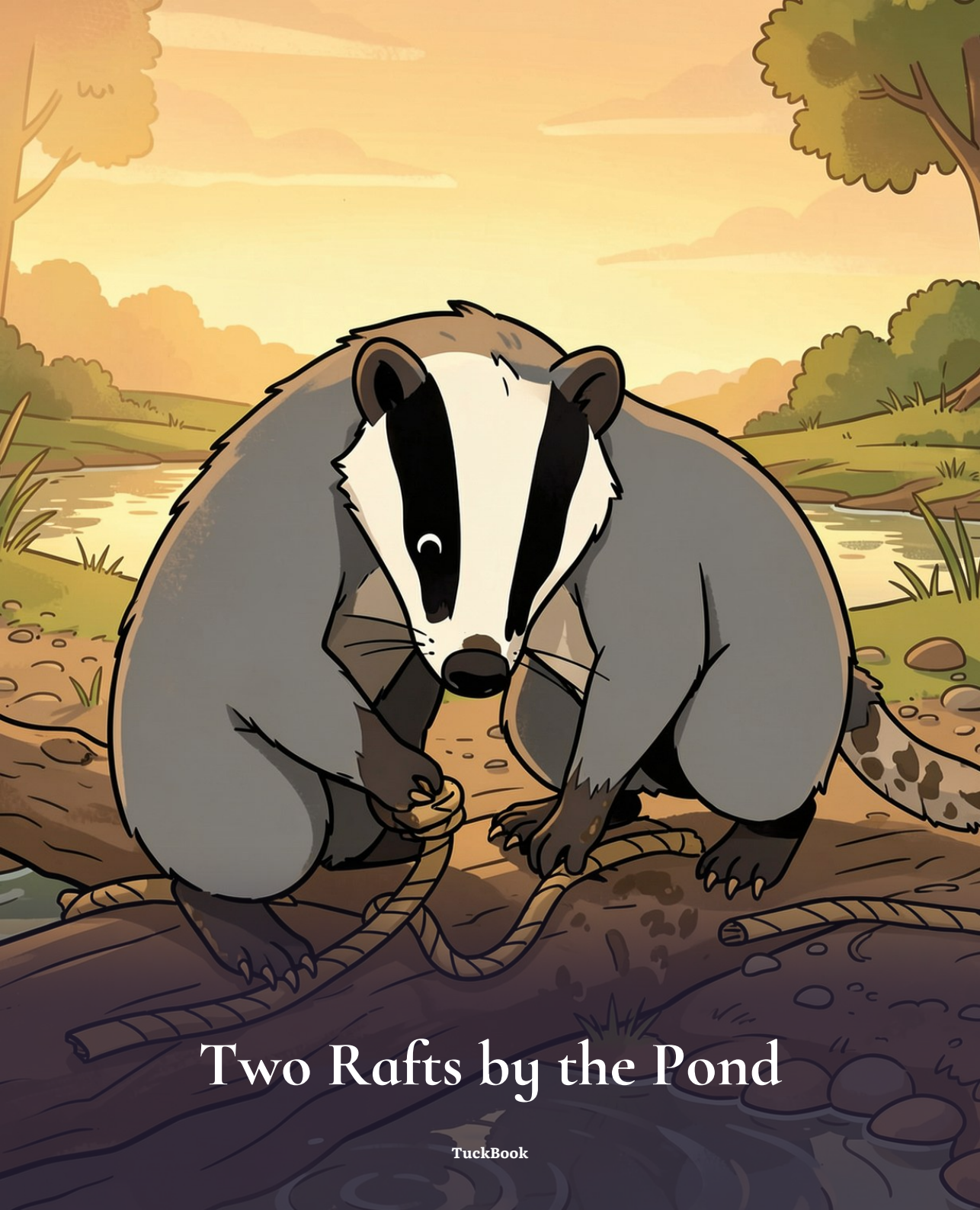




Two Rafts by the Pond

“It needs to carry me,” said Puddle, pressing both paws on a wide piece of bark. The bark lay at the calm pond’s shallow edge, beside a coil of rope and a short paddle he had smoothed from a fallen twig. Puddle was a young badger with a grey-and-black face and muddy paws, and today he wanted one thing very much: to build a sturdy raft and paddle it along the edge of the pond. Mama Badger sat on a flat stone nearby, where she could reach him with one quick step.

Puddle had collected the bark from beneath an old beech tree, choosing pieces that were broad rather than crumbly. He had carried each one in a little pile against his tummy, puffing as he crossed the grass. Now he laid four strips side by side. They looked like the floorboards of a tiny boat. “Not too wide,” Mama Badger said. “You must reach the water with your paddle.” Puddle shuffled the outside pieces closer. “There,” he said. “Raft-shaped.”



He wound rope around the bark strips and made knots as fast as his paws could manage. One knot went under and over. Another went over and under. The last one was a tangle that poked up like a curly root. Puddle gave the raft a proud pat. It bent in the middle. “It is only saying hello,” he decided. Mama Badger raised one eyebrow, but she did not untie it for him.





Together they carried the raft to the water, keeping close to the pebbly shore. Puddle set it down where the pond was so shallow that smooth stones showed through the clear water. He put one paw on the bark. It bobbed. He put on his other paw. It bobbed again. Then the front strip slipped sideways, the curly-root knot loosened, and the raft became four separate pieces drifting in four separate directions.





Puddle stood with his paddle tucked under one arm. His ears felt hot beneath his fur. He had pictured himself gliding neatly past the reeds, but now the water carried his bark in little wobbly circles. “I made a not-raft,” he muttered.

Mama Badger waded one paw-length into the shallow water and nudged the pieces back to shore with a stick. Puddle helped gather them. He wanted to shove the rope away into the grass and go home, where nothing floated apart. But when he picked up the first loose knot, he saw something he had missed. The rope had crossed the bark without squeezing it. There was a gap big enough for his smallest claw.





He examined the other bindings. One had slipped because its end was too short. Another had been tied around only one strip of bark. Puddle sat very still. Then he placed two bark strips together, held them tightly with one paw, and pulled the rope's end slowly with the other. Pull, hold, tuck. He tried the knot again. This time he tugged both bark strips apart. They did not slide.

"I know a move," Puddle said, surprised. "Hold the pieces while I pull the rope tight." He did not use the old curly-root knot. He made three snug knots, one at the front, one in the middle, and one at the back. After each knot, he pressed the bark, tugged the rope, and checked that the strips stayed together. Mama Badger held the coil so it would not roll into the pond, but Puddle chose where every binding went.

The second raft was not as speedy to build as the first. Its rope lay straight instead of twisty, and its bark strips made a firm little platform. Puddle pushed it at the water's edge. It floated. He gave it a careful wobble. It bobbed, but it stayed whole. His tummy gave a flutter that was different from the flutter before. This one felt like a door opening.





Mama Badger stood beside him in the shallows. Puddle stepped onto the raft one paw at a time and crouched low in the middle. The raft dipped, then lifted. He laid his paddle in the water and pushed gently. The pond's edge slipped past: a pebble, a curling reed, a beetle walking on a lily pad. He paddled only as far as Mama Badger's outstretched paw, then turned the raft around with a small, careful sweep.

"It holds!" Puddle called. He paddled along the safe edge again, not fast, not far, but truly floating on his own raft. The bark did not separate. The rope did not sag. When he glanced down, he could see the three snug knots, dark with pond spray and doing exactly what he had asked them to do.



At last Puddle guided the raft onto the pebbles and stepped off. He carried his paddle under one arm and touched the firm middle knot with one muddy paw. The first raft had been wobbly. The second raft had needed slower paws and closer looking. Puddle smiled at the pond, where his little raft waited by the shore, ready for another quiet paddle tomorrow.





Good night.



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After the story



WHAT THIS STORY IS ABOUT

Puddle the young badger builds a little bark raft beside a calm pond. When his first attempt comes apart, he learns to slow down, look closely, and try again.

TALK ABOUT IT AFTER READING

After reading, ask which moment felt the warmest or bravest today.

AND TOMORROW...

The next day, Puddle notices that his raft might need a tiny flag before he shows it to the ducks.



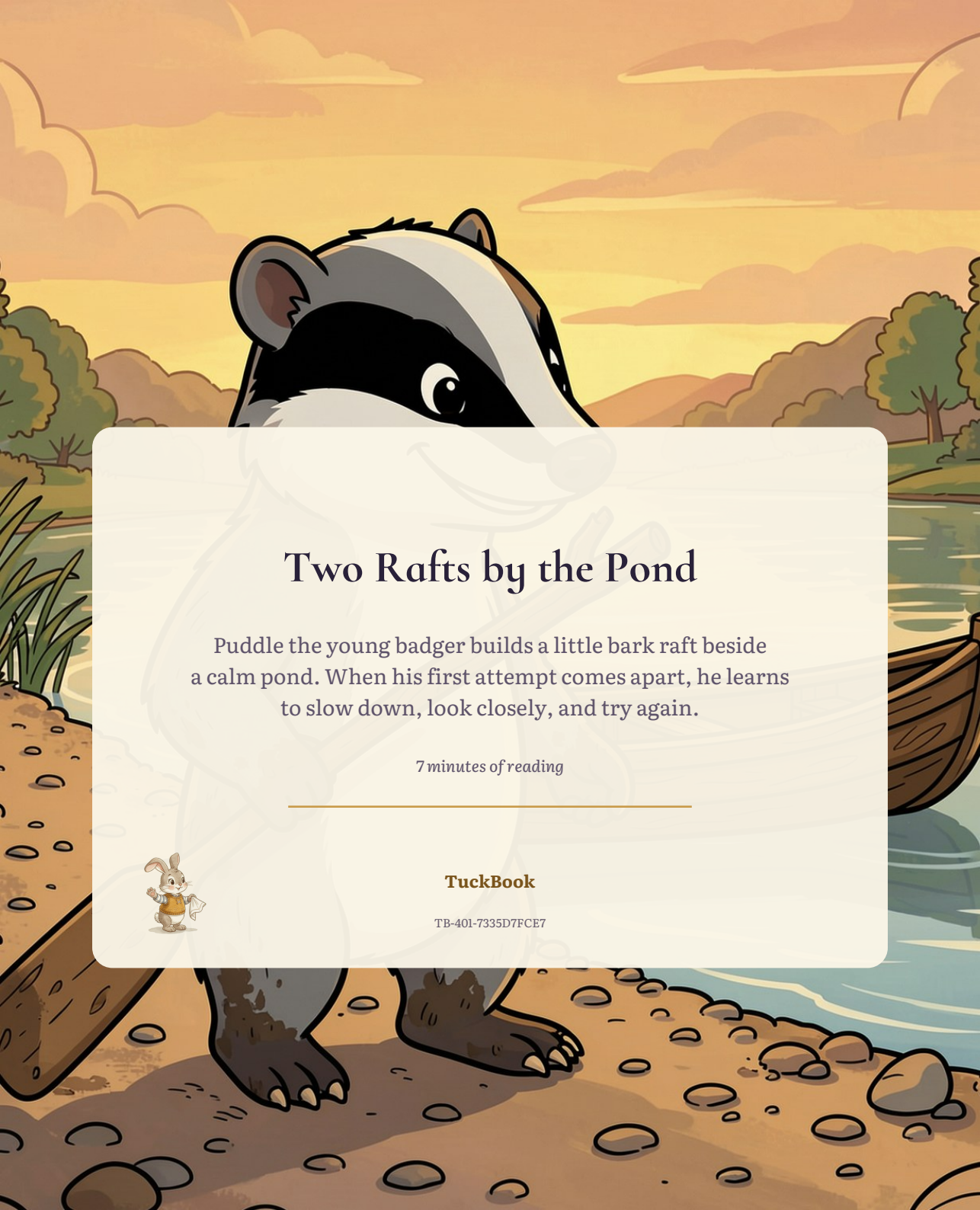


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7 minutes of reading



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