

Henry's

# HOUSEBOAT

BOOK 1

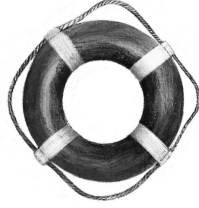


JULIA REJHOLEC

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# CHAPTER I

A breeze carrying the coolness of the river and the delicate fragrance of orange blossoms tousled Henry's dark blond hair, causing him to sigh contentedly. *What a perfect afternoon to spend on our upper deck*, he mused. But then he frowned as the fragrant scent also brought a reminder—he wasn't allowed to walk through the blossoming orange grove or visit its tree house anymore. Images of a big locked gate entered his mind. However, he pushed the thoughts away and instead searched his LEGO bin for a round green brick. After finding it and snapping it in place, he leaned back in his chair, holding up his

miniature Viking dragon ship for closer inspection. The small craft fit neatly in the palm of his hand, just like all the other boats he had made.

“Did you finish it?” his mother, Allison, asked, approaching from the exercise mat where she had been quietly stretching after her workout.

“Yep!” Henry replied, standing up and holding the boat out so she could examine the details.

“This is boat number fifty-two.”

Allison laughed and shook her head in amazement, the ends of her wavy brown hair brushing her shoulders. “I can’t believe it.” Her eyes twinkling with interest, she leaned forward. “I love the shields on the side and the dragon’s head. It’s amazing that you’ve designed all of those fifty-two boats yourself! I doubt I could think of that many different types of boats!”

With a smile, Henry tilted his head toward the thick hardbound book on the table titled *The Biggest Boat Book in the World*. “You know I get all my ideas from that book, Mom.”



“Yeah.” Allison smiled. “I know, but the book doesn’t have any instructions to make the boats out of LEGO bricks. It’s really impressive that you can do that. Do you remember when you saw that book at the old bookstore?”

Henry began tidying up the scattered LEGO bricks as he replied, “Yeah! It was on my ninth birthday, almost three years ago now.” He paused, suddenly noticing movement through a narrow clearing across the river. “Cars, Mom!” he exclaimed, pointing toward the hill on the other side. “Two cars going up to Mrs. Gregor’s old house! Can I go to my lookout to see what’s going on?”

“Yes! I’ll put your stuff away for you today.”

“Thanks, Mom!” Henry cried, running across the covered top level of their houseboat. With a flying leap, he jumped onto the fire pole, wrapped his legs around it, and slid down to the first-story deck. He waved to his father, Mark, who was in his little almost-all-glass office on the lower deck,

working at his graphic design job.

Although Henry was sorely tempted to just jump over the boat's railing onto the long dock where their houseboat was always moored, he followed the rules and ran to the front of the houseboat, where he could disembark on the gangplank.

A brisk two-minute run took him to the top of the hill next to the dock, a spot officially dubbed "Henry's Lookout Point" by his father. Here, perched above the towering cottonwood trees and the delicate willows lining the river, he could see much of the valley, including a sweeping view of the wide river as it snaked through woods and fields. Today, his focus was locked on the land directly across from him: Mrs. Gregor's estate. From the upper deck of their houseboat, Henry could see only a small patch of the estate through a break in the trees, but from this higher vantage point, he could take in the majority of the impressive sprawling property.

Henry made it just in time to see that the people had gotten out of the cars and were about to enter the house. *Yep!* Henry thought. *It looks like a real estate agent with a family.* His heart soared. *And there is a boy—a boy about my age!* The family disappeared through the house's large ornate front doors. With excitement running through him, Henry took a few deep breaths to slow his breathing from his sprint up the hill. *A boy! I knew it. I know this is going to be the family. It has to be!*

Knowing that the new potential neighbors would be touring the home for quite a while, Henry plopped down on the ground and settled into the long grass, enjoying the soft glow of the afternoon light on his skin. He wasn't about to miss a glimpse of the family again when they left the house. He wanted to see the boy—the boy who might become his friend.

Living on a houseboat on a remote part of the river was both peaceful and filled with adventure,

but Henry sometimes felt a pang of loneliness, especially since he had no siblings. There was another dock just around a river bend next to them, where a younger couple with no kids had lived for years before moving a few months ago. Henry still held out hope that a family with kids near his age would move there, but the dock had remained empty so far.

The only other possibility for friendship close by was the estate. Up until a year ago, he'd had a wonderful friend there—a seventy-seven-year-old widow named Mrs. Gregor. He had adored her since he was five, and she had built a tree house for him. Every spring she had added something new to the tree house to surprise him: One year it was a tire swing, another year a rock-climbing wall, then a cozy reading nook, followed by a new platform with a high-powered telescope, and last year a thrilling zip line. But Henry loved Mrs. Gregor much more than the tree house, and many afternoons, after his homeschooling

was done, the two adventurers could be found out in Mrs. Gregor's motorboat, looking for river otters or walking around the orange groves, learning about all the butterflies and insects they encountered.

*I still can't believe she's gone*, Henry thought, opening his eyes. He still remembered receiving the unexpected news that she had passed away from a heart attack while pruning a tree in her beloved orange grove.

The big iron gates to the estate's entrance had never been shut until a week after Mrs. Gregor's death. Shortly after, signs reading "No Trespassing" had been hung around the fence's perimeter, and the big iron gates had been chained shut. Henry's heart had nearly broken.

Interrupting his thoughts, the family came out onto the upper porch outside the master bedroom. The boy ran to the railing and gazed out across the land. *I hope he loves it here!* Henry thought. *I hope he begs his parents to live there!*

Henry waved, wondering if the boy could see him, but he must not have, as he didn't wave back. Mrs. Gregor had frequently waved to Henry in the mornings. She had read her Bible on the upper porch while Henry often read his Bible on the hilltop. During his visits she would usually ask about what he had read that morning, and they talked many times about Bible stories and verses.

Just then, Henry noticed that the mother and father were holding hands. Henry clasped his hands together. *Oh, this is the perfect family!*

“Dear God,” Henry prayed aloud, “if I can't have Mrs. Gregor anymore, please let me have this family—a boy my age, parents who look so nice, and even a cute little dog that I can be friends with too. Oh please, God.”

The family went back into the house, and Henry continued waiting. His eyes wandered among the many tidy rows of orange trees, their thousands of white blossoms bright against the

rich green leaves. Henry had never experienced anything as intoxicating as the smell of tens of thousands of orange blossoms, and at the end of winter, there was nothing more delicious than a juicy, sweet orange just plucked from a tree and still warm from the sunshine. It was another reason for him to hope for a new friend to move in there—a friend who would gladly share the orchard’s bounty.

After another twenty minutes, the family appeared in the front driveway again, entering from the orange trees. *They must have gone out the back door and walked through the orchard,* Henry reasoned.

The parents each shook the real estate agent’s hand and then looked around again. *This seems promising! Very promising!* thought Henry.

But then it happened. A wild rabbit, which was a common sight in the area, came bounding along the edge of the orange grove near the driveway. To Henry’s horror the boy quickly

leaned over, picked up several rocks, and began throwing them at the rabbit.

“No!” Henry called aloud as some of the rocks nearly hit the poor animal.

Quickly, the bunny disappeared into the trees, but the boy wasn’t done. There was a group of starlings on a patch of grass nearby, and the boy ran at them, waving his arms. The frightened birds took flight and flew off.

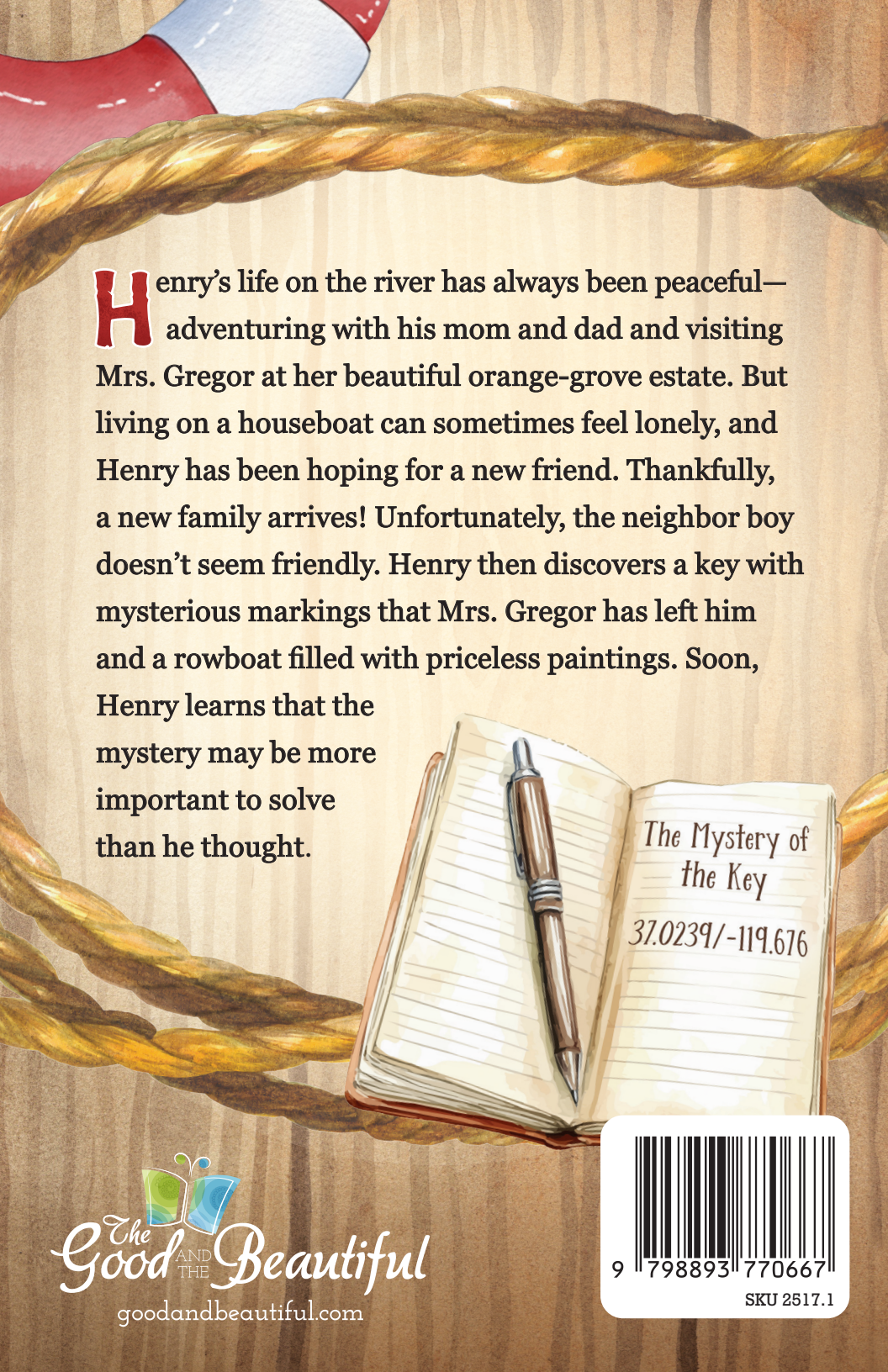
Henry shot up. “Stop it!” he yelled as loudly as he could, waving his arms now. “Stop it!”

Henry wasn’t sure if the boy saw his waving arms or heard his shout, but either way, the boy did take notice.

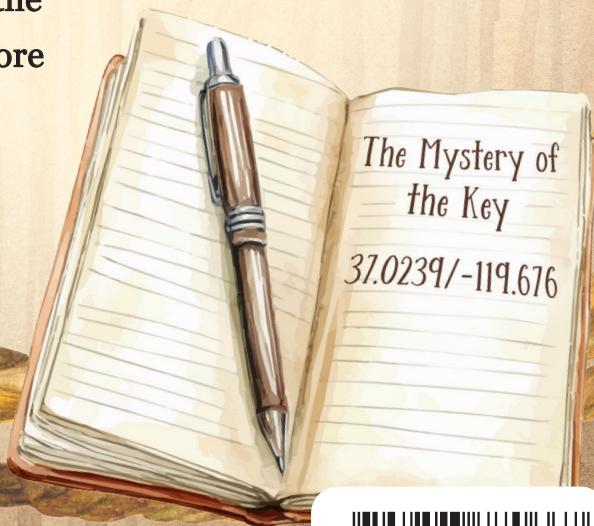
Almost as if in slow motion, Henry watched as the boy bent down, gathered more rocks, and then started throwing them in Henry’s direction. He wasn’t nearly close enough for the thrown rocks to reach him, but as they plopped into the river below, Henry felt his hopes fall.

His eyes pooling with tears, Henry turned and

started running down the hill. *Never mind, God!*  
his heart called out as he ran. *Please do not let*  
*that boy move into Mrs. Gregor's house. Please*  
*keep the boy who scares birds and throws rocks*  
*at bunnies far from here!*



**H**enry's life on the river has always been peaceful—adventuring with his mom and dad and visiting Mrs. Gregor at her beautiful orange-grove estate. But living on a houseboat can sometimes feel lonely, and Henry has been hoping for a new friend. Thankfully, a new family arrives! Unfortunately, the neighbor boy doesn't seem friendly. Henry then discovers a key with mysterious markings that Mrs. Gregor has left him and a rowboat filled with priceless paintings. Soon, Henry learns that the mystery may be more important to solve than he thought.



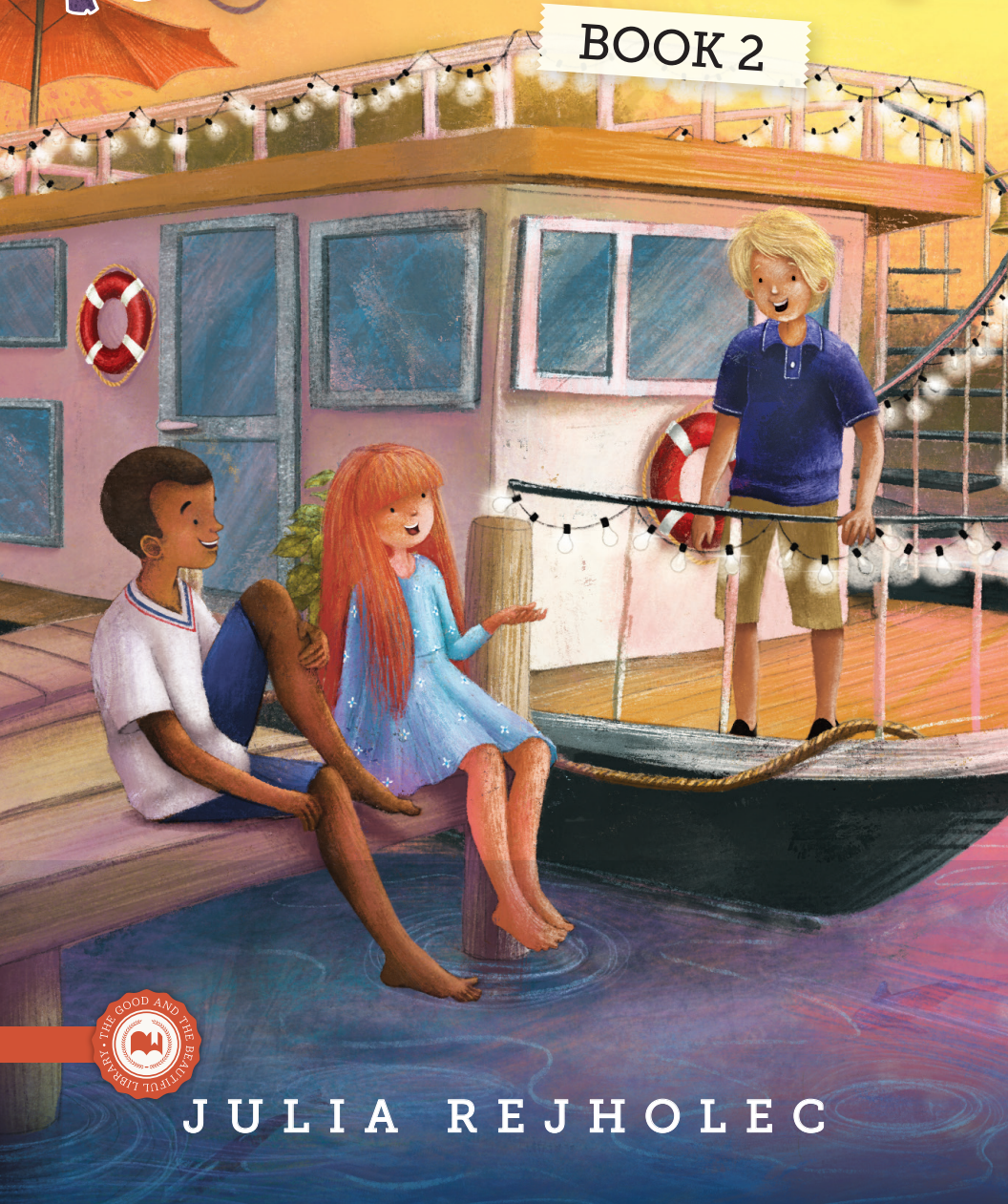
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Henry's

# HOUSEBOAT

BOOK 2

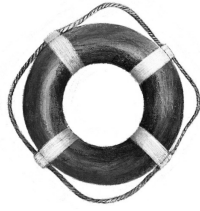


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# CHAPTER I

“There!” exclaimed Henry Hoffman over the roar of the motorboat. The group looked in the direction he was pointing and saw a green shape in the middle of the lake that flowed out into the river.

“The island!” Jordan cried out triumphantly.

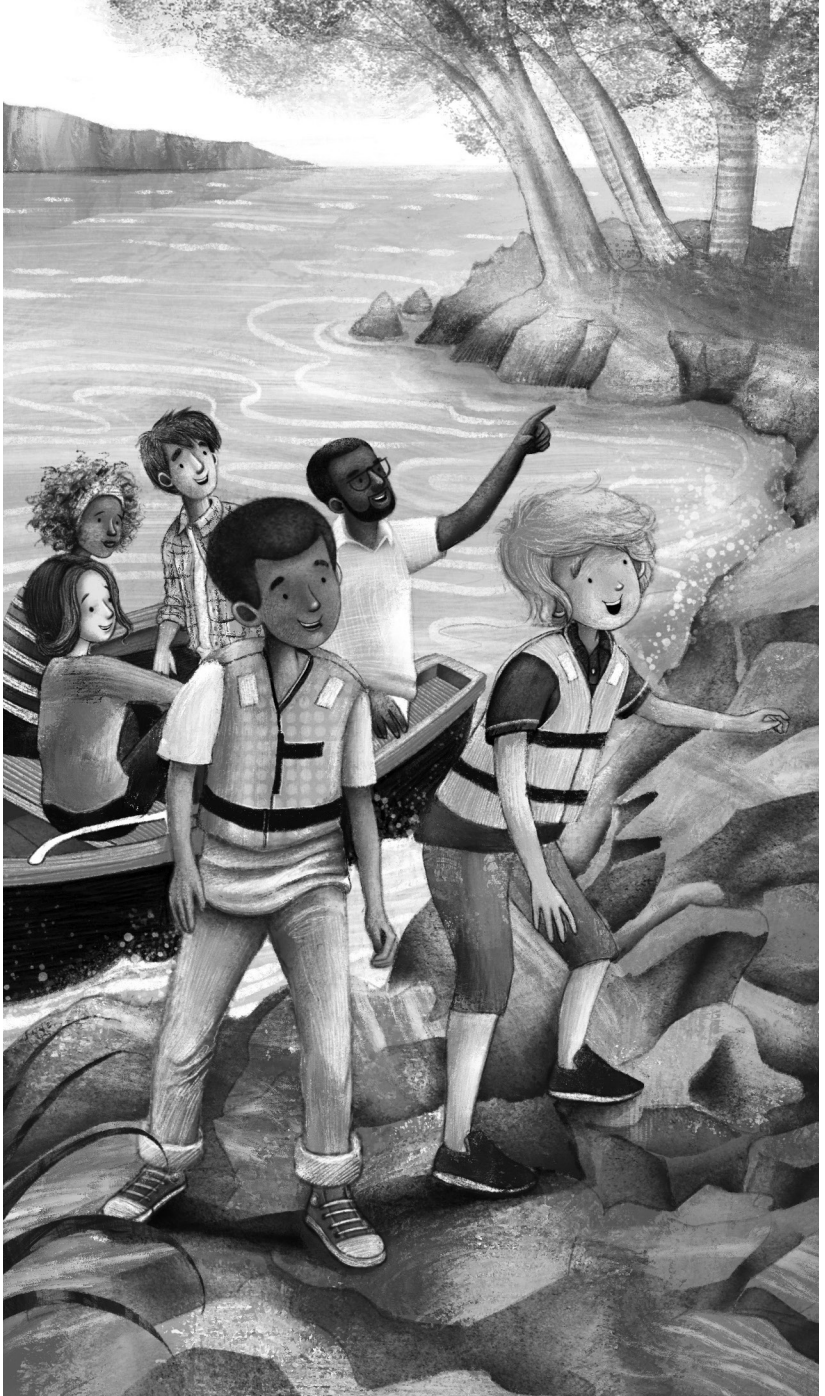
Henry looked at his best friend just as a spray of cool water splashed his face, which was flushed from both the hot sun and his excitement. The glistening blue water seemed to brighten as they made their way across the lake, reflecting the wide canvas of sky above them. Any other day, Henry would’ve longed to jump into the lake with

Jordan and his dad, Mark, allowing the brisk water to refresh his warmed skin. Today promised something more thrilling, however. Today, he was finally going to understand Mrs. Gregor's mystery!

Mrs. Gregor was a dear friend of Henry's, who'd been like a grandmother to him. She built Henry a tree house when he was little, and they'd been on several adventures together over the years. She passed away suddenly last summer—leaving behind a key and a great mystery to solve. The Scotts had bought her house and since had become fast friends with the Hoffmans.

“That’s the one!” said Jordan’s dad, Mr. Scott, looking up from his phone, where he had pulled up the map with the coordinates. “We’re right on track.”

While Henry had wanted to use Mrs. Gregor’s motorboat, his dad had explained that it would be safer and faster if they used their own, seeing as Mrs. Gregor’s hadn’t been on the water for a while. Mark steered the motorboat with quick



efficiency, and they made it to the island not long after spotting it.

“Don’t run off without us, boys,” warned Henry’s mom, Allison, with a smile. “We’ve never been to this island before.”

“I want to see what all this fuss is about!” said Jordan’s mom, Mrs. Scott, a glimmer in her eye.

After hopping off the boat onto the small island’s rocky bank, the boys tossed their life jackets onto the boat’s silver benches. Henry looked up with eager eyes at the towering cottonwoods and sycamores that were rooted in the dark soil. The sun’s hot rays filtered between the branches, and patterns of shadow and sunlight carpeted the ground. Henry was grateful for the shade as the group made their way over the forested island.

The two families searched quickly, scanning for signs of anything unusual. A hush had fallen over them, each person swept up in the excitement of the search.

“Over there!” Jordan called out, running off into a clearing between the trees in the distance.

Branches snapped underneath their feet as the group ran to catch up with him. Henry paused, looking with curious, bright eyes at what stood in the middle of the clearing.

“I wonder if anyone lives there,” said Allison hesitantly.

“It looks like no one’s been around for a while,” responded Mark. “See how the grass is overgrown? Also, the flowers in the pots around the porch are dead.”

Henry stood on the lawn, examining the peculiar structure before him. “Cottage” was the first word that came to his mind as he studied the storybook-like house. Vines tangled about the white brick walls and climbed across the light brown gables. A rusty-red brick chimney protruded from the small slanted roof. Pots of dry stems and sticks littered the porch’s surface. Deep in his gut, Henry somehow knew that the

answer to the mystery of the metal key had to be inside. The cottage seemed like a treasure chest to him, calling out with a longing to be explored. With anticipation building, he started running toward the porch.

“Hold your horses!” boomed Mark’s deep voice. “Let’s try to find out if anyone lives there before we go rummaging around the place.”

With timid excitement the group climbed the steps leading to the cottage. One of the boards on the porch creaked beneath Henry’s weight, but the rest of the wooden porch seemed sound. The cottage wasn’t completely run-down; it just hadn’t been cared for in a while.

Henry’s eyes were immediately drawn to a heavy silver padlock on the black wooden door. Mark knocked softly at first. There was no response, so he knocked louder. After a few moments of agitated silence, the group agreed that no one was inside.

Tracing the silver padlock with his finger,

Henry felt a rush of excitement. Jordan seemed to read Henry's thoughts.

"Henry!" he exclaimed, pointing at the lock. "Your key!"

"Do you think . . ." Allison began as Henry's shaking fingers fumbled for the silver key in his pocket.

*Click!* The key turned smoothly as he inserted it into the padlock.

"Well, I'll be," said Mark, eyes lit with wonder.

Henry was too swept up to say anything. The door opened just as smoothly as the lock had; he had expected it to squeak. The cottage must not be as old as he'd thought.

The two families shuffled in, their eyes rapidly searching the interior. The cottage seemed smaller inside than out! Dust blanketed the white windowsills and wooden shelves stacked with books. Beams of dark brown wood slanted up toward the ceiling. Mrs. Scott gasped as she examined the gorgeous tile on the

floor—cream-colored hexagons, each with a small painted rose in the center. Once again, Henry thought that the cottage seemed to have come straight from a storybook.

As Henry walked farther into what appeared to be the living room, he stopped in front of an art easel. Long blotches of dried paint were stuck to a tray atop a side table, brushes lined up neatly alongside it. Propped up on the easel stood a half-finished painting, and he could quickly tell the mysterious painter had wonderful skill. The painting's soft grass and golden sunlight reminded him of something, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

“Over here!” called Henry, catching the attention of the group, who had been studying the golden-titled book covers.

Mark gasped as he studied the painting over Henry's shoulder. “That looks a lot like the Camille Pissarro paintings we found a while back in your friend Harper's rowboat,” he breathed.

Henry realized with a jolt that his dad was right. The soft scene depicted on the half-finished canvas was the same style as the Camille Pissarro paintings!

“Who is Camille Pissarro?” Mr. Scott asked.

Allison quickly explained that he was a Danish French painter who was a key figure in the Impressionist movement, known for his focus on rural life and commitment to realism. She then gave a quick summary of how they had found two of Pissarro’s paintings in a rowboat floating down the river. “That rowboat belonged to Harper, whose father had bought the paintings with cash. When her family had to declare bankruptcy, Harper hid the paintings in the rowboat so that they wouldn’t be taken by the bank. It was later determined that the paintings Harper’s father bought had been stolen by the person he bought them from,” Allison continued. “There’s still an ongoing investigation.”

Mrs. Scott studied the painting. “You don’t really think this could belong to Camille Pissarro?” she asked.

“No,” said Mark. “It couldn’t. This place isn’t old enough. Someone lived here not too long ago.”

Jordan and Henry decided to explore the rest of the cottage. There were only two other rooms—a small bedroom and a kitchen. Inside the bedroom Henry gingerly opened the closet to reveal more canvases and art supplies.

“Whoever lived here, I think they loved painting,” sighed Jordan, disappointed that they hadn’t found something more exciting.

“It can’t be a coincidence that the canvas in the living room looks so similar to the Pissarro paintings!” exclaimed Henry. “The ones Harper’s dad bought have to be related to this somehow.”

“I agree,” came Mark’s voice as he walked into the room. “Let’s look around a bit longer, but it will be getting dark soon. We can come back

another time if we don't find anything else.”

As the sun's light turned golden through the windowpanes, Henry swiftly searched the house with delicate fingers, not wanting to upset anything. The kitchen and bedroom were just as beautiful as the rest of the house, but he grew disappointed that there were no more exciting discoveries. A part of him had hoped that since the key from Mrs. Gregor had opened the lock on the cottage door, something within would shed some light on why Mrs. Gregor had given him the key in the first place. *How I wish I had the letter Anne Gregor said had been with this key*, Henry thought. He and Jordan had searched every nook and cranny of Mrs. Gregor's house for that letter, but it was nowhere to be found.

“I haven't found anything except paintbrushes,” said an exasperated Jordan as he collapsed onto the small black couch in the living room. “How many paintbrushes does one person need?!”


“It’s about time we head home,” said Allison, yawning as she pushed the chair she had been looking behind back to the wall. “We can come back another day.”

Henry knew she was right, so he agreed without complaining. They *had* found something: an entire cottage! He wondered if Mrs. Gregor had lived in it, but that wouldn’t really make sense. He had visited her estate nearly every day and would’ve known if she had lived somewhere else.

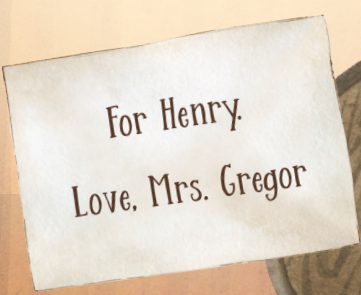
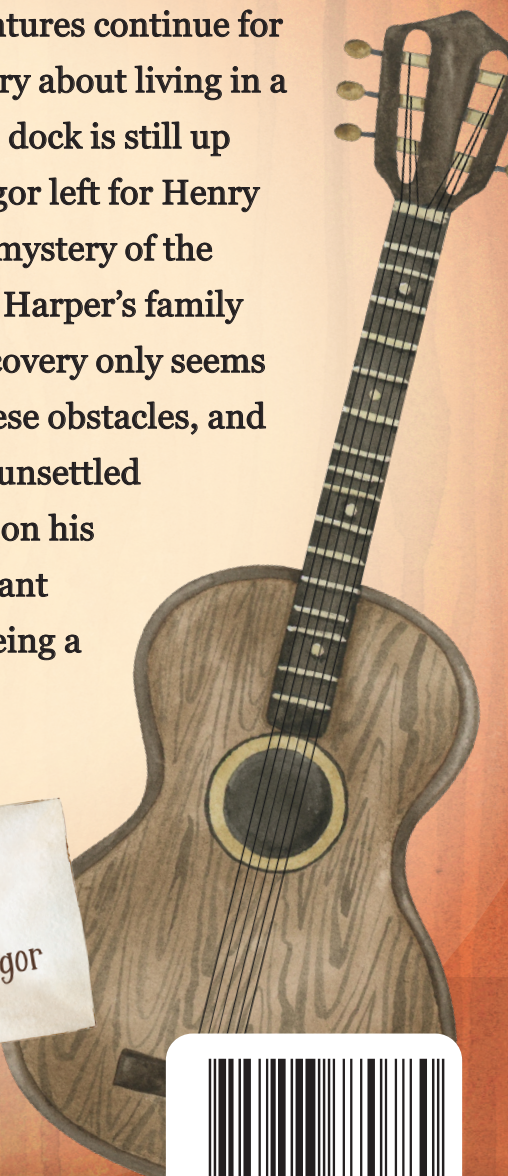
“I wonder why Mrs. Gregor gave you a key to that place,” said Jordan curiously as they strapped their life jackets back on by the lake. Henry had locked the front door as they left and then slipped the key back into his pocket.

“I have no idea,” said Henry, bemused. “I thought the mystery would be solved when we came to the island! It looks like the mystery is far bigger than we thought.”

Jordan brightened up. “That’s what we’ll call it! Mystery Island!”



**F**un and perplexing adventures continue for Henry in this second story about living in a houseboat on the river! The dock is still up for sale, the letter Mrs. Gregor left for Henry hasn't been found, and the mystery of the Pissarro paintings and how Harper's family was involved with their discovery only seems to get more puzzling. All these obstacles, and others, leave Henry feeling unsettled and unmoored. Join Henry on his journey as he learns important truths about courage and being a good friend.



For Henry.  
Love, Mrs. Gregor



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