's a whole room that you can have for your own."

Lissa peered in, not sure what to expect. She'd liked her room in Dad's flat. They'd painted it together, and Dad had let her help

choose the furniture. She didn't think any of it would fit in a little boat cabin.

"Oh!" She swung round to look up at Dad. Her star-print duvet was on a high bunk bed and the space underneath had been made into a sofa. It was piled with cushions and the huge teddy bear that Dad had won for her at the funfair last summer. "It's like my high sleeper."

"I think the people who invented high sleeper beds must have got the idea from boats," Dad said. "Boat designers can fit anything anywhere. Have you seen there's a bookshelf along each end of the sofa? And there are drawers underneath it too."

"Can I sit on it?" Lissa asked, suddenly feeling shy.

"Of course you can. It's your bedroom. No one else is going to sleep in here, I promise. If

any friends stay, they can sleep on the sofa in the saloon – that's the spare bedroom as well."

Lissa nodded and sat down on the edge of the sofa, picking up the big, saggy bear. He smelled of her old room. She looked slowly round the rest of the cabin. Dad was right – it was all so tidy and clever. There was a little table built into the corner with a chair tucked underneath. Dad had put the pens and pencils she'd left at the flat on there, and a Japanese waving cat he'd given her for Christmas. Lissa stretched out and tapped the cat's paw to make it wave – the cabin was so small that she could reach across, but she didn't mind. Dad had brought all her things. He'd fussed about where to put them for her. He wanted her to be happy.

"I thought the table would be good for doing

homework, if you come and stay at weekends in term time," Dad explained. "I know it's not very big… Do you like it?"

Lissa scrambled up and hugged him. "I love it!"





Lissa wasn't usually very good at unpacking when she went to stay with Dad – she was never there for very long so it was easier just to live out of a bag. But on *Rose Dawn* she couldn't do that. There wasn't enough space in her cabin to keep tripping over her huge backpack. She squashed her clothes away in the two big drawers and lined up the books she'd brought on the shelves along the sofa. She put a photo of Mum and Zoe on the shelf too.

Then she stopped to look out of the tiny round window right next to her sofa bunk. She could see out of it if she kneeled up – there was a perfect view of glittering water, and then the boats and trees on the

opposite bank. Her view. Her own little slice of river. A duck floated past, cutting a narrow wake through the water. The odd bubble popped here and there. Something brownish-grey surfaced for a moment, and then disappeared – *perhaps it was a fish*, Lissa thought, almost pressing her nose against the glass. She smiled to herself, feeling all the niggly worries about staying with Dad and missing Mum and Zoe slide away with the deep water.



"How are you doing?" Dad looked round the cabin door. "Oh, well done, you managed to get all your stuff in. I wasn't sure if everything would fit! Do you want to come and sit up in the wheelhouse with me? I've got some biscuits."

Lissa nodded and hurried up the steps, chasing eagerly after her dad. The wheelhouse was the open bit where they'd first climbed aboard. She'd noticed it had picnic chairs and a little table. It was like a sort of outdoor living room, half open to the water. She could keep watching the river, and they could talk about the things they were going to do over the summer.

Dad had promised they could go on all sorts of fun trips. *Rose Dawn* wasn't moored on the Thames in the centre of London, but it was easy enough to get there – there was a train station

close by the mooring. They could still go to museums, see a show at the theatre, and even visit the Tower of London and see the Crown Jewels. Lissa had looked up things to do in London online – Mum didn't live that far away but day trips there were a rare treat. She had made a list of all the things she wanted to see.

Dad had good biscuits, chocolate-coated and with chocolate chips. He'd made himself a cup of tea and there was a glass of blackcurrant squash for Lissa on the table. She curled herself up in the folding chair and looked about. The wheelhouse had a canopy over the top and short fabric walls, a bit like a beach windbreak. It all reminded Lissa of camping. It would be cold sitting there in the winter but on a hot day like today it was lovely. She could hear the water, gently splashing and sucking

at the side of the boat, and there was a river smell. Half nice, and half not. What Mum would call *interesting*.

The splashing was because another boat was going past – a narrowboat, like *Rose Dawn* but not quite so wide. The woman steering it waved as she saw Lissa watching and Lissa waved back at her. That woman thought Lissa belonged on a boat.

Maybe she did.

"I love sitting out here," Dad said. "You get to see everyone walking along the river path, and then the boats as well. And the ducks," he added, pointing to a string of ducks who'd appeared silently along the side, looking hopeful. "I feed them toast crusts. I think they've got us marked down as a good boat to beg from now."

Lissa eyed her half-finished chocolate biscuit. She wanted to feed the ducks but she didn't really want to give it away – besides, maybe chocolate wasn't good for ducks? She knew it was bad for dogs.

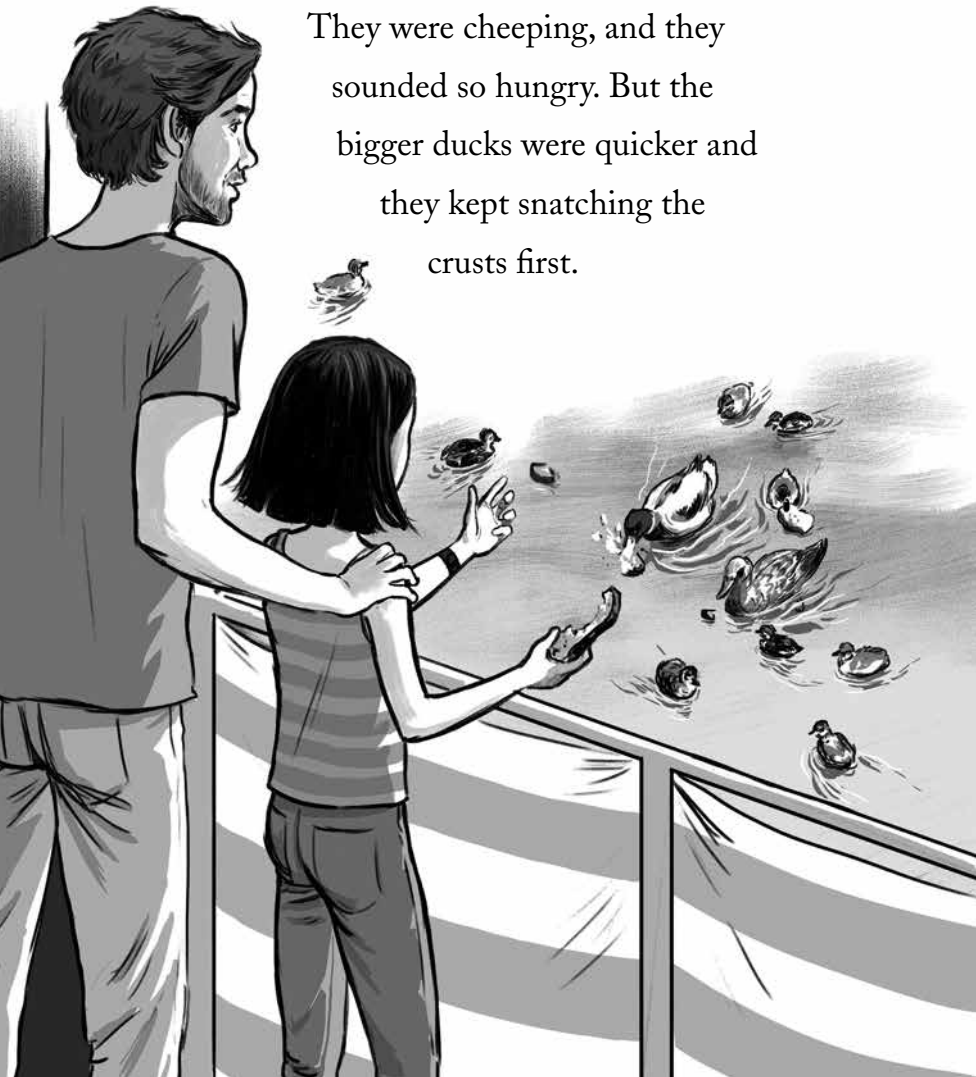
Dad handed her a plate that he'd left on the counter above the wheel. "It's OK. You keep the biscuit. I saved this from breakfast."

"Thanks, Dad." Lissa crammed the biscuit into her mouth and took the plate of leftover toast. The ducks seemed to know what was going on as soon as they saw the plate and they started circling eagerly. "There's more coming," Lissa told Dad as she tore the toast into little bits. "Oh, Dad, look! Ducklings!"

Dad stood next to her. "Cute, aren't they? So small. They bob around like those plastic bath ducks. I can't imagine keeping track of them all,

though… How many are there? Eight? Nine?"

"Nine, I think. They're really fluffy." Lissa threw the toast pieces, trying to aim them at the tiny brown and yellow ducklings. They were cheeping, and they sounded so hungry. But the bigger ducks were quicker and they kept snatching the crusts first.



"Hang on, I've got the end of a loaf going a bit stale." Dad disappeared down the steps into the main part of the boat and came back seconds later with a couple more slices. "OK, we need to send the big ones off over there."

He threw a few small pieces of bread further out into the river and the larger ducks raced after them, the water swirling around their fast-paddling feet. The ducklings fluttered and cheeped, and Lissa was sure they looked sad. "It's OK," she called, tearing up the second slice and throwing it down. "Here you go. But you've got to eat it fast, they'll be back any second…"

The ducklings shot here and there, gobbling up the crumbs and still squeaking excitedly. Then they gazed up at Lissa and Dad, looking for more.

"That was the last of the loaf, sorry!" Dad

held his hands up, as if he was showing the ducks they were empty. "There is actually another loaf for lunch," he whispered in Lissa's ear. "I'm just not telling them that…"

Lissa snorted with laughter as the ducklings paddled away after their mother in a long string. She saw other birds too – geese sailing



down the middle of the river, a swan standing on one leg over on the opposite bank, its head tucked under its wing. Seagulls perched on the rail of the next boat along, watching Lissa with sharp yellow eyes.

So much to see. It was going to be the best summer. Dad had promised.

