Jessie and the Star Rider

Esme Higgs
Jo Cotterill

[Title art work to come]



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: 978-0-241-59771-2

PAPERBACK
ISBN: 978-0-241-59772-9

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.



Chapter 1

Focus – that's the most important thing of all. My mind clears, my vision narrows. The fence and what's beyond it are the only things I see. My hands are light and my body is poised, lifted slightly from the saddle, my knees absorbing all the movement from the cantering horse under me. We approach the jump on the perfect line, and at the right moment, I squeeze very slightly with my legs. Angus

takes off, his front hooves tucked neatly under his shoulders, both of us soaring through the air for a second before he lands beautifully, and I take care not to thump back into the saddle.

From the side of the Starlight Stables arena, my friend Summer cheers. ‘Nice one, Jessie!’

Now that we have jumped, I can relax, and I smile and wave back to her. ‘I’m going round again!’ I call. I bend to give Angus a pat. ‘Good boy!’ I say. Angus



snorts in appreciation. He's 14.2 hands and the most gorgeous dark bay in the world, and I love him to bits. He adores jumping, which is just as well because I do too!

Summer is standing next to my mum, who's watching me carefully. 'That was good,' she calls to me. 'Just watch your angle on the open oxer. I think he might need one more stride in the approach.'

Mum knows what she's talking about. When she moved to Germany from Hong Kong in her twenties, she took up riding for a while and she got pretty good. In fact, that's where she met Dad – he was doing some kind of business placement at the stables where she rode. 'Try it again,' she suggests now.

I take Angus round in a wide circle as I assess the course again. There are only six jumps in the arena today, but I like to do them in a different order each time, to give myself and Angus more practice. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Daniel approaching with a wheelbarrow piled high with horse poo. He puts

the barrow down and joins Summer at the fence, his pale blue eyes watching me.

Some people get nervous when they know their friends are watching, but I love it. It makes me want to try harder. Everyone loves to be told 'well done', don't they? I select a fence to jump first, and bring Angus round to it. 'Here we go, Angus,' I tell him. It's a nice single to start with, and he sails over it beautifully. I'm intending to do the cross-pole next, but as we land, I change my mind and turn him towards the oxer – a spread fence with two rows of poles making it wider. The horse has to go up *and* across.

However, I realize too late that I should have walked the course beforehand, because Mum's quite right, and I haven't given Angus enough strides in the approach. About five metres out, I know I've misjudged it. Instead of circling round, I give Angus a kick to see if he can manage it.

He doesn't even try. Angus knows perfectly well I've messed it up, so he does what he always does in those circumstances – he stops dead.

I, on the other hand, keep moving – over his shoulder, through the air and straight towards one of the uprights.

Crash! The upright, the pole and I land in a tangled heap on the ground.

Aaargh!

'Jessie!'

For a moment, all I can do is catch my breath. Then I gradually disentangle myself, checking to see what hurts where. Maybe some bruises, but nothing too serious, I think – phew.

Mum and Summer run up to me. 'Are you OK?' Summer asks. Daniel goes to grab Angus.

'I'm all right. I'm all right,' I say a bit crossly. I *love* having people watch when I do well, but I *hate* having an audience when I fall off! I get up and brush down my breeches. My body protector and helmet helped me avoid serious injury, but I still feel quite sore and battered.

'You sure?' Mum asks. 'Looked like quite a thump.'

'I'm fine,' I snap. Summer is making concerned noises, which is a thing she does when she doesn't

know what to say. I walk over to Angus. 'I'm going round again.'

You should always get back on the horse. It's best to do it straightaway, before you start to worry that you can't. And I've been riding for so long that I don't even think about it any more. I mean, yeah, when I broke my arm it was pretty obvious I couldn't get back on Charley (my first pony) because when I reached for the reins I screamed like a banshee. But apart from then . . .

Mum gives me a leg-up and I'm back in the saddle, the reins comfortably in my hands where they belong. Angus gives a little snort, almost like he's laughing – and then when I ask him to walk on, he stands still and lifts his tail. '*Seriously*, Angus?' I roll my eyes as he deposits a steaming pile of poo on the ground.

'Oh, *Angus*,' says Summer with a laugh, and goes to fetch the fork. When Summer first came to Starlight Stables, she didn't believe me when I told her horses poo up to ten times a day – but she does now!

Daniel brings the barrow over and helps Summer clear up. 'Good thing Ellie isn't here,' he remarks to me. 'You'd have ended up online!'

Summer, Daniel, Ellie and I are in a group – we call ourselves the Starlight Stables Gang, because that's where we all ride. Ellie is the most media-obsessed of us all; she videos *everything*. She wants to be a detective equestrian film-maker when she grows up. I'm not sure that's a thing, but if it isn't, Ellie will invent it!

'She wouldn't have posted it online!' Summer tells Daniel. 'Ellie isn't that mean.'

'I was joking!'

'If she did, she'd probably have added a happy song over it,' I say, grinning at the thought.

' "Another One Bites the Dust",' suggests Daniel.

' "Oops! . . . I Did It Again",' says Summer, starting to giggle.

'Who sings that?' asks Daniel, puzzled.

'Britney Spears.'

'Oh right.' He grins. 'I have the perfect one. "Never Gonna Give You Up" . . .'

‘Noooo, not Rickrolling!’ Summer and I collapse into giggles.

‘Jessie, you’re nearly out of time,’ says Mum, and I look up from my giggling to see two girls on ponies heading towards the arena with their instructor. ‘If you’re going round again, you’d better get on with it.’

Daniel and Summer take the wheelbarrow and fork through the gate and I turn Angus and urge him into a gentle trot. ‘We’re going round again, Ang-y,’ I tell him. My shoulder is starting to ache – maybe I fell off a bit harder than I realized. But I put it out of my mind and take him round the course one last time. Of course, he jumps *beautifully*. Typical! But it’s good to end on a clear round.

‘That was great,’ Mum says as she holds the gate open for us. The two other riders head in and I dismount to lead Angus back to the stable yard. ‘You look like you’re ready for the competition at Berry Farm next week.’

Every now and then I go to a showjumping competition on a weekend. There hasn’t been one for ages, so I’m really looking forward to it!

Daniel and Summer are in the yard when I bring Angus in and tie him up. He chomps enthusiastically on a hay net while I untack him. 'Ugh, Angus, you are so sweaty!' I get a water spray and squirt all the sweaty bits.

Mum hands me the scraper. 'Are you OK to scrape him down? Make sure you do it properly, Jessie – he's worked hard for you, and it's a hot day.' She wipes her forehead with her sleeve. 'I think we could all do with a cool-down, to be honest! Early July and already this hot!'

'Can we get –' I begin, but I'm interrupted by the most enormous BANG from somewhere nearby. Angus startles wildly and steps back, narrowly missing my foot.

Mum exclaims in Cantonese and looks around.

'What was that?' I ask, shocked.

Daniel runs to a nearby stable, unbolts it and goes in. Summer follows him over, so after checking Angus is OK, I do too.

Joey, the 16-hands dapple-grey warmblood, is standing in the stable huffing and tossing his head.

I don't know Joey very well – he's privately owned, like Angus, so he's not one of the Starlight Stables school ponies. He's only turned out at night because if he's in the fields all day, he could eat too much and get sick.

'Is everything OK?' I hear Summer call to Daniel.

'No!' Daniel calls back. 'He's kicked a flipping hole in the back wall!'

'*What?*' Summer and I try to see past Joey, who is now trying to butt us out of the doorway.

'Can you take him out?' Daniel asks.

Mum slips a head collar over Joey and leads him out of the stable, chatting reassuringly to him. He follows her, docile now.

'Wow.' Now that Joey is out of the way, I can see the gaping splintered hole in the back wall of the stable. Light pours through. 'How did he even manage to kick that high?'

Daniel shakes his head. 'I dunno. It's above the kickboard, which is pretty impressive.'

'The what?' asks Summer.

‘Here,’ I say. ‘See how the wall is twice as thick halfway down? That’s called the kickboard. It protects the building if the horse does kick the wall – and some of them do!’

Daniel pokes the wood at the edges of the hole and it splinters further. ‘Er,’ he says, ‘this doesn’t look good. I’m going to go round the other side.’ He disappears into the courtyard and reappears a few moments later on the other side of the hole. ‘This is really bad,’ he says, tugging on a plank, which simply comes away in his hand.

‘Don’t do that, you’re making it bigger!’ I exclaim.

‘What’s happened?’ Jodie, one of the stable owners, is hurrying towards us, her lean face creased with worry. Mum isn’t far behind. ‘Is everyone OK? I heard a bang.’ Then she sees the hole and looks astonished. ‘Oh *my*. That – did Joey do that?’

‘Yeah,’ I say. ‘Though Daniel just pulled another bit off.’

Jodie is silent as she examines the damage. ‘I was afraid of this,’ she says eventually. ‘I’ve been telling

Sooz for ages this block is falling apart – it's too old.'

Sooz and Jodie own and run the stables together, and they live in a house just round the corner. Owning a stable yard sounds like a dream to me, but I know they have to work really hard to make ends meet.

'Maybe it's not as bad as it looks?' says Mum hopefully.

Jodie pokes at it and then says, 'Let's have a look at the other side.'

When we join Daniel behind the damaged stable block, I understand what Jodie means about it falling apart. I've never really looked at the Starlight buildings closely before – I'm too interested in the horses! – but there are chipped corners, crumbling edges and rusted nail heads. Jodie pulls on a section and suddenly four planks come off at once, landing on the ground with a powdery thump.

'Oh my god,' I say.

'Jessie!' Mum says automatically.

'Sorry,' I say equally automatically.

Jodie lets out a huge sigh. ‘Well, that’s that. Time to do some sums.’

‘Can’t we just patch it up?’ Daniel picks at the part of the wall that’s still standing. ‘Nail some boards over it?’

‘We can,’ says Jodie, ‘but it’s not really safe. This whole back section is rotten. Damp – see here? It’s a structural issue. The whole lot really needs to come down and be rebuilt.’

‘Oh.’ Summer, Daniel and I look at each other. Starlight never has quite enough money. There are several horses here on livery (Angus is one of them), which means the owners pay Jodie and Sooz to look after them. A couple of months ago, one of its livery ponies, Luna, was stolen. We found her again, but it scared some of the other owners who were worried their horses could be stolen too. Jodie and Sooz had to buy in a load of security cameras in order to reassure them. And Luna was in such a bad state after her ordeal that she needed loads of medical care, which cost even more.

Anyway, I guess what I'm trying to say is that looking after horses is a really expensive business, and after everything that's happened recently, I can see why Jodie is looking so upset. We all go round to the courtyard again and she instructs us to move three other ponies out of that section of the building and into other stables.

By the time we've finished doing that, and I've turned Angus out into his field, it's getting late and my stomach is rumbling. 'I'll drop you home too,' Mum is telling Daniel, 'after we've dropped Summer off. Your mum will need your help, I'm sure.' Daniel's mum works two jobs and he has *five* younger siblings. Their dad is in prison for theft and I still don't really know how I feel about that, but Daniel is solid and I know he has to do a lot of stuff to help out at home. We didn't used to get along, but when Luna was stolen, he helped find her.

'I'll just let Jodie and Sooz know we're heading off,' Mum says, so Daniel, Summer and I follow her

up to the building where a sign saying RECEPTION sits over the door to a little office with a counter and a pile of calendars, rosettes and a credit-card machine.

'. . . but where from, Sooz?' Jodie is saying, her voice carrying out on the air.

'Something will turn up,' I hear Sooz reply optimistically. 'It always does. We've always muddled through. It's always like this.'

'No, it isn't.' Jodie's tone sharpens. '*Everything* is costing more, you know it is. I don't even want to think about the electricity bill. And did you see the latest invoice from the farrier? He's so patient, but he won't wait forever – we need to pay it.'

Mum has stopped outside the building, and so have the three of us. It doesn't feel like the right moment to interrupt, but I feel bad eavesdropping too. This is a private conversation.

'Then there's Luna's vet bills,' Jodie continues with a sigh.

'You don't regret taking her on?' Sooz says, a tinge of anxiety in her voice.

I glance at Summer and see her eyes widen in alarm. Summer used to say hello to Luna every day when she passed her field on the way to school. They have a really special bond. When Luna was found after being stolen, her owner Florence decided she didn't want her any more anyway, so Jodie and Sooz bought her for the school.

'No, of course not,' Jodie replies, and Summer looks relieved. 'After what Luna went through, of course we had to take her. She'll be a brilliant school pony in time. But Sooz, the bills! We can't afford a new stable block – we're talking maybe another ten thousand pounds. Where are we going to get that kind of money?'

There's a pause. 'We'll think of something,' Sooz says. 'We *will*.'

'Come on, kids.' Mum shuffles us away. 'Time to go.'

The four of us head to the car park in silence that's only broken by Mum yelling over her shoulder, 'We're off now! See you Saturday!' and by Jodie appearing in the doorway to wave.

As Mum drives us out of the stables, I glance at Summer and Daniel in the back seat. They both look as worried as I feel. We all love Starlight Stables so much.

What can we do to help?