

For the real museum cats – HW

For Max and Bette - SL



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# Museum Kittens

## The Midnight Visitor



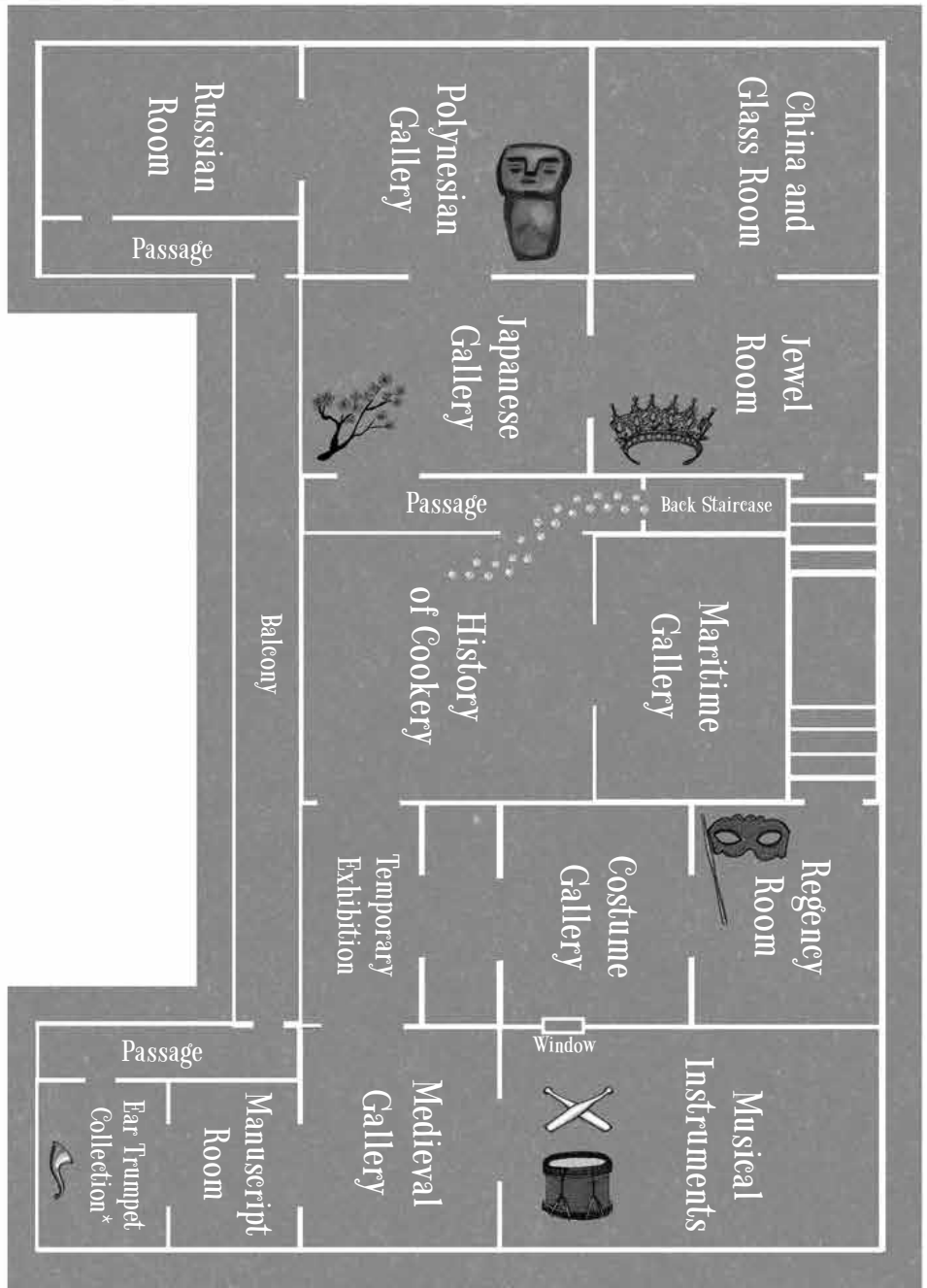
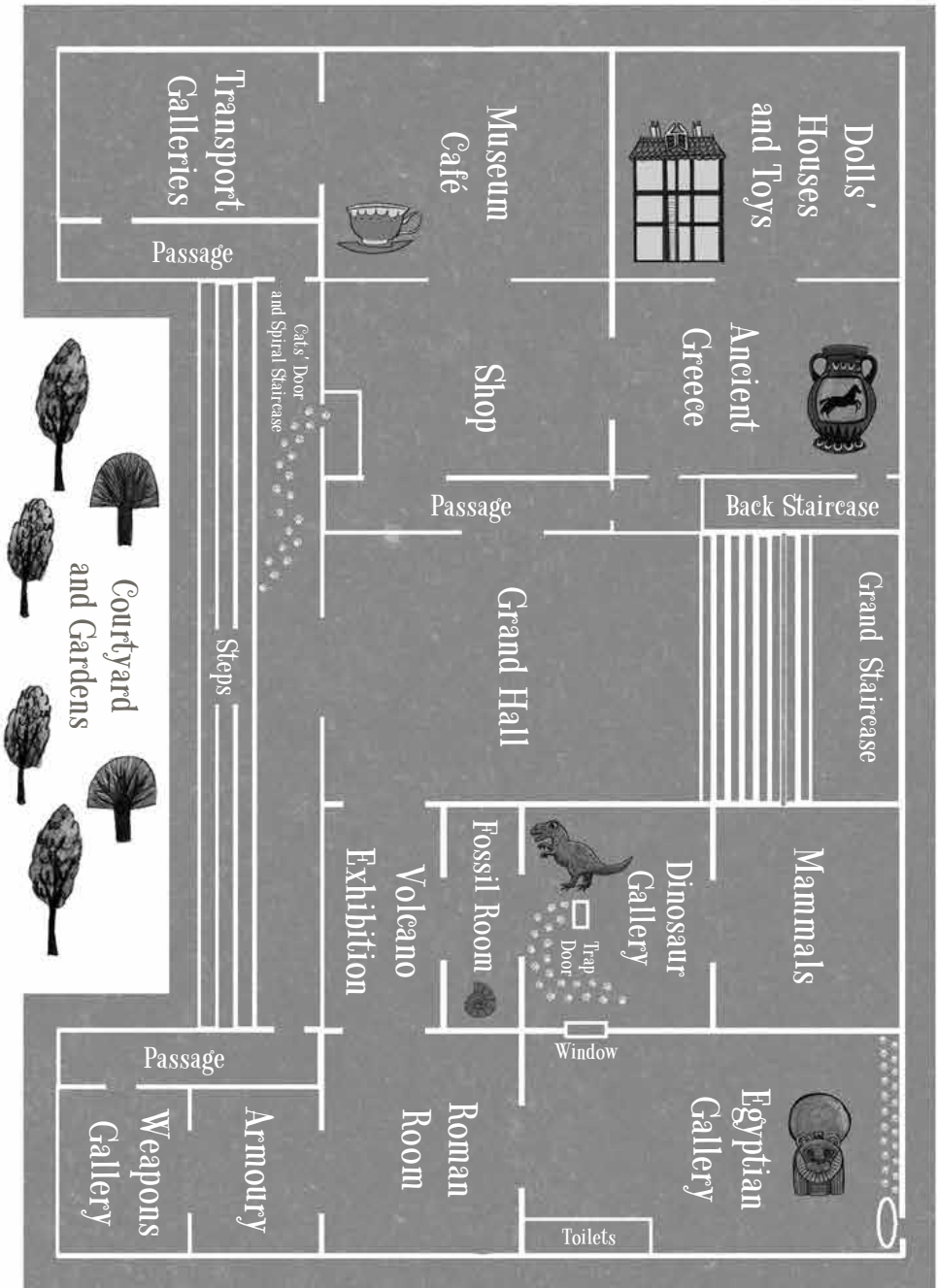
HOLLY WEBB  
Illustrated by Sarah Lodge

LITTLE TIGER  
LONDON

Ground Floor

Museum Map

First Floor



\*Mrs Jane Martlesham Bequest

## Chapter One

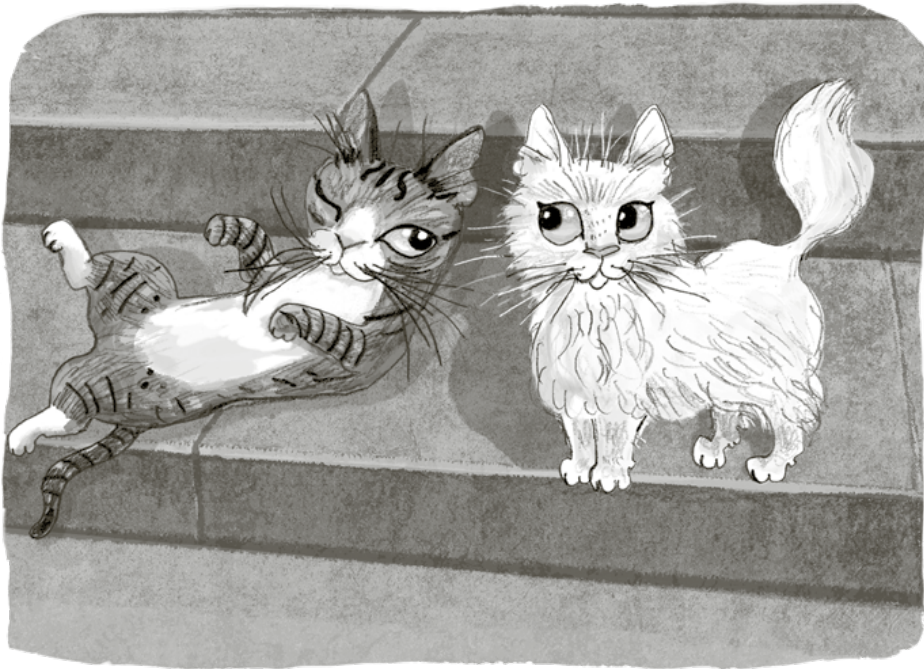
“Mrrrowww.” Tasha rolled over and waved her tiny striped paws in the air. The wide stone steps that led up to the museum entrance were warm from the sun and she was so deliciously sleepy. There was a light breeze blowing off the river and she could hear gulls calling over the water.

“You’re getting your fur dirty, Tasha,”



said a disapproving voice, and the tabby kitten opened one green eye to see who was talking to her. “Ma says we mustn’t get our fur dirty – we should be clean and neat at all times.”

“Oh hush, Bianca.” Tasha closed her eye again, but it was no good. Her sister was still there – she could feel her. Bianca was blocking out the spring sunshine and now the afternoon felt dull and chilly.



“Ma says,” Bianca insisted. She sat down next to Tasha and started to wash. She didn’t need to – her white fur was spotless as always. Even her paw pads were perfectly pink and it looked as though she’d combed her beautiful whiskers.

Tasha rolled over and sprang up, peering over her shoulder at her grey and black tabby stripes. Bianca was right. She was covered in dust and her fur was sticking up all over the place. Half her whiskers seemed to be stuck together too – she wasn’t sure how that had happened. She had gone exploring through the museum workshop earlier on. Perhaps she shouldn’t have looked so closely at that pot of varnish. She stuck



out her tongue to try and reach her sticky whiskers, but it didn't work.

"You are a disgrace to the museum," Bianca said, stopping mid wash with one paw in the air. "Just look at the state of you. Tch."

"I'm not!" Tasha said crossly. "We're supposed to be here to keep the mice and rats away. The rats don't care if my whiskers are tangled. It doesn't matter if I'm clean or not."

"Ma won't agree," Bianca purred, twitching her whiskers at a pair of visitors walking past them up the steps. "See? They thought I was adorable. They just said so. They didn't even notice you."

Tasha considered leaping on her sister's head and rolling her over in the dust.

Then she wouldn't be so perfect. But Tasha would only get into trouble. Ma might keep her downstairs in the cellars in the museum cats' den until bedtime, instead of letting her explore the museum and the courtyard and the gardens with the others.

"Come here," Bianca sighed, leaning over to lick the scruffy fur on Tasha's back. "I'll tidy you up."

Tasha's whiskers bristled as Bianca licked her fur straight. She sat hunched over with her ears flat back, letting out little outraged hisses.

"Don't make such a fuss! If you don't like being washed, you shouldn't get yourself in such a mess."

That did it! Tasha was going to have to

jump on her now, even if it meant staying in the cellars for weeks.

Just as she was about to pounce, their brother Boris hopped down the steps and bumped noses with Tasha. “Don’t even *think* about doing that to me,” he told Bianca with a yawn. “It’s bad enough when Ma makes me wash my ears.”

Bianca looked his ginger coat up and down and sniffed. “You’re almost clean, I suppose.” Then she sighed again at Tasha. All the bits of fur she’d licked clean and straight were starting to stick out already. “I give up,” she muttered.

“Good! Oh look, more visitors.”

All three kittens tried to look charming – sometimes the visitors had snacks to share. But as usual the visitors only made

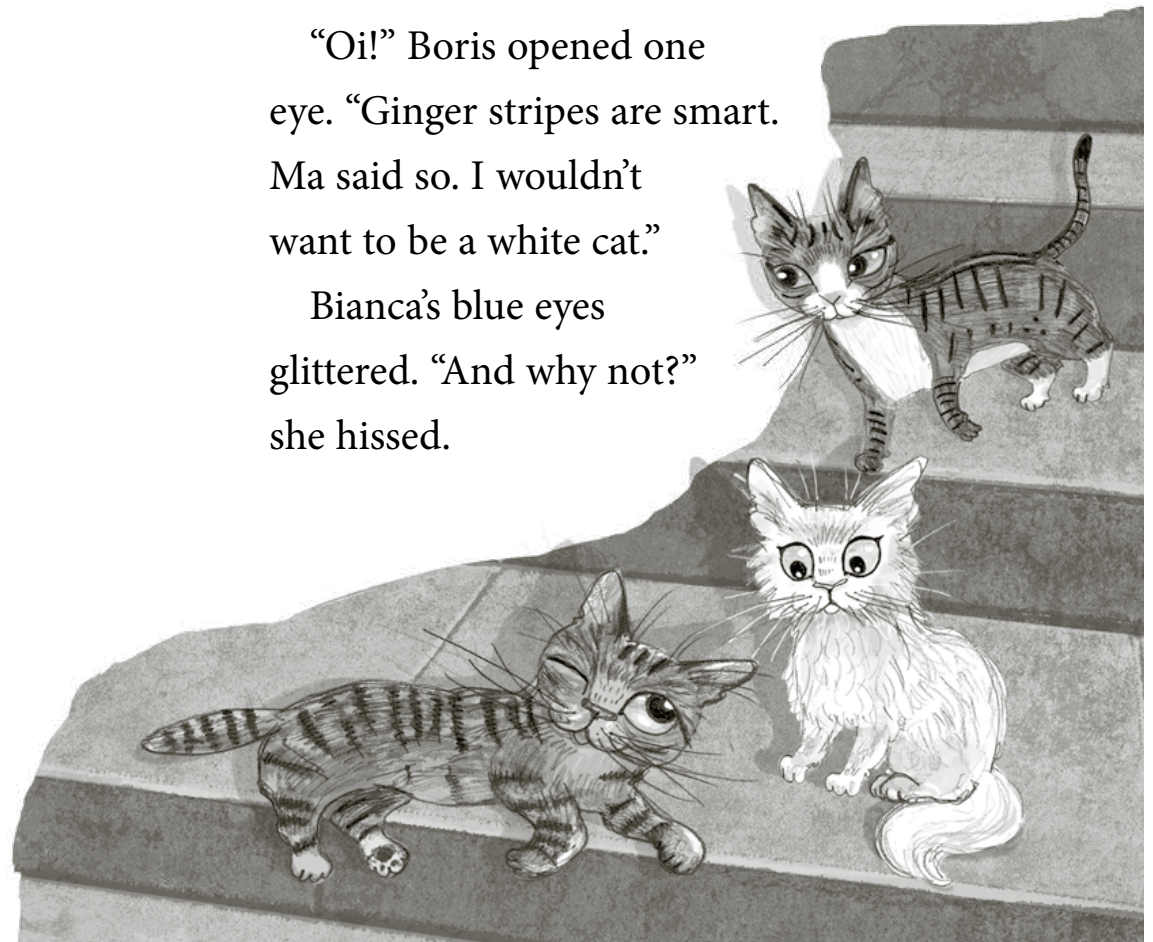
a fuss of Bianca. Tasha watched, wondering how her sister did it, and Boris settled down for a nap halfway off a step.

“White kittens are very unusual,” Bianca purred as the visitors walked on up to the museum entrance.

“You two are ... common.”

“Oi!” Boris opened one eye. “Ginger stripes are smart. Ma said so. I wouldn’t want to be a white cat.”

Bianca’s blue eyes glittered. “And why not?” she hissed.



“Camouflage.” Boris nodded knowingly. “I mean, you haven’t got any. You stick out. Tasha and me can slink into the shadows and hide, because we’ve got stripes.”

“Huh, I don’t want to slink.” Bianca sat up straighter and set her ears at the perkier angle possible. “I am beautiful and I want everybody to see me.” Then she frowned, her muzzle wrinkling as she looked at the dark dots spattering the terrace. “Ugh! It’s *raining!* I shall get wet!” A large raindrop splashed down next to Bianca’s delicate paws and her tail fluffed up in horror. The white kitten dashed up the steps and bolted across the terrace to the neat little door hidden behind one of the columns.

The museum building was very grand, with stone columns all along the front, and statues on either side of all the doors. Even the cats’ door had its own little statue – a marble cat perched on the doorframe peering down. Its nose was almost rubbed away by hundreds of silky tails brushing past over the years.

As Bianca disappeared underneath the statue, a fluffy grey cat with a full fan of white whiskers appeared in the doorway and stepped out on to the terrace. Tasha thought about pretending not to have noticed her mother and darting off across the courtyard, but it wouldn’t work. Smoke was a famous hunter and her green eyes were sharp. She’d know straightaway that Tasha had seen her.



“There’s Ma looking for us,” Boris groaned, and he and Tasha hopped up the steps and padded over to the grey cat.



“Please can we stay out a bit longer?” Tasha pleaded. “It can’t be even close to bedtime.”

Smoke narrowed her eyes, peering up at the sky, and nudged noses with Tasha. “It’s getting late, kitten. And it’s wet. Come on inside, it’s nearly time for supper. The Old Man brought us fish today as a treat.”

The Old Man was one of the museum’s guards and he was in charge of feeding the cats. He was grumpy and sometimes shouted at the kittens when they got in his way, but Ma said that was only because his legs hurt.

Boris’s whiskers fanned out, trembling with excitement. “Fish! Come on, Tasha! We need to get down there first, before



everyone nabs it.”

The two kittens barged through the little door – they weren’t quite tall enough for their tails to stroke the stone cat’s nose yet – and pattered down the stairs to their shadowy home.



Holly Webb started out as a children's book editor and wrote her first series for the publisher she worked for. She has been writing ever since, with over one hundred books to her name. Holly lives in Berkshire, with her husband and three children.

Holly's pet cats are always nosying around when she is trying to type on her laptop.

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