

PADDOCK GROVE



J. P. ROSE

PADDOCK GROVE

A Pony
To Own

J. P. ROSE



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or, if real, used fictitiously. All statements, activities, stunts, descriptions, information and material of any other kind contained herein are included for entertainment purposes only and should not be relied on for accuracy or replicated as they may result in injury.

First published 2025 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Text © 2025 J. P. Rose

Cover, chapter head and map illustration © 2025 Max Thompson

The right of J. P. Rose to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

EU Authorized Representative: HackettFlynn Ltd, 36 Cloch Choirneal, Balrothery, Co. Dublin, K32 C942, Ireland. EU@walkerpublishinggroup.com

This book has been typeset in Adobe Garamond Pro

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, transmitted or stored in an information retrieval system in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, taping and recording, without prior written permission from the publisher. Additionally, no part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems, nor for text and data mining.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:
a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-5295-2284-6

www.walker.co.uk



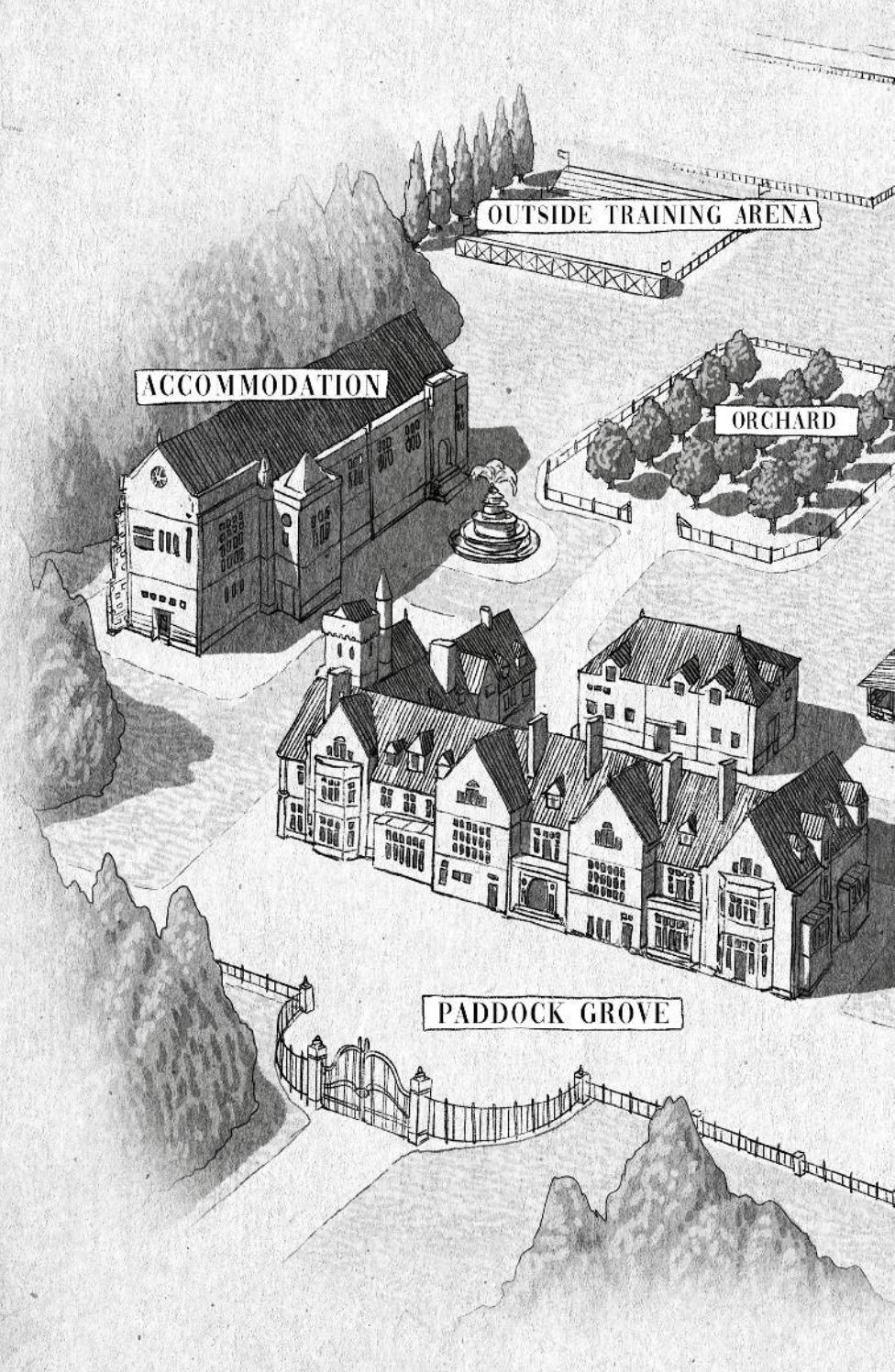


A PONY TO OWN

J. P. ROSE



WALKER
BOOKS

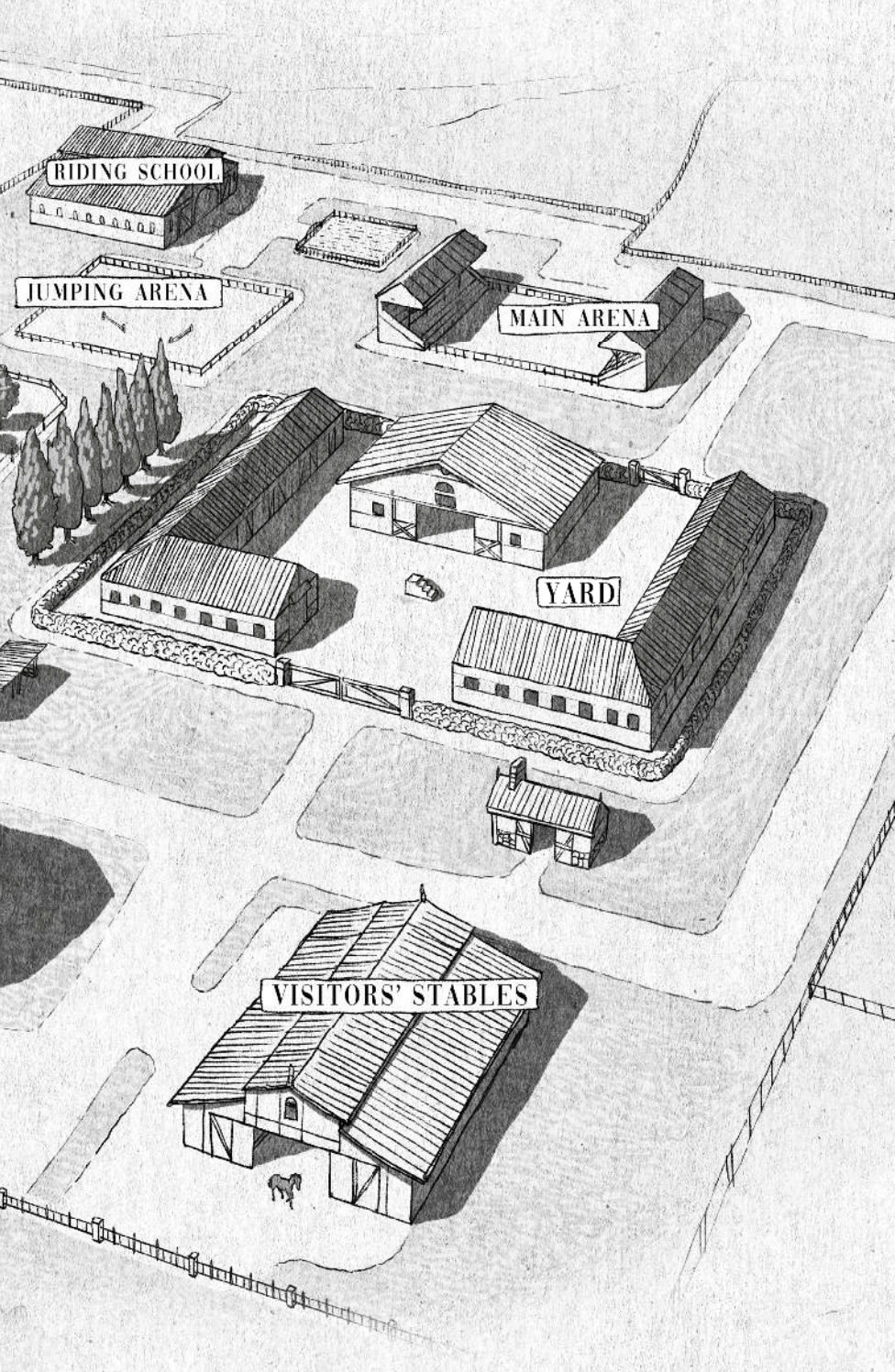


OUTSIDE TRAINING ARENA

ACCOMMODATION

ORCHARD

PADDOCK GROVE



RIDING SCHOOL

JUMPING ARENA

MAIN ARENA

YARD

VISITORS' STABLES

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Georgia ‘George’ Harris – A talented young rider starting at Paddock Grove. Keen to prove that she deserves her place among her classmates.

Bear – A scruffy, mischievous piebald cob from George’s riding school with a big appetite and a mind of his own. (Especially good at undoing knots, gates and stable doors.)

STROLLER HOUSE

Katie Ellis – Sensible and kind-hearted. Katie takes school very seriously, sometimes a little too seriously. She hates to let people down.

Sheriff – A homebred light bay gelding that Katie helped train from a foal. Has a strong, trusting bond with Katie.

Lili Nagata – Light-hearted Lili is fun to be around but sometimes struggles to take things seriously. She’s a chatterbox, except when it comes to the secret she holds.

Ted – Lili’s horse, a beautiful warmblood whose show-ring name is Lord Moonbeam but goes by his stable name, Ted. Excellent in the arena but doesn’t like cross-country.

Tabitha Bailey – Can be stand-offish and strong-willed. Sometimes she comes across as insensitive. Loans her horse from the school.

Misty Dumas – A student from France who is skilled in dressage. Straight and honest.

Dream – Highly trained palomino belonging to Misty.

OTHER STUDENTS

Meg Lopez – A student who likes to get her own way. From rival Frankel House.

Jessica Travis – Unfriendly and snooty. Also in Frankel House.

Harriet Chambers – A mean girl who thinks she's better than everyone else.

SCHOOL STAFF

Mrs Hawksworth – Headmistress

Ms Stopcroft – Head riding coach

Miss Fox – School veterinarian

Mr Thatcher – Yard manager

Mrs Winters – Housemistress for Stroller House

Mr Bassey – School bursar

THE MESSY SURPRISE

Had Georgia Harris known what the day was going to bring, she might well have gone back to bed. As it was, she found herself standing under the September sky, outside a dilapidated sheep shed on the farm behind her house.

Georgia wasn't actually *sure* what she was supposed to be looking at. Nor was she sure why her mum and dad, along with old farmer Albert, their eighty-year-old neighbour, were standing grinning at her. *Everyone* including her friends had been acting rather strangely towards her lately, come to think of it. Even Mrs Crawley, who worked at the village post office and usually stopped to have a friendly chat, had hurried past Georgia when she'd seen her yesterday.

The other curious thing about the past few days was that her parents had been doing a lot of whispering. Each time Georgia had entered the room, they'd quickly stopped talking and mysteriously started "doing something". So far this week she'd caught her mum loading the washing machine with her clean, ironed jumpers. Then she'd caught her dad tying his shoelaces on a pair of slip-on shoes. It had all been very odd.

"Your dad and I have been bursting to tell you, George." Buzzing with excitement, George's mum was hopping up and down on the spot as though she was trying to keep warm, causing her long, wavy, mousy-brown hair to tumble out of the bun tied loosely on the top of her head. "But we wanted it to be a surprise... We all did."

Albert, whose face was drawn with deep lines, wiped his hand over his stubbly chin. He squinted at George, then nodded to the large sheep shed with its battered old wooden door. "Go on then, lass, open it up."

George glanced between them all. Her dad broke into a smile. His crown of thick, jet-black dreadlocks swung forward as he gave her a brief, tight hug, and

when he stepped back the bright afternoon made his smooth ebony skin shine almost as much as his eyes. “We’re so proud of you, George. If anyone deserves this, you do. We know that you’ve wanted this for so long.”

George’s stomach knotted as she looked at the wooden door, and her heart skipped a beat. From as far back as she could remember, the only thing George had dreamt of was a horse of her own. Now that the riding school she’d attended since she was four years old had been forced to close down and sell off the horses, she’d thought maybe ... possibly ... well, her dream would come true, especially now she’d won a scholarship to the Paddock Grove equine boarding school. Her mind suddenly flooded with thoughts of Timmy – the horse she’d bonded with, her soulmate... Could it be? Could it *really* be her beloved Timmy, who had belonged to the local riding school and she’d been *desperate* to own?

“Don’t keep us waiting, your mum looks like she’s going to burst!” Her dad laughed again, and George could feel their excitement crackling in the air.

She slowly walked towards the shed. With trembling hands, she pulled the stiff, rusty bolt across. After a brief

glance over her shoulder to her parents and Albert, who all nodded reassuringly, she took a deep breath and...

"Timmy! Timmy!" George excitedly called out his name as she opened the door. "Tim—" But the rest of his name caught in the back of her throat as a white face with unfamiliar dark eyes stared at her. George's mouth dropped open as she stared back.

Instead of Timmy's sleek form, George saw a scruffy piebald cob with a thick mane and a messy coat covered in soaked oats. There were grass stains on his white patches and he had long, tangled feathers that covered his hooves.

"Meet Bear." George's dad walked up behind her. He wrapped his arm round her shoulders.

"B-B-Bear?" George blinked, then blinked some more, trying to stop her heart sinking. *Bear?!* Oh *no!*

Bear was also from the local riding school. In fact, she'd often mucked him out when she helped out on Saturdays and any evening during the week when she had no homework, in exchange for riding lessons.

Bear was a cheeky pony known for his huge appetite and mischievous behaviour. Whenever a rider saw that

they were scheduled to take Bear for a lesson there was a loud groan. Bear was more interested in eating than doing anything else. More often than not, those riders came back to the stables red-faced and very frustrated with Bear, who wouldn't listen to any sort of instructions. Depending on his mood, he was either a very slow plod or bolted off to get to the nearest patch of grass.

George swallowed hard as she stared at Bear's matted, black tail, which had mud stuck to the bottom of it. "Where's... Where's Timmy?" She hoped she didn't sound rude, but this was a disaster!

"I'm afraid we couldn't afford Timmy, sweetheart. He's gone to another home. They wanted you to have him, but someone else came in with a very high offer, and they had to sell him to the highest bidder." Her mum's voice was tinged with regret, but it was clear she didn't understand. Not really.

"But we thought you'd love Bear just as much," her dad chimed in, looking at George hopefully.

George glanced back at Bear, who was standing by some upturned buckets, busy tucking into a mouthful of sweet-smelling haylage. Bear, like so many cobs, was on

the round side, and George's heart sank. She didn't want to be ungrateful, she really didn't, but *look at* him. Bear was everything Timmy wasn't.

Timmy's chestnut coat had gleamed. He was elegant and athletic, highly trained, and glided over huge jumps with ease. He was a dream. A beautiful, shining, well-groomed dream. Bear, however, looked like he'd never seen a grooming brush in his life. Even his white fetlocks were brown with thick clumps of mud. And if that wasn't bad enough, George thought, the highest she'd ever seen Bear jump was the small hedge by the far field when he was being led back to his stable and he pulled away to get to the tractor loaded with bales of meadow hay. Timmy had been her everything since she'd fallen in love with him on the first day he'd arrived at the stables. George might not have owned him, but in her heart it felt like she did. She wanted to cry.

"We know how much you adored Timmy, George," her mum said. "And we know it'll be difficult without him after all this time, but your dad and I are sure you'll have lots of fun with Bear."

The smell of haylage – like ripened bananas – filled

the air as George battled her tears. Timmy, her beloved gelding, had been her best friend for the past two and a half years. She had kissed his soft, velvety nose and fed him three carrots the last time she saw him, crying quietly into his coat – but she hadn't really *believed* that was the last time. So, the thought of not seeing Timmy or riding him ever again made George feel like he'd taken a part of her heart with him to his new home.

Timmy had been her wings. He'd taken her from local pony club events to competing – and earning a spot in – some of the national showjumping competitions. Even when she'd looked at towering jumps on the cross-country courses or in the ring and hadn't felt brave, George had known that the moment she sat in the saddle, Timmy would look after her and never let her down.

"You do like Bear, don't you, George?" Her dad's eyebrows snapped together in a line of worry.

George nodded furiously, wanting to reassure him. Her parents didn't know much about horses, but they'd always supported her, taking her to lessons and competitions in all weathers and cheering her on. She also knew that her parents would've had to work *extra*

hard to give her this opportunity of having a pony of her very own. It all made sense now why her dad's recent mission had been to sell off their old things in the loft – and some of the newer things too – as well as all the overtime her mum had taken on at her office job. And, therefore, George certainly didn't want to show them how heartbroken she truly was.

"I-I..." She crossed her fingers behind her back and nodded again. "Yes. Yes... I mean, look at him, Dad, he's ... he's ... Well, he's..." George paused and scrambled for the right words. She held back tears, desperately trying to hold the smile on her face. She didn't usually tell lies, but on this occasion she thought it was probably best to do so.

Yet again she stared at Bear, who was looking at her through his messy long forelock, as curious as her mum and dad and Albert as they waited for her to finish her sentence. "He's ... he's ... *beautiful*. That's what he is... He's beautiful, Dad – and Mum – thank you *so much*."

A loud sigh of relief was let out by everyone, and to George it even felt as if the shed itself was breathing out a relieved sigh that she'd found the right words.

“That’s what we all thought. We thought he was beautiful too,” her dad said, beaming. “And Albert’s even found some old tack you can have. He’s sorted out a bridle and saddle.”

As if that was his cue, Albert disappeared into another of his outbuildings.

A minute later, he reappeared carrying a large, heavy-looking brown saddle over his arm and a worn leather bridle.

“It’s old, but it fits him lovely,” Albert said, looking like he was struggling under the weight of it. “And like I’ve always said, a golden bit does nothing to make a horse any better.” George thought it was just as well, since the snaffle hanging from the cheek band was stained the kind of green that would only come off with a fierce scrubbing.

“We’re so excited for you, George.” Her mum warmly laughed out her words.

George threw her arms around her mum and dad, hugging them both tightly, hiding the tear rolling down her face as her heart ached for Timmy.



Chapter Two

RINSE AND RUN

“Come on then, get him out,” George’s dad, who was allergic to horses, encouraged her from a distance. “Then I can take some photos of you both to send to the rest of the family. They were all excited to hear about Bear when Mum told them.”

George inwardly groaned. She felt terrible, not just because of Bear, but because she could see how happy her parents were. She hoped they’d never guess that her heart was breaking.

“Oh, I forgot. We also got you this.” Her mum reached inside the bag she was carrying on her arm and brought out a small parcel, wrapped in bright red-and-yellow paper.

George took it gratefully. “Thank you.” She smiled

and quickly tore open the package. Inside was a beautiful red lead rope, along with a matching red-and-yellow head collar with a small brass nameplate on the side that read: *BEAR*.

“He’s a fine lad. Legs in each corner.” Farmer Albert gently tapped Bear on his rounded backside, which was strong and powerful. “I reckon he’d be good for pulling a cart, this one.”

If George had thought her heart couldn’t sink any further, it did then. Everyone was being so kind, but she’d never dreamt, never *wanted*, to own a pony that could pull a cart. The kind of ponies George dreamt of could soar over the jumps, glide across the cross-country course, and dance on air in the dressage ring. Even with all the training in the world, she couldn’t imagine that Bear could do anything other than eat hay and plod around the bridleways. Or, as Albert said, pull a cart.

“We also got you this.” Her dad handed her a brightly wrapped package that he’d hidden in the corner underneath a pile of clean straw.

George unwrapped it to reveal a brand-new purple

kit box that had her name inscribed on the front in fancy writing. Inside, the brushes were brightly coloured in pinks, blues and yellows. The kit included everything from a dandy brush to a mane comb, a hoof pick and even a bottle of strawberry-scented horse shampoo. Despite her initial disappointment over Bear, George was delighted. “This is brilliant, thank you.”

While Albert cheerfully listed all the farm chores Bear could do, as if describing a four-legged tractor instead of a pony, George quietly slipped the head collar over Bear’s soft muzzle before gliding it over his ear and fastening the buckle on the side of it. Carefully, she ran her fingers under the cheek strap, making sure it wasn’t too tight, then she clipped the lead rope on the ring under his chin before leading Bear out of the sheep shed.

Outside in the late afternoon sun, Bear didn’t look any better. In fact, George realized with dismay, he looked even scruffier now she could see him properly! His shaggy coat caught the light, highlighting every single unkempt patch and tangle.

“He’ll be perfect to take to Paddock Grove.” Her

mum stroked Bear's cheek, which he seemed to like, as the moment she stopped he nudged her with his head to continue.

Paddock Grove? In the whirl of surprise, George had (somehow, incredibly) forgotten about that. She stared at her mum in disbelief. There was no way that Bear could possibly fit in. No way at all. The school was known internationally for its elite equestrian programme. How could she take a cart horse like Bear there?

“Stand next to him, George, and give me a big smile... That's it,” George's dad happily instructed her as he started taking photos on his phone. But all George could think of was having to take Bear with her to her new school. The thought made her feel positively ill. “Smile, George.”

Going to her new school, she'd wanted everything to be perfect, but taking Bear was far from that. She'd never imagined someone like *her* could get into an amazing place like Paddock Grove – not after missing out last year when she was moving up into Year Seven. She'd been one mark short of passing because she hadn't known any Latin. Actually, she hadn't even known that

Latin was a subject! But her parents had encouraged her to try again for this year's intake.

Mrs Llewellyn, a retired schoolteacher who lived in the village and was skilled in Latin, had helped her, and George had studied very hard for the entrance exam and practised her riding every chance she could. When it had been time to take the riding test at Paddock Grove, the local stables had even let George take Timmy with her.

Despite her nerves, Timmy had been her lucky charm. He'd known exactly what to do. As always, he gave her confidence, making the cross-country course feel effortless. He'd shone in their dressage test too and tackled the school's showjumping ring – including the tricky triple bar and oxer – without breaking a sweat. It'd been the best day *ever*, but she hadn't really imagined she'd get in.

As soon as the acceptance letter arrived, offering her a coveted full scholarship to start this autumn term, George had squealed and danced around the kitchen, thrilled at the thought of her new adventure.

After she'd told her parents the news, she'd run all the way to the riding school to wrap her arms around

Timmy, giving him big hugs and kisses. After a lot of discussion, the riding school had agreed to loan him to George to take to Paddock Grove.

Over the summer, everything changed. The riding school was forced to shut down, and the horses sold off one by one. Everyone had been devastated by the news, but George had still held out a little hope...

As George fiddled with the end of Bear's lead rope, her mum told her how they'd talked to Mrs Hawksworth, the headmistress at Paddock Grove. She'd said that George could ride one of the school's own horses, but that the bond between horse and rider can make all the difference – especially for a rider with George's potential.

Her mum smiled encouragingly. "Mrs Hawksworth expects great things from you, George. She believes you can be a fantastic part of the school riding team. She said she hadn't seen such a natural rider in a long time, and now you've got Bear, imagine all the things you'll be able to achieve!"

George remained silent, a lump forming in her throat. How could Bear ever replace Timmy? It was going to be hard enough joining a new school in

Year Eight when everyone knew each other, let alone having to take Bear.

George's mum glanced at her watch. "Well, there's a lot still to do before tomorrow. We've got an early start if we need to be at Paddock Grove by two o'clock. It'll take a good eight or nine hours to get there if we have to stop a few times for Bear." She looked at Albert. "Before we get started, I've got a freshly baked Victoria sponge waiting in the kitchen if you fancy a piece with a cup of tea."

Albert grinned. "I'm never one to turn down a cuppa." He began to follow George's mum, who walked in the direction of their tiny stone cottage at the bottom of the lane.

"And *I* need to get the trunk down from the attic... Unless Bear fancies getting it down for me?" Her dad winked at George. "I'm sure by the time you've finished with Bear, he'll be show ready. You'll be able to ride him with pride."

George watched them go. She held her smile until they'd disappeared around the corner, then she let it drop and let out a long sigh. "Come on, Bear. Let's get you

cleaned up.” George tried to muster up some enthusiasm as she set to work preparing him for tomorrow.

Leading him to the fence, she tied him to the rusty ring on the post. Immediately, Bear began to fidget. He pulled at the rope, pawing at the ground while looking longingly at the grass beyond the gravel yard. “Stand still, Bear.” She sighed impatiently. Then she went over to fill one of the old Stubbs buckets with water from the tap on the wall. She added a generous amount of shampoo, and the smell wafted up as she dipped the sponge from her grooming kit into the soapy water.

George wet Bear’s thick coat then started scrubbing it with the soft, red rubber curry comb she had. The water and suds on Bear’s back quickly turned black as the dirt and grime started to come away.

“Look how filthy you are,” George tutted, and shook her head.

Bear flicked his tail impatiently, swishing shampoo everywhere as he fanned his body away from George.

“Stand still, Bear, it’s only water,” George muttered, and continued to work on the ingrained mud and grass stains on his coat. The white patches on him

would take a lot more scrubbing and George decided that Bear was quite possibly the dirtiest pony she'd ever seen. Her arm quickly began to ache as she used large circular motions, working the comb through his coarse coat.

Once again, Bear shifted his weight, his eyes still fixed on the lush grass just beyond the yard while George carefully and gently worked through the tangles in his mane, wincing every time the comb snagged on a particularly stubborn knot.

As George moved to his tail, the warm breeze changed direction, carrying the scent of fresh grass to them, causing Bear's head to shoot up. His nostrils twitched as he smelt the aroma of it. Then he pulled at the rope harder, and with one big sudden yank, Bear tore the rusty ring from the rotting wooden post, setting himself free to barge past George. Head down, he cantered across the yard towards the field.

Caught off-guard, George stumbled backwards and crashed into the water bucket by her feet. She landed with a big splash, getting soaked from head to toe.

"Great." She wiped water from her face and shook her head. "Just great... *Thanks for that, Bear!*" Frustrated,

George shouted out the last words as Bear stood nearby, munching happily on the grass, looking very pleased with himself.

George sighed and watched him sadly. Bear's behaviour was the opposite of anything Timmy would do. Gosh, she missed everything about him – his kind eyes, his sleek coat, and how he seemed to understand her without her having to say a word. How would she ever love stubborn, wilful Bear the way she loved Timmy?

George felt a twinge in her chest, hoping his new owners, whoever they were, would love Timmy as much as she had. She hoped that he was happy, getting lots of scratches behind his ears, and that his night-time feed was a sloppy mix of chaff and hard food with a couple of apple slices and carrots in it. Just the way he liked it and just the way she'd always made it for him.

She squeezed her eyes closed, picturing herself on Timmy, then forced herself to snap them open. She got to her feet and trudged over to Bear with her clothes clinging uncomfortably to her skin.

"Can you *please*, please just behave yourself, Bear?" George stood in front of him with her hands on her hips,

trying not to be too impatient with him. “We’ve got a big day tomorrow, and I’m already nervous enough, and this isn’t helping at all.” She gently took hold of Bear’s head collar, led him back to the fence, and tied him to a post that looked more secure than the last. She’d have to tell Albert about the ring later.

“There. You’re not going to escape from *that* knot.” She shook her head and patted Bear on his back. Over the next hour George filled more buckets of water, washing more dirt away before using the sweat scraper from her grooming kit. She ran it over Bear’s body, removing the excess water from his coat, then she used a soft cloth and dried his face, gently wiping around his eyes and ears.

Finally, she carefully held each foot and, using the brand-new hoof pick, she cleaned out Bear’s hooves. She removed any stones and mud lodged between his frogs and around the edges of his shoes, while Bear continued to fidget, trying to snatch his foot away.

“Oh no you don’t, Bear!” Panting, she held on tightly. Bear wasn’t the only one who could be stubborn. “You are having your feet cleaned whether you like it

or not. It's not good for you to leave all those stones in there."

George continued to hang on, making sure Bear's hooves were cleaned out and spotless, and at last, tired but pleased, she stepped back to look at the results of her hard work. She smiled at him.

"Who knew you could look this clean, hey?" She gave him a scratch on his withers. Bear's black-and-white coat shone in the late afternoon sun. He looked almost presentable. "Dad should've taken a photo of you looking like this," she laughed.

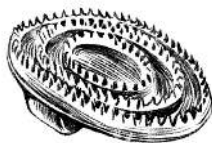
In return, Bear shook himself, droplets of water flying everywhere.

As the sun set, George led Bear back to the stable, checking he had enough water and haylage for the night. Then, with a mix of emotions and a very big yawn, she slowly walked back towards the cottage.

Despite everything that had happened, despite her disappointment over Bear, she felt a tingle of excitement as she thought about tomorrow. Her dreams were really coming true... Oh my gosh. She – Georgia Harris! – was *actually* going to be a pupil at Paddock Grove!

Suddenly she let out a delighted giggle and whirled around and around and around on the spot, looking up at the sky. A new school, a new start, a new adventure lay ahead...

Chapter Three



TRUNKS, TACK AND TAKE-OFF

*“Georgia! Georgia! George, are you up yet, sweetheart?
We don’t want to be late.”*

It was the next morning and George’s mum was calling for her up the stairs.

“I won’t be long, I promise!” George answered as she stood in her small bedroom. The early morning sunshine was just starting to peek through the curtains, casting a rich pinkish light across posters of George’s favourite famous show jumpers on the walls, rosettes from her competitions that hung from the wooden beams, and her bookshelf crammed with horse books. It would be weeks before she saw them all again, and excitement and nerves bubbled inside her.

She hadn't been able to sleep much last night and had got up early to wash her long brown curly hair, which was now tied back in a loose ponytail. The school had several different uniforms for all the different activities, and since she was taking Bear to the school with her, George had dressed in her new Paddock Grove riding uniform – jodhpurs, polo shirt, and the school jumper with its badge sewn on the front, which bore the school's motto: "Together in Triumph".

There came a soft tap on the door, then her mum's head peeked around. "All set for the big day?"

George nodded. "I think so." As butterflies fluttered in her stomach, she added, "I hope so. I'm a bit worried that everyone in my year will know each other."

George's mum stepped into the room and took George's hands in hers. "I know it's hard starting a new school, and even harder to do that in Year Eight, but you always make friends everywhere you go – at school, at the pony club. You even made friends when we went on our camping holiday last year, didn't you?" She smiled. "I promise, you'll soon settle in."

George took a deep breath. She was going to miss

all her friends from her old school but going to Paddock Grove was a once-in-a-lifetime chance. "You really think it'll be alright?"

Her mum laughed warmly. "I *know* it'll be alright." She gave George a hug. "So, Dad's already loaded the bags and trunk onto the lorry. All we need now are you and Bear." She paused, and George saw a glint of tears. "We'll miss you terribly, and the cottage won't be the same without you, but we're so proud of you, George."

She gently let go of George's hands to dab her eyes with a tissue. "Now, how about some breakfast? I've made some scrambled eggs and toast. That's if Albert's left any." She laughed again.

George couldn't even think of eating. Her stomach was doing knots. "I'll be down in a minute if that's OK. I'm just saying my goodbyes to my room."

Her mum nodded. "I'll leave you to it."

Once her mum disappeared, George had one last glance around, then she pulled on her well-worn riding boots, grabbed her new school rucksack and took another deep breath. Then, touching the badge on her jumper, she made her way downstairs.



Half an hour later, and feeling much calmer, George made her way quickly to the sheep shed. The early morning sky was turning from pale pink to pale blue, and a gentle breeze rustled the leaves in the trees as she made her way along the pretty country lane. The village of Hedgedale in the North Yorkshire Moors – and their little stone cottage with its white picket fence – was the only home she'd ever known. She loved this place, but though she would miss it fiercely, she couldn't wait to explore the tracks and bridleways around Paddock Grove, which was nestled near the Jurassic Coast in Dorset, surrounded by amazing white sandy beaches and rolling countryside. It was the perfect place for riding. The perfect place for going to school.

George continued to walk, her shoes crunching on the gravel path which led to Albert's farm, but as she neared the shed, George froze. Oh no! The rickety old door of the shed hung open, broken.

Bear was gone.

Gone!

George whirled round as panic began to rise in her

chest. “Bear? *Bear?*” She ran to the lane to see if he was there, but not being able to spot him, she dashed back to the yard, looking around. “Bear, Bear, where are you?” Oh no, this couldn’t be happening. Where was he?

Then she heard a noise to her left. She darted towards the sound and sprinted around the large tractor shed, passing the old tabby cat basking in the early morning sun. And there was Bear, happily eating one of the hay bales piled up nearby.

“Oh Bear, thank goodness.” But then she stared at him harder, open-mouthed. “Bear, *no!* Oh no! *Bear!*” Mud covered his white patches that she’d worked so hard to scrub clean yesterday. He’d clearly rolled, and sticky burrs and haylage were tangled in his mane and tail.

“Oh my goodness.”

George jumped at her mum’s voice as she walked up behind her.

She whirled round. “Mum, what am I going to do now? I *can’t* take him looking like that.”

Her mum seemed very relaxed about Bear’s appearance. She smiled. “He’ll clean up fine, sweetheart.”

“But look at him!” This time, George couldn’t hide

her disappointment. She'd wanted him to look perfect. She'd wanted everything about today to be perfect, and now Bear had spoilt it.

"George, don't look so worried, it's only some mud."

"But he's a mess. He's ... he's..." George was so upset she couldn't find her words. The excitement of the journey ahead, of the day ahead, of everything she'd worked so hard for, started to fade away. Wiping away any tears, George muttered, "I'll clean him now. Hopefully it won't take too long."

Her mum glanced at her watch. "I'm afraid we haven't got time, George. We need to be there by three. We're cutting it fine already. He'll have to go like that."

"Like that?" George couldn't believe what she was hearing. "No, no, he can't... He can't go like that. There's no way." She shook her head furiously and had a sudden thought: it would be better if they left him here altogether! But as soon as the idea popped into her mind, George pushed it aside. She was being ungrateful, she knew that. Her parents would be so upset if they thought she didn't want Bear.

She glanced over at him. Maybe she could give him

a quick once-over with the dandy brush to take the worst off.

Her dad rounded the corner then, grinning as he pushed back his dreadlocks. “George, your transport awaits! It’s all ready. Albert loaded it up with haylage and water this morning, so we can just go, go, go.” He laughed and nodded towards the gates.

Just when George thought things couldn’t get worse, an old, dirty sheep lorry, held together in places with silver gaffer tape, chugged around the corner. George stared in horror. *This* was to be their transport? What had happened to the riding school’s horsebox they were going to use?

As if reading her mind, George’s dad smiled. “Unfortunately, there’s a buyer coming to look at the riding school’s horsebox today. Albert was kind enough to let us use his sheep lorry.” Her dad waved to Albert, who sat behind the wheel, puffing on his pipe. “So come on, George, load him up.” He rubbed his hands excitedly. “This is going to be some adventure.”

George turned away and rolled her eyes. That was certainly one way of putting it...



Chapter Four

NEW BEGINNINGS

The drive from Hedgedale to Paddock Grove was much longer and more tiring than George thought it was going to be. Not only did the lorry smell of pipe smoke and wet sheep, they'd also stopped several times on the way, checking Bear, who seemed quite content with his large bag of haylage and garlic Likit. (They also made some bathroom stops for Albert, who'd drunk several flasks of tea that George's mum had made for the journey.)

George was quiet most of the way, but her parents and Albert made up for it by singing at the top of their voices, every single song they could possibly remember. Songs George had never heard of and, from the way the adults sang them, never wanted to hear again.

After leaving the motorway, they drove hour after hour down winding country lanes, with the warm breeze whispering through the early autumn fields and flowers. Then they turned for the coast, driving along roads framed by jutting cliffs and windswept stretches of golden beach, while the September sun bounced off the water, turning the ocean into a glistening flat jewel.

George couldn't quite believe it was happening. Everything seemed like the perfect dream. She'd always loved horses. Always. She couldn't actually remember a time when she wasn't thinking about them, dreaming about them or even drawing them. Since she was old enough, she'd spent all her free time at the riding stables, just enjoying being around the horses as well as mucking out and doing the chores no one else wanted to do – work she'd have done with or without free lessons in return. Now she'd won a place at Paddock Grove, her world would be on repeat: live, breathe and dream horses.

George sighed contentedly as they finally turned towards the little village of Willowbrook, which was only a couple of miles from the school.

As they rounded the next bend, George caught her breath. The view was even more amazing than she remembered from when she came months ago for her interview. Ahead were rolling green hills dotted with grazing horses, and George imagined herself galloping across the fields criss-crossed by bridle paths.

In the distance, George spotted a glint of blue – the sea! She'd forgotten how close the school was to the coast, which meant she'd be able to ride through the sea. She'd always wanted to, and she imagined herself galloping along the surf's edge, the sun above and the wind in her face. She knew it would feel something like magic.

They passed a couple of tiny villages and several large equine properties, and George spun round excitedly when she spotted a large sign for Clear Fields, the boys' equestrian boarding school. This was truly horse country!

"It says in the welcome pack that this lane can get cut off when the weather's bad," her mum shouted over the sound of the engine. "The river floods over, blocking the road."

“It’s beautiful,” George whispered breathlessly as they splashed through the ford.

At the top of the biggest hill, George’s heart jumped as she looked down and saw Paddock Grove. The school grounds stretched further than she could see, and as they neared the tall, imposing wrought-iron gates, George tried to stop herself feeling queasy.

Maybe she was being silly, but now it had come to it, she wasn’t quite as confident as she’d been before they’d set off. It was real now: this was going to be her home during term time for the next four years.

“Are you alright, George?” Her mum swivelled round to smile at her. For a moment Mum didn’t say anything, then she lowered her voice into a warm whisper. “I promise you’ll be fine.”

“She’ll be more than fine,” her dad – who’d been sneezing a lot of the journey from his allergy – added. “She’ll be great. Our George earned her place.” He looked across the back seat and gave George a wink. “You’ve worked hard to be here.”

George smiled gratefully, though that didn’t stop her feeling shaky as they drove through the

gates. A wide gravel driveway swept up to the school, lined with perfectly trimmed hedges and colourful flower beds.

The place was *spectacular*.

The main building was a huge converted stately home, majestic against the landscape. The spotless limestone walls of Paddock Grove stretched upwards, topped by tall, elegant chimneys and a beautiful clock tower that caught the afternoon rays of sunlight. Even from where she sat in the lorry, George could see the grand entrance's enormous doors, which had large brass carvings of horses standing either side.

Her gaze darted around. Other buildings spread out across the grounds – accommodation for the staff and students, along with the modern teaching blocks and stables – but it was really the high-tech equestrian facilities that made George's heart soar.

In the gaps between the buildings she could just about spot the outdoor arena, its sandy surface raked smooth and perfect for jumping. Beyond it lay the fields and paddocks, separated by sturdy wooden post-and-rail fences. To the east were the visitors' stables, then

the path to the main yard, and although she couldn't see them, the indoor school and not one but *two* more arenas. Beyond that was the cross-country course, the woods and the bridle paths. George couldn't wait to explore it all...

The lorry came to a grinding, noisy halt in the parking area, sending plumes of smoke from its exhaust into the air. It looked entirely out of place beside the gleaming silver horsebox they'd parked next to. George tried not to be embarrassed (but she was).

She glanced out of the window, breathing in the air, which held the unmistakable smell of horses, but she quickly turned away as she spotted a group of girls staring and giggling. They were all dressed in the same smart jodhpurs and pale-blue polo shirts as George wore. (Although their uniforms looked immaculate, making her overly aware of her own travel-crumpled appearance.)

She wiped the crumbs off her jodhpurs from the biscuit she'd eaten when they'd stopped earlier. "Mum?"

Her mum turned around again.

"Are you sure it'll be alright?" She was so nervous.

Her mum nodded and reached over, pushing a strand of George's corkscrew hair out of her eyes. "It's like Dad says: you'll be great. Everyone gets nervous as well as excited when they're starting a new school. Just remember, everything you need is within you, poppet."

George smiled. She was never quite sure what her mum *actually meant* when she said that, but it always made George feel better.

"Right then, you untie Bear, and I'll open the ramp," Albert suggested loudly.

Shuffling through the cabin into the back where Bear was, George untied his rope from the ring. He took no notice of her and continued to eat his haylage, though as it happened, George paid little attention to him either, lost in a daydream of what it would have been like to bring Timmy here and wondering what he was doing now.

The ramp of the lorry clanged down, breaking off George's thoughts. Albert leant on the side and nodded towards Bear. "You're lucky he's not fussed by anything; a lot of horses are spooked by their own shadow." Albert stared at her from under his bushy eyebrows. He

frowned, and George thought she heard a slight tone of concern in his voice. “Mind, if you want to build a bond with him, you’ve got to do more than just feed and water him. He’ll never be the pony you want him to be if you ignore him.”

George felt her cheeks heating up. She didn’t want to be rude and say, *He isn’t the pony I want now or ever*, so she just smiled, hoping that Albert wouldn’t say any more. She was both surprised and ashamed that Albert had noticed the way she’d been behaving towards Bear.

Turning away from the old farmer, George gave a gentle tug on the lead rope. Bear didn’t move. She tried again, but the most Bear did was shift his weight from one hind leg to the other and stare at George, unimpressed.

“Bear, come on. *Bear*, we’ve got to go...” She could hear the plaintive whine in her voice. “*Bear*.”

“It’s no good getting irritated with him, lass. He’ll only pick up on your mood and wonder what he’s done wrong. It won’t get him to move any faster,” Albert said. (Very unhelpfully, George thought.)

“I know what I’m doing, Albert,” George replied,

wishing that Albert would go away and pulling a little harder on Bear's lead rope at the same time. She'd unboxed Timmy plenty of times when they went to competitions, so she knew what she was doing. It was Bear who was the problem.

"Please, Bear, not now," she whispered desperately. Then, not unkindly, she pulled and coaxed him some more, and even tried bribing him with a nut treat she had in her pocket, but Bear remained like a statue.

"Is that really her horse?" A tall girl with blonde hair, standing by the lorry, snorted with laughter. "I've seen ponies at fairs that look better than that!"

George's cheeks burnt again as she glanced at the other students, their beautiful horses looking glossy in the sunlight as they calmly walked them towards the stable blocks. Just when George thought Bear might refuse to move altogether, he caught sight of something. His ears pricked up, he spun around, and with a sudden flash of excitement, Bear bolted forward.

George yelped.

Stumbling, she tried to keep her balance, but it was no use. Bear was too strong. He trotted at speed