

CHAPTER ONE

Puffin Lau looked around her bedroom. Chunks had been chewed out of her daisy bedspread, bald patches dotted the green carpet, and scratch marks decorated her wardrobe doors. Glancing up, Puffin caught her reflection in the freestanding mirror across the room and brushed back her mop of bushy black hair. Her solemn expression cracked into a grin when a bundle of quivering white fluff bounded over to her, pawing at her shins.

‘Yeep! Yeep!’

Puffin laughed. ‘Noma!’

She bent down to stroke the wildcat, whose luxurious fur stuck out around her body like a pale cloud. Rubbing her furry head against Puffin’s ankles, the little cat arched her spine, purring. As Noma’s shimmering green eyes met Puffin’s dark brown ones, a feeling of peace streamed through Puffin.

Noma was a kuri – a rare species of wildcat with healing powers, native to a place called

Linger Island. Puffin had never thought she would meet one, despite her mum, Allegra, being a kuri researcher. But in an unexpected turn of events, Puffin had not only met a kuri (Puffin had named her Trouble) but she and her best friend, Lance, had embarked on a daring adventure to Linger Island to save Trouble's life. Then, when she least expected it, a baby kuri had entered Puffin's life. Puffin had named her Noma.

Puffin watched Noma stretch out all four legs before bounding over to the bed, back to the desk, swat the chair leg, repeating the same circuit over and over again. Watching the furball's wild antics made Puffin dizzy but she would sorely miss it all when they released Noma on Linger Island. It was a day Puffin was dreading. She recalled Mum's voice in her head, telling her that to mature fully, kuri wildcats needed to bond with an azarine statue, only found on Linger Island. That they must do this to complete their development and learn how to heal. Puffin sighed. She would happily live in a wrecked bedroom if it meant Noma could stay with her for ever.

Knock, knock.

The door opened slightly, revealing Lance's red hair followed by his freckled face. He peered into the room.



‘Is it safe?’ he asked.

Spotting Lance, Noma scrambled down Puffin’s shoulder and dashed towards the door. Grabbing hold of Lance’s tracksuit bottoms with her teeth, she tugged him into the room.

‘No, not again,’ Lance groaned, clutching his waistband tightly. ‘Make her stop!’

Before Puffin could reach her, Noma let go of Lance’s joggers, running circles round him instead, until she was a blur of white fluff.

The kuri squealed, launching herself at his shins like a furry missile. Lance swerved, only

for Noma to somersault in the air, landing at his feet and tripping him over.

‘Ooff!’

‘Yeep!’ Noma chirruped joyfully, bounding away. Muscles tensing, she sprang up onto the mirror frame. Perched up high, she gazed down at them, looking pleased with herself.

‘Why does she always attack me?’ Lance sighed, sitting up.

Puffin grinned. ‘She’s just playing.’

‘If you were on the receiving end, I’m not sure how playful you’d find it. She’s getting worse – look at your room. Your mum’s gonna be so mad when she gets back.’

A thumping rhythm blasted through the room as ‘Ride of the Valkyries’ blared from Lance’s phone.

‘Yeep, yeep, yeep,’ squawked Noma in time with the tune.

‘Can you please change your ringtone?’ Puffin complained.

The faces of Lance’s Grandad Moe and his wife, Helen, flashed up on the screen as Lance answered the video call. They were standing in front of the airport. Puffin could hear the sound of plane engines roaring in the background, reminding her of when Helen had flown her,

Lance and Trouble to Linger Island. Helen was their old head teacher and, more recently, Grandad Moe's new wife. Even though she told Puffin and Lance to call her Helen, Puffin always thought of her as Blackwing, the code name Helen had used as a young activist.

'Hey, kids,' Grandad Moe shouted, waving one arm wildly. Next to him, Blackwing beamed at them and waved too. 'Can you hear me?'

'They could hear you in Timbuktu, Grandad,' Lance said. 'No need to shout.'

'We're about to check in,' Grandad Moe answered, still yelling. 'You both OK? Allegra should be there in a few hours.'

'We're fine,' Puffin called back. 'Just enjoy your honeymoon. I wish I was going to Linger Island with you!'

'Er, that would be awkward, Puffin. You joining their honeymoon?' Lance said, prompting Blackwing's silvery laugh to tinkle through the speaker.

'Text us on the group chat once Allegra's back from Bluster Peninsula,' she said.

Grandad Moe nodded. 'We might not be able to check it until we've arrived so just bear that in mind,' he added. 'By the way, where's the little one? Is she all right?'

‘In her favourite spot,’ said Puffin. ‘Up high as usual.’

Lance turned the phone to show them Noma perched on the mirror. She let out a little *yeep* when she saw Grandad Moe’s face.

‘Now remember to look after each other,’ said Grandad Moe, ‘and don’t forget to—’

‘Just go, Grandad!’ Lance urged. ‘You’ll miss your flight!’

They watched Grandad Moe salute the screen and Blackwing wave before their smiling faces disappeared.

Pocketing his mobile, Lance shuffled backwards towards the door, his eyes glued to Noma, whose ears pricked forward in his direction.

‘Don’t egg her on,’ Puffin said.

‘As if. I wish she would listen to me the way she does you. I guess it’s ’cause you’re birthbonded. Wish I had a birthbond. It’d be so cool to be bound to one thing in life that you look after and it looks after you.’

‘You do,’ Puffin retorted. ‘It’s called *food*. It calls to you wherever you go.’

But as she met Noma’s gaze, the warm feeling inside her stomach bubbled up. Lance was right. She was lucky to be birthbonded to the kuri species. It was something she’d inherited from

her dad, who was born on Linger Island and died there when she was five years old. All Linger Islanders were bonded to a natural element from the island. In George Lau's case, his family had a birthbond with the kuri species, and it had passed down to Puffin. She was part of a long line of caretakers for the kuri. When she had met Trouble – the kuri she'd saved from Mum's boss, Mr Smoult – Puffin had felt an instant connection and love. Now, she felt the same with Noma, who had hatched from a rock that Mum had found on Linger Island. Puffin had carried it around in her pocket, calling it her lucky kuri poo . . . until, one day, the rock had split in two, revealing it wasn't fossilized poop after all – but in fact contained a little baby kuri inside.

'True words. Food is my bond,' Lance agreed, patting his stomach as if it were a pet. 'Can't wait to start at Anglestone Boys. It has the best—'

'—food-tech course in the borough,' Puffin finished, rolling her eyes. 'I know. You've only said it about a million times since we finished Year Six.'

Lance did not reply. His light brown eyes met Puffin's with a serious expression that said, *Maybe you don't know me as well as you thought.* Confused, Puffin stayed silent. Could Lance not

take a joke any more? The moment stretched on for a beat too long, broken only by a beeping sound.

It was Lance's phone. He pulled it from his pocket. Glancing at the screen, he frowned.

'What is it?' Puffin asked, relieved that the awkward moment had passed.

Peering over his shoulder, she saw a garbled text from Mum. For the hundredth time, she wished she had her own phone, but Mum had said she couldn't get one until she started high school.

The message was a mix of symbols, numbers and letters that made no sense. The only decipherable words were *news broadcast*. Frowning, Puffin tried to read the words again. Mum had been away working on a remote peninsula called Bluster. She'd planned to be home yesterday, but the weather at Bluster meant that, instead, she was due to arrive just hours after Grandad Moe's and Blackwing's flight so that she could look after them during the school holidays. What did this text mean and why was it all jumbled? Was Mum all right?

Noma's plaintive miaow from across the room startled Puffin. The kuri was squinting at her, alert to the change in her mood.

‘It’s OK, Noma,’ she said unconvincingly, but then her eyes widened in alarm as the kuri’s hindquarters tensed.

‘No, Noma! Don’t! You can’t glide—’ But before she could say any more, Noma had sprung into the air, her four limbs spread. In a flash, Lance pushed past Puffin and caught the plummeting kuri.

‘Because your webbing hasn’t formed yet,’ Puffin finished, relieved.

Putting the squirming kuri on the carpet, Lance nodded towards Puffin’s bedroom door.

Puffin nodded back in understanding: they should check the news channel. She smiled. This was the Lance she knew: her best friend who she understood so well that they often didn’t need words to communicate. Surely their bond would last, even if high school took them in different directions?

She scooped Noma up and headed downstairs with Lance to the front room. Lance flicked through the channels on the TV remote, stopping on the twenty-four-hour news channel.

The onscreen footage showed a reporter dressed in a puffer jacket, standing in front of a vast crater in a frosty arctic landscape. Low buildings were dotted around the crater’s

perimeter. Behind her, uniformed figures formed a human barricade, preventing a group from approaching the crater's edge. Above them, curlicues of wispy grey and dull white smoke plumed from the crater's surface into the air. Puffin gasped.

'That must be the Blusterwind,' she murmured, stepping closer to the screen.

This was the natural landmark that Mum had gone to study – a crater that contained a whirling tumult of shimmering air. Puffin recalled how Mum had described the phenomenon: 'It's like the Northern Lights, where light and wind form swirling coloured air, except it's as if those swirling colours have fallen from the sky and become trapped in a hole in the earth.'

Screeching winds blasted through the microphone as the reporter spoke to the camera.

'... an unprecedented turn of events today at Bluster Peninsula where earlier (*yeep*) SUNBA mining interests clashed with (*yeep*) local scientists at the Blusterwind. This unique natural (*yeep-yeep-YEEP!*) landmark was created by a meteorite impact several years ago—'

Noma scrambled down from Puffin's lap, her shrill *yeeps* punctuating the reporter's voice. Standing on her hind legs, she batted the TV

screen with her front paws.

‘Noma, hush!’ Puffin said, but the kuri refused to stop, her cries getting louder.

‘Unusually, the meteorite disintegrated quickly into the soil. Equally unusual were the (*YEEP!*) residual winds that have remained trapped within the crater to this day. Once uninhabited, Bluster Peninsula (*YEEP-YEEP!*) currently houses a satellite research base that was established to study the winds and the properties of the mineral deposits around the crater. (*YEEP-YEEP!*) Over the past twenty-four hours, escalating wind activity within the crater has caused interference (*YEEP-YEEP-YEEP!*) in the atmosphere encompassing Bluster Peninsula.’

The TV was now showing a scuffle between the security guards and one of the group members. Puffin stiffened. She reached out and grabbed Lance’s arm.

‘You’re cutting off my blood supply,’ Lance moaned, but he didn’t move as the camera zoomed in on the person being handcuffed.

Puffin’s stomach dropped.

‘Mum,’ she exclaimed, her voice tight with confusion.

‘Woah,’ Lance gasped as Allegra’s defiant face filled the screen. ‘What’s she doing?’

‘This is an outrage!’ Mum yelled at the security guards, who were attempting to hustle her away from the news crew. Struggling free, she marched towards the camera, shouting to the reporter, ‘Is this being broadcast globally?’

‘Er, y-y-yes,’ stuttered the reporter.

Puffin watched in shocked silence as Mum stared into the camera lens.

‘Puffin!’ Allegra shouted. ‘Puffin, I’m so sorry, but I—’

The broadcast glitched, turning the TV screen into a fuzzy blur before fading into blankness with the message:

WE ARE TEMPORARILY UNABLE TO
BROADCAST FROM BLUSTER PENINSULA.

Puffin blinked, letting go of Lance’s arm. On the carpet, Noma had fallen into an exhausted sleep.

‘Mum,’ Puffin whispered, the frantic look on Mum’s face still fresh in her mind. She closed her eyes for a moment, blocking out the TV message.

‘Um, are you OK?’ she heard Lance ask.

She opened her eyes and turned to face him.

‘I will be,’ she replied, ‘when we get to Bluster Peninsula and rescue Mum.’