

WONDERFULLY ATMOSPHERIC AND LYRICAL—ALI SPARKES

Rebecca Smith



SHADOW
CAT
SUMMER

Illustrated by Dawn Treacher

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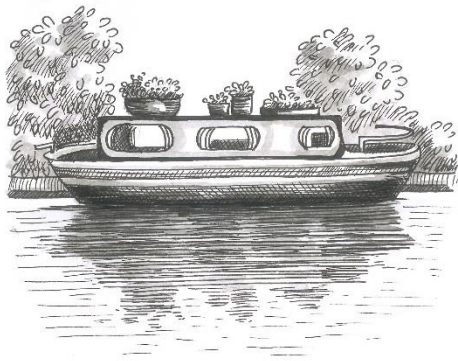
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For Harry, Daisy and Eddie
with all my love.



Chapter 1

London

You might think it's lovely living on a houseboat. Sometimes you would be right. It's lovely when it's sunny and you get up early and see birds and other boats going by, and eat your breakfast outside, or stay up late and look at the stars and the lights dancing on the black water. We have a string of coloured lightbulbs and paper lanterns for parties. But a lot of the time you'd be wrong. Sometimes it is freezing and smelly and our clothes are never dry. The wind is salty even though we're miles from the sea, and suddenly our lips crack and we get cracks on our fingers, like the world's deepest ever papercuts. Maybe an evil papercut demon sails down the Thames and sneaks on board in the night. Even now in summer it can be really cold.

On our boat everything is tiny and everything really should be kept tidy. When your only space in the world is this small, you can't leave a mess, or keep stuff you don't need. One time our mum even made us chuck away things out of party bags on the way home from a party.

All the rooms go into each other. That's annoying. Mum has a bedroom to herself up at the bow, but she practices her viola wherever she likes, often on deck when it's not too cold. Alex and I have to share a bedroom, which is not good when you are eleven. Mum put a curtain up to try to make separate spaces, but it doesn't really work. We always know what the other one is doing, even what they're thinking...

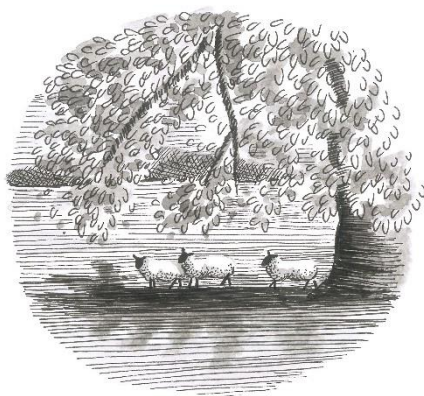
Katrina McCloud looked up from her work. She realised she was doing what Mr. Morgan called “digressing”. They were meant to be writing about “Where I Live”. She glanced across the classroom to see what Alex was doing, even though she knew he'd be at the illustrating stage already. He never wrote much, just wanted to draw and draw and draw. Katrina wondered what exactly she should draw. A picture of their houseboat that morning wouldn't have been very nice. Her mum had been banging about in the bedroom, playing horrible, scratchy music, and not bothering to see if they had breakfast (they did, cornflakes with no milk) or even if they went to school.

Katrina wondered if she would ever write the truth about what life on The Bluebell was like. Somehow, she and Alex had always known that they weren't meant to talk about some things. It was as though they had a secret, a dark, shadowy thing that lurked, and sometimes went away, but then suddenly came back and yowled, and nobody talked about it being there.

She crossed out the bit about the party bags, not with one neat ruled line, the way they were meant to, but with black, angry scratches of pen that almost ripped through the paper.

She got up and went over to look at how Alex was getting on. He was drawing a picture of The Bluebell, a cross-section, so that

you could see how all the rooms connected and what was inside them. She knew that he would go on to add a view under the water with freshwater fish and plants and little creatures that only he knew the names of. His pictures always looked perfect. Funny that you could be twins but not good at the same stuff. She wished she'd got some of the drawing skills. And Alex could have done with a bit more of the boldness that she had. Though it was only people he was timid with, the sort of people who laughed when they found out that his real name was Alexei, and who asked rude questions about their dad, and how come they couldn't speak Russian.



Chapter 2

Scotland – North of Inverness – The same day

The farmer and the vet looked at where the sheep's windpipe had been. Much of the body was gone too. What remained was damp and stained red and brown. Flies buzzed around it. Decay was setting in already. The other sheep cropped the grass, occasionally baa-ing to each other, keeping clear of the men and the horrible find.

'Well, none of us likes to see it. She was a fine ewe,' the farmer said, rubbing his handkerchief across his brow.

'You've told the police already?'

'Aye, and not just for the insurance. If there's some rogue dog about, we have to put a stop to it.'

'This doesn't look typical of a rogue dog,' said the vet.

'My two woke us. You know them, Ed, they're good girls,' said the farmer. 'Going crazy. Thought we had a burglar. But when I

went to see if there was someone in the yard, they just whimpered and refused to come. I've never seen them like that before. They're working dogs! Behaving like a couple of rabbits, they were. My wife said she heard this yowling, something like a fox, but not. Must have been the rogue dog folk have been talking about. Shone the torch around the yard, but I couldnae see anything. I came up here this morning, all the sheep were huddled up in the far corner, and then this...'

'I hope she'll be the only one you lose.'

'Aye. Three it was in the winter. And Murdo McPherson lost two last month. It's got to be stopped.' He stomped off towards the Land Rover.

Ed Stirling was still thought of as "The New Vet" even though he'd joined the practice five years ago. He'd grown up in Edinburgh and worked all over the world, but he loved this place. It was where his grandmother was from. He knelt in the rough grass and looked at the deep red trenches on the sheep's back.

The farmer returned with some old sacks and threw them over the remains.

'Keep the crows off until the police get here.'

In silence, the two men looked about for large stones to weigh the sacks down.

Ed drove off. He had a few more calls to make that morning, and surgery to run that afternoon too. He saw the green and yellow Land Rover that belonged to his friend, Archie Carmichael, coming towards him, so he pulled into a passing place and flashed his lights. Archie stopped and rolled down the window.

‘Nasty kill up there,’ Ed said, indicating the field behind him. ‘Jim McIntyre’s lost a ewe.’

‘Shame. Whose dog was it?’ Archie asked. ‘Tourist, I suppose. July, eh? Did he see anything?’

‘Thought he heard something in the night. Sheep was in a terrible state. He’s called the police.’

‘I’ll keep an eye out,’ said Archie. With a brief nod he pulled away.

Archie Carmichael spent his day much as he always did; a few phone calls and emails at the Visitor Centre, and then he was out in the forest. That day he had to repaint some of the markers on one of the trails, and he’d decided to divert another path away from where he knew there was a pine marten family. More time at the Visitor Centre in the afternoon, and then he was home for his tea.

The Carmichael’s cottage was half a mile up its own little track. His wife, Clara, had made one of the outbuildings into a studio. He could see her framed in the window, bent over her work. She was a wildlife artist; a successful one too. There were t-shirts and birthday cards, tea towels and calendars of her watercolours of birds, otters, pine martens, red squirrels and wild cats. The wild cat pictures had to be done from photos of captive ones and from the imagination. Clara knew as well as Archie, that almost anybody who thinks they spot a Scottish wild cat is mistaken.

Archie parked beside the crumbling barn that they were going to make into a holiday cottage, crunched across the gravel, and knocked on the studio door. He waited for her to say “come in”. He would never have gone in uninvited. He expected her to be happy after a whole day of peace, a whole day to paint, but she

looked worried. Nothing in the studio looked quite right. The flowers in the jam jar on the windowsill were wilting, and the picture of puffins she'd been working on looked hardly different from that morning. There was an uneaten sandwich on the table (her lunch? not eaten at almost five?) and her phone was in there too. Clara never took her phone into her studio.

'What's wrong?' he asked.

'I'm worried about Chrissie. She won't answer her phone. I've left endless messages, but she's ignoring them. It's always switched off. And I'm even more worried about Katrina and Alex.'



Chapter 3

London

Katrina and Alex always walked home from school by themselves. That day, at four o'clock, the tide was on the way out, but there was just enough water for the pontoons to bob and sway. They loved it that the tides made such a difference here, in the middle of London, so far from the sea. But as soon as they saw The Bluebell, they knew that something was very wrong.

'Uh?' said Alex.

'Oh no!' said Katrina.

The door to the cabin was wide open. There was a lot of stuff pegged out, but it wasn't clean washing. It was their mother's concert clothes at crazy angles. A black silk dress was hanging sideways from its skirt, a green velvet shawl hung by one peg and was trailing on the floor like a defeated flag, a purple dress had

been flung across a bench, and lay there, as though it had been assassinated. There were sheets of music, damp and torn, pinned up among the clothes. Her aquamarine dress, the one they really loved, was dripping wet and muddy, like something dragged out of the river. Her two good jackets, her pretty scarves and skirts and tops were all hanging there or crumpled in heaps on the deck.

And Mum always complained about how you couldn't wash most of this stuff. They were always being sent to collect things from the dry cleaners when she was getting ready for a concert and was late as usual.

'Maybe she accidentally dropped it overboard and decided to wash it instead, or just dry it out or something...' said Alex. Katrina just looked at him. They both really knew what must have been happening.

And when they got closer it was even worse. There was blood, mostly dried and brown, splattered on the deck and smeared on the clothes and on the sheets of music. And there was silence.

'Mum,' called Katrina, clutching at her brother's arm. 'Mum, are you there?'

No answer.

They went into the cabin.

'Oh no!' said Alex. The mirror had been smashed. The gold frame with its carved roses and leaves was still in one piece, but there were lethal jags of glass everywhere, all over the floor, and in the otherwise empty viola case. Alex gently closed it and ran his finger across the worn silver lettering – *Chrissie McCloud* – then he opened it again and left it as it had been. He'd felt as though he were closing a coffin.

‘We have to mind where we walk,’ said Katrina. And then Mr. Tom came running in, meowing.

‘His paws!’ shouted Alex. Katrina lunged and scooped Mr. Tom up.

‘We’ll shut him in our room,’ she said. ‘It might be alright in there.’ She picked him up and buried her face in the soft ginger fur. She would have liked to cry into it, to curl up on the bed with him and sob and sob. But she didn’t, they had to be tougher than that. They had to sort things out.

They crunched across the splinters of glass, through the kitchen and into their bedroom. There was a trail of their mother’s clothes, but nothing broken. They put Mr. Tom down on Alex’s bed. It was the one that they both knew he preferred because it got more sun, although normally Katrina would have denied it and kept trying to settle him on hers.

‘I wonder if he’s had any food,’ she said.

‘I gave him some biscuits this morning,’ said Alex, ‘all that was left in the box. He’d run out of the smelly stuff.’

‘Maybe she got him some more.’

‘Maybe.’ They shut Mr. Tom in the bedroom and picked their way back to the kitchen.

‘It’s lucky we’re both wearing trainers,’ said Katrina. Yesterday she had been moaning that she was the only girl in the class who didn’t have any summer shoes and it was nearly the end of term. She bit her lip. Perhaps, she thought, if she hadn’t complained her mum wouldn’t have been so upset. Now they didn’t even know where she was. Katrina felt the familiar muddy sludge of guilt and worry settle inside her. Their mum’s phone was on the

windowsill behind the sink where she always left it. The battery was dead. Alex plugged it in to charge.

The twins had washed up and put away their bowls from breakfast, not that dry cornflakes made much of a mess. Now there were three mugs of black coffee, half-empty, in the sink, and a vodka bottle, completely empty, on the draining board.

‘I thought she had been drinking yesterday,’ said Alex. ‘She had that horrible smell.’

‘Me too. We should have said something.’

‘I never know how.’

‘Me neither.’

‘Do you think we should go and look for her? She might be hurt somewhere,’ said Alex.

‘Or somebody horrible might get hold of her,’ said Katrina. ‘What if she fell overboard, or off the pontoon?’ They looked out of the kitchen’s tiny porthole, as though they might spot her through that. There was now just a thin layer of water over the mud. Could she be lying face down in it somewhere?

‘We didn’t check her bedroom, or the bathroom,’ said Alex. ‘Come on!’ Bubbles of hope and fear rose up inside them, though they both knew that she wasn’t on the boat at all. They had sensed her absence immediately. They found a boulder of towels and more of their mum’s clothes in the bathroom. All her lotions and potions had been knocked into the bath. Lots were spilled, but none were broken. It looked as though it had been an accident, a clumsy stumbling or grasping-at-something accident. Her bedroom was worse, but she wasn’t there either.

‘She’s always come back eventually before,’ said Katrina.

A picture of her mum being brought back by a sinister taxi driver who'd wanted to come onto the boat, who'd leered at her and said, "Not got a man here to look after you, then?" flashed into her mind.

'Maybe she's with a friend,' said Alex.

'Yeah, like who?' said Katrina.

'Someone from the orchestra or something?' Alex tried to sound hopeful.

'But they've all gone, haven't they? They're all on tour except her. It started today. It's on the calendar. I'm sure that's why she's gone so ...you know...'

'Maybe she had to stay to look after us. But Auntie Clara could have come here like last year...'

'I've got a feeling they didn't ask Mum. They didn't want her. She was so cross after the last rehearsal. Maybe they cancelled her place on the tour.' The twins looked around the kitchen. Everything was horrible.

'Well there's no cat food and nothing for tea. We'll have to go and get something for Mr. Tom anyway. And we can look for her at the same time. I've got £20 in my pig,' said Katrina.

'I've got £12 something too.'

When they went back into their bedroom Mr. Tom made a dash for the door, but Alex caught him.

'You have to stay in here till we've cleared up. Sorry,' he said, putting him back on the bed.

Katrina took the stopper out of her pig. The four five pound notes were gone. There was nothing but a scrap of paper inside, and on it scrawled

I owe you £20
Signed Mum.

They stared at it, neither of them wanting to say anything.

‘Here’s my money anyway,’ said Alex. He untied the knot in the end of a football sock and tipped it onto his bed. £12.43.

‘At least we can get some cat food,’ said Katrina.

‘And maybe some chips,’ said Alex.

The streets were hot and crowded with people leaving work early because it was a Friday and summer. The cafés and bars were packed, the pavement tables were full, and the braying laughter of grown-ups was spilling outwards, so thick that moving through it seemed difficult. Their mum probably wouldn’t have been in one of those posh, noisy places, but they looked anyway. She could be anywhere. They were remembering the last time, a rainy Sunday night in February, when they had found her crying in the doorway of a florist after she hadn’t come home after a rehearsal.

Soon they were at Mini-Market, the shop they went to most often. There weren’t many proper shops near where they lived. It was all estate agents, and perfume shops and clothes shops where things were so expensive that there were no prices in the windows. The only shop Alex liked was the one selling artists’ materials. He had been planning to buy some proper watercolours and more brushes. Aunty Clara had given him some at Christmas, but now the paints were nearly all gone.

Mum wasn't in Mini-Market. Alex carried the basket and they chose Go-Cat biscuits and Felix in Gravy for Mr. Tom. There wasn't much choice.

'He'll lick off the gravy and leave the rest,' said Alex.

'Well Kit-e-Kat always makes him throw up,' said Katrina. 'If we get a big thing of milk we can have cereal for dinner and breakfast. There were quite a lot of cornflakes.'

The queue at the checkout was long.

'Some chips would be nice,' said Alex. 'And we could carry on looking for Mum as we went.'

'Ok. But we should try to save some of the money. No fish for Mr. Tom.'

Katrina thought that she would feel funny eating chips, guilty really, when their mum was lost. Would Mum be cross if she came back whilst they were eating them and think that they hadn't been bothered about her being gone and were really greedy? And what if she didn't come back that night? Or tomorrow?

Mini-Market was run by two middle-aged brothers. The one the twins called The Nasty One was behind the till. He always looked at them as though they were about to steal something. If it had been The Nice One they might have asked him if he'd seen her.

The Nasty One pushed their change across the counter towards them.

'Your mum was in here this morning,' he said. 'She very bad, very, very bad.' He made a horrible gesture of drinking. 'She needs to see the doctor. You take her to doctor. You got a dad? Make sure he take her.'

‘We will,’ said Katrina. She took the change and pushed Alex ahead of her, out of the shop.

‘We should have asked what time he saw her,’ said Alex, once they were outside.

‘He said “this morning”. And he’s horrible. I don’t want to ask him for help.’ Katrina knew that Alex was sharing her thought: If only we *did* have a dad to take her to the doctor.

They walked the few streets further to the chip shop and then hurried home. Nothing had changed on the deck of the boat. She definitely hadn’t come back. They sat on the pontoon and ate the chips, dangling their legs over the mud, not wanting to be back among the spoilt clothes and blood and broken glass. When they had almost finished and were thinking about throwing the last few scraps to a swan and her three cygnets, they heard their mum’s phone ringing.

Maybe it was her. They sprinted, leapt on board, crunched and slipped across the broken glass and into the kitchen. Alex grabbed the phone and said hello. A soft, familiar voice said, ‘Alex, is that you?’

Aunty Clara.

Alex couldn’t make his voice work. The out-of-breathness from running and chips turned into sniffing and gulping.

‘Don’t!’ Katrina hissed at him, but it was too late, Aunty Clara had heard. Alex let his sister take the phone.

‘He’s a bit upset,’ Katrina said.

‘Is Alex hurt? Where’s your mum? Is she at a concert?’

‘We’re alright,’ said Katrina. ‘We just haven’t had a very good day.’

‘But where’s your mum?’

‘Um...we’re not sure,’ said Katrina.

‘She hasn’t gone on tour and left you alone, has she? You shouldn’t be on your own on a boat in the middle of London. She was meant to be telling me what was happening. Is she alright?’

‘Um,’ said Katrina.

‘Come on, I’m her sister and your aunty. What’s going on down there? I know there’s something. I had that feeling. Tell me, or I’ll just have to get the first plane down and find out.’

‘Really? Would you really?’ said Katrina, realising at once that she’d given it away, and Mum might be cross if they didn’t keep things private.

‘Tell me what’s wrong,’ said Aunty Clara. Then it was Katrina’s turn to start sniffing and gulping.

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Shadow Cat Summer

Twins Katrina and Alex normally live on a houseboat in London, but are spending the summer in Scotland while their mum, a brilliant musician, receives treatment. Aunt Clara is an artist, like Alex, and Uncle Archie is a forest ranger. Almost right away, the twins find themselves searching for what seems to be a big cat. Or, is something stalking *them*?

“Rebecca Smith writes with subtlety about twins Alex and Katrina, uprooted from an uncertain life on a London houseboat after their vulnerable mother is found collapsed and in need of rehab. Up in the Highlands, despite the idyllic landscape and loving support of their aunt and uncle, something fearsome is prowling in the shadows. Could deep scratches on a tree, and attacks on local livestock be the work of something bigger and wilder than a fox or a dog? Has Alex really seen it outside in the night? Or are the twins just being stalked by their own dark fears while they wait to find out whether their mother will recover? A wonderfully atmospheric and lyrical story, unsentimental but so affecting.” – Ali Sparkes

“*Shadow Cat Summer* is an absorbing mystery, but also a moving tale of twins piecing together the puzzle of their broken family. A wise and wonderful novel by an accomplished storyteller.”

– Martyn Bedford, Costa Prize shortlisted author of *Flip*.

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