



CHAPTER ONE

The beach was beautiful, with pristine sand, and the sun glimmered on the water. There was a fresh breeze and Amy was glad she'd worn her padded jacket. She pulled her long blonde hair back into a ponytail, and found herself a good spot to sit down and do some sketching while she waited for Mum to join her.

She'd been coming to the beach every day since they had arrived at White Horse Bay, a week ago. She was getting to like the small Cornish fishing village. She loved exploring

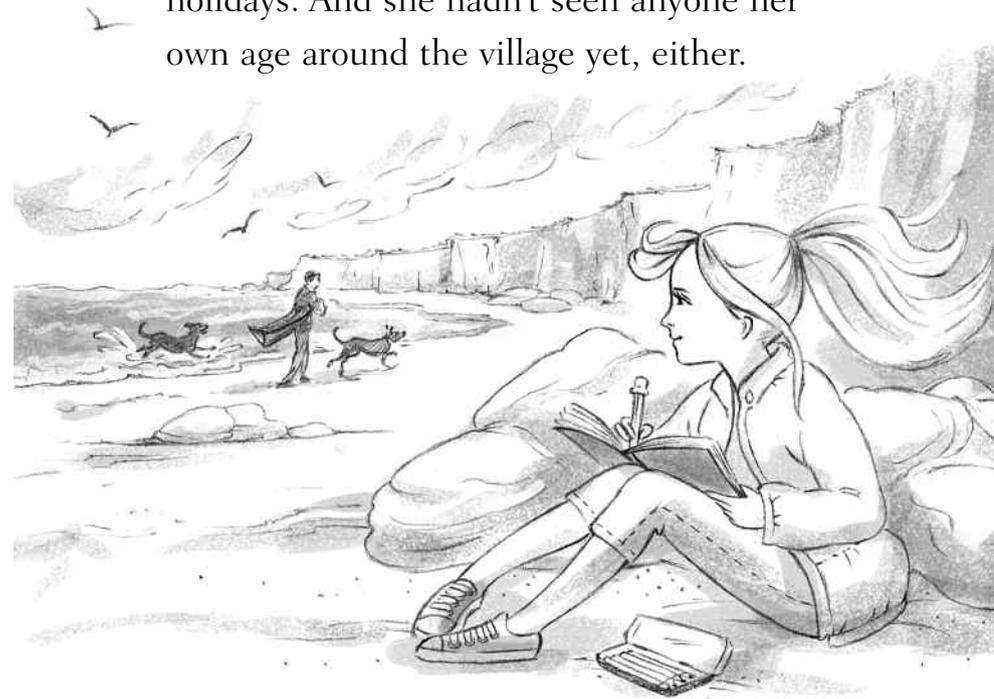
its narrow, winding streets or sitting with Mum on the harbour wall, eating ice creams and watching the little boats come and go.

It still felt like they were on holiday, though – she couldn't imagine the B&B Mum had bought actually being her home. Especially not once the builders had finished, and there were guests coming and going all the time. To Amy, home was London. Home was traffic and bustle and museums and shops. And Dino's Italian restaurant, of course.

She and Dad would often head over there when he got in from work. Even though her parents had split up years before, Dad had always lived round the corner. Amy had her own room in his flat and she used to spend almost half her time there. Now she'd only be staying with him one weekend a month. He'd promised to visit her whenever he could, but still, they'd

have far less time together. That would take some getting used to.

"I live in White Horse Bay," Amy said aloud to herself. But it still didn't seem real. She couldn't stop thinking about Lucy and Aisha, her best friends from school – well, her old school. She'd still be able to meet up with them when she visited Dad, but it wouldn't be the same. She wasn't starting at her new school, where she'd be a weekly boarder, until after the Easter holidays. And she hadn't seen anyone her own age around the village yet, either.



But Amy didn't mind – not that much, anyway. She was having her first riding lesson that afternoon. Just thinking about it made her stomach flip with excitement. Amy loved animals and she'd been into ponies for as long as she could remember. She had loads of books about them and read *Pony* magazine, but she'd never actually got the chance to ride. She was always so busy in London, with after-school clubs, sleepovers and cinema trips with her friends. Then there were visits to art galleries with Dad, and shopping with Mum, of course.

When her mum announced the big move, it had come as a complete shock to Amy, and she hadn't wanted to leave. The riding lessons were the only good thing she could see about leaving behind everyone and everything she knew. Mum had suggested them – it was her way of trying to cheer Amy up. Amy wondered what the instructor

would be like (not too strict, she hoped!) and what kind of pony she'd get to ride. She couldn't help smiling to herself as she checked her watch. Today, in precisely two hours and forty-two minutes, she was going to be riding for the very first time.

Amy found a clean page in her sketchbook and took a pencil from her pencil box. It had been a gift from Dad just before she'd left London. They'd had the longest hug, and she knew he'd miss her just as much as she'd miss him.

There weren't too many tourists around, not this early in the season, so the beach was the perfect place for sketching dogs. She began to draw one of the Labs that was bouncing around in the sea, when...

DOOOOOOF!

Suddenly, there was a big wet nose in her face and huge paws on her jeans, and she was knocked backwards into the sand.

Her pencils scattered in all directions and her sketchbook went flying.

“Oh, hello, boy!” she cried, pulling herself up. “Where did you come from?” The big shaggy brown dog looked like a cross between a retriever and something scruffier. She ruffled his fur, and he panted happily and tried to lick her face.

“Rufus! Come here!” A girl came hurrying over, wearing denim cut-offs and a checked shirt despite the cold wind. Her brown wavy hair was blowing all over the place.



The girl grinned at Amy. “Sorry! He *has* been to training, but none of it sank in!”

“I don’t mind,” Amy insisted, rubbing the dog’s ears. She was happy to be talking to someone her own age at last. “He’s gorgeous! I’d love a dog.”

“You should get one, then,” said the girl, as if it was that simple.

Amy frowned. “I’m working on my mum. But it’s not going to be easy! She’s not exactly an animal person. I’m Amy, by the way.”

The girl grinned at her again. “I’m Leah. And this dufus ... is Rufus!”

Amy gave Rufus another big pat, and he lay down on the sand and rolled on to his back so she could stroke his tummy.

“What kind of dog would you like?” Leah asked.

Amy didn’t hesitate. “Well, it would have to be energetic enough to take for long walks, but small enough to curl up with on

the sofa,” she said. “Maybe a Jack Russell, or a clever mongrel with bags of personality – a rescued one so I could give it a lovely new home...”

“Rufus is a rescue dog,” said Leah proudly. “I haven’t seen you before. Are you on holiday?”

“We’ve just moved down from London,” Amy explained. “My mum’s opening a B&B.”

“Oh, right,” said Leah. “It must seem a bit boring round here, then!”

Amy smiled. “Not really, just different.”

She leaned over to pick up her scattered pencils.

Leah knelt down to help, and peered at her sketchbook. “Wow! These are really good!”

Amy blushed and mumbled, “Thanks.”



Then Rufus leaped up, and began barking and bouncing about. “Gotta go,” said Leah. “I promised Ru we’d go right round the bay to climb on the rocks!”

“Oh, OK. Bye,” said Amy. “Hey, I wonder—” she began, but Leah and Rufus were already bounding off towards the cliffs. She’d wanted to ask whether Leah fancied meeting up some time, and now she’d missed her chance. Still, maybe she’d see her around.

She picked up her sketchbook again. The Labs were far away down the beach now. There was an old St Bernard loping along next to his owner, but she’d drawn him before, so instead she started on a plucky little terrier chasing a ball.

“Amy! Amy!”

Amy turned to see Mum stumbling across the sand in her high heels, carrying a picnic basket. She smiled and waved.

ANIMAL SOS.

It looked like Mum still needed to adjust to life by the sea, too – starting with buying some sensible shoes!



After their picnic, Mum drove Amy to her riding lesson. Amy's stomach flipped again when she saw the sign for White Horse Stables. By the time they pulled into the ramshackle farmyard, she was so excited she couldn't stop grinning. There were a few ponies grazing in the field beside the car park, and she wondered whether one of them would be hers. As they made their way over to the yard, a tall, tousle-haired man strode up to greet them.

“Hi, you must be Amy!” he said cheerily.

“Yes, and this is my mum,” she said.

The man gave them a warm smile.

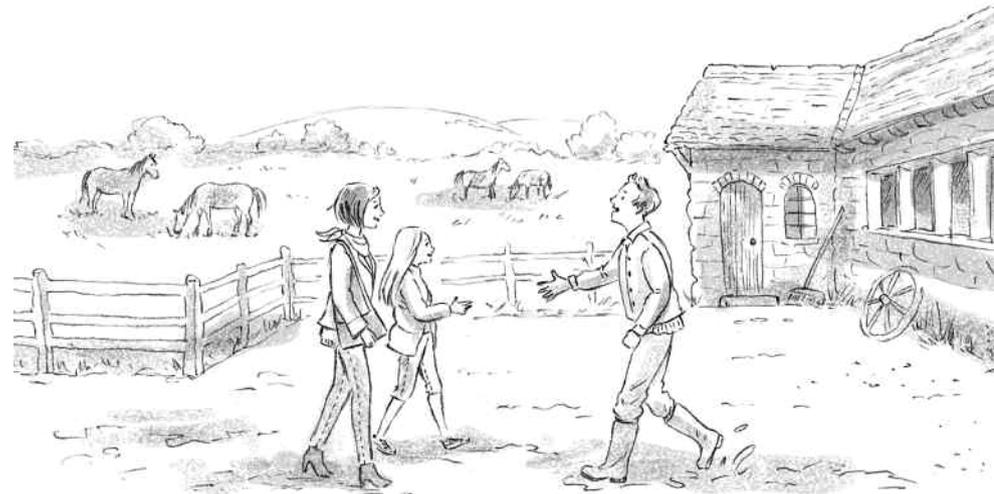
“I'm Dan. My wife, Rosie, and I run this place. I mainly manage the yard, but I do

ANIMAL SOS.

a bit of instructing and take visitors out on hacks, too. So, feeling excited, Amy?”

Amy nodded. “Yes, very! I've never ridden before, though, so I haven't got a hat or the right boots or anything...”

Dan grinned at her and gestured to a low building in the corner of the yard. “Not to worry, we've got plenty of spares in the yard office. You head on in there and get yourself kitted out. Rosie is expecting you. She'll be teaching you today on Nutmeg. Have a great time.” He turned to Mum. “Feel free to stay and watch.”



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“Thanks,” they both said. Then he smiled and strolled away.

Mum gave Amy a hug. “Good luck. I know you’ll be brilliant. I’ll go and stand by the fence. Unless me watching is going to make you too nervous, of course.”

“No, it would be nice to have you there,” Amy insisted. She suddenly felt a pang of nerves. “You can come and pick me up when I get thrown off,” she added.

“You’ll be fine, sweetheart,” Mum reassured her.

“I hope so!” said Amy. “Right, let’s go for it.” She headed over to the yard office, but as she reached the doorway she stopped still. There was some kind of argument going on. Then, with a start, she realized that the row was about her.

“But, Mum, why does she have to ride Nutmeg?” a girl moaned. “I was planning to take him out for a hack this afternoon!”



“You know why,” said a woman. Amy thought that it must be Rosie. “He’s nice and steady—”

“So’s Gracie,” the girl protested.

Rosie sighed. “Gracie’s had two lessons already today, and with the group hack later on, it’ll be too much for her.”

She looked up sharply, catching sight of Amy. “Oh, hello! It’s Amy, isn’t it?” she asked, smiling. “Welcome to White Horse Stables.”

The girl with her turned round, and Amy gasped. It was Leah! So Rosie and Dan were her parents. This was her home.

“Hi!” Amy said brightly. But to her surprise, Leah just muttered something about finishing the mucking out, then marched past her and stormed off across the yard.

“Don’t worry about her,” said Rosie. “She just got out of the wrong side of bed this morning. Let’s find you some gear.”



Amy felt excited and nervous all at once when Rosie’s teenage son, George, led Nutmeg out for her. He was a gorgeous chestnut pony with a thick, unruly mane and clumpy feet. He hadn’t seemed that big, but once Amy was in the saddle she felt very high up. Rosie showed her how to hold the reins and helped her to adjust her stirrups, and then they were off.

“Oh!” she gasped, as Nutmeg started walking towards the manège, with George

keeping hold of the lead rein. It was a really strange feeling and with every step she felt like she was going to slide off.

“Keep looking forward, and concentrate on sitting up tall and keeping your heels down,” said Rosie. “That will help you to balance. And you can hold on to the front of the saddle, too, if you feel really unsteady.”

Amy nodded and tried hard to remember everything. After a few minutes in the saddle, she was getting used to the way Nutmeg moved. She’d even stopped glancing down at the ground all the time.

“Now, let’s think about going forward to halt,” Rosie called. “Shorten your reins a fraction, and then sit up tall and give a gentle pull.” As Nutmeg came to a stop she said, “That’s it. Well done.”

“I can’t believe I made him halt!” cried Amy in delight.

After a few more tries at going from walk

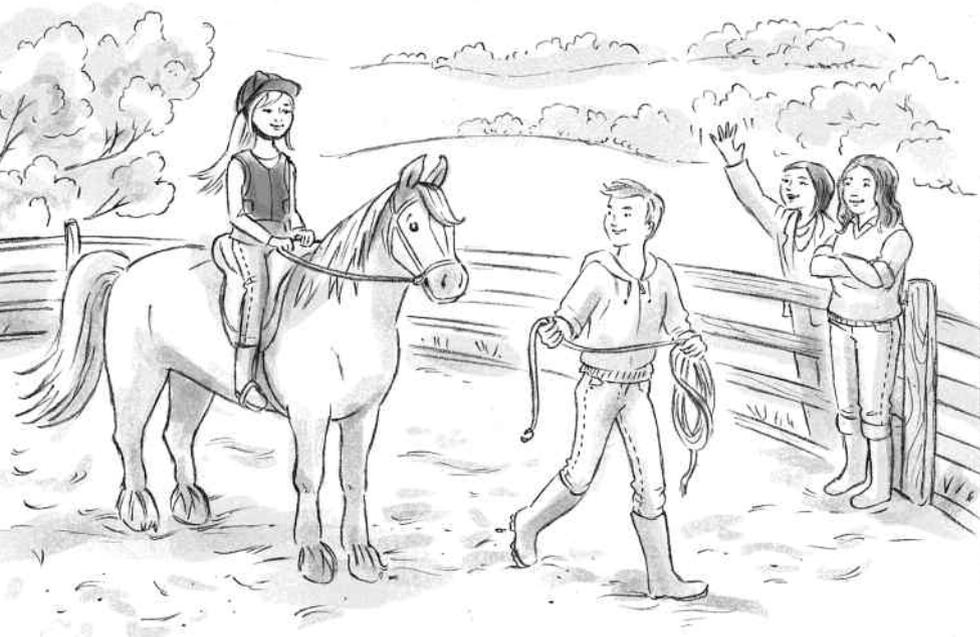
to halt and back to walk, Rosie called, “I think you could have a go at trot, if you’d like to.”

“Yes, please!” said Amy.

When Nutmeg started trotting, Amy really did think she was going to fall off! But then Rosie showed her how to sit deeply into the saddle so that she didn’t bounce around so much, and soon she got into a rhythm and felt much more stable.

“Right, time to come off the lead rein, I think,” Rosie said then, and Amy beamed.

“Well done, darling!” Mum called out.



“Thanks! That was amazing!” Amy cried, as Rosie showed her how to dismount at the end of the lesson. After taking Nutmeg round the manège all by herself several times, she felt like a real rider! She made a big fuss of him, ruffling his mane and stroking his nose.

Rosie grinned. “You’re a natural – your balance is excellent,” she told her.

Amy couldn’t help smiling. “Maybe it’s because I used to do gymnastics at my old school,” she said.

“Yes, that would definitely help,” said Rosie, “but you’ve got a lovely way with ponies, too. Nutmeg felt as easy with you as you did with him.”

Amy gave the gorgeous pony a final pat and stroke, and as Rosie led him away to the stables, Mum rushed over and hugged her.

“Did you enjoy yourself?” she asked.

Amy grinned. “It was great,” she said. “I definitely want to come back again. How about tomorrow?”

“I’ll see if they’ve got a space free next week,” Mum told her. “Until the B&B is up and running we’re on a bit of a tight budget, I’m afraid. It’s brilliant that you liked it, though. Oh, and I noticed a girl walking across the yard earlier. She looked about your age. Did you see her?”

Amy frowned, thinking of Leah. “Yes, she’s Rosie and Dan’s daughter,” she muttered.

Mum smiled. “So she lives here. Even better, then! Maybe you could invite her over? I know you’ll make new friends when school starts, but it would be nice to know someone locally, wouldn’t it?”

“Hmm.” Amy pretended to be very interested in undoing her riding hat. She

had hoped to get to know Leah after they’d met on the beach. But now, having seen how moody she’d been over Nutmeg, she wasn’t so keen to make friends.



“Leah, you know it wasn’t Amy’s fault she had to ride Nutmeg,” said Rosie. Amy and her mum had just left, and Rosie was leaning on Nutmeg’s stable door as Leah untacked him.

“I know,” Leah said. “I just really wanted to take him on a long ride this afternoon. I hardly ever get the chance—”

“We have to put the clients first, you know that,” Rosie cut in. “You can’t just pick and choose when you ride.”

Leah undid Nutmeg’s girth and put it carefully up on top of the saddle. “It wasn’t anything against her,” she mumbled.

“Well, when she comes next time I’d like

you to apologize,” Rosie said sternly. “Amy loved her lesson, she was great with Nutmeg and she tried really hard, too. I don’t want her to feel she isn’t welcome here. OK?”

“OK,” Leah muttered. “Sorry, Mum.”

“Good,” said Rosie. “There’s some chocolate cake in the kitchen,” she added, softening. “You might want to get in and have some before your brothers spot it.”

“Thanks, Mum,” Leah called, as Rosie strode away.

Leah pulled off Nutmeg’s saddle and hung it over the stable door. Nutmeg whinnied and gave her a stern look, almost as stern as Rosie’s.

“I know,” she told him, wincing. “I shouldn’t have taken it out on Amy. She seems really nice and, oh...” She sighed deeply, thinking of what a rotten welcome to White Horse Stables she’d given her. “I’ve been awful, haven’t I?”

Nutmeg nudged her sleeve softly. That meant yes, Leah decided.

“I’ll make sure I’m extra friendly to Amy at her next lesson,” she resolved. “Come on, I’ll get you turned out and then grab some of that cake before making up the teatime feeds.”

