


LBRIS

We know
books

Song of the River

GILL LEWIS

Illustrated by
Zanna Goldhawk

Barrington  Stoke



CHAPTER I

I never wanted to live here.

Before we moved to this valley, we lived in the city. Mum, Dad and me.

We lived in a warm flat at the top of a big building. The street was lined with trees and my bedroom overlooked the park. I walked to school every day and at weekends I played with friends.

Every Friday night, Dad and I got fish and chips from the chippy. We all sat in front of the telly eating them from the paper bags with loads of salt and vinegar.



And I remember looking at the advert – at the grassy lawn and the big old trees that dipped their branches into the sparkling river. But I couldn't see us being there somehow, because I knew Dad couldn't be there with us too.

But Mum bought the cottage. She sold our flat in the city and we moved in here three weeks ago, before the end of the summer term. I left all my friends and school behind.

But the cafe is Mum's dream. Not mine.

I didn't want to leave our old flat at all.

Because leaving the city meant leaving Dad behind too.

CHAPTER 2

"Cari!" Mum calls to me from downstairs. "Hurry up! I need some help down here."

This is the day of the grand opening of Mum's cafe. Mum planned everything before we even moved into the cottage. She bought and painted old tables and chairs in bright colours. She sewed hems onto checked tablecloths and bought vintage teacups and saucers from charity shops. It means that we are ready to open our doors just three weeks after moving in.

The rich scent of sweet baking and roast coffee swirls up the stairs.



Up here, there's a bedroom each for Mum and me, plus a big room we use as a living room, with a saggy sofa and a TV. The downstairs of our house has become the cafe rooms and kitchen. The cafe spreads out into the long strip of garden that runs alongside the river.

"Cari!" Mum shouts again. "We're opening in fifteen minutes."

I pull on the red-and-white-checked apron that Mum made me. She even said she'd pay me proper money to be a waitress in the cafe. But somehow each new thing we do takes us further and further from Dad. I stop and run my fingers along the chest at the foot of Mum's bed. All of Dad's stuff is in there. All his stuff that Mum didn't want to sell or give away.

I open it and look in, knowing what I'll see. There's all his camera equipment: camera, long lenses and tripods.

Dad was a photographer. He did portraits, weddings and other events. I remember him telling me he loved taking photos because looking through the lens gave you a window into other people's lives. Dad said it gave you a different way to see the world. Underneath the camera gear is Dad's big red woollen jumper he always wore.

I lift the jumper up and bury my nose in it. It still smells of Dad. And my heart aches so deep inside because Dad's jumper is here, but he's not. He can never be here. I can't even see Dad's face. If I try to imagine him, I see him at the hospital. But that's not the dad I know. I just want to go back to our old flat, curl up on the sofa with him and eat fish and chips from the paper. I don't want to be here at all.

"Cari!" Mum says. "Come down! I can see people walking up the lane."



I go downstairs and pick up my notepad and pencil to take the orders. It's a nice day. The sun is shining and the tables in the garden are ready for our customers. Mum's put the tables by the river in the shade of the trees. She's put birdfeeders out too, but I don't think it's such a good idea. I can already see bird droppings on the clean tablecloths and I'm sure I saw a rat swimming in the river the other day.

The river looks almost pretty today in the sunlight. Mum says she loves hearing the sound of the water. She says it makes her feel calm. But I can see there's a power to the river. I can hear its angry rumble as it surges down the valley. It's dark and churning under its sparkling surface. I feel angry like the river too.

I look along the lane and see a family walking towards us: a mum, a dad and a boy

and girl. The girl looks about my age. I step back into the kitchen. It feels as if Mum and I are half a family now. Suddenly I don't want to be seen.

"Come on, Cari," says Mum. "I need your help." She pulls a batch of freshly baked brownies from the oven.

I force a sparkling smile and walk out into the garden where the family have sat down at a table.

"You must be Cari," says the woman.

I nod.

"I met your mum in the post office yesterday," she goes on, smiling. "I'm Mandy, and this is my husband, Alan. And this is Emmi and Ollie."



Ollie's younger than his sister. He's sliding in his seat, fidgeting as if he doesn't want to be here.

Mum comes out and joins in the chat. "Hello again," she says to Mandy. Mum turns to me. "These are our neighbours, Cari."

Mandy nods and says, "We're from Beverley Farm up the valley."

Mum then turns to Emmi. "Cari will be in your class at school after the summer. That'll be nice, won't it, Cari?"

I smile, but I want to shrink away. I've always been shy. I'm never sure how other people know what to say. And I don't want to go to the school here. I want to be back at my old school with my old friends.

Emmi smiles but says nothing too.

"What can we get you?" asks Mum. "Tea? Coffee? Cakes?"

I take the order back to the kitchen with Mum and already there are other people sitting down at the tables.

We're busy all morning and into the afternoon. It's not until 5 p.m. that we finally stop serving and put the closed sign on the gate.

We're clearing up when a young man and woman cycle up to the gate. They look out of breath.

"Are we too late?" asks the man.

I can see Mum doesn't want to say no. "We're shut now, but I could get you a cup of tea and piece of hummingbird cake," she says. "It's all we've got left today."



"Perfect," says the woman. "Thank you."

They take a seat by the river. I make the tea and put two pieces of cake on plates and take it to them.

By the time I get there, the woman is crouching down on her knees and looking past the long grasses to the river.

She turns to the man and asks, "Luke, did you see it?"

Luke shakes his head.

"There!" she says. "It's on the other side."

I look across and see a rat swimming in the water, its nose above the surface.

"Oh yes!" said Luke. "You're right, Jenny. A water vole. I'm surprised it's here. They normally like slow-flowing water."

"It's not a rat?" I say.

They both turn and Jenny smiles. "No," she replies. "It's a water vole. They're very rare. Luke and I work at the nature reserve above Beverley Farm and we've been trying to attract water voles for years. I didn't know they were here."

I shrug. It's small and brown and looks like a rat to me. I can't see why they are so excited about it.

"And these are common blue damselflies," says Jenny. She points at what look like blue dragonflies rising up in front of her.

