

Book 5: THE STRANGER'S SECRET



Pibbin
α Pine Barrens
Treefrog



Leeper
α Leopard Frog



Alix
α Red Squirrel

Miss Green
α Green Snake



Bo, Mo, and Slo
Spring Peeper Frogs



Keena
α Eastern Fence
Lizard



Riff
α Green Frog



The Cat



Chapter 1

Party Time

“A party!” Leeper said. “Hey, Pib! Did you hear what the peepers said?”

Pibbin turned to the three peeper frogs.

“Work party,” said Bo.

“Dragonfly Bog,” said Mo.

They both looked at Slo. He grinned. “Go ask at Gaffer’s. Join the crew!”

Leeper grinned back. “Work parties are fun,” he said. “Thanks for the news. We’ll have to find out about this.”



Pibbin snapped up one more water bug and hurried to follow Leeper.

He'd always wanted to go on a work party trip. Now he was bigger, so this was his chance!

Pibbin and Leeper hopped quickly through the pine trees toward Gaffer's tree house.

A gray lizard waved her broom at them from the old treefrog's deck. Skitter lived nearby, and she often came to clean and cook for Gaffer.

"I was hoping I'd see you two," she said. "They need help at Dragonfly Bog."

"What happened?" Leeper asked.

"That storm! It was the biggest we've ever had, and Dragonfly was hit pretty hard."

She swept pine needles off the deck. "What a flood! All the mouse families had to move out of their burrows. Rabbits and chipmunks too. The Bog-Keepers want to help them, and I'm sending some food."

"Cookies?" Pibbin said.

She smiled at him. "Of course. And I made beetle bars for all the frogs in the work party."

"Sounds good," Leeper said. "Is Uncle Dip Squirrel heading it up?"

"No, he's working on the bridge," Skitter said. "The storm tore it apart. But he wants to send a crew over to Dragonfly."

"I'll help," Leeper said. He looked at Pibbin.

"Me too," Pibbin said.

"Good!" Skitter said. "Uncle Dip's still up on the Dike, by the bridge. You'd better talk to him. The work party's leaving tomorrow night, and he'll tell you their plans."

They headed back through the pine woods toward Friendship Bog, and a light rain began to fall, but Pibbin didn't mind. He started to ask about last night's storm and stopped.

What was that? A cry?

No, it was more of a peep. It came from the open space ahead of them.

He glanced at his pal. Leeper pulled his cap down as if he were getting ready for something and picked up a stick.

They crept under the wet bushes, slipped into a clump of grass at the edge of the clearing, and waited.

A tiny bird that looked like a ball of white fluff huddled on the ground.

It lifted its beak and peeped again. It turned its head in every direction. "Ma! Ma!"

Pibbin smiled and hopped toward it.

The chick stepped back so fast it almost fell over. "Yikes!" it cried. "*Maaaa!*"

"We won't hurt you," Pibbin said. "Are you lost?"

He looked up into the tree above them. "Did you fall out of your nest?"

"Ma! Ma! *Help!*"

"Calm down," Leeper said. "This isn't a safe place. If you have to call for your mom, stay out of sight under a bush."

"He's right," Pibbin said. "I'm sure she'll find you soon. She can help you better than we ever could."

And he would make sure he was far away when that mother owl came back.

The tips of the tall grass behind the chick seemed to bend, just a little. Pibbin froze. What was that, behind the grass stems? Black fur?

Leeper was staring into the grass too. "Someone's watching us," he said in a low voice. "Get out of here, Pib."

Pibbin dived under a bush.

Leeper raised his stick and jumped forward. He took a huge leap, all the way over the chick's head and into the grass.

"*Ma!*" cried the owl chick, but it stumbled toward the bushes too.

A yowl came from the grass.

That's where Leeper had gone. Why was he jumping up and down?

A shriek rang out, and a long striped animal bounded away.

Leeper hopped out of the grass and waved his cap in the air. "Surprise attack!" he said.

"The stick?" Pibbin said.

Leeper nodded. "They don't know what's got them, and it feels like claws."

"What was it?" Pibbin said.

“Cat!” Leeper said. “I’ve never seen one around here, but my uncles at Wild Bog can tell a tale or two. They taught me that trick.”

He frowned. “I hope the cat doesn’t decide to hang around Friendship Bog. If it does, we’re in trouble.”

“Umm . . . what do cats eat?” Pibbin said.

“Anything small, like frogs and mice and baby birds. They’re really bad about creeping up and making a grab when you’re not looking.”

“Good thing you got rid of it,” Pibbin said. “Maybe it’ll stay away now.”

“Poor little owl chick,” Leeper said. “I just wanted to give him a chance.”

He dropped the stick. “Let’s get out of here fast, before *Ma* shows up.”

