

MOONSEEKER

1.

There once was a girl named Luna.

One midsummer evening, after sunset but about an hour before she usually went to bed, Luna looked out of her bedroom window and noticed that the moon wasn't there. Luna was particularly fond of the moon. In fact, that was even the meaning of her name. She was used to seeing the moon shining down from high up in the sky while she got ready for bed. It always made her feel happy and peaceful. But on that night, it was simply gone.

Since she had some time before her mother came to say goodnight, Luna decided to investigate. She slipped on her rubber flip-flops, quietly crept down the stairs, and went out the back door. She also took a flashlight from the kitchen pantry but kept it off since it was still bright enough outside to see.

It had rained only a few hours before, so the early evening air was crisp and fresh, as if all of outside had just taken a much-needed bath after the heat of the day. Once Luna was out in the gravelly alley behind her house, she felt happily surrounded by the green trees, bushes, and flowers that lined her path. It felt marvelous to be outside at this peaceful hour as the stars were all popping into place, one by one. As she looked around the sky, however, she quickly thought of the missing moon and felt a little sad again. But she was resolved to find her old friend. So she walked onwards down the alley into the creeping, deepening darkness of the evening.

All of a sudden, Luna heard a strange chirping by the edge of the alley, among the bushes and shrubs. She turned on her flashlight and slowly crept towards the sound. Once she was closer, she saw a blue jay there among the long blades of grass. The bird looked upset.

“What are you doing here, birdie?” asked Luna.

“I’m looking for my nest,” said the blue jay, though it didn’t use words.

“Oh,” said Luna. “Can you tell me about it? Maybe I’ve seen it and can help you.”

“Yes,” said the bird, “It’s made of twigs and also has a piece of bright-orange string in it.

I really must find it, my chicks have been alone there for what seems like forever. I’m so ashamed that I lost my way...”

Before the blue jay could despair, Luna cut in: “Don’t worry. I’ll help you find your nest and your chicks. Hop on my shoulder and we’ll find them together.”

“Thank you, girl,” said the blue jay, now calmer. And she flew right onto Luna’s shoulder.

“By the way,” asked Luna, “have you seen the moon tonight?”

“No,” answered the blue jay, “I’ve been wondering about that, too.”

2.

Luna and the blue jay continued down the long alley. A few streetlights brightened their way so Luna turned off her flashlight.

All of a sudden, Luna and the blue jay heard a strange rustling sound beyond the alley, in the yard of one of the houses beside it.

“What was that?!” chirped the blue jay as she jumped in surprise on Luna’s shoulder.

“I don’t know,” said Luna cautiously. She turned her flashlight back on and pointed it towards the sound. She couldn’t quite see anything but the dark-green grass of the yard, so she moved closer.

“I would be careful if I were you,” whispered the blue jay.

“Don’t worry,” said Luna. As she got closer, the beam of her flashlight came upon two glowing, neon-green orbs that seemed to float in the air.

“Ahhh!” yelped the blue jay. “Run!” The blue jay flew off of Luna’s shoulder and back into the light of the alleyway. Luna herself was quite startled, too, so she turned off her flashlight. For a moment she considered following the blue jay back into the alley, so she began to turn away. But she quickly changed her mind instead and faced back towards the strange green lights; they seemed to have suddenly vanished into the night as quickly as they had appeared.

“Who’s there?” Luna said, calmly but with a slight quiver in her voice.

“*I’m* here. Who’s *there*?” answered a voice, but it didn’t use words.

“Come into the alley where there’s a bit of light,” Luna responded. She stepped back to make sure the whatever-it-was could see that she meant no harm.

“Well, all right...” said the voice hesitatingly. As Luna backed up a bit further, she saw a small raccoon approach. “Now I’m *here*,” said the raccoon. It stopped and stood up on its hind legs to face Luna and the blue jay.

“Hello,” said Luna. “So you’re a raccoon?”

“Yes,” answered the raccoon.

“Well, I’m a girl and this is a blue jay,” said Luna. The blue jay chirped a cautious greeting.

“Hello,” said the little raccoon. “What are you two doing out here anyway?”

“Well, the blue jay here is looking for her nest and I’m looking for the moon,” said Luna.

“What are you doing out here?”

The raccoon suddenly looked sad and dropped back down to all fours. “I’m looking for my mother and my brother and sisters,” he said. “Have you seen them?”

“No,” said Luna. “But maybe we can all help each other. Would you like to come with us? We’ll help you find your family and you can help us find the nest with a bright-orange string in it...and the moon, which is, well, you probably know what the moon looks like, don’t you?”

“Yes,” said the raccoon. “And I was wondering where it was tonight, too.”

“Good,” said Luna. And so the three of them continued on into the creeping, deepening darkness of the evening.

3.

Luna, the blue jay, and the raccoon walked for a short while down the alley until they came upon a street that crossed it. They could see that the alley continued on the other side as they walked closer.

All of a sudden, a voice yelled out (but it didn’t use words): “Wait!” it said. Luna, the blue jay, and the raccoon looked all around in confusion. But they couldn’t see anything.

““Wait?”” Luna echoed the voice. “Why?”

“Don’t cross it!” said the invisible voice. “Don’t cross the street!”

“Why not?” said Luna, still confused. “I cross streets all the time. It’s safe as long as you look both ways. And then back the first way again just in case.”

“My friend...it took my friend!” cried the voice. Luna turned on her flashlight to try to see what the whatever-it-was was. But all she could see was the blue jay on her shoulder, the raccoon at her side, and the alley, street, and houses around her.

“Where *are* you?” asked Luna suspiciously.

There was a pause. “Turn off that light and I’ll show you,” said the whatever-it-was. Luna obeyed and turned off her flashlight. All of a sudden a single, bright neon-green light shone before them, a color much like that of the raccoon’s eyes when Luna had shined her flashlight on them.

“*A-ha!*” said the raccoon. “I know what you are!”

“Yes,” said Luna. “You’re a lightning bug!”

“You’re right!” said the lightning bug. And he lit up once more.

“Why are you so scared of the street?” asked the blue jay. At once the lightning bug stopped shining his light and went completely dark.

“I was here with my best friend,” said the lightning bug, “but a car drove by and I think that he was squashed onto its front part. All I know for sure is that he’s gone.”

“Oh,” said Luna. She pondered for a moment. “Well, maybe he’s okay and he just went for an accidental ride.”

“I hope so,” said the lightning bug. “But I need to make sure either way. As I said, he’s my best friend.”

“I understand,” said Luna. “Well, we’re already looking for a family of raccoons, a nest full of chicks with a bright-orange string in it, and the moon, which is...well, you probably already know what the moon looks like. But it’s missing.”

“Yes,” said the lightning bug. “I thought it odd that I couldn’t see it glowing in the sky tonight.”

“Right,” said Luna. “So let’s go find everyone and everything.” Luna looked both ways down the street and then once more again the first way to be sure it was safe. “Let’s go,” she repeated. And the four of them carried onward into the ever-deepening darkness of the evening.

4.

A little further down the alley, Luna, the blue jay, the racoon, and the lightning bug came across a wide puddle of mud. It was still wet and slimy from the rain.

“You can’t go around it,” said the racoon, “It’s too wide.” He scurried up a tree on the right side of the alley. “Unless you can climb like me!” He jumped effortlessly down from the tree onto the other side of the puddle.

“Or you can fly like me!” said the blue jay. She launched from Luna’s shoulder and flew right over the large puddle, landing on a nearby tree branch on the other side.

“I can’t fly like you...but I can fly like *me!*” said the lightning bug. He did several loop-de-loops as he flickered his neon-green light on and off and flew over the puddle after the blue jay. He stopped and turned around towards Luna, hovering in the air beside the blue jay on her perch.

Luna just stood there on the other side, not sure of what to do. “I can’t climb - or fly - like any of you. How am I supposed to get across?” The three others just looked at her.

“We don’t know,” they then all said, but they didn’t use words.

“I suppose I’ll just have to walk across,” said Luna, a little frustrated, after another moment. She stepped forward, placing her right foot onto the surface of the squishy, sucking mud. She stepped down and her foot sank deep down into it. “Ewww...” she said. “This is gross.” She placed her left foot alongside the right and it likewise made a squishy, sucking sound as she put her weight on it. She stood there for a moment.

“Come on, girl,” said the raccoon. “You can do it!”

“All right,” said Luna. She began to lift up her right foot from the mud but it was so thick and deep that she couldn’t get it out. She kept pulling upwards until finally her foot slipped out of her rubber flip-flop. “Ahhh!” she yelled.

“Be careful!” cried the blue jay. But Luna lost her balance. At once she shifted her weight onto her left leg - which was still firmly planted in the mud - and flapped her arms to try and regain her balance. But she couldn’t manage to stay upright. She slipped out of her left flip-flop as well, falling onto her backside into the wet mud with a *squish* and a scream. The three animals all gasped.

Luna sat there in the puddle for a moment before saying anything. Her shorts were now covered in mud, as were her legs and forearms. “Gross!” she finally managed to blurt out.

“Are you okay?” asked the blue jay.

“I’m, I’m...covered in mud!” Luna shouted back.

The lightning bug and the raccoon suddenly both started laughing.

“But are you hurt?” asked the blue jay, shooting the raccoon and the lightning bug an angry glance until they both stopped laughing.

“No,” said Luna, calming down a little. “I’m not hurt. I’m all right. I’m just...covered in mud.” She lifted herself up from the slippery, squishy mud. She was barefoot since both of her flip-flops were still stuck in it. Once she was upright, she pulled both of the flip-flops out of the mud with a loud *pop!* With her face scrunched up, she trudged through the rest of the muck and mud and back onto the dry gravel of the alleyway. Finally, she stepped back into her flip-flops and kicked off some ooze.

“Let’s go,” Luna said with a sigh. The blue jay flew back onto her shoulder.

“Don’t worry, it’ll dry,” said the lightning bug.

“And now you smell a little *less* like a girl...and a little *more* like a racoon,” said the raccoon with a chuckle. “Which is a good thing,” he clarified. Luna just looked at them and gave a quick smile. And they all continued on into the now-deep darkness of the evening.

5.

After a little while, the group of four heard something move in front of them.

“What was that?” yelped the blue jay. Luna pointed her flashlight at the middle of the alley and turned it on. A pair of bright neon-*red* orbs shone before them, much like the raccoon’s eyes had done before in green.

“Turn the light off!” said a voice behind the red orbs, but it didn’t use words. Luna obeyed and a pure-white cat walked into the small sphere of light shining from a lamppost onto the alleyway.

“A cat!” shouted the blue jay fretfully. She hopped from the edge of Luna’s shoulder to hide herself, standing almost entirely behind Luna’s neck. The lightning bug and the raccoon moved cautiously behind Luna’s legs.

“Hello, cat,” said Luna. “What are you doing out here?”

“I’m...looking for something. Maybe you all can help me,” said the cat, rather mysteriously.

“Each of us is looking for something, too. Maybe we can all help each other,” said Luna. “What are you looking for?”

“I’m looking for my dinner. I seem to have lost it,” said the cat.

“Oh,” said Luna. “Well the lightning bug here behind me is looking for his lost friend...”

“Lost *best* friend,” the lightning bug corrected.

“Right. His lost *best* friend,” Luna said. “The raccoon is looking for his family and the blue jay is looking for her chicks in a nest with a piece of bright-orange string in it, and I...” but before Luna could finish the cat interrupted.

“A blue jay, you say? I *thought* I saw a little bird there on your shoulder,” said the cat. The blue jay shivered behind Luna’s neck.

“The blue jay?” Luna asked.

“Yes, the blue jay,” said the cat as he tried to get a better look at the bird hiding behind Luna’s neck. The cat quickly returned his gaze to Luna. “And a nest full of chicks is what you’re hunting for, hmm? Well, I think that it’s only fair that if you help me find my dinner, *I’ll* help you all find the - if I have this right - the lightning bug’s friend, the raccoon’s family, and, of

course, the little blue jay's little nest full of babies. Oh yes, and the nest has a piece of bright-orange string in it, we mustn't forget."

"All right," agreed Luna after a moment. "Let's go then."

"Right," said the cat.

The cat led the way forward, but the others still kept their distance behind Luna. He swished his long white tail back and forth as he walked, peeking backwards at all of them from time to time.

"By the way," Luna asked the cat after a few moments, "have you seen the moon? I can't seem to find that either."

"The moon?" said the cat. "I didn't even notice it was missing."

6.

After a short while, the white cat stopped before a patch of shrubs and weeds next to a fence alongside the alley. The others stopped, too.

"This is where I last saw a family of raccoons," said the cat. "But they ran in here..." He lifted the shrubs aside with his paw to reveal a hole at the base of the fence. The others all peered inside. With the light of Luna's flashlight it looked to be the opening of a dark and narrow tunnel, just barely wide enough to allow a girl of her size to crawl through.

"Are you sure?" asked Luna.

"Positively positive," replied the cat with a flick of his tail. "After you," he said, stepping aside so the others could enter the hole. Luna stuck her head in and shined her light as far as she

could, but it didn't reach very far. She crouched down to all fours and entered the hole. The others followed.

Once inside the dark tunnel, the cat began to guide them from the back. "In a few moments we'll reach a fork in the tunnel," said the cat. "Girl and raccoon, you go to the right side since you two are the biggest and that side is wider. And I'll take the blue jay and the lightning bug through the left side, which is narrower."

"All right," said Luna.

They kept going. After a moment more of crawling forward through the darkness, however, Luna had a thought: "Wait," she said, stopping in her tracks. "Why can't the raccoon go on the left side, too, cat? You both are about the same size."

The cat did not answer immediately. "I'm an *alley*cat," he finally said. "I know these alleys and their shortcuts like the back of my paw. So just trust me." There was something about the cat's answer that Luna didn't like.

"All right..." she managed to say. And then she continued crawling forward.

After a few more moments the group of five reached the fork in the tunnel. Since she was in the front, Luna saw it first. "I see the fork!" she yelled back to the others.

"Excellent!" said the cat. "Now, you know what to do."

The raccoon was directly behind Luna, followed by the blue jay, the lightning bug, and, finally, the cat. "Be careful. I'll see you on the other side," said Luna, not able to turn around to face the others.

"Right," said the cat. With the raccoon behind her, Luna headed into the right tunnel, and the others into the much narrower one on the left.

After a few moments of crawling forward, Luna stopped. “Why do you think he sent you into this great big tunnel with me?” she asked the raccoon.

Before the raccoon could answer, they both heard a shriek, at the same time both close and far away, it seemed. What was clear was that it came from the branch of the tunnel to their left.

“What was that?” Luna gasped, stopping in her tracks. The raccoon kept walking and ran into her from behind.

“Ooof!” said the raccoon as he lightly crashed and then stopped behind her. “I don’t know, but it doesn’t sound good.” Suddenly, they heard the unmistakable hiss of a cat, followed by a loud shriek - the shriek of a bird!

“The blue jay!” shouted Luna. “We have to turn around and help her!”

“Right!” said the raccoon. He was small enough to turn completely around in the tunnel but Luna had to go in reverse, still on her hands and knees. “Just keep coming straight backwards until we get to the fork again,” said the raccoon. And so Luna did.

After a few moments the two of them reached the fork. “Let me go in front of you,” said Luna. “I have the flashlight.”

“Yes,” said the raccoon. “You also have big hands for grabbing cats’ tails!”

“Let’s hope I don’t have to grab *anyone’s* tail,” said Luna.

7.

Now back at the fork in the tunnel, Luna crawled into the much narrower left-side branch. The raccoon followed closely behind. The cat had been right about one thing: Luna barely fit. In

comparison the right side had seemed spacious. She grunted and panted, moving as rapidly as she could, all the while pointing the flashlight forward.

“Hurry!” yelled the raccoon from behind her.

Finally, after what had seemed like forever, Luna and the raccoon reached an open chamber. It looked to be some kind of animal’s den. “This looks like an old mole’s house,” whispered the raccoon.

Luna shined her light all around the den’s interior until it fell upon the white alleycat in a pouncing stance, facing away from her and the raccoon. The cat’s tail was now swaying back and forth many times faster than before.

“Now I’ve got you!” hissed the cat. Luna pointed her light upwards to see where the cat fixed his gaze: the blue jay was cowered against the den’s earthen roof. As she struggled to flap her wings and stay in flight away from the cat she chirped and squeaked in fear.

Suddenly, Luna heard the lightning bug’s voice beside her. “Turn off the light!” he shouted into her ear, but he didn’t use words. Luna instantly did so. Just as soon as the light was off, she heard a ruckus of fluttering, scratching, hissing, and then a dull thud upon the den’s floor. Luna gasped. The lightning bug turned his own light on as bright as it seemed possible, in one long, unbroken glow. There Luna saw the raccoon tumbled in a heap, not far behind the cat, who also looked confused.

“Yahhhh!” coughed the cat, “Who pulled my tail?!”

“I did!” said the raccoon. “Get your dinner somewhere else.”

“Hey, a cat’s gotta eat! Who are you to stop me?” snapped the cat, now regaining his balance as he faced off against the raccoon. Both the cat and the raccoon had their tails up. As

they looked about to skirmish, the blue jay took the opportunity to find the exit tunnel and escape the abandoned mole's den.

Just then, the cat pounced towards the raccoon, but the raccoon dodged him and jumped to the side. The raccoon then ran forward and leapt into the hole of the exit tunnel, following the blue jay. "Catch us if you can!" shouted the raccoon as he disappeared into the darkness. The lightning bug quickly followed him.

Now alone with the cat, Luna turned her flashlight back on and shined it at him.

"Stop right there!" said Luna.

"I'll get my dinner, you'll see!" said the cat, his eyes glowing red in the beam of white light upon him. He quickly jumped into the hole after the others and disappeared into darkness.

8.

Luna followed the cat, the raccoon, the lightning bug, and the blue jay back above ground through the den's exit. She quickly realized that she was now in a maze of thick, tangled bushes and branches. Her flashlight helped, but the foliage was so thick that it was hard to see any further than a few feet in front of her.

"Hey! Where are you?" she shouted after the others. But she heard nothing in response. *This* maze, she found, was narrow and cramped, but not nearly as much as either of the underground tunnels she had just been in. So she managed to walk along as she crouched down under the leaves and branches above her head.

After a few moments of walking, Luna finally heard the soft sounds of rustling in the bushes nearby.

“Who’s there?” she whispered.

“It’s me... lightning bug!”

“Where?” asked Luna, puzzled.

“I can’t shine my light or else that cat will find us,” whispered the lightning bug. “So you better turn off your light, too!”

“Okay,” Luna whispered back. And she turned off her flashlight. “Stay close to me,” she said. “We’ll find the others. I think I can see some light ahead. We’ll follow it.”

“Right,” said the lightning bug.

Luna and the lightning bug continued through the winding maze of bushes, following the faint light ahead of them. After a short while, the light became brighter and brighter until finally they could see that they were no longer in the maze - they were back in Luna’s backyard. The light they had seen from inside the maze was from the porchlight of Luna’s house.

“Hey!” said Luna. “We’re back at my house!” But before the lightning bug could respond, they both heard the blue jay chirp.

“Hey, you two!” said the blue jay. “You found me!” Luna and the lightning bug looked over and saw that the blue jay was perched on the seat of Luna’s bicycle. They also saw that the blue jay was unaware that the cat was right behind her, poised once more to pounce.

“Now I’ve *really* got you, you little morsel!” said the cat. Luna and the lightning bug gasped in horror. The blue jay turned and, frozen in terror, saw that the cat had just leapt up high into the air towards her...

All at once, and almost as if by magic, another person appeared. It was a grown-up, Luna saw. To be exact, it was her neighbor, Mr. Jim.

“Theeerrrrre you are, Fuzzykins!” said Mr. Jim, just as he caught the white cat in mid-air. The blue jay flew off to safety. The cat made a sad-sounding *meow* as Mr. Jim held him in his arms.

“Fuzzykins?” said Luna.

“Oh, hi, Luna,” said Mr. Jim. “That’s right, my kids and I just adopted this cat from the animal shelter yesterday. They told us that he’s used to being outside. But it looks like he’s gone a little too far from home tonight. Thanks for finding him for us!”

“Umm, sure,” said Luna.

“Well, have a good night,” said Mr. Jim. And he walked towards his house holding the now gentle-looking white cat in his arms. Fuzzykins flicked his tail back and forth as he stared back at the others and *meowed* sadly once more.

Just then, the little raccoon came bounding into the yard from the direction of the maze of bushes.

“What happened?!” he said, a little out of breath. “I lost everybody in that maze!”

“Luna’s neighbor came and saved us from that cat,” said the blue jay, fluttering back onto Luna’s shoulder. “And guess what the cat’s name is.”

“What?” asked the raccoon. The blue jay started to giggle and then so did Luna and the lightning bug.

“Fuzzykins!” said the blue jay, the lightning bug, and Luna in unison.

“Fuzzykins?!” said the raccoon. And he fell over on his side in a fit of laughter.

“Well, I should probably go back inside,” said Luna to the others after they had finally stopped laughing at the cat’s very unexpected name. “My mom will worry if I’m not there. Maybe we can all go looking for our lost ones again tomorrow?”

Just then, another bright-green, glowing orb flew into the middle of the group.

“Burt!” said the lightning bug. “I thought I had lost you!” But he didn’t use words.

“I thought I had lost *you!*” replied Burt. “I heard all the noise and came over to see what it was. And now here you are.” Burt dimmed his light as he met the other lightning bug in mid-air. As they almost touched, each began to blink his green light on and off and on and off.

“You found your friend!” said Luna. “That’s wonderful. I knew you would.”

“Thanks to you all,” said the lightning bug. “I would’ve just stayed right there by the street forever if you three hadn’t come along.”

“You’re welcome,” said the raccoon and the blue jay. But they didn’t use words.

“Tomorrow Burt and I will help you find your friends and families, I promise.” Luna looked up at the sky sadly, remembering why she had first wandered outside that night. Still the moon was nowhere to be found.

“I really hope we can find everyone and everything,” said Luna.

“Me too,” said the raccoon.

“Me three,” said the blue jay.

“Don’t worry,” said Burt. “Lightning bugs are excellent at finding lost things.”

And with that, they all said their goodbyes for the evening. The two lightning bugs continued blinking happily as they flew off into the night. The raccoon scurried away into the bushes. And the blue jay fluttered away into the leafy boughs of the nearby trees. Luna went up

the porch stairs of her house. As she did, she paused for a moment and looked up at the sky. Once again she became sad that the moon wasn't there. She was covered in mud and dirt from both the puddle in the alley and the chase with the cat. She couldn't remember another time when she felt so tired. With a sigh she climbed the stairs and went inside her house.

"Tomorrow I'll find you," she said to no one in particular.

10.

The next evening, at about the same time as the evening before, Luna once again set out to find the missing moon. As she looked up at the sky when she stepped outside, she noticed that there were again many clouds. Perhaps they were blocking her view of the moon, but she couldn't be sure.

Soon later, the lightning bug and his friend Burt appeared, their neon-green lights flashing happily on and off.

"Hello, girl!" said the lightning bug, but he didn't use words.

"Hello!" said Luna. "How are you two doing?"

"Great!" said Burt, "My best friend and I have been flying and glowing all over the place ever since the sun went down."

"That's nice," said Luna.

"Don't think that we've forgotten about our promise, girl," said the lightning bug. "We'll help you find the moon."

"Thanks," said Luna, a little glumly.

Just then, the little raccoon came barrelling into Luna's backyard, followed closely by the blue jay. The raccoon stopped right at Luna's feet and the blue jay landed on Luna's shoulder.

"I really hope we can find my family tonight!" said the raccoon hopefully but a little nervously. "It's been over a day now and I really miss them."

"Right!" said the lightning bug and his friend Burt at the same time.

"Let's find them quickly and then we can look for my nest!" said the blue jay.

"Okay," said Luna. "Let's go."

Luna, the blue jay, the raccoon, and the two lightning bugs started their way back down the alley. The sun had already set but it was still bright enough for them to see without a flashlight. Grey, silent clouds continued to cluster above them in the ever-darkening sky.

"Where do you think your family might be, raccoon?" asked the blue jay. But she didn't use words.

"Well," he replied, "Fuzzykins the cat was maybe onto something when he led us into that tunnel. We raccoons like to hide out in places like that sometimes. But then again, sometimes we like to sleep inside of tree trunks. If they're big enough for us to fit, that is."

"Hmmm," said Luna. "Big trees, you say? There's a really big tree not far from here. And I know that it has a pretty big hole in its trunk. One time I even looked inside. There wasn't anyone home, but it could definitely fit a family of raccoons, I think."

"Wow, okay," said the raccoon. "I think we should go check that out."

"Right," said the two lightning bugs together.

And so the five of them continued on into the creeping, deepening darkness of the evening.

After a few minutes of walking down the alley, Luna turned to the left and led the group down a narrow footpath. Soon the path ended and they walked into a large open field. At the far end of the field stood a gigantic juniper tree.

“There it is!” said Luna. As she pointed, they all stopped and stared at the majestic tree in the distance, the only one there in the entire wide-open field.

“Let’s go see if they’re there!” said the raccoon. And he scampered off ahead of the others.

As they all began to approach the tree, a loud clap of thunder rumbled in the distance. The raccoon stopped in his tracks and turned around to face the others.

“What was that?” he said.

“Thunder,” said Burt the lightning bug.

“Yeah, I think it’s about to rain,” said the other lightning bug. At that very moment, it indeed started to rain. At first only a few light, dainty drops fell to the group. But only moments later another peal of thunder sounded, even louder than the first, and the raindrops became big, fat, and heavy.

“Ahh! I’m getting soaked!” shouted the raccoon.

“We all are!” shouted Luna back.

Just then, not far from them, a bright bolt of lightning crashed violently into the ground. For a brief moment, the entire field lit up like it was the middle of the day. They all screamed in surprise and fear.

“We have to get out of this field!” yelled Luna. “Into the forest!” She led the way and the others quickly followed her out of the field and into the dark barrier of trees in front of them. The loud thunder continued to boom every few moments from what seemed like all around them.

Once they entered the forest, they could see that the trees were so thick and close together that very little rain could get through. They all moved very quietly, forward and away from the open field, behind Luna.

“I wonder if my family was still inside that tree,” said the raccoon. “I don’t know know if it’s safe there in this storm.”

“I don’t know either,” said Luna. “It’s a pretty big, strong tree, though.” But the raccoon just sighed.

As they walked deeper and deeper into the dark forest, the sounds of the rain and thunder became more and more muffled by the dark canopy of the trees surrounding them.

12.

“I’m getting a little scared,” said the blue jay, again perched on Luna’s shoulder. Indeed, as they walked onwards into the forest, it grew darker and darker.

“Me too,” said the raccoon.

“Here, I’ll turn on my flashlight for us,” said Luna as she did so.

“Here’s some more light for you,” said Burt the lightning bug as he and his friend flashed their green lights on and off all around them.

They walked deeper and deeper into the forest until it was as if it were the darkest time of night.

Suddenly, the five of them heard the sound of a twig breaking above them. Or maybe it was behind them. Or maybe somewhere else entirely. It was impossible to tell.

“What was that?” whispered the blue jay, but she didn’t use words. They all stopped in their tracks. Luna used her flashlight to search all around them. All they could see, though, were the green leaves on the branches of the many trees of the forest.

“I don’t see anything,” said Luna. “Let’s keep going.” She started walking again and the others slowly followed her.

After a few moments, they heard the same sound of a twig breaking. And again it was impossible to know where it came from. Only this time the breaking twig sounded like it was much larger. Again, they all stopped in their tracks and Luna shined her light all around. And again, they could see nothing but leaves, branches, and tree trunks.

“What do you think that is?” asked the blue jay. “A... a... *bear*?” And she began to tremble on Luna’s shoulder.

“No, no,” said Luna. “There aren’t any bears around here. Not that I know of.”

“Well, what if it’s a coyote, then? Or... or... *another alleycat*?” The blue jay now squeaked and peeped in fear as she continued to tremble on Luna’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry,” said Luna, “I’ll protect...” but before she could finish her sentence, the sound of something loud and heavy began to fall from the trees above them.

“Ahhhh!” cried the raccoon and the bluejay.

“Woahh!” yelled the two lightning bugs.

“What?!” shouted Luna. (She was the only one who used words.)

“Ahhhh!” said the sound as it fell down and down and down from the trees above them...to land right at the feet of Luna, as the others stood close behind her.

It was another young raccoon. Only this one had a slightly longer tail.

“Brother!” shouted the raccoon that had just fallen from the trees.

“Brother!” shouted the other raccoon. They each approached the other and then nuzzled their faces together when they met.

“This is my brother, Bill,” said the raccoon. “Bill, these ones helped me find you.”

“Hi. I’m Bill,” said Bill.

“Hello,” said everyone else.

“Where’s our family?” asked the raccoon.

“Just over here!” said Bill. And he turned and led the others a little further into the forest. After a moment, they arrived at a large sycamore tree in a clearing. Like the juniper tree they had seen in the field, this tree also had a big hole in its trunk. Luna shined her flashlight right on the tree near its hole so they all could see. “We just found this new house yesterday,” Bill explained. “But we knew we had to find you, brother. I’m so glad you’re back.”

13.

They all looked on as Luna continued to shine her light on the hole in the sycamore tree. All of a sudden, two more small raccoons popped their heads out.

“Brother!” they shouted. “You’re back!”

“Sisters!” shouted the raccoon, but he didn’t use words. The raccoon’s two sisters crawled out of the hole, scrambled down the tree trunk, and then made their way over to the raccoon. They all nuzzled their faces together like he and Bill had before.

“These are my sisters, Delilah and Rose,” said the raccoon to the others. “These ones all helped me find you,” he said to his sisters, pointing his snout towards Luna, the blue jay, and the lightning bugs.

“Hello!” said Delilah and Rose, but they didn’t use words.

“Hello!” said the others.

“Where’s Mom?” the raccoon then asked his sisters and brother.

“She’s up there in the tree, talking to our neighbors,” said Rose.

“Our neighbors?” said the raccoon.

“Yes,” said Bill, “our neighbors who live in a nest way up high.”

“They make a lot of noise during the day and it’s hard for us to sleep,” said Delilah.

“We like to sleep during the day,” explained the raccoon to the others.

“Wait,” said the blue jay. “Did you say they live in a *nest*?”

“Yes,” said Rose. “They’re birds.”

“Birds? What kind of birds?” asked the blue jay suddenly, hopping and chirping in excitement on Luna’s shoulder.

“I don’t know,” said Bill. “Blue-ish birds? Oh, and there’s a piece of bright-orange string in their nest. I remembered that because it really stood out from other birds’ nests I’ve seen.”

“My nest!” shouted the blue jay. She quickly hopped off of Luna’s shoulder and began to fly, up and up and up. Finally, after a few moments, she arrived at the highest branches of the big

sycamore tree. There she found her nest with the bright-orange piece of string in it. Her three chicks were there in the middle, right where she had left them, chirping and peeping away as her mate stood nearby.

“Henry!” shouted the blue jay as she flew and landed on the tree branch, right next to her mate.

“Darling!” chirped Henry in return. They nuzzled up next to each other. Then she hopped over to her nest and did the same with all three of her little chicks. They were now chirping so happily and jumping up and down so much that the blue jay had to hold them between her wings so they wouldn’t fall out of the nest. “My babies! I missed you so much!”

“It’s all right, Bernice, you can come out now,” said Henry in a loud call towards a higher part of the tree.

“Bernice?” asked the blue jay, confused. All of a sudden, a full-grown raccoon crawled into view.

“Hello,” said the raccoon to the the blue jay, but she didn’t use words.

“Hello,” said the blue jay. “You must be the little raccoons’ mother.”

“I am!” she replied. “I was a little afraid that maybe you wouldn’t like me near your nest. That’s why I was hiding over here.”

“Don’t worry,” said the blue jay. “I’m just happy to be back with my family.”

“Bernice and I were just discussing how to keep our chicks a little more quiet during the day, while she and her family are sleeping,” said Henry. “I feel really bad about all the noise since they moved in yesterday.”

“It’s all right,” said Bernice. “I know that they just missed their mother. Now that she’s back I’m sure that you’ll all be a big happy family again.”

“Oh!” the blue jay then remembered, “*Your* lost one is back, too! He’s down there with his brother and sisters.”

“Really?!” said Bernice. And she immediately began to climb and hop from branch to branch to make her way down the tree. “Off I go!” she shouted up to the family of blue jays.

14.

When Bernice the raccoon got down to the bottom of the sycamore tree she found all four of her kits playing and romping around the trunk. Luna and the two lightning bugs were there too, joining in the fun. Once they all saw Bernice, however, they stopped playing.

“Mom!” shouted the little raccoon, but he didn’t use words.

“Son!” she replied. They both met and nuzzled up next to each other in a perfect raccoon hug. “We all missed you so much,” she said.

“I missed you, too.” Then the little raccoon pointed to Luna and the two lightning bugs. “These ones helped me find you all. The blue jay, too.”

“Thank you all so much for helping us find each other,” said Bernice. “I’ll be sure to thank the blue jay, too.”

“You’re welcome,” said Luna.

“You’re welcome,” said the two lightning bugs, but they didn’t use words.

“Please come back and visit us any time,” said Bernice in reply. “Now,” she said to her four kits, “let’s get you all to bed. It’s late!” All at once the four little raccoons formed a line and climbed back into their tree hole. Once they were all inside, they poked their heads out.

“Goodbye! Goodnight!” they all shouted at once to Luna and the lightning bugs.

“Bye!” Luna and the bugs replied.

“Thank you, again!” said Bernice. “Get home safe!” She too then climbed up the tree and back into the hole and all five of the raccoons vanished inside.

“Well, isn’t that nice,” said Burt.

“Yes,” said the other lightning bug. “The blue jay found her chicks and the raccoon found his family. Just like I found my best friend... *you!*” He then started to chase Burt around the tree, happily blinking his green light on and off.

“Catch me if you can!” said Burt, joining in the game as Luna looked on.

After a few times around and around the tree, Burt flew off into the distance and in an instant he was gone. The other lightning bug quickly followed after him.

“Weeeeeeeeee!” he shouted into the night as he disappeared from Luna’s view.

“Hey, wait!” she yelled after them. But they were already gone. Luna stood there under the giant sycamore tree, all alone. “What about me and the moon?” she asked no one but the silent darkness of the forest.

Luna walked slowly back through the forest the way she had come with the others not long before. Once she emerged from the darkness of the trees and into the big open field, she saw that it had stopped raining. However, many dark, grey clouds still filled the evening sky.

She was angry. Now that all her new friends had what they wanted, she was also confused. Did they forget about her? She hadn't forgotten about them and their lost ones, even after that first long night of mud and mazes and a hungry cat. She even kept helping them after that big bolt of lightning in the field earlier that night. She had *wanted* to run back home then, but she didn't. She stayed true to her word and kept going until everyone - but her - was safe and back with their special ones. Why didn't they all stay and help her find the moon?

She trudged on and on, back through the big open field past the giant juniper tree, onto the narrow footpath, and back onto the alley. Soon later, she was in her backyard again.

She looked up at the sky once more. There were still so many clouds that, even if the moon were there hiding somewhere, it was impossible to find it. She sighed, walked up the porch stairs, opened the back door, and went inside.

When she got upstairs to her bedroom, her mother was sitting on her bed, waiting there for her.

"Where have you been, honey?" asked Luna's mother.

"Oh, I was just outside, looking for the moon," she replied.

"Hmm. I see," said Luna's mother. She patted the bed next to her and Luna went over and sat down on the bed as well. "The moon comes and goes," she said to Luna. "But I'll tell you a little secret: even when it doesn't look like it's there," and she paused for a moment, "it is."

Luna thought about this for what seemed like a long time.

“Okay,” Luna finally said. But she didn’t really believe it.

“Anyway,” said Luna’s mother, “everything will make more sense after a good night’s sleep. So go brush your teeth and put on your pajamas and I’ll come back to say goodnight.”

“Okay, mom,” said Luna.

Once Luna was tucked in her bed and her mother had said goodnight, Luna lay there in the darkness. She was so confused and frustrated about so many things. But before her mind could get itself worked up into too much of a tizzy, her eyes began to slowly close. Within a few moments she was fast asleep.

16.

The next evening, once again Luna went outside just after the sun had set but before it was time for her to go to bed. She looked up into the sky and saw that even though there were still clouds there blocking her view, there were fewer than there had been the night before. In fact, there were even a few clear patches of sky where she could see some stars just starting to twinkle into view.

After thinking about it all that day, Luna knew that neither the blue jay, the raccoon, nor the lightning bug - nor any of their friends or families - could help her find the moon. So she would have to do it all by herself. But good riddance! They weren’t very nice to forget about her and the moon like they had. Who needed friends like that, anyway? So she set out once again with her flashlight and headed down the gravelly alley behind her house.

Suddenly, the blue jay flew down from a nearby tree.

“Hi, girl!” she chirped (but she didn’t use words).

“Oh, *hey*,” said Luna in a not-very-friendly tone as she kept walking forward. But the blue jay didn’t seem to notice and kept chirping happily.

“Wanna come with me to find some more colored string to put in my nest?” she asked Luna, flying right alongside her.

“Um, *no*,” said Luna sharply after a moment. “I’m kind of busy right now, okay?”

“Oh. Okay!” said the blue jay. And she quickly flew away.

“Unbelievable!” said Luna under her breath. She couldn’t believe that the blue jay could be so selfish after all she had done for her and her family!

Just then, all four of the little raccoons came out of some bushes next to the alley and crossed Luna’s path.

“Hi, girl!” said Bill.

“Wanna come play hide and seek with us?” asked Rose. Luna just stopped in her tracks and stared at them for a moment. Then she clenched her fists and stomped her foot once on the gravelly ground.

“No!” she said loudly. “I do *not* want to play hide and seek right now. I am *busy*!” The raccoons all just stared up at her. After a moment they chuckled.

“Okay!” said Delilah. “See you later then!” They all then frolicked back into the bushes and out of view. Luna just stood there in silence, fuming with anger.

“Them too?” she muttered to herself. “They’re just as selfish and unhelpful as the blue jay! And after I helped them so much, too!” She stomped her foot once more onto the gravelly ground.

Luna continued to walk forward. Before she could go more than a few steps, though, suddenly the two lightning bugs appeared. Their green lights flashed happily on and off and on and off all around her.

“Hello, girl!” they both said at once.

“Oh, *hey*,” said Luna in the most unpleasant, impolite, and downright ugly voice she could possibly muster. But the lightning bugs didn’t seem to notice.

“Do you want to play a game of chase with us?” asked Burt. Luna just stared at them in disbelief as they hung there in the air near her face, their little green lights flashing quickly in happiness and excitement. She let out a huff of rage and frustration. Finally, after another moment, she spoke:

“No! I do *not* want to play *anything* with *any* of you! You’re all selfish and mean! And it’s not fair that you all found your lost ones! You might think it’s silly that I’m trying to find the moon, but I think of it as one of *my* best friends and... and...” but before she could continue with her temper tantrum, the lightning bugs interrupted:

“Come on, girl! Catch us if you can!” they sang merrily. And they flew off behind her, back down the alley towards Luna’s backyard.

That was the last straw.

Luna shrieked in anger. As she turned around towards them, she shouted, “I’ll *squish* you if I can!” She then began to run after the lightning bugs as fast as she could. She was so angry that she ground her teeth together and snorted like some kind of monster from a scary story. She would show them!

The lightning bugs, she saw, then headed towards her treehouse, high up in a great old oak tree in the middle of her backyard. They both flew up inside of it through its bottom door. She followed them and climbed up the ladder behind them, still angry as could be.

“I’m so *tired* of everyone else getting what they want but me!” she pouted as she climbed up each wooden rung of the ladder. “I fell in the *dirty, stinking* mud! I crawled through a *creepy* dirt tunnel and a *tiny, prickly* maze! I almost got struck by *lightning*! And then... and *then*... and *then* everybody else but me found what they’re looking for... and they forgot *all* about me and the moon!” She huffed and puffed until she finally reached the entrance to the treehouse in its floor. She climbed through. The treehouse had no roof so she could see the partly cloudy sky above, even through the large, leafy boughs of the old oak.

There inside the treehouse Luna found the blue jay, the raccoon, and the two lightning bugs waiting for her. It was then that she also noticed that it was decorated with hundreds of strands of beautiful string, of all the colors of the rainbow. Dozens of other lightning bugs began to dart around her, creating a wonderful light show.

“Look up!” said the little raccoon, who was now on a tree branch right beside her. As the clouds parted, a beautiful crescent moon shone above them in the sky, with a countless number of stars twinkling all around it. Luna gasped.

“The moon!” she shouted.

“Did you think that we forgot about you?” asked the blue jay.

“I...” Luna started. All of her anger and frustration suddenly disappeared. “I thought I’d lost the moon,” she said. “But what I found was all of you.” But she didn’t use words. They all sat and admired the beautiful moon, together.

THE END.