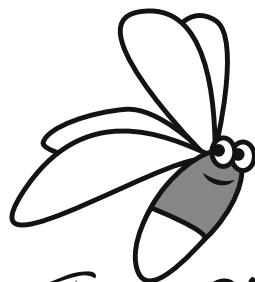


The Ten
RIDDLES
of
Eartha
Quicksmith

LORIS OWEN



Firefly

*See the ordinary as extraordinary,
the familiar as strange*

Novalis

Chapter One

The Coin

'Someone's watching me.'

Kip looked down from his favourite hideout halfway up the Chess Nut Tree. A couple of Saturday joggers and dog walkers went by, but they all had their eyes on the ground.

He returned to his homework, which was balanced on the flattest part of the Halfway Branch. But he'd written only a few lines when that unmistakable feeling of being watched came back, stronger this time.

There was definitely no one looking up at him. As usual, Ashleigh had disappeared with her squawking friends right after dropping him off. And Chess Club didn't start for twenty minutes.

'Who is it?' he wondered.

Kip shifted his weight to scan the park behind him, then pulled back instinctively. Silently hovering between the bare branches, and swaying ever so slightly, was a flat, oval drone. It was white and metallic and about the size of Kip's hand. Two fat antennae stuck up from the front, and at the top of

each antenna was a bright, emerald light that turned the nearby branches a ghostly green.

After a few seconds, Kip said, 'Hello?'

The drone did not respond. Kip noticed with a sense of unease that it was expanding and contracting gently.

'Looks like it's breathing.'

Like a floating, futuristic beetle, the drone moved closer, weaving slowly through the branches. It stopped just as Kip could see his forehead and short-cropped brown hair reflected in its gleaming side, distorted like your face when you look into a spoon.

'What do you want?' he challenged.

The reflection of his own eyes looked back – a mixture of glittery brown and light grey, as if copper and iron had half melted together.

Kip tried waving a hand cautiously in front of the green antennae tips and, at last, the drone did something. With a quiet *whirr-click*, a tray slid out from its underbelly.

In the tray was an envelope, and below the first-class stamp there was something handwritten in dark-red ink.

To Kip Bramley

Kip picked up the envelope. It could be a prank. He checked thoroughly in every direction: still no suspects in sight. Carefully, he pulled open the glued-down flap so it came away without ripping.

Instead of a letter inside, Kip found a fifty-pence coin. He held the envelope upside down and gave it a gentle shake. Nothing else fell out.

‘What...?’

But his question faded away as he looked up. The drone had gone.

A few people were setting up their chessboards on the tables underneath the tree. Voices drifted up through the branches stripped clean by winter.

‘Spring is finally here.’

‘Can’t believe it’s warm enough to have Chess Club outside already.’

Kip put the coin back in the envelope, zipped it safely into his rucksack and began to climb down. It wouldn’t be long before everyone else arrived – young and old, tall and small – all brought together by their love of the game.

After Chess Club, Ashleigh was waiting. To earn her wage, she had to collect Kip and take him home to Eelstowe housing estate. As usual, she dumped him at the front door of his flat like she was a bored delivery girl with something much better to do.

‘Be right back,’ she said, tapping at her phone.

It was often hard to tell if she was talking to him, or saying her texts out loud.

Kip let himself in, sat down at the small kitchen table and took the envelope out of his rucksack.

‘Who would send me fifty pence? In a drone?’ he thought.

It couldn't be a mistake. There was his name in dark-red letters on the envelope. Kip ran his fingers around the seven edges of the coin. Weren't they usually silver? But this one was gold. Something else was different, Kip was certain, but he couldn't quite work out what it was.

'I should find another one. To compare them.'

He emptied the contents of the chipped mug that held all the spare change. Fortunately, there was a shiny fifty-pence piece hiding among the pennies. Kip put the silver and gold fifties next to each other.

On the tails side of the silver coin was a lion. But the gold coin had a strange candle with a flame at both ends. When he turned the coins over, the silver coin had a portrait of the Queen, with her name and the year written in an arc above her. The gold coin had the Queen too, but instead of her name there were three words:

CHANGE YOUR WORLD

There was a jangling of keys outside, and Kip hastily returned the gold coin to its envelope as the front door opened.

The Pointers

The Pointers lived a few doors down and Mr Pointer was employed by the council to do repairs on the sixty

or so flats in their building. Ashleigh, their daughter, had finished school last year. Now she sold second-hand vinyl records on londonshopfront.com to make money. Almost as soon as the Bramleys had moved in she had been hired by Kip's dad, Theo. Her job: to hang around when Theo was working late shifts or overtime, which was most days.

'Does she have to? She's so annoying,' Kip had complained after a few weeks. 'And I'm too old to have someone looking after me.'

Theo had picked up the family photograph on the windowsill and stroked the glass with his thumb.

'I worry about you, that's all...'

As his dad had blinked away tears and hugged Kip tightly, Kip had felt his own eyes prickling.

'Sorry. I know, Dad. It's OK, Ashleigh's not that bad really.'

A hand waved in front of Kip's face, interrupting his thoughts.

'Hello Kipper,' crooned Ashleigh.

She leaned against the fridge, loudly picking food out of her teeth and holding another reminder from the electricity company for Mr T Bramley to pay the bill, written in big, shouty letters.

'It's Kip,' he said for the two-hundredth time.

But Ashleigh was already yelling at someone behind her.

'Dad. DAD – you coming?'

She turned back to Kip and looked at her phone instead of at him.

‘Your sink’s blocked.’

A lanky, grey-haired man carrying a rusty toolbox creaked slowly into the kitchen after Ashleigh. Close behind him was a large woman wearing rubber gloves and waving a duster.

‘You been washing noodles down the plughole again, Kip?’ said Mrs Pointer. ‘Course you have.’

She prodded Old Man Pointer with a yellow finger.

‘Tony, it’s noodles. Check for noodles.’

Mr Pointer grunted and Mrs Pointer scanned the kitchen for anything of interest. Her greedy eyes noticed the envelope in Kip’s hands.

‘What’s that? A party invite? Course it is. See Ashleigh, he’s making new friends already. Didn’t I say he would?’

Ashleigh looked up from her phone.

‘Wassat?’

‘Who’s it from, dear?’ said Mrs Pointer.

Kip slipped the envelope behind his back and inched away.

‘Exactly ... a party invite. From ... um ... ’scuse me for a moment.’

‘Must be a girl...’ Mrs Pointer’s voice trailed from the kitchen.

On his way to hide the envelope, Kip glanced at the menu on the worn-out corkboard in the hallway and

smiled. Theo Bramley was a chef and every week he made up a daft theme. He was a genius with food, turning everyday supermarket ingredients into fiendishly realistic creations.

Last month had ended with *Supervillain Banquets*, and March had begun with *Disgustible Dining*. The last couple of days had already included some of Theo's finest creations ever.

Thursday

Dinner:

Tentacle-and-beak surprise with extra ooze
Twice-boiled drain toad on peppered slug tracks
Pickled zombie skin in slime mould trifle

Friday

Dinner:

Find-the-eyeball soup
Runny sock cheese with wet dog armpits
Lice pudding in four-sneeze sauce

They were going to be hard to beat, but today's menu looked promising.

Saturday

Lunch:

Coughed-up hairballs and bedbug couscous
Chef's fingernails in bin-juice jelly

Dinner:

Bellyflap mushrooms on furry green toast
Elephant earwax stir-fry
with thousand-year-old cabbage
Bath-scum ice cream with grated frostbite

In the kitchen Ashleigh and Mrs Pointer started arguing about something and Kip hurried on to his bedroom. Above him, a small white butterfly crawled across the white-hot bulb of the hallway light. Had Kip looked up, he might have wondered why the heat wasn't frying the insect's delicate wings into two flapping crisps.

Pinky

Once the envelope was stowed safely between two pages of a big blue notebook, Kip put the book inside Pinky's lair. This was a tall, metal storage rack from a used-furniture shop, which Kip and his dad had adapted, adding wire mesh to make a secure hutch with lots of roaming room. One of Kip's happiest memories was creating a paradise for Pinky inside: apple tree branches, rope swings, toys, and comfy hiding places packed with shredded old clothes. A board tied to the mesh proclaimed 'DANGER' in pink paint.

'Pinky, guard this with your life! Don't let anyone near it!'

Pinky was curled up in her favourite napping nook – a half coconut shell Theo had saved from work. Two chocolate-drop eyes peered out from under a scrap of Kip’s outgrown pyjamas. Beneath them, a small smudge of a nose twitched at the centre of a spray of long, dainty whiskers.

This was her way of saying, ‘I am Pinky – security guard – licensed to kill – message received.’

‘However bad Ledhill Academy gets,’ Kip said, ‘you were worth it, Pinky.’

His mobile beeped and Kip grabbed it eagerly: it might be a message from his best friend, Hal. It had been weeks since he’d heard anything.

We’re short-staffed again :(Back before dinner. Don’t forget your homework. Sorry, Dad.

Doubly disappointed, Kip left the phone on the bed and wandered back to find that Mrs Pointer had put his plate of coughed-up hairballs on the fold-out dining table. Now she was dusting two photographs on the chipped windowsill.

‘This is such a good one,’ she said, holding up the plain wooden frame. ‘What’s the joke?’

‘No joke, really,’ said Kip. ‘You just had to be there.’

It had been taken in one of those photo booths that prints out a strip of four different snapshots. Theo and Kip were pulling uglier and uglier faces in each picture, except the last one where they had both collapsed in laughter.

‘And this, so beautiful, such a beautiful family.’

She dabbed a faded golden frame with her stained duster.

Theo had his arm round the shoulders of a girl with braces on her teeth and her hair done up in twisty buns – Kip’s older sister Suzie. That photo sometimes seemed more real than his memories of her, memories that came and went like the sun trying to break through thick clouds: her zebra-stripe slippers; falling off her BMX; the garden den she built from old sheets. Theo’s other arm was around a pretty woman with light brown hair just like Kip’s. Rosalind Bramley – or Rose as everyone called her. On her knee was a toddler as chubby as a dough ball – mini-Kip. The sun was shining behind them so their faces weren’t very clear, but you could tell they were all smiling.

‘So tragic,’ Mrs Pointer muttered as if Kip wasn’t even there. ‘Isn’t it just like a story from the news?’

Kip pretended to blow on his lunch a lot and made sure his mouth was always full so he didn’t have to say anything.

‘Falling in love at the museum,’ mumbled Mrs Pointer, ‘so romantic. Meets the handsome chef at the Valentine’s Day chocolate fountain. Then happy families ... but such heartbreak...’

Sometimes when Kip was thinking about his mum, he found himself twisting the piece of quartz crystal that hung on a thin leather cord around his neck.

When he looked at it, tuning everything else out was easy, even Mrs Pointer's babbling.

All those years ago, after the lightning struck, Theo had found Rose and five-year-old Kip on the path from their old house to the sea, and she had been clutching this fragment of quartz tightly. Although unconscious, Rose hadn't relaxed her grip. It was only later, in the hospital, that she had woken and called Kip over. With great effort, she had pressed it into his hand and spoken a single word: 'keep'. With all the bad stuff that was happening, everyone except Kip had been much too busy to give it more than a fleeting glance at the time.

To Kip, the forking pale blue icicle was both beautiful and terrible. There was a shape inside that only appeared in the right light and it was there as he stared down now – an amber wave trapped forever in the moment of breaking. Every so often, staring at it was like trying to remember something.

'And how is your mother doing, dear?' asked Mrs Pointer, suddenly standing right next to Kip.

'OK I s'pose,' said Kip, shifting uncomfortably. 'The same...'

The bedbug cous cous had now cooled down enough to finish in a few bites. Kip took his plate back to the kitchen, grabbed his bowl of bin-juice jelly and an orange and excused himself to do his homework.

Both bedrooms were tiny but Theo had given Kip the larger one, so there was just enough space for a small desk next to Pinky's lair. Kip squeezed past the wardrobe and put down his bowl.

Inside the lair, Pinky's face emerged from the coconut cradle. Kip's lunchtime was only halfway through her usual ten hours of sleep, but her delicate nose snuffled alertly in the direction of the jelly. Then the tiny flying squirrel darted out of the half-coconut and scampered up the wire mesh until she was hanging upside down from the hutch roof in line with Kip's ear. She somehow clung to the wire expertly while she scratched under her chin with one back paw, and blinked sleepily.

'Come on then Furball,' said Kip, opening the lair door to let Pinky out. 'You can have some orange. But no jelly.'

Pinky's daily routine usually went something like this:

04:00 – 05:30 rope climbing; ladder scurrying; search for secret nut stash

05:30 – 06:30 rockstar rehearsal with toy cymbal/bell; investigate different sleeping options

06:30 – 07:00 bedtime snack and cuddles

07:00 – 17:30 hide away from bright sunlight in one of the following a) scarf hammock b) sock nest c) coconut cradle d) Kip's pocket or under Kip's shirt; sleep, squeaking occasionally; forget

location of secret nut stash; get up for mid-sleep fruit snack

17:30 – 18:00 chirruping and waking-up cuddles

18:00 – 21:00 breakfast; Find-the-Raisin; curtain climbing and gliding practice; more breakfast; watch Kip go to sleep

21:00 – 04:00 guard Kip

As Pinky nibbled on her orange slice, Kip took the notebook and shook the coin out of the envelope on to the bed. The boy and the squirrel stared at the heptagon of shiny metal.

‘Look Pinky. Someone’s sent me a weird fifty pence. But why? It’s not like I collect coins.’

Pinky dropped the orange and tried to flip the coin over as if the answers to Kip’s questions might scuttle out from underneath.

‘And what about that drone? I agree – it doesn’t make any sense.’

Frowning, Kip opened the big blue notebook. On the front were these words:

Book of Squirrels Part 13

Sometimes, when Kip was thinking really hard about something, the space behind his closed eyes would fill up with irresistible patterns: squirrels. It was a childish word now for a boy his age, but he didn’t care; it was the name his dad had given them.

‘Your drawings are halfway between squiggles and swirls,’ he had said. ‘Squirls.’

Kip flicked through the pages. He had been drawing squirls for as long as he could remember, but had never really found the exact words to explain what they were. To him they felt alive, with veins of light instead of blood, and sometimes it even seemed as if he shared the same pulse.

Pinky yawned and crawled up Kip’s arm to snuggle in the crook of his elbow. He stroked her silky brown back gently with one finger and she closed her eyes and sighed a tiny sigh.

Kip reached across to the desk for a pen and closed his eyes too. But not to sleep. It wasn’t long before a squirl shimmered and rippled into focus from the far distance. As Kip drew, it felt like he was sailing along its waves and rolling down its bright corkscrews. And when he was lost in a squirl like this the hours could sail and roll away like minutes...

‘Knock knock?’

The door opened a crack, then widened and Theo Bramley entered the room. He was a short, broad-shouldered man with a kind face and a neat salt-and-pepper beard.

‘Sorry I’m so late,’ he said. ‘But the good news is our weekend starts ... now!’

At the sound of Theo’s voice, Pinky woke with an excited chirp. Kip jumped up to get a hug that smelled

of freshly baked bread, and Theo rubbed the soft bristle of Kip's hair with his knuckles. They sat back on the bed and Pinky ping-ponged between her two favourite people in a blur of brown and white fur until Theo produced a sweet potato treat from his shirt pocket. Pinky took it delicately with her teeth and began to eat, nibbling and squeaking at the same time.

Theo stood up to straighten the duvet and Kip's mobile slid off the bed.

'Anything from Hal today?' asked Theo gently, putting it on the desk.

Months ago, when Theo had quit his old job, they had moved to London and ended up at this flat in the estate. That had meant a new school for Kip – Ledhill Community Academy – and leaving his best friend Hal behind.

At first, Kip and Hal had texted and called all the time, and had visited at weekends whenever they could. But then, disaster had struck: Hal moved to Australia with his family. As the weeks passed, Hal's replies took longer and longer to come back and Kip felt more and more alone.

'I guess he's busy,' said Kip.

'Well, I'm sure you'll always be close. But he's started a whole new life on the other side of the world. He'll need to make new friends there.'

Theo looked down at the half-drawn pattern in the Book of Squirrels.

‘Things getting any easier at Ledhill?’

Kip tried to put on a brave face. He didn’t want his dad to worry.

There were three groups in his class. First there was the sporty group, but Kip didn’t like the way they shoved each other for fun and picked on the kids who weren’t good at PE. Kip didn’t belong in the clever group either: they talked noisily about how brilliant they were, did sums out loud and boasted about how many awards they’d won. And the cool kids just made fun of everything everyone said and mocked anyone who dared to do well in class.

Then there was The Snibbug.

Kip’s form teacher – and the dreaded Head of Science – was Miss Gubbins. But when Kip said her name backwards it seemed to suit her much better.

The questions The Snibbug asked made Kip wonder if she thought all children were stupid. She actually even called her students ‘dense’ or ‘dull-skulled’ if they didn’t get something right first time. Most infuriatingly of all, she swallowed yawns when Kip was answering her questions.

Kip’s ‘it’s-fine’ face didn’t fool his dad.

‘Perhaps I should talk to Miss Gubbins?’ he suggested.

‘No, it’s OK,’ said Kip hurriedly. ‘I don’t think that’s a good idea.’

‘Maybe you could invite a friend to come to the climbing wall with us?’ Theo said.

Kip said nothing. There was no one he could call a friend, never mind a best friend.

‘Let’s give it to the end of term and see if things get better.’

Kip nodded. But he knew it would feel like forever until the holidays.

‘Look what I found,’ he said, changing the subject.

‘Won’t mention the drone. Probably just a bored, rich kid. Don’t want Dad to overreact and cancel Chess Club or something.’

Theo took the gold coin.

‘Hmmm,’ he said. ‘That’s unusual. Heads: it’s leprechaun gold and gives you three wishes. Tails: it’s for the drinks machine at MI5’s secret headquarters.’

He flipped the coin.

‘Heads it is.’

Seven chimes spilled out from the clock in the hallway.

‘Better get dinner on,’ said Theo, giving Kip the coin back. ‘Don’t know about you, but I could eat an elephant.’

‘Think we’ve only got elephant earwax,’ Kip replied, trying to keep a straight face. ‘Double helping?’

The Vending Machine

Like all the best Sundays the next day was full of playful promise. Kip and his dad wallowed in the

morning and lazed through lunch. But as always, the afternoon ran into the evening too fast and another Monday came stomping up to crush the short-lived weekend under its heel.

Kip usually sat at the back of the classroom, trying not to get volunteered for anything. On this dull Monday morning, he felt occasionally for the cold, smooth coin in his pocket, to check it was still there.

When school finished there was no one to say goodbye to, and he hurried to the gate where Ashleigh was waiting. He passed Olly Gorton, the boy from his class who had made it his mission in life to be as unfriendly to Kip as possible. Olly was always boasting about his hunting knife, as if he liked the idea of making other kids uneasy.

'Don't turn around,' Kip thought. *'Don't ask me who Ashleigh is.'*

Kip's back arched involuntarily as he thought about the Claw Chair. For the last few weeks, someone had kept swapping his chair for the spare one with the sharp nail that stuck out. He had suspected Olly and challenged him in front of everyone. It didn't turn into a fight but after that someone drew the outline of a knife in pink glitter pen on his desk. And the Claw Chair kept on turning up.

Kip tapped Ashleigh on the shoulder and walked on ahead as fast as he could.

'Where's the fire?' Ashleigh complained, unable to

text and keep up with Kip's get-away-from-school pace at the same time. 'Wait! I have to buy tomatoes.'

Kip stayed outside the grocer's, watching an ant carrying a breadcrumb. He followed it round the corner of the building and came across a gum-vending machine on top of a thick black pole.

'They must have put this up over the weekend,' he thought.

The upper half of the machine was clear and, instead of gum, Kip could see a pile of plastic eggs inside. The bottom half was made of steel, into which these words were stamped:

CHANGE YOUR WORLD

Kip took the gold coin out of his pocket and looked at the letters around the Queen's head.

'Knew I'd read that somewhere before!'

There were so many things he wanted to change in his world, but only one really mattered. His fingers felt around the shape of the crystal pendant hidden safely out of sight under his shirt as always.

There was only one option. The coin rattled down inside the machine and a few seconds later a plastic egg dropped into the collection drawer. As he picked it up, Kip felt his heart pick up a beat too.

The plastic egg screwed open easily and inside Kip found two things: an oblong pin badge with a protective peel-off cover, and a piece of folded paper.

'Really? A stupid badge? What a scam.'

He put the badge in his pocket and unfolded the paper, hoping for something more promising. The last thing he was expecting was a wordsearch.

The theme was 'Types of Energy'. Twelve letters had been ringed with dark-red ink, making a diamond in the grid. In a blank space under the wordsearch someone had scribbled something, also in red ink. Kip recognised the handwriting from the envelope.

You already have the other half.

Questions poured from his head like the overflow from a hydroelectric dam.

'Other half of what? How can this possibly be meant for me? Who knew I would put the coin in that machine? And get that exact egg?'

Kip took the badge out of his pocket. On closer inspection, it looked broken – there was no pin at the back to attach it to his clothes. The cover peeled away easily, revealing a honeycomb-patterned red candle. At each end of the candle was a white flame and in each flame was a golden eye.

'The image on the coin!'

Things were looking less and less accidental. It was hard to believe, but someone had planned this. Someone was trying to get a message to him.

The shop doorbell tringed as Ashleigh came out.

'Wassat?' she muttered, glancing at the badge.

‘Just a stupid free gift,’ said Kip, putting it back in his pocket.

It wasn’t long to wait until he was back in his bedroom, away from prying eyes. Everything was peaceful: it was an hour until sunset and Pinky the flying squirrel was still sleeping in her scarf hammock. Silently, Kip placed the drone envelope, the candle badge and the wordsearch on his desk.

First, he picked up the wordsearch and looked at the letters that had been circled.

q i k m t s n i e y u o

Kip spent ages thinking about those twelve letters. He read them backwards. He looked at them upside down and in the bathroom mirror, in case they spelt out something back to front.

‘Anagrams!’ he whispered suddenly.

But when he tried jumbling up the letters into something that made sense, this was the best Kip could do:

I quit monkeys

Mini sky quote

My quiet oinks

‘This isn’t going anywhere,’ he thought. ‘Try something else.’

On the desk, still awaiting inspection, were the

candle badge and the envelope. He picked up the badge first. There was a slider on the side, which he pushed up and down – but it didn't do anything – so he turned his attention to the envelope.

It was made of ordinary paper, but that didn't mean it couldn't be hiding something. None of the letters in his name were bold, underlined or highlighted. And there were no hidden flaps. Kip dabbed it with lemon juice from the kitchen, in case something was written in invisible ink. But all that did was make it smell of lemons.

There was a rattle in the lair, and Kip looked up to see Pinky gnawing the edge of her cuttlefish bone.

‘What am I missing, Pinky?’ he asked.

Kip opened the lair door and held up the badge, the wordsearch and the envelope. Pinky bounded over, extended one paw uncertainly and sniffed at the envelope.

Clock Face

‘You're right,’ Kip said. ‘It's definitely the envelope. But why?’

He looked at the stamp in case there was a postmark showing where the envelope had been sent from. And then excitement sparked between his ribs as he realised.

‘I've got it, Pinky! Why would you put a stamp on a letter delivered by drone?’

The stamp looked innocently stamp-like – small and square and smooth.

‘Maybe it folds out?’

But it was just as thin and flat as a stamp should be.

The picture on the stamp was of a red brick clock tower with a yellow face. Outside in the hallway, the Bramleys’ clock ticked encouragingly.

‘The time might be a clue?’ Kip thought.

But the yellow clock face on the stamp was blank, with no hands or numbers to mark off the hours. Kip stared at it so long that his eyes started crossing.

‘Anyone home?’ Theo’s voice drifted in from the hallway.

Kip shoved the candle badge and the wordsearch in the envelope, hid it under his pillow and ran out to greet his dad. By the time dinner was finished and they had played an hour of Find-The-Raisin with Pinky, Kip’s eyes wouldn’t stay open and he fell gratefully into bed.

Late that night, when the dark was at its darkest, Kip woke up from a dream that promptly faded. With a surge of excitement, he remembered the unsolved mystery and lifted the corner of the pillow. Now, in the still of night, there was something different about the envelope. A faint, yellow glow was radiating from the corner where the stamp was.

Instantly awake, Kip opened the curtain. He didn’t want to hurt Pinky’s sensitive nocturnal eyes with

sudden bright light, and the streetlight that seeped in was just enough to see by. From the highest platform in her lair, she watched curiously as Kip dived under his bed for a box of old, abandoned toys. After an impatient hunt, he held up a chipped magnifying glass like the prized trophy of a lost civilisation.

Staring down into the ghostly circle of the magnifying glass was like looking into a shadowy well, with the stamp floating at the bottom. And there, around the stamp's clockface, glowing in the dark, were twelve tiny letters instead of numbers.

By the soft light of the moon and the streetlight leaking through the window, Kip copied these luminous letters on to a piece of paper.

u c s i h i v t s o c m

'Twelve letters,' he thought.

Somewhere in the toy box was a torch. It still worked, and soon Kip was examining the wordsearch. There were exactly twelve letters there too, ringed in red.

q i k m t s n i e y u o

Underneath them was the unsolved clue: "You already have the other half."

One by one, he wrote down the letters from the wordsearch, slotting them in between the letters he had already copied from the stamp. The two halves of the puzzle fitted together perfectly.

‘Quicksmiths...’ he whispered.

‘...invites...’

Pinky chattered softly, sensing something important.

‘...you.com.’

‘Quicksmithsinvitesyou.com. A website. And an invitation?’

Kip waited impatiently for his ancient, second-hand laptop to start up, while anticipation drummed like fingers on his ribcage.

When the website finally loaded, there was hardly anything on it. Just the candle symbol again, an address, a date and a time, and his name.

88a Helix Avenue, London

March 20th

Kip Bramley

Appointment time 09:30

Underneath, there were two download buttons which linked to a chess puzzle and a series of large emojis.

‘Not exactly answers, Pinky. And two weeks until March the twentieth.’

As Kip closed the laptop lid, his eyes started to shut down too, so he climbed back into bed. Pinky kept watch silently, making sure that her human was safe and all was well. From her vantage point in the third-floor flat she looked down at the tops of the streetlamps, clinging on to the night and refusing to

give up their light. A white butterfly circled one of them energetically. The little flying squirrel watched it with interest until the orange glow of dawn began to spread across the sky like Kip's favourite breakfast marmalade.

First published in 2020
by Firefly Press
25 Gabalfa Road, Llandaff North, Cardiff, CF14 2JJ
www.fireflypress.co.uk

Copyright © Loris Owen 2020

The author asserts her moral right to be identified as author in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patent Act, 1988.

All rights reserved.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form, binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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

ISBN 978-1-913102-31-9
ebook ISBN 978-1-913102-32-6

This book has been published with the support of
the Welsh Books Council.

Typeset by Elaine Sharples