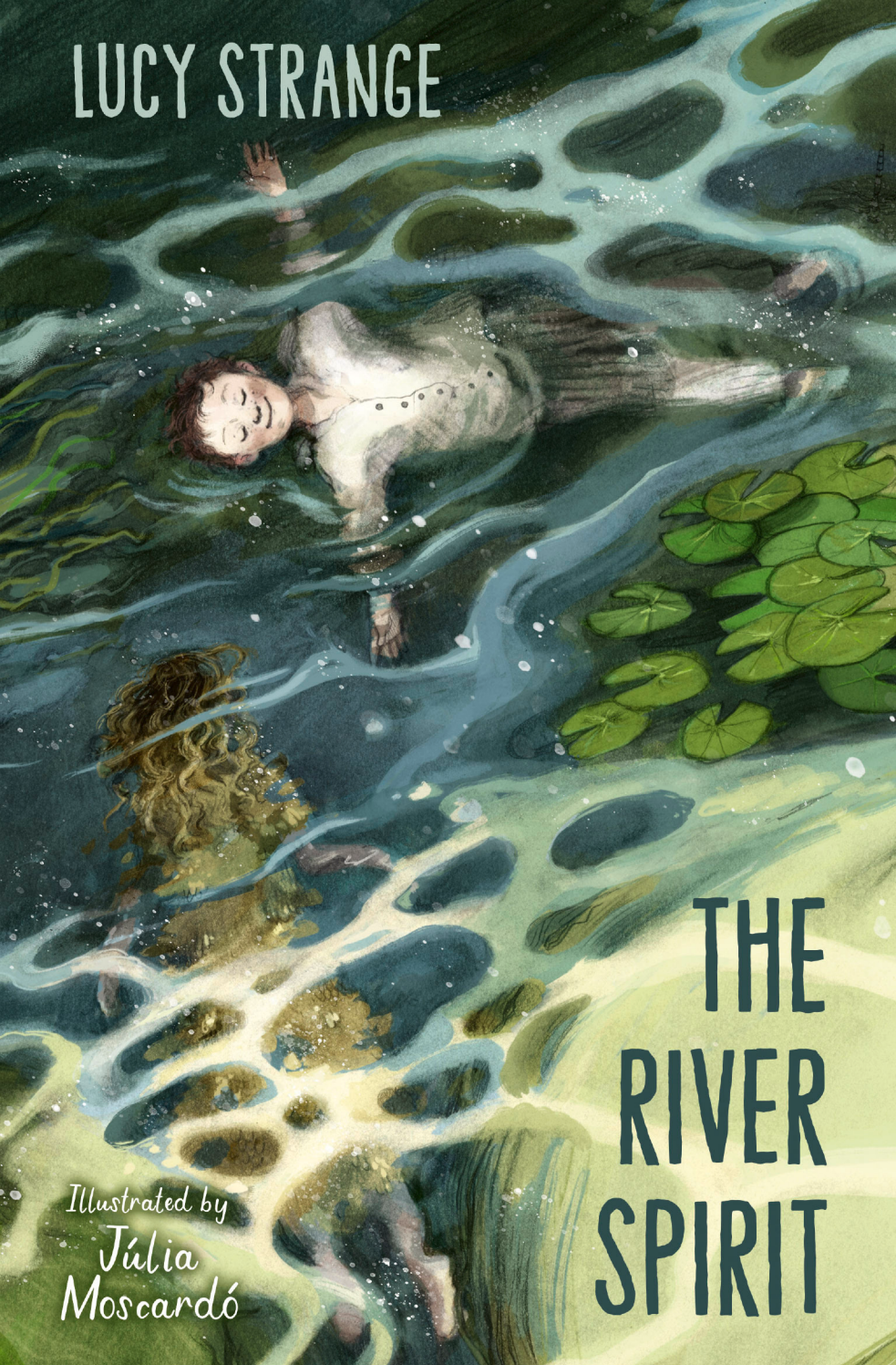




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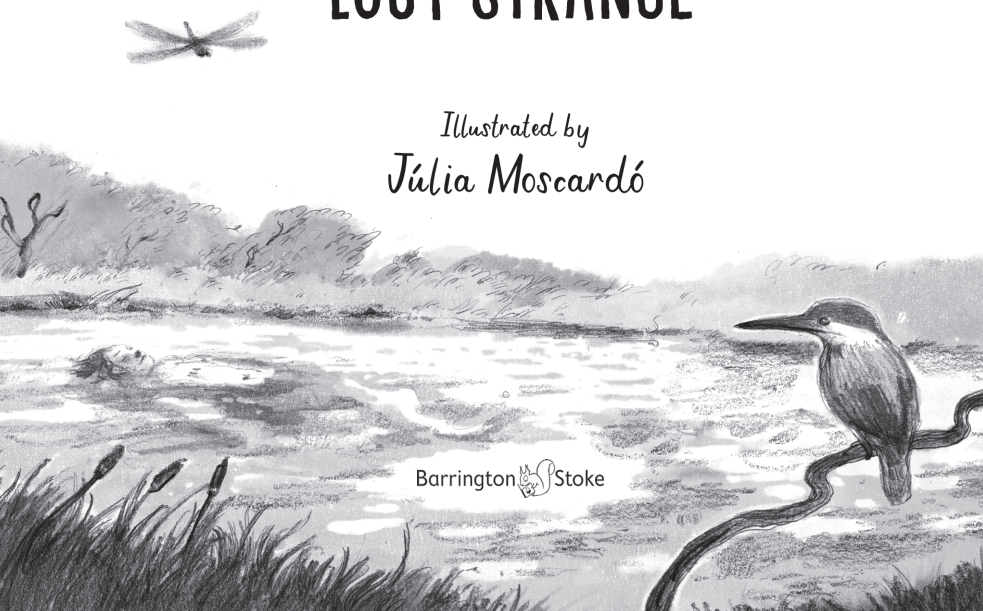
THE RIVER SPIRIT

Illustrated by
Júlia
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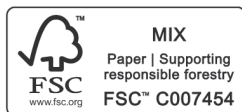
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For Ellie

CHAPTER 1

A few weeks ago, I started seeing things. I mean *odd* things. Things that most people say aren't really there.

I saw a soot monster crouching in the darkness of a chimney. I saw fairies fluttering about in the wild flowers by the river. I saw the ghosts of dead ferrymen, drifting in the reeds like morning mist. In church, the vicar told us we'd burn in hell unless we stopped poaching and pinching and scrumping. As he spoke, I saw a gargoyle grin down and wink at me.

But then I saw Elle. She was different from all those odd things because the other chimney sweeps saw her too. And Mister Crow, our boss. His heart nearly stopped when he saw Elle standing on the riverbank. She stared at him with her big gold eyes, and he stared right back.

She must be real if Mister Crow can see her,
I thought. *Mustn't she?*



We'd been having our Sunday morning wash. Mister Crow's wife, Sally, took us to the river once a week before church. We had a dunk in the icy water, whether we wanted it or not. Bert didn't want to get in, as usual. Sally Crow chased him up and down the riverbank, and Bert squealed, "I'll be drowned!"

The smallest chimney sweep, Squirrel, got in without any pushing or nagging. She sloshed about, glaring at Sally Crow all the while. Squirrel never shrieked or shivered – she said she'd never give Mister and Missus Crow the satisfaction.



At last, Bert went into the shallow water, with a push from Sally. He dipped in his hands and face, and the top of his curly head. Then he shook himself dry like a dog. The sooty droplets flew all over Sally Crow, and she screamed at him.

Mister Crow came down the track to see what all the noise was about. His donkey, Mavis, was tied to the fence post. She *heehaawed* loudly, joining in the racket.

I was in the river, lying on my back, watching them all. I was watching the fairies too, and the dragonflies as they flitted between the spikes of pink willowherb.

A kingfisher darted over my head – a sudden flash of colour. She swooped up to perch on her branch.

I smiled and breathed slowly.

I was the only one who enjoyed the Sunday morning wash. I got in happily – in summer and winter. I was a better swimmer than the other chimney sweeps, and I knew that the icy water only stung for a minute or two ... And then it was just wonderful.

“Tom! Get out now or we’ll be late!” Sally Crow yelled at me.

But I ignored her. I didn’t want to get out.

I loved the river. I loved the way the river lifted you and rolled you and washed you clean.

Floating in the cool current, I could daydream about playing in the orchard on the far side of the river. I could gaze at the thatched roof of our old cottage, peeking between the trees. I could pretend life was just as it used to be ... That I wasn’t a chimney sweep – a slave to Mister Crow.

In the river, I was Tom Waterman once more.

I was the ferryman's son.

I was free ...

“Tom! Get yourself back here now!” Mister Crow yelled.

I gasped, jolted out of my daydream, and almost swallowed a mouthful of the river. I looked around, blinking water out of my eyes. The kingfisher had gone from her perch.

The fairies had vanished into the willowherb.

A cloud had covered the sun.