

Copyrighted Material



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.

Copyrighted Material

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

Copyrighted Material

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

Copyrighted Material

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

Copyrighted Material

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.

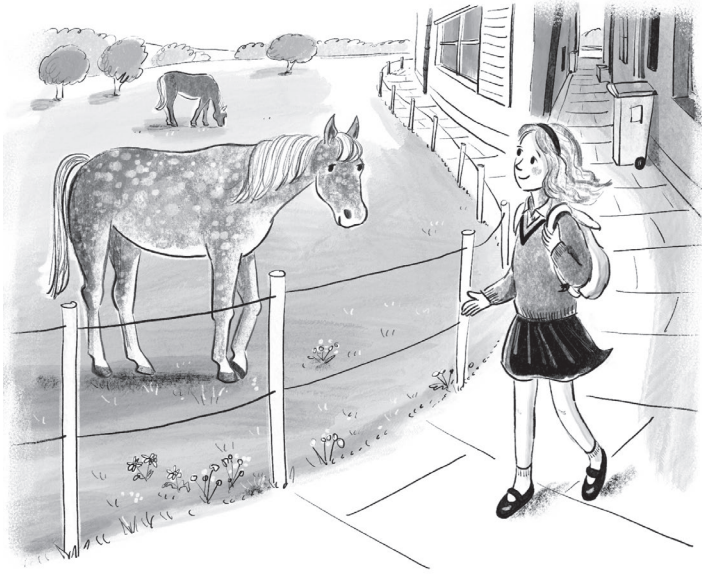
Copyrighted Material

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

Copyrighted Material



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.

Copyrighted Material

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,

Copyrighted Material

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

Copyrighted Material

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

Copyrighted Material

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.

Copyrighted Material

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

Copyrighted Material

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

Copyrighted Material

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.

Copyrighted Material

They let kids go and help out there.

They let kids go and work there and be with the horses and groom the horses and tack up the horses and look after the horses and ohmygoodness I–

I can't even –!

THE DAPPLE-GREY MARE IS CALLED LUNA AND MAYBE I COULD LOOK AFTER HER!

Hope clutches at my heart. Maybe . . . maybe if I do an amazing job working there, and I go every day and I work really hard, maybe . . . they might let me ride Luna sometimes.

I am so late for registration that I get detention for the next day, but I don't care.

All I've ever wanted to do is ride horses, and now . . . now it might actually happen!



Chapter 2

I spend the rest of the afternoon in a daze, my thoughts a whirl. I desperately want to know more, but I don't know how to start. I keep an eye out for Jessie but I don't see her again; she's not in any of my lessons.

After school, I practically run to the field and shout, 'Luna! Luna!' She hears me and comes trotting over, though I can't tell if she recognizes

Copyrighted Material

her name or if she'd have come over anyway. I've been calling her Pebbles for weeks, so maybe she answers to anything. I rub her nose and breathe in her soft, warm smell and say, 'I can't believe I know your real name! I've met someone who knows you, Luna. Do you know Jessie?' I tell her about my meeting with Jessie and what she said about coming to work at the stables. Luna munches grass and I'm sure she's listening. 'I wonder where it is exactly,' I say to her. 'Starlight Stables. It sounds very grand.'

Then I realize I could easily find out! I call a hasty goodbye to Luna, race home, jump on to my bed and pull out my laptop to search for Starlight Stables. While it boots up, I get out of my uniform and into comfy leggings and a fleece.

There it is: a whole website with pages of photos of the horses and ponies – including Luna! There's a photo of two women on the welcome page, along with their names – Jodie and Sooz, just as Jessie said. They own and run the stables. Imagine owning a *whole* stable yard! I read every paragraph on every webpage, which takes me a while because I've got

Copyrighted Material

dyslexia and my brain finds it hard to read what's actually there. I often read words wrong so the sentence doesn't make sense, and my eyes skip ahead to the second line without reading the first.

At school, I mostly pretend I can read better than I actually can. You can get away with a lot by listening closely to other people and guessing. But at home, I want to be able to read everything correctly, so it takes me a long time.

There's a map too, showing the location of Starlight Stables. I look at it carefully. That's . . . not too far. It's in the opposite direction to school, and down a couple of small roads, which is why I'd never known it was there before. I only know certain parts of this area. When Dad and I moved in, we didn't really do much exploring beyond finding out where the shops and the bus stop were.

I glance at the time on my laptop. It's 4.30 p.m. Dad won't be back until 6.30 p.m. at the earliest. That's two hours. The computer map says the walk would take me twenty-five minutes. I could . . . I could walk to Starlight Stables now.

Copyrighted Material

I could go to the stables right now.

I'm so excited by this idea I can barely breathe. My whole body tingles. Can I? Am I allowed? Would Dad be OK with me going?

I pull out my phone to message him although I'm not sure there's much point. When he's working on the ward, he can't use his phone. Still, I guess I *ought* to let him know . . . he's got an app that tells him where I am so, if he looked at it, he'd see I wasn't at home and he might be worried.

I message him quickly:

Summer

Going for a walk. Will be careful crossing roads!!! Love you xxx

I refill my school water bottle and take a bag of crisps from the cupboard. They're cheap own-brand ones and I don't like them much but I should probably take a snack. I grab an apple as an afterthought. Then I brush my hair really well and tie it back neatly. It's very important to have tied-back hair when you're working around horses; you

Copyrighted Material

need to make sure you have full vision and nothing can get in your eyes. I put the water bottle, apple and crisps in a small rucksack, grab my waterproof jacket just in case, and go out of the door, my heart thumping.

It takes me three tries to get the key in the lock because my hands are trembling, but at last the door is locked and I go downstairs, out of the main front door and on to the pavement. My phone is in my hand and I glance at the map telling me which way to go.

I can't believe I'm doing this. I've never been anywhere on my own apart from school and the shops. I feel grown-up and terrified at the same time. I have no idea what I'll do when I eventually get to Starlight Stables. I can't imagine they let people simply walk in. But even if I can see the horses for a *minute*, that would be *something*.

I take two wrong turns. Following a map is harder than I thought, even though the app keeps beeping to tell me where to go. If I were following a real map, I'd have been lost within five minutes. I feel my

Copyrighted Material

breath catch in my chest as I turn off down a small side road. A wooden signpost says: **Starlight Stables**.

The hedges on either side are tall and overgrown. Birds chirrup invisibly in the branches. It's hard to believe that only ten minutes ago, I was surrounded by buildings. This feels like the proper countryside.

A car comes the other way and I step up on to the grass verge, turning my ankle on the rough ground. *Ouch*. That's all I need! When the car has passed I step down again and gingerly test my foot. It's not too bad, just a bit of a twinge. I see the car turn out of the road. It was a big car, a four-wheel drive. I don't know much about cars but it looked expensive.

For a moment, I stand in the road, hesitant. The kinds of people who have horses are also the kinds of people who have expensive cars. I'm not that kind of people. What on earth am I doing here?

But it's taken me thirty-five minutes to walk here, so I might as well walk the rest of the way. The app says it's only three more minutes.

So I walk for three more minutes. And there it is: the entrance to the stables. A big shiny sign saying

Copyrighted Material

‘Starlight Stables’ in curly navy writing on a cream background with a silhouette of a horse. And opening out in front of me, up a short driveway, fields and buildings . . . and *horses*. The hedges give way to fences, and I see horses grazing: some with rugs, some without, some with flashes or blazes, some with socks, some tall, and some smaller ponies. And one teeny Shetland pony that makes me say ‘Awww!’ out loud before I realize it.

A car comes up behind me and gives a single hoot to warn me to get out of the way. As it passes, a head sticks out of the passenger window and shouts, ‘Hey! It’s you again!’

It’s Jessie! Jessie, waving frantically from the car and beaming widely. I feel my mouth curve into a smile in response, and my hand automatically lifts to wave back.

‘Stop, stop, Mum!’ Jessie’s car stops with a lurch and she tumbles out of the front seat, tidy and impressive in jodhpurs and riding boots. ‘It’s you!’ she repeats happily.

‘It’s me,’ I reply somewhat lamely.

Copyrighted Material

‘Did you ... did you *walk* here?’ She swings around, looking for a car.

‘Er ... yeah.’

‘On your own?’

‘Yes.’

‘That’s so cool. Wish my parents would let me go places on my own.’

I don’t explain that Dad is still at work and doesn’t even know I’m here.

She smiles. ‘Come with me, I’ll show you *everything*.’ She takes my arm and walks me past the sign and up the driveway. To our right is a large car-parking area, and Jessie’s mum is already parking up and getting out to join us. She’s a tiny woman with short black glossy hair and a smile like Jessie’s. She’s dressed for the stables too.

‘Hello, who’s this?’

‘Oh, this is a friend from school,’ says Jessie easily, and I blink, because it’s been forever since someone called me their friend, and how can she say that already? She doesn’t even know my name! ‘This is Summer. Summer, this is my mum.’

Copyrighted Material