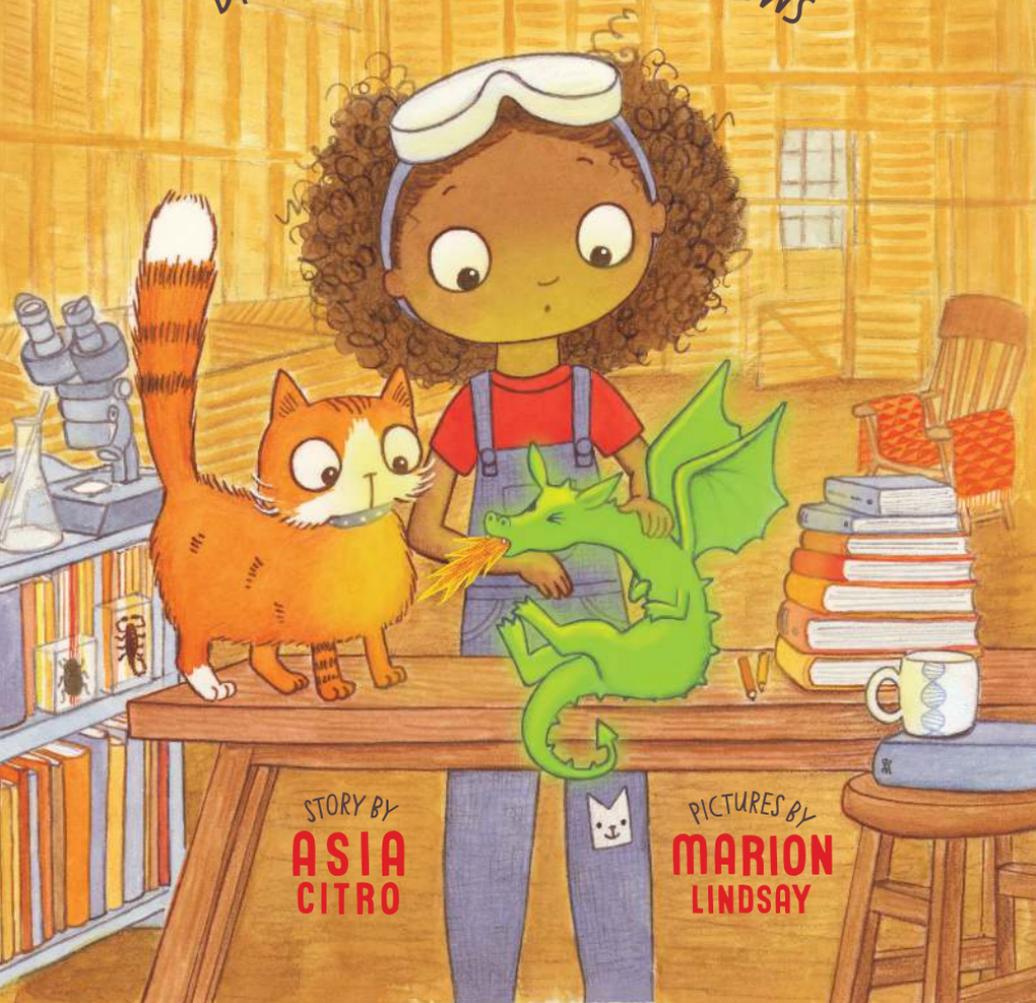


Zoey AND SASSAFRAS

DRAGONS AND MARSHMALLOWS



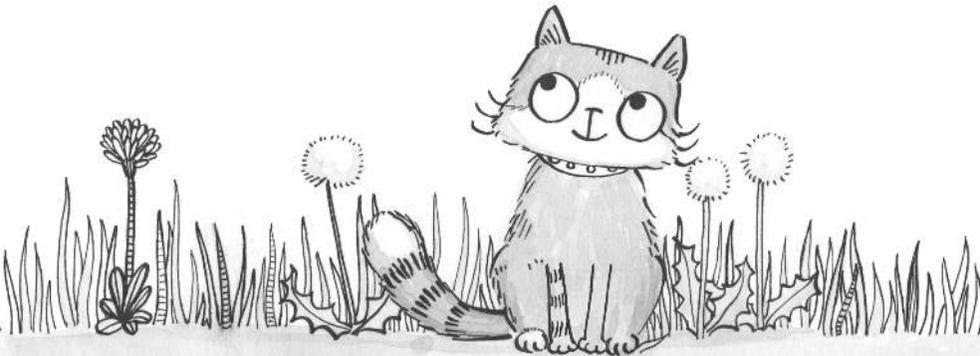
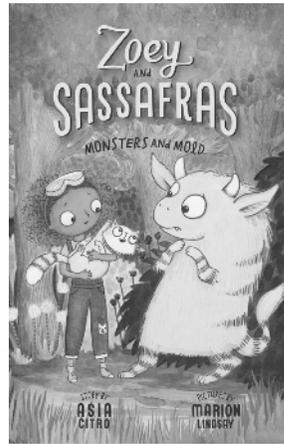
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DRAGONS AND MARSHMALLOWS



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FOR TIM – ML
FOR GOOSE AND BUBS – AC

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CHAPTER 1 BUG CIRCUS

“What is it, Sassafras?” I crouched down and ruffled my cat’s fluffy fur. He was trying to flip over a heavy, mossy rock with his paws. Something good was definitely under there.

I gently tipped the rock over on its side. Yes! I clapped my hands together. This rock *was* hiding a treasure. A billion roly-poly bugs!

OK . . . maybe not a *billion*. But at least twenty.



Sassafras took a step forward. “Meow?”

“No! Don’t eat the bugs! That’s gross.”

My cat loves bugs as much as I do. But we love them for different reasons. I love to play with them. He loves to eat them.

Hmmm. Now I just needed to think of something super amazing to do with the roly-polies. I held one in my hand and its tiny feet tickled as it walked.

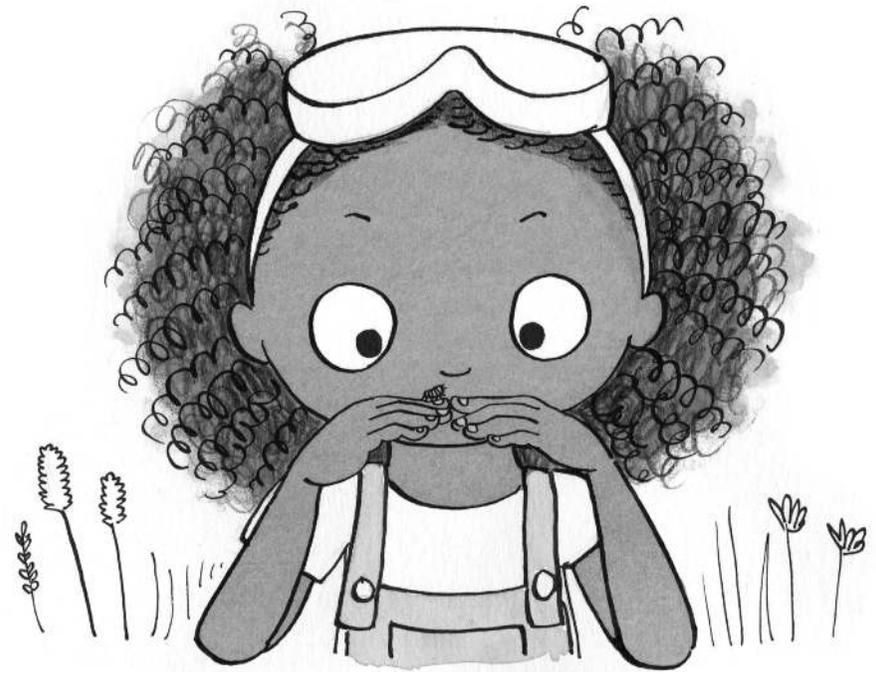
Sassafras trotted over to my pile of stuff and pawed at my Thinking Goggles.

“Ooh, good idea,” I said as I put them on my head.

Most scientists wear goggles over their eyes, and I do too when I need to keep my eyes safe. But when I need to think of brilliant ideas, I wear my Thinking Goggles on top of my head. That way they’re closer to my brain.

The roly-poly on my hand walked across a bridge I’d made by touching the tips of my two pointer fingers together.

“I’ve got it! Let’s make a bug circus!”



I bent some thin twigs into hoops for the bugs to crawl through. Then I set up some small, round rocks for them to balance on. Next, I tied some grass on either end of a flat piece of bark to make a swing that I held low to the ground (in case any of my performers fell).

My favorite part was a tightrope I made by balancing a long twig between two flat rocks. One of the biggest roly-polies crawled up to the twig tightrope.

I got down on my elbows in the soft



grass to cheer him on. “Come on, little buggy! You can do it!”

Almost . . . almost. No! He tumbled into the grass. And then another one followed. The bigger roly-polies were having too much trouble. Hmmm. I carefully plucked the smallest of the roly-polies from the ground.

“OK, little guy. You might be the smallest, but I think you can do this. Show me what you’ve got!”

I placed the tiny roly-poly on one end of the twig. As he crawled along, I held my breath and didn’t let it out until he was across.

He made it! I jumped up, cheered, and looked around for my mom. Then I remembered she was inside packing. I was so used to her being out here with me.

“Mom is gonna love this. Let’s get her, Sassafras. Come on!”

I glanced over my shoulder just in time

to catch Sassafras creeping toward my circus performers.

“No way, kitty. You’re coming with me. I do *not* trust you out here with my bugs. My new little friends are not snacks!”

Sassafras gave me a stinky look, but he gave in and followed me. As we got close to the house, I spotted my mom in the window. But she wasn’t looking at us. She was looking at our old barn. And holding a photo.

CHAPTER 2 THE MYSTERY PHOTO



Sassafras and I burst into my mom’s office. She jumped and quickly hid the photo under a pile of papers before smiling at us.

“Mom! Sassafras found a billion roly-polies under a rock in our yard. And I wasn’t sure what to do with them, but then I used my Thinking Goggles. And we made a circus! With a tightrope and everything. Can you come see? Please?”

“That sounds wonderful, Zoey. I’m almost finished getting ready for this trip.

Give me five more minutes?”

I shrugged and leaned on her desk while Sassafras wove through my legs. I was trying to act like I didn't mind her leaving for a trip. But maybe I felt a little nervous about not seeing her for a whole week.

I was also curious about that photo she'd stashed away so quickly. As she packed, I poked at her papers and scooted them around. Whoa. *What* was that? A purple glow came from under a pile of papers. I pushed the top papers aside and gasped. In the photo was my mom when she was around my age. She was grinning with two missing teeth. With a purple frog on her head. That was *glowing*. I almost dropped the photo.

Mom glanced over her shoulder. “What is it?”

I held out the photo with a trembling hand. “This . . . photo . . . the frog . . . it's glowing. How?”

My mom spun around so fast that some of the papers she was holding fell and scattered on the ground.

“You see Pip?”

Pip? Who was Pip? What on earth was going on?





CHAPTER 3

PIP

Mom was still frozen in place. She whispered, “I never thought . . . I was so sure I was the only one.”

She finally snapped out of it and sat down at her desk. “Sorry for acting strange. Come sit, and I’ll try to explain.” Mom shook her head once more and smiled at me.

I sat down slowly. I was super confused. A glowing frog? That only my mom could see? My stomach flipped and flopped.

I picked up Sassafras and gave him a squeeze. He settled into my lap and purred, which calmed me down a little. I seriously hoped that all of this would start making sense soon.

“Remember how this used to be Grandma and Grandpa’s house?”

I nodded slowly and kept petting Sassafras as my heart thumped loudly.

“When I was your age, I also spent hours wandering in the forest. One day, I was tossing rocks into the stream when I saw something shimmer in the sunlight.”

“The purple frog?” I guessed.

Mom nodded. “His bright purple skin was covered head to toe with neon-orange spots. I’d never seen anything like it. I was sure I’d discovered a new species!”

I nodded again. I love frogs, and I’d never seen a frog that looked like that.

“The poor thing was crumpled on the ground, barely breathing. I knew it must be very sick or hurt. I had to help it. I

carefully scooped it up and held it close. I found an old empty fish tank in our barn and got to work figuring out what was wrong. Books helped a little, but I needed to run some simple experiments, too.

“I used what I learned from the experiments to help the frog recover. Once he was better, I knew I had to return

him to the forest. I reached into his tank and he hopped right into my hand! As I lifted him out, something incredible happened. It was the craziest thing I’d ever seen . . .”

I could tell my mom was about to say something big. My mom is a scientist, so she sees crazy things all the time. If this was the *craziest thing she’d ever seen*, then it must be incredible.

I leaned in, scooting so far forward that Sassafra slid to the ground with a *whump*. I quickly scooped him back up. “What happened? What did you see?”

“The frog looked me in the eye, smiled, and said, ‘Thank you!’”

I clapped my hand over my mouth.



What was going on? Was my mom playing a joke on me? She seemed pretty serious. But a talking frog? Really? It just couldn't be true!

"I was so shocked," my mom continued, "I almost tossed the poor frog into the air! 'Whoa!' he said. 'Steady there, little girl! Don't be afraid. My name is Pip. And I'm so grateful for all of your help.'"

Here I *had* to interrupt. "But Mom – this is *crazy*! Frogs. Can't. Talk."

Mom patted my knee. "That's what I thought at first too. But the frog kept

on talking. I wasn't dreaming. I wasn't imagining things. There really was a frog named Pip talking to me.

"My hands shook so much that I set Pip on a table for his own safety. He told me he'd been out past dark looking for something he'd dropped during the day. An owl attacked him. He was terrified and hurt, but managed to escape. He didn't remember anything after that until he woke up in our barn.

"Once I recovered from the shock of it all, Pip told me that there are lots of magical animals in our forests. Humans can't usually see them. He asked if I'd help others like him who were hurt or sick. I agreed, of course. Pip spread the word about me and the barn after he left. And I've been helping the magical animals of our forest ever since."

A big smile spread across my face. This was incredible. The only thing I might love more than science is magic. And my mom



was telling me there was magic right here
in our own backyard!

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