



## CHAPTER ONE

# Popcorn

Leni loved birds of every kind. Big and small, chirpy and squawky, wide-winged and web-footed. They were all special.

In her notebook, Leni liked to draw pictures of different birds she'd spotted, note down any distinctive calls, and copy the tracks she noticed in the sand.

Leni was a happy mix of down-to-earth and up-in-the-clouds. She had owl-brown eyes and raven-black hair, which usually had leaves stuck in it, because she spent so much time in her tree house.

It was from here that Leni gazed out towards the horizon, where the ocean blended into the sky like a big

blue slushie. This afternoon she was looking for seabirds, diving down to the water to catch fish. But suddenly a flapping of wings interrupted her view and, in a flurry of green feathers, a bird landed on the windowsill.

“Oh, Popcorn, it’s you!” cried Leni.

Popcorn was an echo parakeet, a rare type of parrot found only in Mauritius, an island country in the Indian Ocean.

Mauritius was Leni’s home and she was fond of all the birds here, but especially Popcorn. A wild parakeet, he lived in a nearby tree, but he liked to follow her around, listening to what was being said and joining in from time to time.





Leni held Popcorn in her hand and stroked him. She touched her nose to his red beak.

“Hey, Popcorn, are you hungry?”

“Hungry!” the bird squawked. He loved to copy human speech. Leni smiled, cut open a pomegranate and offered him half in her open palm. The parakeet sat on her hand, and started pecking at the seeds as delicately as if he were picking flowers.

Leni lived with her mum and dad on Mauritius’s main island, in a place called Baie de la Vie, which means “Bay of Life” in French. This beautiful, palm-fringed bay looked out over a clear blue lagoon and coral reef. Leni’s mum, Manishi, and dad, Roshan, owned some thatched holiday huts dotted along the shore and rented them out to visitors.

Near the beachside huts stood the large and majestic “dodo tree” and in its branches nestled the tree house, which Leni’s father had built for her when she was six years old.

Popcorn was just finishing his pomegranate when Leni heard voices outside. “Wonder who that is?” she

said to the bird. The huts were quiet at the moment. In fact, there were no guests staying in any of them and the neon “vacancy” sign glowed every night outside the front gates.

Leni peered down and spotted her father walking towards one of the holiday huts. He was carrying an old, battered travel trunk by one of its leather handles. Behind him, holding the other handle, was a new guest.

It looked like somebody had checked in.





## CHAPTER TWO

# The Handkerchief

The new arrival was an old man. He was slim, with spindly arms and legs and had rolled up the sleeves of a shirt that was brownish, but probably used to be white. In contrast, his hair was white, but probably used to be brown. From her tree house lookout, Leni could see he hadn't put on any sunscreen, and his bald spot was pinker than a flamingo's tongue.

The old man had a white moustache, was wearing a pair of well-worn sandals and had a hanky hanging out of his back pocket. "The trunk is a bit of a beast!" he remarked as they hauled it onto the front deck of hut 187.

Just why it was numbered 187 had never been clear to Leni, as there were only five huts for holidaymakers. But anyway...

“Here you are, sir, number 187,” said her father cheerfully. He took out a key and unlocked the door of the hut. Together they hauled the trunk inside and then reappeared at the front door.

“Thank you so much,” the man said to Leni’s dad in an English accent.

“Don’t mention it,” replied her dad. He handed the old man the key. “Your hut will be cleaned every day by our wonderful cleaners, Marion and Mimi. They’ll also take care of any laundry you’d like done. Anything else you need, just use the phone in your hut and we’ll be right over to help.”

“Thank you, that is most kind,” said the old man.

“Enjoy your stay, sir,” her dad said. Then he smiled and waved goodbye.

The white-haired man waved and returned to his hut. As he did so, his handkerchief fell out of his back pocket. But he didn’t notice and closed the door behind him.

Leni climbed down from the tree house, padded across the sand and picked up the hanky. It was cotton and crumpled. She unfolded it carefully and held it by the corners.

“Look at that,” she said under her breath. On one corner of the hanky, there was a little embroidered blue owl and the initials IBBB.

“Look at that,” repeated Popcorn.

“IBBB? I wonder what that means,” she whispered to her companion.

Leni hesitated, wondering whether she should knock on the old man’s door. “He’s only just arrived. Is it a good idea to disturb him?” she asked the bird. Then she sighed and said, “Oh well, I’ll knock anyway. Even if it’s not.”

Popcorn just looked at the hanky.

“Snot!” he squawked.

