

LAND ^{OF} _{THE} LAST WILDCAT



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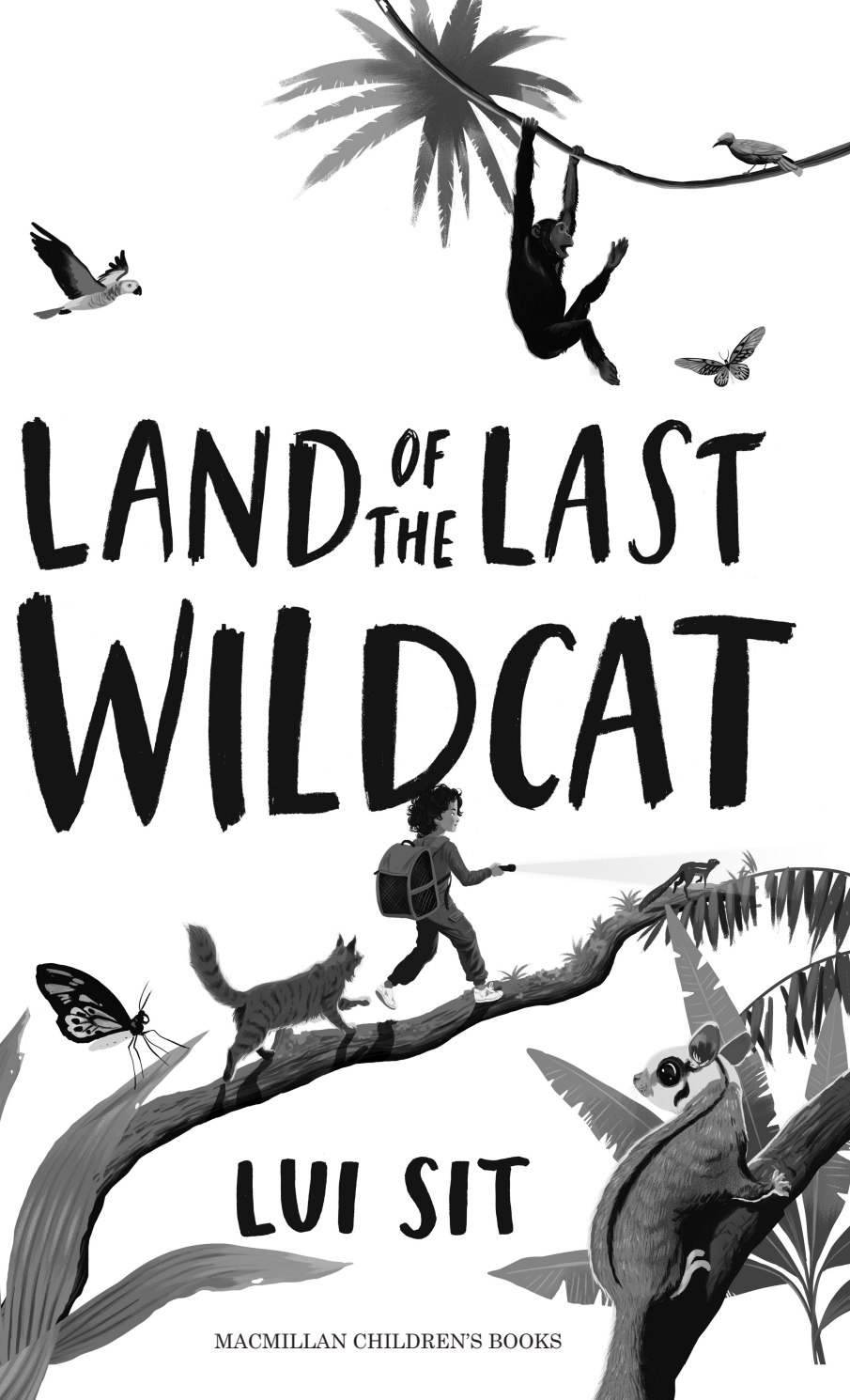
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LUI SIT

MACMILLAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

I am not afraid of storms, for I am learning
how to sail my ship.

– L. M. Alcott, *Little Women*

PROLOGUE

The rock arrived in the post.

Tearing open the padded envelope, Puffin pulled out a black lump the size of a walnut. She rubbed her fingers over the nubby surface, before holding it up to her nose, sniffing in the faint scent of soil and dried leaves.

‘What is it?’ she wondered out loud. She scanned the handwritten note accompanying this latest fossil, but it was full of questions, not answers:

Are you eating enough?

Are you doing your homework?

How are Lance and Grandad Moe?

Puffin peered at the lump, holding it up to the light.

‘It’s a poo,’ she decided. ‘Kuri poo.’

This latest object joined her collection of ocean-washed green glass, smooth grey stones streaked with flecks of white and red, shells

shaped like cats' heads and a sparkly nugget that Puffin called bird gold. These treasures arrived in padded beige envelopes, with Puffin's name scrawled across the front in her mum's bold handwriting. But, for all the wonders of the natural world that arrived, the only thing that Puffin longed to see come through the door, was her mum.

CHAPTER ONE

'This is the kuri.'

Puffin Lau clambered up the podium steps towards a gold-framed oil painting mounted on the wall of the Linger Island Gallery room. The picture showed a large orange wildcat leaping off a cliff edge into a starry night sky.

It had fluffy triangular ears, a muscular body covered in shimmering orange fur and a tail twice the length of its frame. Its round eyes glowed a deep blue-green. As Puffin moved sideways, the eyes seemed to follow her. She grazed her fingertips against the canvas, touching the tip of its painted tail. The plaque beneath the painting read: *Kuri – Legend of Linger Island*.

'What are you doing?' hissed Lance, who was standing below. 'Get down!'

Puffin ignored her best friend, whose freckled face flushed as he realized what she was up to. He rolled his eyes.

'Here we go again,' he muttered as Puffin planted her legs solidly on the podium, hands on



her hips. 'Wherever you are, Puffin, you always find the spotlight.'

'Hey!' A shout from across the room made her look up to see a young boy pulling his mum by the hand across the gallery space.

'Hey,' the boy repeated, 'are you the museum guide? Are you giving the free talk about the wildcat?'

'Yes.' A shiver of excitement flushed through Puffin. 'Do you want to hear about the kuri?'

The boy nodded. His mum peered over her glasses at Puffin. Dressed in her school uniform with the Corvida Academy logo embroidered on

her jumper, Puffin didn't look like a museum tour guide, especially considering the VISITOR sticker on her chest.

'Are you sure, dear?' she asked. 'Is the *adult* guide coming?'

'Er, yes, if you wait a few min—' Lance started to say.

'No need for an adult,' Puffin interrupted, hands still on hips. 'Because *I* am a kuri expert.'

She brushed her brown, bushy hair off her face. She'd inherited very few of her Chinese dad's features, only George's straight eyebrows and wide jaw. The rest of her resembled her Portuguese mother, Allegra. Puffin's light brown eyes crinkled in the corners as she beamed at her audience of two.

'No you're not,' Lance interrupted back. 'Your mum's the expert. Speaking of which, shouldn't she be here by now?'

Puffin ignored him. She had grown up in the Pokko Science and Research Museum, which housed a research laboratory in its basement. The laboratory funded much of the museum's activities and also employed her mum, who was Head of the Mysterious Animal Genetics and Innovation Centre division. The Linger Island Gallery was Allegra's creation, filled with

artefacts, reproductions and information about her specialist area of study – the kuri of Linger Island.

The lab was out of bounds for children. But one time when she was fed up waiting for Mum to finish work, Puffin had headed down, only to be greeted by a pair of security guards who escorted her back upstairs.

So she had made the Linger Island Gallery her home away from home instead. Here, she watched Mum give talks to a curious public. There was no doubt that she *was* the next best person to tell visitors about the kuri. Even though Mum had recently returned from her research trip to Linger Island, Puffin had barely seen her and now she was late for her own talk.

Rolling her shoulders back, Puffin took a big breath in.

‘The kuri,’ she boomed, as if addressing an audience of millions, ‘is a legendary wildcat that lived many years ago on Linger Island with the Lingese people. They believed it possessed special powers. But one day all the kuri disappeared from the island – and no one knows why.’

She paused for effect, just as Mum did when she gave talks. Reaching into her pocket, she rubbed the fossil – aka kuri poo – stashed there.

Touching the small stone was comforting. It was like having a part of Mum with her when she wasn’t around. Which was often.

Just then, Puffin noticed the boy’s mouth hanging open.

‘Can you guess the kuri’s special power?’ she asked him.

‘Can it fly?’

‘Yes!’ Puffin answered, flinging her arms wide.

Lance snorted, pulling a face.

‘But there was something else it could do,’ she continued before Lance could speak. ‘Something *better* than flying.’

‘Better than flying?’ the boy squeaked. ‘Can it shoot lasers? From its eyes?’

Puffin didn’t answer. Mum always said that a dramatic pause was good for building suspense. Hopping down from the podium, Puffin marched up to the largest statue in the gallery. It was of a giant cat carved in grey-blue stone, standing upright on its hind legs with two deep hollows for eyes and a belly that stuck out like the underside of a canoe. Three metres tall, it loomed high above everything else in the room. Beside it, Puffin looked tiny, even though at ten she was one of the tallest girls in her class.

She patted the statue’s cold stone leg.

‘This is an azarine,’ she told the boy. ‘That’s pronounced *az-ah-rin*. It’s thought that the Lingese made them out of a special stone called azarite to honour the kuri. This isn’t an original one, though; it’s a replica. I call him Frankie.’

‘Excuse me,’ said the mum. ‘Should you be touching that?’

Puffin pretended not to hear.

‘Follow me,’ she beckoned, moving around the gallery, stopping at the display case that contained a fake orange kuri sitting upright on a nest made of straw and dried moss. For the billionth time, she read aloud the panel beneath the display case:

KURI (Ku-ree. Lingese. *Felis magna* alas)
The kuri, a breed of wildcat, was believed to be native to Linger Island, which is located in the North Atlantic Ocean, off the coast of Western Africa. For many years, the kuri lived in harmony with the Lingese people until the species was thought to have become extinct. The reason for its extinction is unclear. Within local mythology, the kuri was worshipped for having healing powers. Some historians believe that the species was eradicated by mass culling during a period of famine. Evidence of the kuri’s existence

include historical drawings of Lingese statues called azarines. These totemic sculptures, presenting in the form of the kuri, were made from azarite, a mineral found only on Linger Island. All were plundered from the island and remain lost. Lingese folklore claims that azarite is the source of the kuri’s powers. Rare sightings of the kuri have been reported but never proven.

Puffin bent down and pressed her nose against the glass, looking at the model of the kuri, which reached just below her hips. Once again, she wished she could reach through the glass and stroke it.

‘Hello,’ she whispered, willing its frozen snout to move. ‘It’s me. Puffin.’

The kuri stared back in silence; its plastic eyes fixed for ever in one direction.

‘Where are its wings?’ the boy asked, now standing beside her, his nose also against the glass.

Before Puffin could reply, the gallery doors burst open and Grandad Moe stormed in. Tall and wiry, he was dressed in his security guard uniform and moved fast for a man in his sixties. Scanning the gallery floor, his wrinkled face looked grim.

‘Uh-oh.’ Puffin skittered around to the back of the azarine. Crouching down, she found herself alongside the boy, who’d followed her.

‘But what about the kuri?’ His eyes were glued on Puffin. ‘What was its power?’

Puffin started to speak, but Grandad Moe cut her off.

‘Puffin, I can see you. Get up.’

She grinned at the boy, putting a finger to her lips.

‘I should have known you’d be in here,’ Grandad Moe continued. ‘Why did you wander off without telling your teacher? Mrs Shalouf’s been looking all over for you. Ah, Lance, I see you there. Wherever one is, so is the other.’

‘Sorry, Grandad,’ said Lance as he shuffled into Grandad Moe’s full eyeline despite Puffin’s hands waving at him to stay put.

She glanced at the boy’s mum, who looked very confused and on the verge of whisking her child away. The boy inched closer to Puffin, his eyes still fixed on her.

‘What can it do?’ he repeated.

Puffin smiled, dimples appearing in her wide cheeks. Leaning forward, she whispered into his ear.

‘It can help you live for ever.’

CHAPTER TWO

Puffin and Lance watched Grandad Moe usher the mother and son out of the gallery. As the doors closed behind them, Puffin sighed.

‘That kid really liked my talk,’ she said, thinking of the wonder in the boy’s eyes.

‘I can’t believe you said it could fly,’ Lance said. ‘*As if.*’

‘Did you see his face, though? He loved it.’

‘It’s called lying.’ Lance’s ears were bright red, as if someone had pinched them. ‘You just can’t help yourself, can you?’

‘It’s called *imagination*,’ Puffin retorted. ‘Mum says you have to stretch the truth sometimes to find it.’

Grandad Moe’s face was solemn as he walked back towards them.

‘What were you two thinking, running off from your school group like that? Mrs Shalouf was frantic.’

‘Sorry, Grandad,’ Lance said. ‘You know what Puffin’s like.’

‘Hey!’ Puffin elbowed Lance hard.

‘Oi! Stop!’ He retaliated by poking her in the arm.

‘*You* stop,’ she said, poking him back. ‘I thought Mum would be here. I wanted to see her before the talk.’

‘Stop it, both of you,’ ordered Grandad Moe. ‘You are in my workplace. Behave yourselves. Now, I need to tell your teacher where you are.’

Puffin kicked the polished floor while Grandad Moe radioed through to security.

‘Where’s Mum?’ she muttered. ‘She’s supposed to be here. She’s been home a week now but I’ve hardly seen her. Is she downstairs in the lab? Can I go see?’

Grandad Moe sighed.

‘You know perfectly well that the lab is out of bounds for children. It’s not safe.’

Puffin stared at the floor, her face thunderous.

‘It’s not fair. I don’t see her when she’s away for work and then I don’t see her much when she’s back home either. Why can’t I go with her on these work trips? I want to look for the kuri too. And . . . I want to see where Dad is buried.’ Puffin took a deep breath. ‘She keeps saying she’ll take me to Linger Island when I’m older. I’m old enough now, aren’t I?’

Grandad Moe sighed again.

‘Puffin, we’ve talked about why now isn’t the time yet. There’s the matter of school, for one.’ He squatted, his knees cracking, so he could look her in the eye. ‘Listen, Puffin.’ His brown eyes were warm beneath his shock of wiry white hair. ‘I knew your mum – and dad, may he rest in peace – before they even had you. And I was one of the first to visit when you were born. I know you want to spend time with Allegra, but she only just got back from her research trip. There’s a lot of paperwork to do after such a big trip. She’ll have more time soon. Don’t forget – we’re your family too.’

He flashed her a smile, melting the knot inside Puffin’s stomach. Grandad Moe and Lance had started out as her neighbours, but after Dad died, she and Mum had moved in with them so that Grandad Moe could look after her when Mum was away for work. She flung her arms around his neck.

‘You’re the only grandad I have, even though you’re not really my grandad . . .’

He grinned, ruffling her hair just as Class 5C from Corvida Academy surged into Linger Island Gallery.

‘Miss! Miss!’ shouted Milo D’Annunzio, who

everyone called Treetops because he was so tall. 'Here she is! Found them!' He pointed at Puffin and Lance with his lanky arms.

'Puffin Lau. Lance Moe.' Mrs Shalouf's voice blasted across the room as she stepped forward. 'What is the meaning of this? Why on earth did you both leave the group without telling me?'

'She wanted to find her mum,' Lance answered before Puffin could. 'We're sorry, Mrs Shalouf.'

The teacher's furrowed brow relaxed slightly as she scanned the gallery space, taking in the empty podium.

'Is Allegra not here yet?' She looked at her watch. 'The class talk is supposed to start in a few minutes. Would it be possible to check if it will begin on time?' she said to Grandad Moe. 'The school bus is arriving in less than an hour to fetch us.'

Grandad Moe nodded, winking in Puffin and Lance's direction before striding out.

The class shuffled restlessly.

'Boring,' Puffin heard Deanne Evans say. 'It's just a room full of dried bark and old stones.'

Puffin's fingers curled tight around the fossilized kuri poo in her pocket. Mum was supposed to dazzle the class with her stories

about the kuri and Linger Island. She pressed her lips tight as she watched Deanne roll her eyes. She couldn't bear it.

'You're a Lau,' Dad used to say, 'and Laus stand up when others sit down.'

When he had stopped saying it, Mum had taken over. But now that Mum was so busy and distracted with work, Puffin had to say it to herself if she wanted to hear it at all. She took in a deep breath. She was not going to allow the class to think badly of Mum's work. She had to do something.

'I have something to show you all,' she announced, loud enough to make twenty-six pairs of eyes turn towards her.

'Do you now?' Mrs Shalouf sighed. 'All right. Go ahead, Puffin.'

Puffin cleared her throat and pulled the ink-coloured stone from her pocket, waving it high above her head.

'Look!' she yelled. '*This* is KURI POO!'

Deanne Evans snorted. 'Is that why you smell? Because you carry poo in your pocket?'

'Deanne!' warned Mrs Shalouf. 'That's enough. Now, Puffin, how did you come across this, er, object?'

Puffin rubbed her fingers over the indents on

the rock's surface, counting down from ten to one in her head.

'Mum sent it to me,' she said between gritted teeth. 'While she was away on Linger Island.' She looked around the gallery. Still no sign of Mum.

'How can that be poo?' interrupted Treetops. 'It looks like a mouldy pingpong ball.'

Several children giggled, but Puffin remained stony-faced.

'It's foss-i-lized,' she answered, adding the word 'stupid' in her head, 'which means it's not mouldy 'cause it's been preserved.'

'What kind of parent sends poo to their kid in the post?' Deanne started again. 'A weirdo.'

'She's a scientist specializing in kuri research,' Puffin said, her jaw clenched. 'She's searching for the kuri.'

'Fake news,' Deanne sniffed. 'She hasn't found it, has she? She's not much of a mum – always leaving you behind.'

An explosion of red stars clouded Puffin's vision as her ears filled with a low buzzing.

'Shut up!' she yelled, flinging the poo at Deanne's head. It landed with a thud by Mrs Shalouf's feet.

'You,' Deanne smirked, 'are in SO much trouble.'



'QUIET PLEASE!' The unfamiliar voice booming from the podium made everyone freeze. Puffin turned to find a burly man in a white lab coat standing where she had been just a few moments ago. He had blue eyes, a broad face and thick blond curls.

'Hello, children,' the man said. 'May I have your attention, please?'

Everyone remained still and silent. Puffin picked up the kuri poo, avoiding Mrs Shalouf's steely gaze.

'Unfortunately, Dr Lau can no longer give the talk on the kuri today. She apologizes, and I have been sent in her place.' The man grinned, baring bright white teeth.

Puffin frowned. Mum had *promised* to do her class talk.

‘My name is Roger Smoult and I am the CEO of Pokko Research Laboratories, which is located underneath the museum, right below where we are standing. You might know about us because our laboratory helps fund this wonderful museum you are visiting. We are known for the restoration of ecological habitats after exploration. Now, who knows what our main area of research is?’

A few palms waved in the air while Puffin’s remained stiff by her side. She felt cheated. Mum had been away for weeks on her research trip to Linger Island. Puffin had missed her terribly and to make it up to her, Mum said she would wow her class with her kuri talk. But now it looked like that talk was not going to happen after all. Instead, they were going to be stuck with this strange man. She locked eyes with Lance, who just shrugged.

‘Linger Island?’ someone piped up.

Mr Smoult nodded.

‘Indeed you are correct. In fact, you’re all in the Linger Island Gallery, which you can see is filled with wondrous artefacts and treasures from the island.’

The class followed his gestures, taking in carved figurines of Linger Island birds and native plants that had become extinct on the island long ago. There were canoes shaped from tree trunks hanging from the ceilings, and clear plastic cylinders along the walls showing soil samples.

‘I’m sure you know that the main focus of our Linger Island research is the kuri,’ said Mr Smoult.

Puffin’s throat tightened as she watched her classmates nod. They had laughed at her a few minutes ago, but now they were hanging on Mr Smoult’s every word.

‘The kuri is thought to be able to heal through regeneration of cells. Do you know how I know this? It healed me!’ he declared.

Puffin’s mouth dropped open. Along with her classmates, she stared wide-eyed at Mr Smoult.

‘I was on a research trip when I crash-landed on Linger Island,’ he went on. ‘Somehow I managed to crawl out of the plane with only a broken leg and arm, though I was in agony. The last thing I remember seeing before passing out was the approaching figure of a large orange wildcat. When I woke up in the island hospital, the doctors were mystified how I’d managed to

survive a plane crash intact with no injuries. After that, I learned everything I could about the kuri. I knew it had healed me; I just didn't know how.'

Puffin's chest hurt. She realized she was holding her breath.

'If we find a kuri and discover how it heals, do you all know what that could mean?' Mr Smoult's voice boomed across their heads. 'Do you know how important that could be to human health? To the world? We could potentially cure diseases that we can't right now.' He paused, scanning their faces.

'And what's more,' he continued, 'I believe that my number-one kuri research specialist, Dr Allegra Lau, is the mother of one of your classmates!'

Puffin winced. 'Yeah,' she thought. 'Allegra Lau, who couldn't even be bothered to turn up to give a talk to her daughter's class.' The fizz of excitement in her stomach hardened into a leaden lump.

'Where is it then?' Deanne asked. 'Why has a kuri never been found?'

Puffin caught an odd expression flickering across Mr Smoult's face before he smiled.

'What a great question. Let me tell you about

our junior conservation scheme. My daughter, Kathy, set it up before she . . . left. Maybe one of you might apply when you're older . . .'

Mr Smoult's voice faded in Puffin's mind as she watched her class being held in thrall by this stranger who worked with Mum. Puffin blinked back the swell of tears threatening to spill down her cheeks. She wished she did not care, after all she should be used to it by now. Mum would probably have some work-related excuse for her absence. Swallowing down her disappointment, she put the fossil back in her pocket, filing away this latest let-down with the others, all caused by Mum.

CHAPTER THREE

‘Line up, everyone. Single file.’

Standing in the class queue for the bus, Puffin watched Mrs Shalouf wrangle 5C into order. Behind Puffin, Lance was humming tunelessly. Grandad Moe hadn’t been able to find Mum, and so after Mr Smoult had finished, Mrs Shalouf ushered them all through a whistle-stop tour of Linger Island Gallery before hustling the class to the exit.

‘See you both at home later,’ Grandad Moe had said, waving them off. ‘My famous lasagne for dinner!’

Standing in the museum foyer, Puffin looked across to the gift shop where piles of plush kuri toys were for sale. Some of her classmates had bought one and were standing with them tucked under their arms as they waited to board the bus. Their fluffy orange faces and plastic eyes did not resemble the sharp look of the wildcat Puffin was familiar with from the painting hanging inside Linger Island Gallery.

Mum’s recent research trip to Linger Island to find the kuri had, like all of her previous trips, yielded no results. Still, she’d always made time for Puffin, no matter how busy she was when she returned. She’d been excited about having Puffin’s class visit her gallery, so why hadn’t she turned up for the talk? Puffin’s fingers drummed against her leg. Irritation replaced her earlier disappointment. ‘Don’t I have a right to know?’ she thought.

‘What happened to Mum?’ she asked herself again. The question rankled her, made worse by the fact that all the adults who might have known seemed unbothered. Grandad Moe. Mr Smoult. Even Mrs Shalouf, who had organized the museum visit, simply accepted the fact that Mum had been unable to make it. What was wrong with them? Puffin shoved her hands into her pockets, feeling for the kuri poo inside.

For as long as Puffin could remember, Mum had always been busy with work, even when she wasn’t away on research trips. After Dad died, it was often Grandad Moe who attended Puffin’s school assemblies or parent days in Mum’s place. So why did Puffin feel so let down today? She was used to Mum not turning up, but today felt different. She turned to Lance, who was bobbing

his head as he hummed.

‘Earth to Lance,’ she whispered. ‘Do you copy?’

‘What?’

‘Something’s not right.’

‘Well, your mum often doesn’t come to things, so it’s not that weird, is it?’

Puffin bit her lip.

‘Something’s different about today, Lance. I don’t know how to explain it, except that something feels *wrong*.’

‘Maybe she’s stuck downstairs in the lab,’ Lance said. ‘But if she is, you’d think she could have come up quickly to let us know. After all, it’s only a ride up in the lift.’

‘Let’s go, everyone.’ Mrs Shalouf clapped her hands, leading the way out of the museum. The queue of children started to follow, but Puffin’s feet stayed rooted to the spot.

‘Come on,’ Lance urged. ‘You heard, let’s go.’

Puffin watched her class stream slowly through the main doors. The uneasy feeling continued to bubble up inside her, and instead of her teacher, she heard her own voice thundering through her head.

Find Mum.

She yanked Lance by the elbow once Mrs Shalouf’s back was turned and they started to run.

‘PUFFIN!’

She looked behind to see Mrs Shalouf’s startled face.

‘Grandad Moe needs us!’ Puffin yelled over her shoulder. ‘He said he’ll take us home!’

Puffin and Lance raced through the foyer, zigzagging between the visitors milling about.

‘Where are we going?’ Lance panted as Puffin turned down a corridor and arrived at a set of double doors. Above them was a sign that read POKKO RESEARCH LABORATORIES: RESTRICTED ACCESS AREA.

‘I want to find out why Mum didn’t show up.’ Puffin answered. ‘And since no one is prepared to tell us or seems to care, I’m taking it into my own hands.’ Lance’s face lit up.

That was a wonderful thing about Lance, Puffin thought, pushing the doors open. No matter what he said, he was always up for an adventure. The doors opened into a small reception area.

‘Puffin. Lance.’ The security guard behind the desk smiled at them. ‘To what do I owe this pleasure?’

Puffin composed her face to look as innocent as possible. ‘Here goes nothing,’ she thought.

‘Hi, Robert,’ she said, smiling back. ‘We need

to get some bus money from Grandad Moe downstairs. The school bus left without us. Lance was in the toilet.'

She heard Lance suppress a squeak. She too was impressed by how glibly she lied. Was it an inherited scientific explorer trait? How to get out of a tight spot by lying?

Robert scratched his head.

'Oh, well. I can't really leave my station. We're short-staffed today. Shall I radio him to come here?'

'No,' Puffin said quickly. 'He messaged Lance and told us to pop down. We know where he is.'

'We do,' said Lance, nodding.

Robert took a swift glance around and typed into the keyboard behind the desk.

'Make it quick,' he said, nodding towards the lifts. 'When you get down there, tell Nicoleta I let you through.'

Puffin flashed him another smile, swiftly walking towards the lift before Robert could change his mind. The only access to the lab was down through the lift, which was heavily secured by cameras and staff.

She and Lance stepped in, and she held her breath as the lift doors slid shut. Being inside small spaces made her feel uneasy, her chest

tight and head dizzy. Grandad Moe said the name for it was claustrophobia – a complicated word for the feeling of being trapped.

As the lift descended, Lance turned to Puffin. 'Can't believe you used me as an excuse!' He frowned and waved a finger under her nose to see if she was breathing. 'Don't hold your breath. *Breathe* when you feel stressed,' he said, but Puffin batted his finger away as her face started to turn red.

'Basement. Home of Pokko Research Laboratories,' the lift's robot voice announced. The doors slid open, revealing a spacious foyer. The words POKKO RESEARCH LABORATORIES were painted on the cream wall in shiny black paint. Sitting behind a long desk was a woman with dark, slicked-back hair.

'Hello,' she said. 'What are you two children doing here?'

Puffin squared her shoulders.

'We just need to get bus money from Grandad, Jake Moe – he works here. Robert let us through.'

Nicoleta narrowed her eyes.

'Robert shouldn't have done that. The lab is not for children.'

'We know,' Puffin replied without missing a beat. 'Which is why we've never been before. But

we can't get home otherwise. Maybe we could wait here with you until Grandad Moe's shift finishes?"

Nicoleta's eyebrows shot up. She narrowed her eyes again at Puffin.

'You look familiar. Are you Allegra's daughter?'

Puffin nodded. A long moment passed before Nicoleta broke her gaze, then she rummaged behind the desk and handed them two plastic passes.

'I really admire Allegra. It's not easy being a single working mother. I don't know how she juggles it . . .' Nicoleta trailed off, then switched back to work mode. 'Here, use these passes,' she said. 'I've run out of lanyards. Do you have pockets? Please remember to hand them back when you're done.'

Puffin nodded and looked at the laminated card in her hand: *Pokko Research Laboratories: Visitor Access Pass*.

Nicoleta gestured to the metal turnstile by the desk, and Puffin and Lance shuffled through.

'OK,' said Nicoleta, checking her computer. 'Jake Moe is in Section A – that's in Lab C. I'll let you in from here,' she instructed. 'Go down the stairs and Section A will be clearly signposted. Come back out this way once you're done. And be quick!'

'Thanks, we will!' Puffin said over her shoulder, as she hurried towards the double metal doors, over which a sign with bright red letters declared:

LABORATORY C
HAZARDOUS MATERIALS PRESENT
AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY

'Ready?' Nicoleta called.

Puffin nodded, placing both palms on one of the doors, ready to push.

Lance did the same with the other door. 'Beyond here there may be no return,' he muttered dramatically.

Puffin rolled her eyes. They were just going to find Mum, not infiltrate MI5. But she played along. 'I think we passed that point a while ago,' she replied as there was a loud click and the doors unlocked, letting them both through.

CHAPTER FOUR

On the other side, Puffin found herself standing on a metal bridge that extended across a cavernous, domed room. The bridge was one of five, all winging out from different doorways around the room. The bridges, like spokes of a wheel, met in the middle of the room at a suspended metal platform. From there, a spiral staircase wound down to a vast open-plan workspace. Down there she could see staff in white lab coats and working on computers. Others walked around while a few chatted with one another, heads bent close together.

‘Wow, it’s like a film set,’ Lance said, voicing Puffin’s thoughts.

‘Come on.’

They crept down the spiral staircase to the main floor, and found themselves amid a labyrinth of shelves and long tables crowded with machines with buttons, dials and screens. Fighting for room on the table surfaces were glass bottles, pipettes, Bunsen burners, test



tubes, flasks and microscopes. There was so much to see. Puffin's eyes felt like they were on stalks.

Lance reached out to touch the dials on the closest machine, but Puffin pulled him back, ducking under a table, as a man neared and reached into a cupboard where multiple coats hung. They watched him pull out a lab coat and a blue plastic cap, transforming himself into a lab worker. Once he had gone, Puffin eased open the cupboard door and did the same.

'Put it on,' she said to Lance. 'It'll help us to blend in.'

'I doubt it,' Lance said, shrugging on the white coat, which sagged around his shoulders and dragged on the floor. 'I hope we're not caught. Otherwise we'll be grounded for ever.'

Puffin ignored him, pulling on the blue cap, which flopped over her ears. Lance sniggered.

'Have *you* looked in the mirror?' she retorted. Looking up past the row of tables, she spotted a doorway marked SECTION A.

'In there,' Puffin said, pointing. 'Let's try to find Mum's office before Grandad Moe finds us.' Hurrying over to the door, Puffin pulled out her visitor pass, tapping the card reader. The red light turned green.

'Yes!' Puffin mouthed as they entered a long corridor, lined with floor-to-ceiling windows on either side.

Approaching the first window, she saw a white room containing a small metal spaceship. On the gangplanks coming down from opposite sides of the ship stood hundreds of yellow chicks, fluffing their downy wings like a field of swaying dandelions. Video cameras spaced around the room recorded the activity.

'Chicks from outer space,' Lance said, palms pressed against the glass.

'They're trying to find out if chickens grow up to have best friends,' Puffin read from the panel next to the window, 'and if so, what makes them choose one friend over another.'

'Do you think that's a real spaceship?' Lance asked.

'Who knows? Quick, let's go.'

But despite their best efforts, it was hard not to dawdle, gawking at the experiments behind each window. One room had large blocks of cheese on which olive-green mould grew. Another room was filled with plants where a glass wall divided the room in half.

'An experiment to see if plants grow better if they are spoken to,' Lance read aloud. 'The

plants on the left are listening to recorded voices on a sound system.'

'What are the voices saying?' Puffin wondered aloud.

'Probably *How are you?* That sort of thing.'

The next door along was slightly ajar. Puffin could hear voices inside.

'Do you think that's the recorded voices? Talking to the plants?' Lance went to enter, but Puffin pulled him back by his lab coat.

'Wait,' she said, squatting low behind the open door. 'Listen.'

A woman was speaking in an upset tone.

'I told you not to remove it, but you didn't listen. Natural habitat is *vital* for its survival.'

Puffin froze. She knew that voice. She hovered closer.

'Why would I *not* take it? It's like finding a unicorn. It's a miracle!'

'This is NOT what I signed up for.'

'Of course it is. Don't kid yourself, Allegra.'

Puffin's knees gave way, toppling her against the door, which flew open, sending her sprawling across the floor.

'Puffin?!'

Mum's shocked face stared down at her. Next to her was Mr Smoult.



'WHAT are you doing here? How did you even . . . ? What are you wearing . . . ?' Mum's voice petered out into silence. Wisps of brown hair escaping her ponytail frizzed around her face, framing her harried expression.

Puffin scrambled to her feet, looking behind for Lance, but no one was there. Confused, she looked around the room, which was filled with empty metal cages, all stacked on top of each other. The cage doors hung open, exposing the straw beds and bowls inside. A photo of a rabbit or cat was fixed to each cage door. Wires dangled down from the ceiling into each cage, like black serpents, writhing in space. She stared at one

of the pictures, a happy-looking grey cat. She couldn't imagine a cat being happy inside one of these cages. The whole set-up made her feel uneasy. Why would they need to lock up rabbits and cats? And what were the wires for?

'Where were you, Mum?' she said. 'You were supposed to give my class a talk, but you never came.'

Mum's brown eyes blinked behind her glasses. She started to speak but was cut off.

'So *you* are Puffin,' Mr Smoult said, his bright-blue gaze trained on her. 'Didn't I see you earlier with your class? Upstairs in the Linger Island Gallery?'

Puffin stared back. Although his lips smiled, it did not reach his eyes.

'I missed the bus back,' she answered, stopping herself from mentioning Lance. Where was he?

'I see,' Mr Smoult said. 'I suppose you came looking for your mum. Quite a feat to get into the lab. It's not a place for children.'

'And for good reason. I'll make sure she leaves,' Allegra interrupted. 'Puffin, come with me. Quick! You need to go.' She grabbed hold of Puffin's arm, but Smoult blocked their way, his chest swelling as he straightened.

'No need,' he said, breaking into a laugh that

reminded Puffin of a kookaburra bird she had seen on a nature show. It made the strangest noise, like the bird was choking on its own tongue. 'She's quite the explorer, just like her mum.'

Puffin felt Mum stiffen beside her.

'You need to come with me, Allegra,' he continued, 'our *business* can't wait.' He bent forward so that he was face-level with Puffin. Up close, his breath smelled of mint and coffee.

'Maybe one day you'll work for me too,' he said with a wink. 'I'm always on the lookout for curious minds. Now, you wait here until your mum is done. We won't be long.'

'That's not a good idea, Roger,' Allegra said crisply. 'She should get home.'

Puffin watched Mum and Mr Smoult eyeball one another. The moment stretched until Mr Smoult turned towards the door.

'Fine.' He shrugged. 'Do what you want. But no one knows better than you what's at stake.' Without another word, he opened the door and disappeared.

'What's he talking about?' Puffin asked Mum, who was staring at her with a strange expression on her face.

'Mum?' she said, but Allegra held up her hand.

‘Not now, Puffin.’

‘But, Mum—’

‘Puffin. *Not now*. You shouldn’t have come down here.’

Up close, Puffin could see the worry in Mum’s eyes.

‘Unfortunately he’s right. I can’t take you upstairs now. I have an urgent matter to attend to. Wait here until I get back. Do. Not. Leave.’

Mum pulled out a card from her lab coat.

‘Here’s my pass, in case you get locked in by accident. Don’t lose it.’

Puffin felt Mum’s lips brush the top of her head, her jasmine perfume lingering in Puffin’s nose as she left the room. She looked over at the empty wire cages and animal photos.

‘Creepy.’

The pass Mum had given her was printed with the words: *Pokko Research Laboratories Staff Security Pass: Allegra Lau – Mysterious Animal Genetics and Innovation Centre*. A blurry photo of Mum stared out from the left-hand corner. What was so urgent that had made Mum break her promise and now just leave her in here by herself? Finding Mum had only confused Puffin even more.

She stuck her head out of the door, looking

down the hallway for Lance, but he was nowhere in sight. Why should she wait in this creepy room alone? She had got them into the basement. She could get herself out. And Lance too if she could find him.

‘Lance?’ She started walking towards the end of the hallway where a closed door had the words DO NOT ENTER above it in red.

‘Lance!’ she shouted, looking from side to side, only to see more experiments like the ones they’d already seen as she passed. Feeling for her visitor pass, she tapped it against the card reader once, then twice, but the light remained red, the door sealed tight. Her fingers dived into her other pocket, feeling the hard plastic edge of Mum’s security pass.

Whipping it out, she whacked it hard against the card reader. Time slowed as she held her breath. The light flashed green and the door popped open with a dull click.

‘Yes.’ She exhaled and went through.

Puffin found herself standing alone inside a large viewing enclosure decorated with potted plants. A glass wall separated the display space from the viewing area where she stood. The enclosure’s floor was covered with white sand and leafy branches. Several flat grey rocks lay

on the ground and in the far corner was a pale, stone cave about the size of a large kennel. Two shallow dishes containing water and dried pellets sat near the side wall. Near them lay a pile of square, olive-green lumps, the size of the Turkish Delight she ate at Christmas. Puffin looked closer. They looked like poo, but how could poo be square-shaped?

Puffin surveyed the enclosure again for signs of movement.

‘Nothing here,’ she thought. ‘Just an empty display.’

She turned to leave, but before she reached the door, the back of her head started to tingle as if an electric switch had been turned on. The feeling spread down her arms and legs, reaching her hands and feet. She gave them a quick shake, but the feeling stayed.

‘I should have eaten more at lunch,’ she thought. ‘If only Lance was here – he always has snacks in his backpack.’

A flicker of movement caught the corner of her eye. Turning back to the glass, she saw only her own blurred reflection. She shrugged, watching her reflection do the same. She walked close up to the glass until she and her reflection were nose-to-nose.

‘What was that?’ she asked, but her reflection didn’t reply. Shaking her head, she told herself to stop being silly. She must have imagined it. But why, then, were the hairs on the back of her neck standing up, and why did she feel, all of a sudden, that she wasn’t alone? The tingling in her limbs was growing stronger by the minute.

‘Low blood sugar,’ she told herself. She went to leave, but when she reached the door, her hand hesitated on the door handle.

‘Turn around,’ said a voice inside her head.

‘No. Nothing’s there.’

Turn around and say bye to your reflection.

‘That’s silly.’

No one can see you. Who cares!

So she did. And when Puffin turned to wave to herself in the glass one last time, the tingling reached fever pitch. For looking back at her from behind the glass was . . . a kuri.