SILVER BROOK

YUMNA AND THE GOLDEN HORSE

HODDER CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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Chapter One

Oh Allah, please don't let me die!

Yumna's chest heaved. Her breath came out in wheezes, like an asthmatic terrier. Despite the cool dawn air, beads of sweat were racing down the sides of her face. She was hot, stressed and trying not to cry.

Left. Then right. Then left, c'mon!

Gripping the handlebars so tight that the metal threatened to warp, Yumna pushed one pedal down, then the other. Her progress up the mild incline had been glacial. At this rate, she wouldn't hit the peak until lunchtime.

Left, right, left, bismillah, yallah!

Yumna hissed through gritted teeth as she willed her body up the hill. The village was still and quiet, save for the occasional bursts of chatter from birds and sporadic bleats from sheep. She was glad it was far too early in

the morning for anyone but the fauna to witness her struggle.

'Good morning, young lass!'

The booming voice came from behind her. Startled, she lifted her feet off the pedals and found herself rolling straight back down the hill. Yumna came to an undignified stop at precisely the point she had begun, outside the weathered front door of her house. There hadn't even been enough time to hit the brakes.

'Oh, hello, Mr Turner.' Yumna spoke with an attempt at breezy calmness, although flames of deep shame were burning up her neck. She straightened her back and smoothed her headscarf, pretending all was going to plan, then turned her attention to the man standing at his gate.

She had only ever seen Turner in formalwear, no matter how early or late in the day they crossed paths. Often, he was in a black suit and waistcoat, but sometimes, like today, he sported the 'penguin outfit'. Turner had explained the fancy costume was called a morning coat, but Yumna preferred to think of him as dressed up like a giant, flightless aquatic bird.

Pay attention.

Yumna narrowed her eyes. The leather shoes had been recently polished. The bronze cufflinks looked large and heavy, more ornate than Turner's usual. Taking in the details, Yumna deduced there must be some special occasion, or

someone Turner was hoping to impress. Her assessment had been completed in the space of a few breaths, and she felt far better for it.

The elderly man smiled. 'Struggling on the bike, are we?'

Yumna chuckled, her embarrassment thawing under Mr Turner's warm gaze. She liked her neighbour, the tall man with owl eyebrows who worked as a part-time butler in the castle up the way, officially known as Wenning Keep. He was the only adult – apart from her father – who paid attention to her, who asked her questions, who noticed she was there. Yumna knew she wasn't like her two best friends, the athletic and beautiful Sadeeqa, or the sassy and charming Nafisa. She was a small, stocky thirteen-year-old who spent most of her time buried in books, avoiding conversations with strangers. Most people took no notice of her, but she didn't mind. One thing she had learnt from all the detective series she'd read: you can get away with a whole lot if people don't see you.

'It's my first day on the job,' Yumna admitted. She gestured at the stack of rolled up newspapers packed into her front basket like a bundle of cinnamon sticks. 'Mr Gareth said if I can get Eastbourne Lane done before sunrise, he'll let me do the whole village next week!' Yumna sighed. 'I don't think I'll make it . . .'

Rubbing his jaw, Mr Turner peered at the dials on

Yumna's handlebars. She had remembered the settings from the last time she went on a ride with her father and adjusted them to match. Judging by the expression on Mr Turner's face however, Yumna wondered if she had missed a trick.

'You know how these gears work, lass?'

She shrugged, hoping Mr Turner would not ask any more questions. It was far too early on a Sunday morning for a quiz on bicycles!

'They certainly don't work the way you've got 'em!' Mr Turner chuckled, twisting the dials until they were at the lowest numbers on both sides.

'Give that a go, eh?' Mr Turner stepped back, beaming, and gestured up the street.

Sceptical, but willing to give him a chance, Yumna placed her foot on the pedal with the same amount of force she had been exerting a few minutes earlier. The bike bunny-hopped forward.

'Ay!'

Squeaking like an excited guinea pig, Yumna was off and flying without a backward glance. At the top of the hill, which came sooner than expected now the bike was in the right gear, Yumna paused to yell her thanks to Mr Turner. But when she turned, all she could see at the bottom of the hedge-lined street were curls of soft, grey mist.

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Yumna hummed under her breath as she rode, pausing in front of each house on Eastbourne Lane and pushing the morning paper into the letterboxes, careful not to bend the edges.

The houses on this side of the village were much grander than where Yumna lived. On her street, houses had numbers. Here, the buildings had names, all with matching personalities.

Peacock Manor had an enormous shrub at its entrance, trimmed in the silhouette of the sullen-faced bird. Winterbeck House had a driveway so dramatic, Yumna pictured horse-driven carriages lined up there for the ball of the season. Belvoir Cottage was as much a cottage as Buckingham Palace was a modest family home. The estate was so enormous, it had its own postcode! Fortunately, it only had one letterbox. The round metal cylinder of the newspaper holder jutted out from the brown stone wall beside high golden gates, and she pushed the paper in, pleased at how neatly it fitted.

Yumna's basket was almost empty as she made her way up the final stretch of Eastbourne Lane. The sun had come over the horizon now, clearing the mist and raising the temperature. A wide smile lit up her face as she approached; Yumna had kept her favourite house for last. Here, there was no giant wall hiding the residents from view, or an intimidating gate glowering over passers-by.

Instead, the walls were a low, red brick, gently curving into a driveway lined with towering chestnut trees that greeted visitors with a warm, welcoming hug. The sweet smell of jasmine hung in the air, and the ground was carpeted in a lush, deep green with bursts of lilac and yellow wildflowers sprinkled across the landscape like confetti.

'The Red Mansion' – that's what Yumna and her friends called Glebe Manor, the old Georgian house that had sat empty for as long as they could remember. It had once been attached to the old church and been the home of the local vicar, but over the years it had fallen out of use. Yumna had often wondered why the grand old residence had been left empty and unwanted for so many years, despite its charm and rough beauty. With its brick walls covered in ivy, its wide front garden and scramble of lawn and woods out the back, it seemed like an ideal home for a bustling family. What would the walls say, if they could talk? Was the house ever lonely?

Yumna dismounted and wheeled her bike to the main entrance, looking for the postbox. There hadn't been anywhere to leave the paper at the foot of the driveway, but she couldn't see anything here, either. There wasn't even a mail flap in the cream-coloured front door. Yumna knew that her boss, Mr Gareth, would ask her if she had delivered each paper to its intended recipient, and she

couldn't bear to lie. This was meant to be her gig for the whole summer, she couldn't get fired on the first day!

Parking her bike and perching on the front steps between the overgrown pots, Yumna pulled the rubber band off the newspaper and unfurled it. Flicking through the stories, an ache bloomed across her chest. Gosh, there was so much happening in the world! Detectives catching thieves, children winning chess competitions, ancient treasure being discovered, murders being solved. It was all so exciting, and all so far away. Nothing happened in this village, in this tiny, boring corner of the world. Silverbrook was an invisible place, and she was an invisible person in it.

Yumna wanted more. She wanted to be in the thick of it, following clues like Sherlock Holmes or Nancy Drew, discovering hidden secrets and unravelling knotty mysteries nobody else could figure out. Yumna knew she could do it: she was curious and observant, she could sneak into places and she always guessed whodunnit before the end of a detective novel. But how on earth was she meant to become a detective from Silverbrook? The only real mystery in this village was why they were living here in the first place.

Yumna was folding the paper back up when an advert caught her eye. On the back page, tucked in between two screaming adverts for second-hand cars and farming

equipment was a short paragraph. She almost missed it, but it had a magic word in the headline.

FANCY YOURSELF A SLEUTH?

'Yes, yes I do!' Her nose grazed the ink as she read aloud.

Private detective agency looking to recruit young candidates for training. Must be clever, curious and cunning. Send in CV with a cover letter describing a time you solved a mystery in your local area.

There was an email address at the bottom: sleuthmenow@pm.me.

Yumna gasped. This was her chance! Committing the details to memory, she folded the paper back up and left it propped against the door before scrambling to her feet. Being a detective in training was a way better summer job than the newspaper round. Imagine what she could learn, all the tips and tricks of the trade she would be taught. Yumna tried to guess the character of the lead detective based on the tone of the advert. Was it the voice of the sharp but unassuming Ms Marple, or the bolshy and brusque Hercule Poirot? The email address seemed very modern; maybe it was a younger detective, opening up their own agency and hoping to battle it out with the old guard.

Yumna amused herself with these fantasies as she rode

home, letting out a squeal of glee as her wheels picked up speed and the bike raced downhill, gravity doing all the work. She even tried taking her hands off the handlebars for a brief moment, but the thud of the front wheel tripping over a pothole threatened to send her careening over the basket. YIKES! She clamped her hands back down and squeezed the brakes gently to slow her descent. She couldn't slow her heart down, though. It was all too exciting!

It was only once she'd entered the dim kitchen and picked up the note her father left (*'Gone to work, lunch is in the fridge.'*) that Yumna realised the flaw in her plan.

She had never solved a mystery before.

'Ya Allah . . .' Yumna slumped on a kitchen stool, jutting her bottom lip out in a pout. She had tried last summer, but that had only ended in embarrassment. This time would be different, she was sure. There had to be *something* to discover in quiet, boring Silverbrook!

'Oi oi!'

A loud knock on the front door, and the voice of a not-quite angel. Nafisa had arrived. 'Hey, Yumna! You coming, or what?'

Yumna sighed. Nafisa was one of her best friends, and also her cousin, since their mums were sisters. The youngest of three daughters, Nafisa was full of 'little sister' energy.

Despite her two older siblings moving away for university, her sense of entitlement had not changed one bit.

'We're going to be late!'

Not bothering to change clothes – she wore black all the time anyway – Yumna grabbed her backpack from its spot in her orderly bedroom, checked she had all her essential items (wallet, phone, earbuds, notepad and pencil, binoculars, magnifying glass) and headed out, locking the door behind her.

'You're quiet this morning,' Nafisa said, as they settled in behind the counter at the local bookshop. The cramped hole-in-the-wall had been there for decades, oozing cosy village charm. With ceilings low enough that some visitors had to hunch, shelves threatening to fall over at any moment and piles of books in every corner, Yumna sometimes thought it looked more like a hoarder's house than a place of business.

There was no rhyme or reason to the space, no organisational system behind the chaos. Customers were encouraged to lose themselves in literature, browse and discover something new. Nafisa's family had been given this place when they bought the grocery shop and pharmacy across the road, and it soon became clear it was more village novelty than serious money maker.

Nafisa, like all her siblings, had been sent to watch the till as soon as she could count. Once her father's job started taking him away from home for days at a time, Yumna joined her cousin at Silverbrook Books. She spent more time reading than she did selling, but nobody seemed to mind.

Yumna shrugged at Nafisa's comment, and her cousin clicked her tongue. 'Don't be like that. I can't read your mind.'

Yumna didn't know what to say. How could she explain that the perfect opportunity for a life of solving mysteries had revealed itself, but she had no idea how to grab it? Nafisa wasn't like Yumna, had never been unsure of who she was. Nafisa was loud and tall, and everyone listened to her. It helped that her family was wealthy; they lived a few doors down from the large bush shaped like a peacock, on the rich side of Eastbourne Lane. She would never understand.

But then again, Nafisa's family had always been good to them. Yumna's father often talked about how grateful he was to his sister-in-law for taking them in when they'd first moved. 'I wouldn't have been able to do it without them,' he would tell Yumna. 'They were so generous, mashallah. Especially with everything that happened with your mum.'

Yumna still did not know where, exactly, her mother had gone. She avoided dwelling on the topic; any thought of her mother felt like touching a raw, throbbing wound.

Nafisa, losing patience with her cousin's silence, began scrolling on her phone. Yumna sighed. She probably would sound ridiculous to her cousin, but she might as well try.

'I wish there was more going on in this town, it's so boring! There are no mysteries!'

Nafisa looked up, chuckling darkly. 'Oh, little cousin. This village is full of secrets.' She cleared her throat and glanced left and right. There was nobody in the bookshop apart from them, but Yumna thought she saw a flash of fear dash across Nafisa's face, before being replaced by a sly grin. *This was unexpected*.

'Haven't you heard about the mysterious figure in the fields last month?'

Yumna's eyes widened, and she shook her head.

'This is why you need to start talking to more people, little cuz.'

Yumna ignored her cousin's jab, focusing on the important information. 'What did the figure look like? What was it doing?'

Nafisa leaned in, her voice dropping to a whisper.

'Apparently, it looked like a monster, huge, with black shiny skin and gleaming eyes. They say it's searching for something. And as of last night,' Nafisa bored her eyes into Yumna's, 'it's back.'