Esme Higgs

and Jo Cotterill



The Starlight Stables Gang

Illustrated by Hannah George

PUFFIN

PUFFIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Puffin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com

www.penguin.co.uk
www.puffin.co.uk
www.ladybird.co.uk



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published 2023

001

Text copyright © Esme Higgs, 2023
Illustrations copyright © Hannah George, 2023

The moral right of the author and illustrator has been asserted

Set in 10.5/20pt Merriweather
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

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

LIMITED-EDITION HARDBACK
ISBN: 978-0-241-59767-5

PAPERBACK
ISBN: 978-0-241-59768-2

All correspondence to:
Puffin Books
Penguin Random House Children's
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW



Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

For Bruno, Toby and Willow,
who started me on this journey.



Chapter 1

The air fills my lungs: salty, with a tang of excitement. In front of me, the wide, sandy beach stretches off into the distance, completely empty.

Empty apart from me and my horse. The only prints on the smooth sand are his as we walk slowly towards the water's edge. The waves paint ever-changing reflections on the wet sand in the early-morning light.

The sun is just coming up, edging the clouds above the horizon with pink. It's going to be another beautiful day. I reach over to pat the horse's neck, feeling his strength and warmth flow into my fingers.

Come on, I urge, but I don't need to say the words aloud because he instinctively knows what I want, and he moves forward, picking up the pace until we are moving in an easy canter.

The scrunchie at the base of my hat comes loose and my hair streams out behind me as I lean forward, into the wind, the reins light in my hands because the horse knows what to do – and then we are galloping, galloping, the spray from the surf in my nose and mouth and eyes, as the hooves thud into the ground and the sun's rays spear the sky, and I have never felt this *alive* . . .

A voice is calling me. 'Summer? Summer!' I don't want to turn my head because I don't want to lose this moment, but someone is shaking my shoulder, and my dad's voice is saying, 'Come on, you've got to get up, Summer. I have to leave in a

minute and I need to make sure you're up and dressed.'

And I open my eyes and the beach disappears, and the horse has never been real, and, like always, I wake with a pain in my heart for a dream that can never come true.

Dad leans over me. He's dressed for work in plain brown trousers and a polo shirt. His brown hair is cut very short (Nomi who lives next door lets him borrow her clippers) and his lanyard hangs from his neck, showing his name and role: *Paul Taylor, Mental Health Care Assistant, Ryton Stoke General Hospital*. Under his beard, he's smiling at me. 'You look so cute, like a curled-up squirrel. But seriously, Summer, please get up. I'll miss the bus.'

I sigh and throw back the covers. The sun is already up outside, and light glows brightly through the too-thin curtains. The bedroom is stuffed – not only with my clothes but Dad's as well. There's a wardrobe and a chest of drawers, but it's not really enough storage for what we have. When we moved

in, I had no idea we'd have so little space. There's only one bedroom, so Dad sleeps in the lounge on the sofa. He says it's quite comfy, but he's too tall for it so his feet hang off the side.

I pull on my school uniform and go through to the lounge. Dad is hovering by the door. 'I'm dressed,' I say, spreading my arms to demonstrate. He grins and dashes over to hug me. 'Superstar. I'm off. Eat, wash up, brush teeth –'

'And don't forget to lock the front door,' we say in unison.

'Bye, Dad.' The door closes and I'm on my own at 7.10 a.m.

Don't feel sorry for me. I don't like it when people do that thing where they put their head on one side and give me that *sympathetic look*. The look that says, *Poor little Summer, only eleven years old and already having to look after herself*. I'm fine, I can manage. Dad goes out, I get myself breakfast, and then I go off to school. When I get home, I let myself in and play games on my laptop or (most likely) look up videos about horses and maybe try to draw them

until Dad comes home at about 6.30 p.m. It's not that bad once you've got used to it.

I eat some cereal and then wash up my bowl and spoon. We have a dishwasher but it's broken. The landlord keeps saying he'll fix it, but Dad says 'Don't hold your breath,' which is one of those weird things adults say, because why would I hold my breath? And what's my breath got to do with dishwashers?

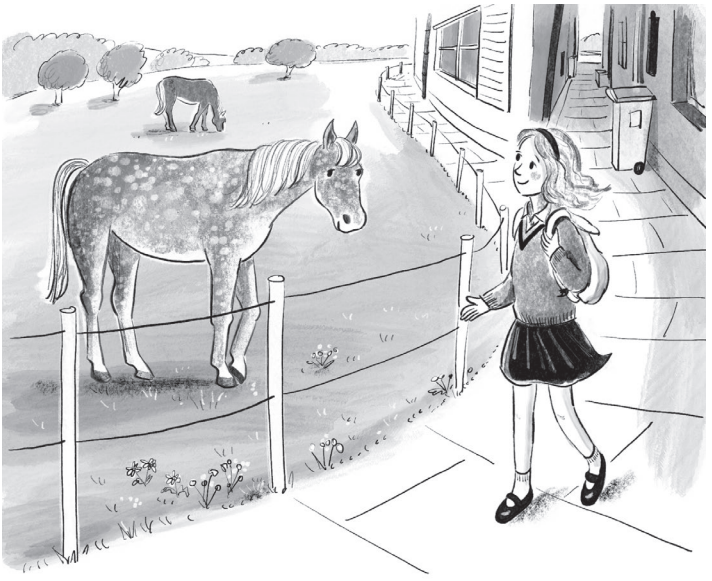
I brush my teeth and hair and wipe a flannel over my face. We're running out of loo roll, so I'll try to remember to buy some on the way home from school. Dad has a pot of coins on top of the fridge for things like that.

There are two routes to school. One goes along pavements and across roads. The other is twice as long and involves going down a little alleyway and round the back of the houses. For maybe fifty metres, the path borders a couple of fields. In one of the fields there are two ponies. One of them is a small chestnut gelding who stays at the other end of the field, but the other is a dapple-grey mare and she always, always comes to the fence to say hello.

When we first moved here, I was miserable – until I discovered the path behind the houses, and now I visit the grey mare on my way to and from school. She's my best friend, which is either amazing or very sad, depending on how you look at it.

This morning I leave the house extra early so I can spend even more time with the pony. She makes this funny sound when she sees me – they call it 'nickering': it's like a cross between a snort and a purr. She trots over and nuzzles me. I used to give her an apple, but then a sign appeared on a fence post saying PLEASE DO NOT FEED THE PONIES, so now I pull up handfuls of grass because I figure she eats that anyway. And I check to see that no one else is around, in case I get into trouble.

'Hello,' I say softly this morning. I don't know what her name is, but I call her Pebbles because the markings on her back look like pebbles in a stream. I rub her velvety nose and she tips her head and bumps it against mine. 'How are you today, Pebbles? Have you eaten any nice dandelions recently?' I place my hand against her neck, feeling the muscles



underneath. She's warm and solid and has this smell that I can't describe – like biscuits and friendship.

I tell her about the video I watched this morning where a girl my age was talking about the three ponies she owns, and about the different tack she uses, and Pebbles nods like she understands. I think Pebbles is a Welsh Cob, according to the pictures I've looked at on the internet. She's the most beautiful pony I've ever seen.

Even though I've got to the field early, I'm nearly late for school because I always lose track of time when I talk to Pebbles. I would spend all day talking to Pebbles if I could. Even simply resting my head against hers makes me feel . . . I can't explain it. Calm. At peace, like all my worries and fears have gone away. I wave goodbye and have to run the rest of the way, arriving at school breathless ten seconds before they close the gates.

I don't have any friends at school. I did, but everything changed when Dad and I moved. He couldn't get a place near my old school, so I had to change school halfway through the term, and everyone was already sorted for friends.

Don't feel sorry for me, I told you.

In my school bag, I have a small book called *The Complete Guide to Horses*. It's a Christmas present from two years ago and it's full of facts and pictures of horses and ponies. When it's break time, I sit on my own and look at the pictures in the book and dream of what it would be like to have my very own horse. I've been on a pony three times in my life,

each time on holiday. Mum was going to book me riding lessons last year, but then she . . . well, she didn't.

Today, after looking at my book, I head to the toilets, and I'm in a cubicle when I hear a couple of girls come in. 'It took me half an hour to realize one of my stirrups was higher than the other, and that's why I was sitting wonky!' says a voice.

Immediately, I freeze. Stirrups. She's talking about *horse riding*.

'Didn't you know straightaway?' says the other voice.

'I should have,' says the first voice. 'I mean, I felt so stupid once I realized. But the saddle had slipped a bit sideways, so it felt like my feet were almost the same height, you know? And it was a new saddle; I wasn't used to it.'

'What did Angus think of it?'

'He didn't notice. He's a bit dozy like that.'

The toilet door crashes and another group of girls comes in, talking loudly. I can't hear the first two properly any more. In a panic, I finish up, accidentally

dropping a handful of tissue on the floor, flush the toilet, and bash my hand on the door as I try to undo the catch as quickly as possible. A girl passes me to go into the one I just left. 'Why can't people tidy up after themselves?' she says pointedly, glaring at me before banging the door shut.

I start to wash my hands, scanning the row of basins. I can't see two girls talking to each other about horses. Have they already gone? My heart is beating fast. I wonder if I should dash out into the corridor to search for them. And then I get a grip of myself. For goodness' sake, Summer! What would you do, anyway? Throw yourself on them and sob, '*I love horses too, can I come and ride yours?*'

And then, while I'm standing there, soap on my hands, paralysed with indecision and embarrassment – a couple of girls are looking at me weirdly – I hear the second voice again. 'Jessie? You still in here?'

'Yeah.'

'Me too.'

They giggle. And then two cubicle doors open at

the same time and the girls come out, and I know instantly which one is Jessie because I've seen her in assembly. She has long black hair and she sometimes wears lip gloss, which is totally illegal in school but I think she gets away with it.

I don't know what I was expecting, but my heart sinks a little because Jessie looks *exactly* like the kind of girl who would have her own pony.

The other girl is short and stocky and has a cloud of orange hair. I don't know her name. My school is *so* big. 'Are you going there again after school today?' she asks Jessie as they come over to the basins and plonk down their bags.

Jessie flips her plait over her shoulder so it doesn't fall in the sink. 'Yeah. Three times a week. I'd go every day if I could, but Mum works. Hey, you want to see a photo of us jumping at the weekend?'

The other girl rolls her eyes and says teasingly, '*Another* one? Yeah, go on then.'

Phones get confiscated if the teachers see you with them, so you can only use them in the toilets.

Jessie pulls hers out of her bag and dries her hand on her skirt so she can swipe the screen. 'Not this one, not this one – here.' She holds it out, and in the mirror's reflection I catch a glimpse of a girl in competition riding gear, with a smart black hat, perched on top of what looks like an enormous horse – from here I can't tell what breed it is, but it's a beautiful glossy dark brown – and girl and horse are suspended in mid-air over a jump.

'Oh, wow,' I breathe.

Jessie hears me and turns round. 'Do you want to see?' She holds out the phone to me.

I turn scarlet because I didn't mean to say anything out loud, but I can't take my eyes off the screen. 'Is that an Arab?' I ask.

Jessie beams. 'It is! Mostly. An Arab cross Welsh, which means a bit of a mixture. Isn't he gorgeous? His name is Angus; I haven't had him long. Do you have a pony too?'

I give a short laugh. 'Oh no. No, nothing like that.' I realize I still have soapy hands, and I rinse them off and wipe them on my skirt like everyone else

does. Someone shoves me from behind as they pass. 'No, I . . . I just like horses.'

'Me too.' Jessie swipes through her photo gallery. 'At the stables where I keep Angus, they have some gorgeous ponies. Look . . .'

I gaze at photo after photo on her phone, drinking them in, oblivious to everyone around me, the flushing toilets, the banging doors. Jessie's friend says something about having to go, but I barely notice. There are horses in fields, horses looking over stable doors, selfies Jessie has taken with horses, pulling faces . . . and then . . .

'Stop!' I cry. 'That's my horse!'

'What?' Jessie swipes back a couple. 'What do you mean? I thought you said you didn't have a horse?'

'I don't! I – I walk past this one every day.' I stare at the dapple-grey mare on the screen, unable to believe my eyes. 'This is at your stables?'

'It's not my stables,' laughs Jessie. 'I don't own the yard. But yeah, that's Luna. She lives in a field with Jasper. They're besties, it's so cute.'

Pebbles is really called Luna! And the chestnut is

called Jasper! I can't believe I know their real names at last. 'Where's the stables?' I ask. Suddenly I want to know everything.

'Two fields away from that one,' Jessie says. 'It's called Starlight Stables. You should come along.'

'Oh.' Cold washes through me. 'I – I don't have any money for horse riding.'

'Oh, that's a shame,' says Jessie. 'You could come and help out, though, like I do. Mucking out and grooming and tacking up – Jodie and Sooz are always mad busy.' The bell for afternoon registration rings. 'Argh! I've got to get right across the site! Gotta go. Come and find me if you want to know more, OK?' She disappears.

You know how, in films and videos, things sometimes go into slow motion at a crucial moment? This is it. Around me, a stream of girls rushes out of the toilets, into the bustling corridors, but I can't move.

There's a stables.

An actual stables within walking distance of my flat and I never knew.