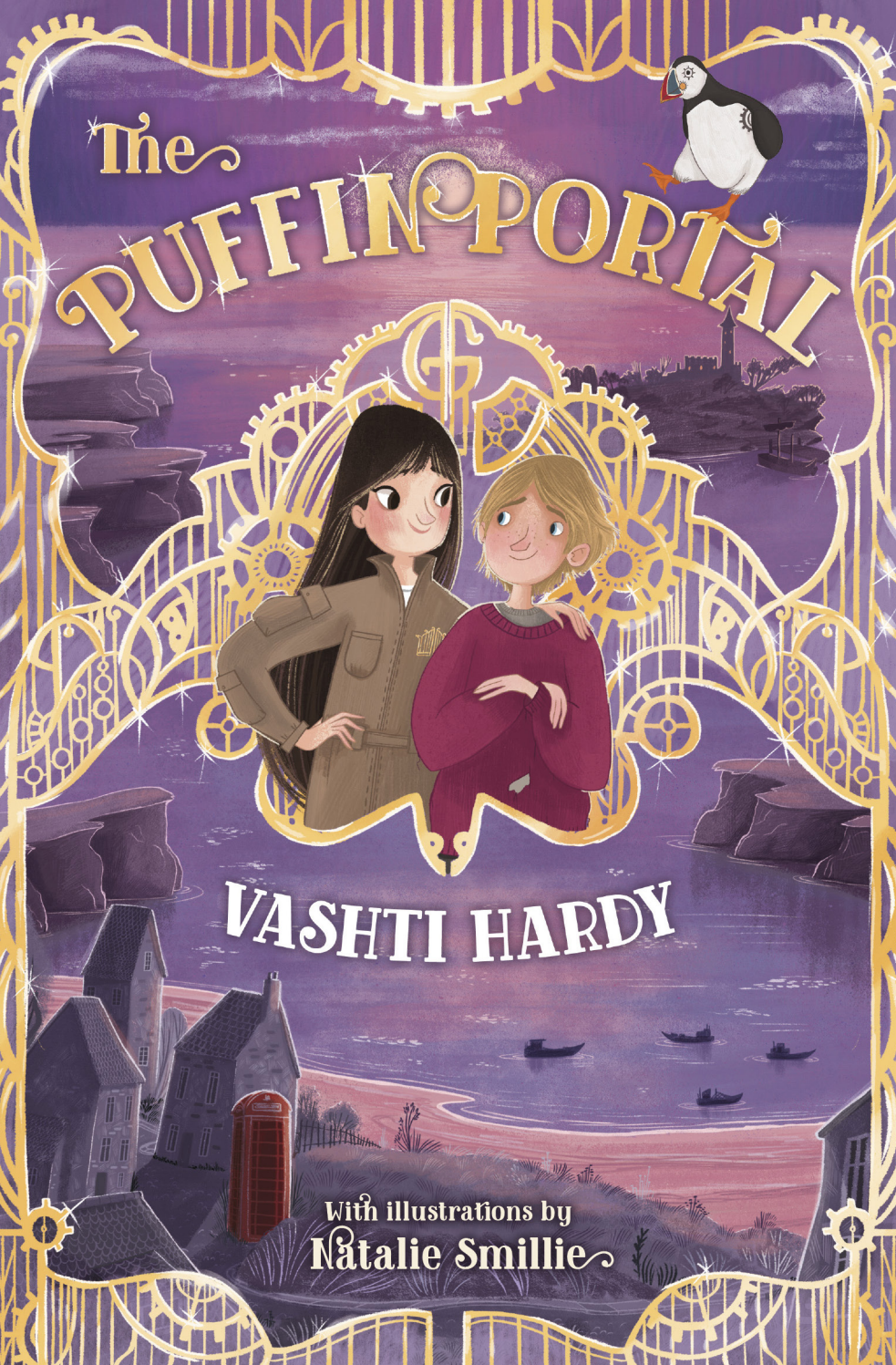

The
PUFFIN PORTAL
VASHTI HARDY
With illustrations by
Natalie Smillie

The PUFFIN PORTAL



VASHTI HARDY

With illustrations by
Natalie Smillie

Barrington Stoke

For Poppy

First published in 2021 in Great Britain by
Barrington Stoke Ltd
18 Walker Street, Edinburgh, EH3 7LP

www.barringtonstoke.co.uk

Text © 2021 Vashti Hardy
Illustrations © 2021 Natalie Smillie

The moral right of Vashti Hardy and Natalie Smillie to be identified as the author and illustrator of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in whole or in any part in any form without the written permission of the publisher

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library upon request

ISBN: 978-1-78112-981-4

Printed by Hussar Books, Poland

CONTENTS

1	Mysterious Thefts	1
2	Carp Cove	15
3	Stake Out	29
4	Eely Isle	37
5	Tom Eely	50
6	Puffin Robots	62
7	Signs	70
8	Suspicion	75
9	The Orphanage	81
10	Mix-Up	90
11	Puffin Attack	94
12	Family	102

1

Mysterious Thefts



Bright blue crackling light blazed around Grace Griffin as she teleported back to the map room of Griffin House. She'd been to visit Mr Minnow in Carp Cove after he'd reported a theft.

"That was a short trip," said Watson, the family robot raven. He was perched on the back of an armchair.

Grace nodded. "It was yet another strange theft with no clear evidence or suspects." She gazed at the Griffin map, which was laid out on a huge table in the centre of the room. They'd

had lots of calls about small thefts lately, and not just in Carp Cove.

Grace, her brother and their mum were wardens of the Griffin map, an amazing invention that allowed them to teleport across the whole of Moreland. Great Grandma Griffin had created the map years ago. She'd wanted to find a way to travel to even the most remote places in Moreland when people needed help.

The map showed the entire country with its many towns and villages, each with its own electrical gate. The gates were portals, letting the wardens teleport into the map. The Griffin family answered calls for help and played a part in ensuring life in Moreland ran smoothly. If a gate flashed red, it was an emergency call, and flashing blue meant it was a smaller problem.

As the youngest in the family, Grace took the blue calls and left the emergency ones to Mum and her brother, Bren. But Grace didn't mind. So many blue calls were coming in lately

that her feet barely touched the ground in her home city of Copperport.

Grace placed a pocket-sized device on the map table. It was the re-compass that teleported her back home.

"So what did Mr Minnow say?" asked Watson, flying to land beside Grace.

She shrugged. "His spanner had gone missing. Once again, there were no fingerprints at the scene. Oh, and Mr Minnow said something strange about a puffin 'lurking' outside his shop."

"A puffin?" Watson squawked.

Grace frowned. "It doesn't make much sense, does it? None of the thefts do. The things being stolen don't have much value. If you were a thief, wouldn't you at least take more than one object at a time if you were going to the trouble of sneaking in to places without leaving

fingerprints? Why is each theft so small – just one item?"

"Perhaps it's a nervous thief?" Watson suggested.

Grace shrugged again. "It's been the same for all the calls I've answered lately: a missing loaf of bread, glue, a pint of milk and now a spanner. They're all small thefts. I can't help but think they must be connected."

"Grace, you said yourself last time that old Mr Minnow seemed a bit scatty," Watson said. "He probably just mislaid the spanner."

"Maybe," Grace replied. "Didn't Mr Minnow accuse a bird of stealing something a few weeks back?"

The cogs in Watson's brain whirred, then he opened his mouth. Watson was able to replay recordings of things he'd heard people say, and that was what he did now. "You won't

believe the call I've just been on, Watson." Grace's voice came out of Watson's mouth. "Mr Minnow at Carp Cove says a bird stole a jar of jam from his shop!"

Grace laughed. "Listening to myself is worse than when you play back Mum's rules! But you're right, Watson. Listening back, it does sound a bit daft. Maybe Mr Minnow is not so reliable."

Watson flapped his mechanical wings and flew a loop of the map table, circling Moreland. "We have no evidence that the thefts are connected. Besides, the thief would have to be fast, as the other thefts have taken place in separate areas of Moreland, hundreds of miles apart." Watson pointed to several places on the map far apart from each other as he flew. "It just doesn't make any sense."

"I know, but ..." Grace trailed off. There was something tugging at her brain about the thefts, but she wasn't sure what. "I'd better do the report and move on." Grace flipped open

the digi-screen beside the map, typed *Stolen spanner, puffin* into the mission-report section and pressed save.

"Lazy," Watson said with a tut, landing beside Grace again. "You finished that report faster than I could blink."

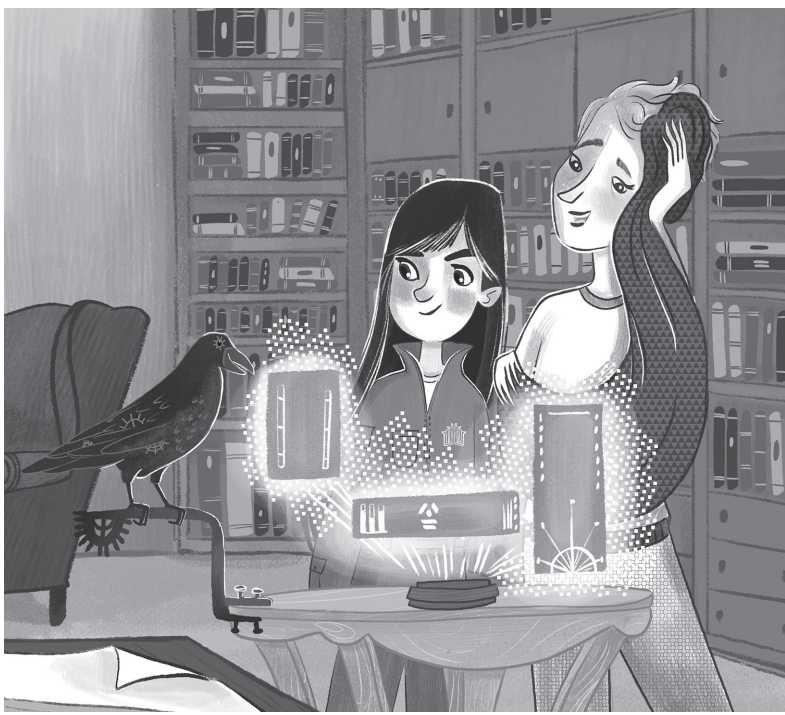
"I'm keeping it simple," said Grace, raising her eyebrows. "This is my fifth report in three days. No one has time to read them anyway."

Just as she said this, Grace's mother breezed into the map room towel-drying her hair. "Honestly, I don't think I'm going to get the stink of Rotty Marsh out of my hair," Ann Griffin said. "It wasn't my favourite day at work to rescue five robotic carts and horses that were neck deep in mud during a storm." She glanced at Grace and narrowed her eyes. "You *are* filling in your reports properly, aren't you?"

"Of course," Grace said, smiling at her mum. She flashed Watson a "don't you dare" look as

he moved to open his beak. Grace's stomach groaned and she noticed it was past teatime. "What's for tea, Mum?"

"Er … Is it that time already?" Ann said. "I haven't had a moment to think." She looked at the digi-screen beside the map and sighed. "We've had thirty calls in one week – our busiest time ever. Is Bren still on a mission?"



Grace looked down at the notepad beside the map and nodded. Bren had written *Gone to emergency in Floom*. Her stomach grumbled loudly again. "About tea?"

"Watson, you couldn't rustle up one of your vegetable stews, could—" Ann began, but stopped as two gates began flashing on the map almost at the same time – one red and the other blue. "Darn it, I thought that would be it for the day." Ann sighed. "Do you mind taking the blue call, Grace? I'll take the red and we'll meet back here for dinner. Watson, you go with Grace and see if you can pick up a pizza – there's a nice place in Grimble, where the blue call is coming from."

Ann kissed Grace on the head, passed her an apple from the fruit dish and grabbed a re-compass. She scribbled her destination on the notepad, then reached towards the flashing red gate. Ann Griffin disappeared into the map with a whirl and a flash of blue.

Grace stuffed her own re-compass into one of the many pockets of her uniform jumpsuit, then tapped her shoulder and Watson flew to it. “Come on, let’s see what’s up in Grimble,” Grace said. “Most importantly …” She picked up a pen then, tummy rumbling, she wrote: *Gone to Grimble to help and for PIZZA*.



Grimble wasn’t the prettiest town in Moreland. The buildings were straight and square, and the smoke that rose from several factories seemed to hang in the air, giving it a dusty grey gloom.

The cobbles beside the old red box that had been used to call the wardens were wet with drizzle. Great Grandma Griffin had copied these boxes from olden times, when they had contained something called a telephone – now they were used by the people of Moreland to call the wardens when they needed help. A woman

in blue overalls with short chestnut hair stood beside the box and beckoned to Grace.

The woman pulled Grace under her umbrella and smiled. "Thank you for coming so fast. I'm from Olive's Oils. I'm Olive." She pointed at a shop. It happened to be next to the pizza parlour, which wafted out a delicious smell.

Grace knew of Olive's Marvellous Machine Oil – it was the finest oil in Moreland and perfect for oiling Watson's joints. "I'm Warden Grace Griffin," she told Olive. "How can I help you?"

Olive ushered her into the shop, where row upon row of oils were stacked. "I don't like to bother you about such a small matter, but this is the third time it's happened this month."

She pointed to a shelf of neatly placed tins, where a single one was missing. "You see, I re-stock the oil before I leave every evening," Olive explained. "The shelves are always neat

and full for the next day. This evening I shut the shop and went out the back – when I heard a noise. I came inside again, but there was no one here, yet a tin of oil had gone."

Grace took out her notepad and wrote *Stolen oil*. "There was definitely no sign of anyone?" she asked.

Olive shrugged. "No. I've told the Lawmakers, but they're as confused as me. I thought you wardens might be able to help, since you have such a great track record."

"Do you mind if I look around?" Grace asked.

"Please do."

Grace checked for fingerprints using the special powder and brush from one of her pockets, but there weren't any. There were also no signs of anyone forcing their way inside.

"There's nothing, Watson, just like Carp Cove," Grace whispered. "I hate to admit it, but I'm puzzled by all of these strange thefts."

"Indeed," Watson agreed. "It's hard to put facts together when there aren't many!"

Grace's stomach groaned. "Well, it's a fact that my belly is empty and there's a pizza parlour next door." She winked at Watson, then stood up and looked over to Olive at the counter. "I'm afraid the thief hasn't left any evidence at all, so I'll fit a second door lock for you as extra security and let you know if I get any leads."

"Right you are, thank you for looking," said Olive.

Grace and Watson fitted the second lock in no time. "All done," Grace said. "Do give us another call if it happens again." She waved goodbye, then noticed one of Watson's feathers lying by the door. "Here, Watson, we'll need to reconnect this when we get home."

Watson lifted his head back. "That's not one of mine," he said. "My feathers are much sleeker!"

Grace stared at the feather more closely and realised he was right. "Oh. Then what's a feather doing in the shop?" Grace called back to Olive, "You don't own any pet birds, do you?"



"Birds?" Olive said. "Not me, deary."

Grace shrugged and put the feather in one of her jumpsuit pockets. She had a feeling that something about it was plain odd.