BECCA ROGERS



The GIRL with GILLS

BECCA ROGERS

The GIRL with GILLS



ZEPHYR
An imprint of Head of Zeus

This is a Zephyr book, first published in the UK in 2025 by
Head of Zeus, part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Copyright © Becca Rogers, 2025

The moral right of Becca Rogers to be identified
as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be: i) reproduced or transmitted in any form, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by means of any information storage or retrieval system without prior permission in writing from the publishers; or ii) used or reproduced in any way for the training, development or operation of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, including generative AI technologies. The rights holders expressly reserve this publication from the text and data mining exception as per Article 4(3) of the Digital Single Market Directive (EU) 2019/790.

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (PB): 9781035912377
ISBN (E): 9781035912384

Cover design: Khoa Le
Typeset by Ed Pickford

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK

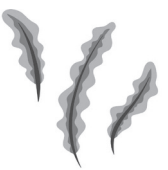
Bloomsbury Publishing Ireland Limited,
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, D02 AY28, Ireland

Head of Zeus Ltd
First Floor East
5–8 Hardwick Street
London EC1R 4RG

To find out more about our authors and books visit www.headofzeus.com
For product safety related questions contact productsafety@bloomsbury.com

For darling Elsa and Hetty.

For my beloved dad.



Time and Tide
Thirty years ago…





Shard Marrow was dented and rusting, but she was still watertight. Just. In the cold, pre-dawn chill, Reed uncurled from the woodburner in the galley. It was pointless lying there. The whispering embers had fallen into stone-cold silence hours before.

He blinked in the gloom, squinting at the river through the porthole. He may as well get up and move; get some warmth into his limbs.

There were two cabins in *Shard Marrow* and he allowed himself, for a moment, to think about the cosy bunk in the smallest one. It had covers and even a pillow, but they had long been buried in gleaming white bones – no wonder the other larker families avoided him and his mother. He didn't blame them. How could he, when he could scarcely endure her company himself?

Reed reached his hand under his scarf and stroked his gills. A way of soothing himself he'd had since he was little.

He *was* as good as anyone else. Deep in the most secret part of his heart, he clung to that hope. Just as his forebears had risen from the muck and mire of their circumstance to

grow gills and become larkers, perhaps he too could rise from this dented tin boat so empty of affection. Weren't his gills proof that it was possible?

A shaky voice sounded next to him. 'Reed…'

'Shhhh, it's all right, Marsh. Don't worry.'

'I'm so cold.' The younger boy coughed, a rattle that shook his thin shoulders.

'I know.' Reed kissed him on the forehead, adjusting his brother's polka dot neckerchief. Carefully he tucked his own blanket around Marsh. 'It's early. Try to get some more sleep.'

Reed climbed out of the hatch, salty river air blasting through his cropped hair. His heart sank. His mother was already awake. Maura scowled across the water, gills uncovered, her black dress ragged around her ankles.

'Get on with it, boy. Tide won't wait for you and neither will I.'

Silently, Reed picked his way through broken bottles, shredded nets and animal bones that littered the deck. His mother's *projects* were always underway, their fortunes pending, but somehow never completed.

As Reed reached the shore, his mother cuffed him hard around the back of his head. She didn't even look at him.

Reed curled his angular body in on itself, swallowing the yelp that leaped into his throat. He had learned, long ago, how fear only made his mother crueller.

'Find enough to sell,' Maura snapped. 'Or yer brother'll go hungry. Again.'

A water snail crawled across a pebble by Reed's foot. He lifted his foot and ground the creature beneath his heel. The crack of shell didn't make him feel better as such, but it released a pressure somewhere in his heart. To know that he could control the fate of another, the way his mother controlled him, was a comfort.

'Into the swells with you. Get deep in the mud. Don't come back till dusk.'

His mother thrust a bag into his hands and turned away.

Reed lowered himself into the water, taut gills unfurling as the river washed over them. He narrowed his eyes, waiting a moment for his water gaze to settle; for the blurry shapes beneath the waves to make sense. When his sight adjusted, he pushed off from the riverbank and cut, sharp as a blade, through the undercurrent.

His mother didn't know about his collection. Reed smiled. He would fill his bag with things to sell – scrap metal, old coins, driftwood that could be dried for the fire. It would be too dangerous to return to Maura empty-handed. Today he was not only larking for the old bones his mother collected, but something else as well. Excitement flickered through him.

Living creatures.

It had taken months to find the perfect place. But once he had, it had been easy to plan. He'd rigged wire and rusted metal into makeshift cages. Ugly, but effective.

Now he could begin to fill them.



Mudlarking

For centuries, mudlarks would search the muddy banks of the River Yore for valuables that had washed ashore. They reached the water in many ways – dropped from pockets, tossed from bridges and ships from far-flung lands – all of interest to those who knew how to look.

Over time, larking was no longer viewed as acceptable. Larkers became outcasts, but many continued their work in secrecy, hiding – like their treasure – beside the sand and silt of the river.

Time and Tide Today…



One



Effra drew a deep breath through her gills and swam from the bottom of the river. With a quick peep first to check she wasn't observed, she surfaced fully. A cold breeze prickled her damp skin. The Yore smelled fresh today, with a hint of algae. The frills of skin either side of her neck tingled, but there was no more time for larking this morning.

She clambered up her boat ladder, plucked a strand of livid green eelgrass from her hair, and shook droplets from her webbed toes. She looked back across the murky water. *The browner the river, the richer the pickings*. Every larker knew that. Her stomach flipped with excitement. Something had disturbed the Yore's muddy depths and *that* meant treasure.

'Fleet! Move yer rollin' bones,' she called, pulling on some dry clothes. 'Tide's turnin'.'

There was a thumping sound coming from his cabin, which sounded suspiciously like a seven-year-old leaping up and down. 'Comin', Effie.'

The deck rocked and creaked grumpily beneath her feet, but *Snug Harbour* was tough. The sea-glass blue planks slotted together, tight as sardines in a tin, keeping out the damp river mists. Once there had been lots of cabin boats on the thriving Yore waterway. Now only *Snug Harbour* and their neighbour, the *Pickled Eel,* remained, bobbing alongside luxury yachts.

'*Bigger ain't necessarily better*,' her grandfather, Boppa, used to say with a twinkle. '*You know well enough from the foreshore, some treasures come small. Don't we have a bed, blankets, fire an' a roof? Well, then…*' With that he'd pull another chunk of dried river wood, throw it into the burner and shake the metal kettle to check for water. '*What else should we need?*'

Sadness puddled in Effra's stomach. *Don't think about Boppa.*

'Quick as a crab, Fleet!' She stuck a finger in her ear, wiggling it to release a trickle of river water. 'We need to get to the market and shift a few trinkets.'

Fleet hopped out of the cabin; one shoe on, one shoe in his hand. Fleet was his middle name really, a family name, which had floated quietly down the generations. It had bobbed back to the surface with her brother. He was slim as an eel and so fast – fleet of foot, fleet of wit, fleet of laughter – that it suited him better than anything else. He beamed up at her through a tangle of

hair, revealing the gap where his front two milk teeth used to be.

'Ready!' he panted. 'I was doing starfish jumps.'

Effra couldn't keep the smile from her lips – Fleet could never keep still. 'Come here, let me check you.'

She ran her eyes over Fleet's neck. His red neckerchief was wonky, a tiny glimpse of frilled skin visible over the top.

'Fleet! Yer gills are showing.' She tucked his scarf back and tied her own expertly. 'Do you *want* to be snatched for 'speriments by some lubber?'

Fleet looked at the boat deck and scuffed it with his toe. 'No.'

'What would Boppa have said?'

Fleet's mouth turned down at the corners. 'He'd say, "Keep yer head down and yer neckerchief on,"'

'Exactly.' Effra tried to look stern, but her resolve melted at the sight of his chin dipping to his chest.

They climbed off the jetty to the riverbank, the Yore washing beside them with a *hush, hush, hush*. Fleet trotted to the water's edge, cupping some of the river in his hands.

'Oof.' He splashed his gills and dampened his neckerchief. 'That's better, they were *parched*. Good lark this mornin', Eff?'

'A few good pieces of brass, but we might 'av more luck later when the tide turns. Something's been stirring

the depths.' She steered Fleet towards the ladder leading to the street. 'So. What's the rule?'

'Effie. I *know* the rule, you say it every time.'

'One more time won't hurt, then, will it?'

Fleet sighed. 'You can never trust a lubber.'

'What happened to Granny Pip?'

'Arrested for a pickpocket and never came home.'

'And Uncle Graves?'

'Went to a doctor for gill-ache and disappeared.'

'Come on, then.'

They shinned up the ladder on to the pavement. Fleet was humming a shanty, but Effra's jaw was tense. A steady stream of city folk marched the street, eyes glaring straight ahead. The fresh smell of the river was swallowed into the smog.

Effra closed her gills to the city's spewing fumes. She grabbed Fleet's hand and whispered, 'Last one there's a rotten snake egg!'

They hurtled along the embankment, up Cobble Street and round the corner to the huge arched front of the market. A drab stream of lubbers swept inside, their faces expressionless and sun-weathered from spending so much time in the Overwater. Effra sighed. If it was up to her, she and Fleet would lock the hatch to *Snug Harbour*, keep the world out, and stay safe on their patch of river. But they had to eat. Every week market day came round

again, like a bad penny in a riptide. Today the grand hall was busy with lubbers and so loud it made her gills *itch* to return to the peace of the water.

'Wilf!' cried Fleet, waving. 'Mabel!'

He darted off between the stalls, past the rag-and-bone woman, the honey-scented apiarist and the glinting wares of the book gilder. With a polite, 'Not today, fank you,' he skipped round the muttering fortune teller, waved at the eggler, who had so many feathers poking from his jumper he resembled his brood of hens – and turned to avoid the leech winkler with her jars of twitching black parasites.

Effra followed him to a table in the centre where their guardians were sitting in a pair of rickety chairs, their hair two fluffy white clouds above high-necked jumpers. For the past six months, Wilf and Mabel had popped into the *Snug* every day; bringing meals, books or cast-off clothes they thought would fit. Effra suspected most of these offerings were an excuse to check in on her and Fleet.

'Mornin', minnows!' Wilf heaved himself from his chair, knee joints cracking. 'Oh, rusty bones today! You two all right?'

'Ahoy,' said Mabel, knitting needles clacking madly.

'Ahoy. Ooh, look!' Fleet wandered to a stall heaped with old photos and started sifting through.

'This is a prime spot.' Effra nodded to the tabletop, dotted with river-washed glass bottles. 'Who'd yer have to bribe?'

Wilf winked and leaned forward. 'A larker just took on stallholder management. So…'

Effra glanced round. The prime pitches were all taken by larkers from the major families. Each had a speciality – glass, garnet, ceramic – that they broadly stuck to when trading. She took in the sparkling silver on the table beside them, before swinging her rucksack on to their table and unloading the bent spoon bracelets and old coin necklaces she'd made the night before.

'How are you?' Mabel looked up from her knitting and deep into Effra's eyes. 'How are you *really*?'

The answers sprang into Effra's mind. *Heartbroken. Sad. Lonely.* But the words snagged in her throat like fish on a hook. She didn't want their guardians to know about the tears that flowed so freely at night-time that she might as well have dunked her pillow straight into the river before going to bed.

'We're fine.'

'Effie!' Fleet ran over clutching a black-and-white photo. 'Look what I found! It's our mooring, back in the olden days. Can I buy it? Please?'

Effra's stomach clenched. Her purse was light. She was relying on trade today to top them up for another week.

'Pleeeeeeease?'

'I'll get it for you.' Wilf reached into his pocket.

'No!' Effra said, a little too loudly. She tried again: 'Thanks, but we can manage on our own.'

'It's no bother, darlin',' murmured Wilf. 'Takes a lot of streams to make a river.'

Effra shook her head. 'We don't need any help.'

She thought about the tin of beans she'd been planning to eat that night. Fleet looked up at her, eyes as wide as they could go. *Half a tin will have to do.*

'Last one, Fleet, all right?' She slipped a coin into his clammy fist.

'Yes!' Fleet beamed. 'You're the *best*, Effie.'

As he skipped back to the photo stall, a cut-glass voice said, 'Are these for sale?'

A girl was eyeing the coin necklaces. She looked about thirteen, Effra's age, hair hanging either side of her face, dyed red on one side, turquoise on the other. Effra glanced instinctively at her smooth, gill-less neck.

Lubber.

The girl half-smiled at Effra.

She wasn't used to people her own age. She'd never been allowed to go to school in case they spotted her gills. Apart from her and Fleet there weren't many young larkers in the Shallows and there was no way she'd leave their stretch of water, not after Boppa's stories of Deep River.

'Er…yeah. Fresh from the foreshore.' Effra picked up a necklace and dangled it so it caught the light. 'This one's a—'

'Gold quart, by the look of it?' The girl peered at the date. 'Same year they opened the Iron Bridge.'

Effra raised an eyebrow.

'I'm interested, you know, in history.' The girl ducked her head so her hair covered her face. 'Do a bit of mudlarking myself, actually.'

Boppa's voice flew into Effra's mind. '*They don't call it larkin', them that's not off the boats. They call it "Mudlarking". But if I was to start with all them extra 'd's an' 'g's, I wouldn't get home in time to 'av me pipe. I'd be grumpy as a hungry gull!*'

Effra shook her head. *Not. Now.*

'Well, I picked this one up at—'

A tall man strode over, a tailored suit jacket straining over his generous stomach. He eyed Effra and wrinkled his nose. 'What's this *tat*, Annabelle?'

'Call me Bow, Dad, remember?' said the girl, a hot blush creeping up her cheeks. 'This is the stall I was looking for, with the things from the river.'

'Not this again,' the man boomed, glancing dismissively at Wilf's bottles. 'I've told you before, *Annabelle*. This mudding, or whatever you call it, is a filthy hobby. Pointless too. If you want something worthwhile, I'll buy it for you. He grabbed his daughter's arm and marched

her away. Effra tried to smile, but Bow was lobster red and wouldn't meet her eye.

'Lubbers!' Wilf huffed.

'Mmm.' Effra let the necklace drop back to the table. 'Mad as mud-crabs.'

'Got it!' Fleet trotted over clutching the photo. Spotting a manhole cover, he took a running jump and leaped over it. '*Drains on the run, dodge the Rivermun!*'

Mabel tutted. 'Rivermun ain't a laughin' matter.'

'Why?' Fleet's tongue poked out of the side of his mouth as he judged the distance from the next drain. 'What's so bad about 'im?'

'We collect trinkets.' Wilf gestured to his table of river finds. 'Rivermun, well, he collects too, things that take his fancy.' A worried look passed over his face. '*Critters* that take his fancy. He'll drag 'em from the water without a care, just like we might put a shiny button in our pocket. Rivermun's compassion washed away on a tide as old as I am.'

'He was larker once,' said Mabel. She wrenched a string of wool over her knitting needles and pursed her lips. 'Unsettlin' boy. Put things in cages, pulled the legs off newts, y'know. But he *was* larker, till he was land-locked by Mother River.'

'Land-locked?' Effra shuddered. *Forbidden to enter the river at all. How could any larker survive more than a day?*

Mabel's brows drew together in a frown. 'It was a bad business. Nothin' funny about that time. Brought shame on us all.'

'Were you there, Mabel?' said Effra. 'You knew 'im? Rivermun?'

Mabel peered determinedly at her knitting.

'Bother. I dropped a stitch.' She yanked the needles out, ripping stitches until she had a fistful of neon wool and barely any tea cosy. 'Don't distract me now,' she said, not meeting Effra's eye. 'I've got to count these rows.'

'But…'

'One, two, three…'

Wilf clapped his hands. 'Tide's handy today.'

A pang of longing shot through Effra; the thought of a river breeze and shingle crunching underfoot. Her gills were already dry from the muggy city air. 'Yep.'

'Go on.' Wilf laughed. 'Ain't no use us all bein' stuck here. We'll see to the stall, you take yer brother and get some larkin' done.'

'I don't know…' Effra glanced at the trinkets and chewed at her thumbnail.

'Oh, Effie, I need to have a lark,' cried her brother. 'I ain't bin out all mornin'!'

'Be off with yer both,' Mabel said, the smile back on her face. 'We'll drop yer takings round later.'

Wilf waved his hand regally. 'Away you go!'

'All right.' Effra winked at Fleet, who was zipping his photo into his pocket. She scooped up a snapped rose head, lying on the ground by the herbalist's stall. 'Time for a spot of larkin'.'

