



## CHAPTER ONE

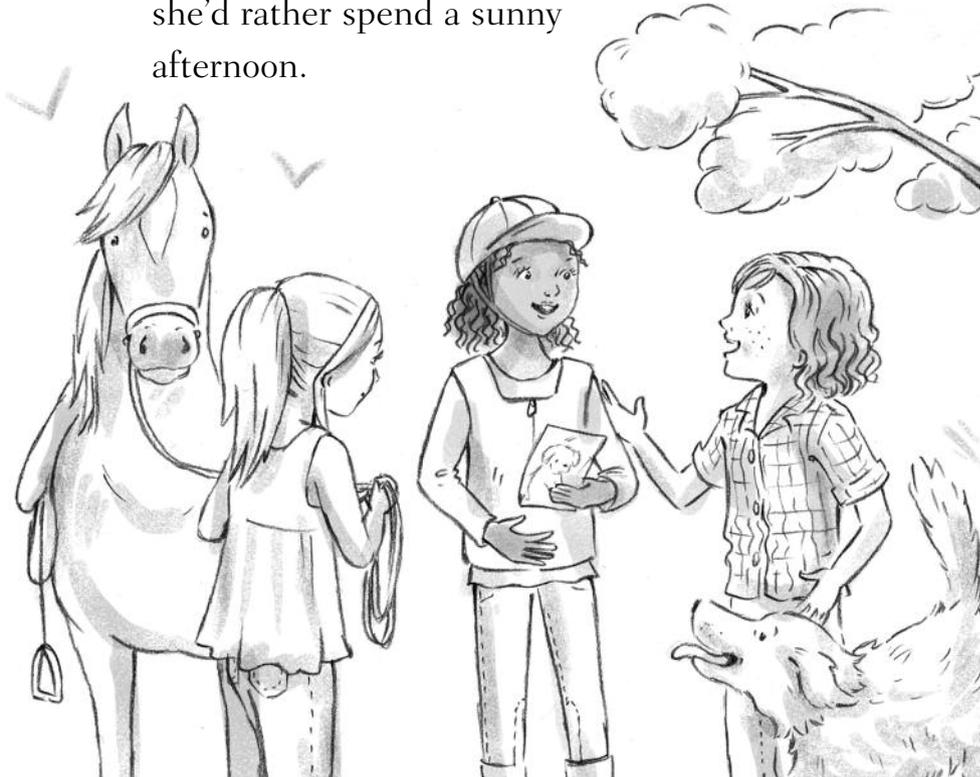
“Oh, he’s gorgeous!” Amy cried, gazing at Carrie’s photo of the cute Labrador puppy.

“He makes Rufus look huge!” Leah exclaimed, as her big shaggy dog bounced around beside them.

“He’s called Oscar,” Carrie told them. “I’ve only had him a week.”

Amy and Leah were in the yard at White Horse Stables. Carrie had just started riding there and she and the rest of her group were back from their lesson, so the girls were helping them all to dismount and

untack. Amy and Leah often gave Jane the stable girl a hand with the chores and getting the ponies ready to ride. There were all the usual Saturday lessons going on, as well as a group of tourists arriving for a hack out with Dan, Leah's dad, and George, her older brother, as they did every day in the summer holidays. The yard was busy, buzzing with people and ponies, and Amy couldn't think of anywhere she'd rather spend a sunny afternoon.



Amy held on to Carrie's pony's bridle while she ran up her stirrups. "Why don't you come round and see Oscar sometime?" Carrie suggested.

"Really?" said Amy. "Oh, I'd love to!"

"Yeah, of course," said Carrie, "and you, too, Leah."

Leah smiled. "That would be nice. If I can ever get away from this place."

"Oh, here's Mum now," said Carrie, waving towards a blue sports car that had just pulled into the car park. "I'll go and check if it's OK."

A few minutes later, she hurried back and invited Amy and Leah to come round at two o'clock the next day.

"Great!" cried Amy. "See you then!" She waved to Carrie and the other girls as they made their way over to the car park. Then she turned to Leah, expecting her to look just as excited, but Leah was frowning.

“Surely if we explain to your mum about Oscar, she’ll give you a couple of hours off,” Amy said.

“No, it’s not that,” Leah replied. “It’s just, I thought he looked a bit small to be away from his mother. Still, it’s hard to tell from a picture.”

“Maybe he was the runt of the litter,” Amy suggested.

Leah shrugged. “Yeah, probably.”

Just then, Jane came up, clipboard in hand. “Hi, girls. How did you get on with my list?” she asked them.

“We tacked up Barney and Petal, and Prince is just in from a lesson, so we’ve given him a drink and loosened his girth while he’s waiting,” Leah reported.

“And Bella and Guinevere are in from the field and brushed down, but we haven’t got their tack on yet,” Amy added. “I think that was all of them, wasn’t it?”

Jane smiled. “I’m impressed. You’d make a great stable girl, Amy,” she said.

Amy couldn’t help grinning. It wasn’t so long ago – just in the Easter holidays, in fact – that she’d had her first riding lesson. Now she felt totally at home on the yard, and pretty confident handling the ponies. Rosie said her riding was really coming on, too – she could canter now, and she was hoping to have a go at jumping soon as well.

They all looked round as a minibus pulled into the car park. “Oh, here are the tourists,” said Leah. “Come on, Amy – if we’re quick we can finish getting Bella and Guinny ready while Mum’s sorting the riders out with hats and boots.”

“Thanks, girls,” said Jane. Then she glanced at her watch. “And don’t forget your own lesson, Amy. It’s nearly half two now. As soon as we get this group mounted up and away, Leah’s mum will be ready for you.”

“Wow, time flies when you’re having fun!” cried Amy with a grin.

“When you’re run off your feet, you mean!” grumbled Leah, but she was smiling, too.

Amy and Leah finished getting the tourists’ horses and ponies ready. Then they headed over to the tack room to grab a lead rope for Gracie, the lovely sweet-natured grey pony that Amy always rode. Amy couldn’t wait to go and get her in from the field. They’d been far too busy all day to even go up and say hello to her, or to Leah’s pony, Nutmeg. Just as they were crossing the yard Leah’s mum, Rosie, came out of the office.

“Hey, Mum, is it all right if I ride Nutmeg in the second manège while Amy has her lesson?” Leah asked. “I’m not going to see him all day otherwise.”

Rosie frowned. “Usually you could, but I’ve already told Billy he can lunge Spark in

there while the yard’s quiet.”

“Oh, OK,” said Leah. Amy could see how disappointed she was and she had a sudden thought. “Could Leah ride in with me?” she asked. “I loved riding with her and Billy when we were working with Spark.”

Leah grinned at her. “Yeah, could I?” she asked Rosie. “It would do Nutmeg good to have a lesson – go over the basics.”

“Yes, all right,” said Rosie, “so long as you two promise not to distract each other!”

“As if we would!” giggled Leah.

The girls went and grabbed two lead ropes before hurrying off to get Nutmeg and Gracie in from the field. On the way they met Billy coming down the track with Spark. Billy hadn’t been coming to the yard long, but already he felt like part of the furniture. The sleek black pony walked calmly by his side, with the lead rope slack between them. It was hard to imagine that

## ANIMAL S.O.S.

Spark had been that distressed, bewildered animal they'd found running loose on the road only a couple of weeks ago – the same one they'd helped Billy to bring to White Horse Stables, and launched an Animal S.O.S. mission to help keep him! Thinking about it made Amy wonder if she and Leah would have any more exciting adventures over the summer.



## ANIMAL S.O.S.

“Hi, Billy!” she said brightly. “How’s it going?” She walked slowly up to Spark and gave him a gentle pat on the neck.

“Yeah, really well, thanks,” said Billy. “He’s so much more relaxed already.”

“That’s great,” said Amy.

“We’ll have to all go out on a hack together again soon,” said Leah. “I’ll ask Mum when she might be free to take us.”

“That’d be good,” said Billy. “Maybe we could ride on the beach this time. I want to keep giving Spark new challenges.”

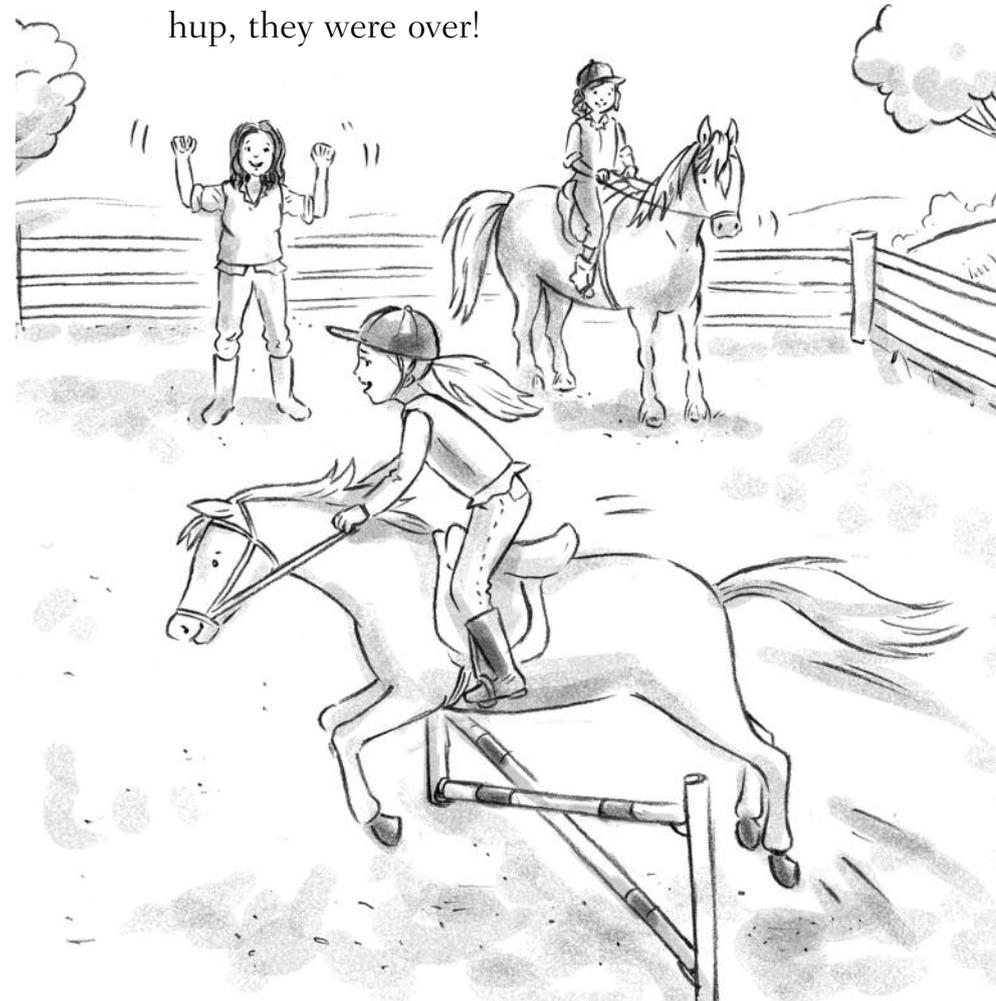
Amy felt a shiver of excitement rush through her. Riding out on the beach with her friends sounded amazing! She found it hard to believe how much her life had changed in the past three months. There was the move down from London with Mum, opening up the B&B (and working hard to help Mum keep it running smoothly), learning to ride, starting at her

new school, and now, in the summer holidays, hanging out at the stables with Leah. Sometimes she felt like she had to pinch herself – it just didn't seem real!

The girls said goodbye to Billy and Spark and hurried up to the field. They got their ponies in, then brushed them down and tacked up as quickly as they could. When they got to the manège, they found that Rosie had laid some trotting poles down on the woodchips. "We're going to have a go at jumping today," she told them, as they walked their ponies round on the track to warm up. Amy felt that shiver of excitement again – jumping!

Rosie explained that they would go over the poles on the ground at first, to help them get their ponies to take nice even strides. When they'd done that, she put up a small cross pole. Leah popped over it as though it wasn't even there, of course, but

when it was Amy's turn, she felt her mouth going dry and heard her heart pounding in her ears. She trotted halfway up the short side of the manège, as Leah had done, then turned Gracie off the track to face the jump. One – two – three strides and then – hup, they were over!



“Wow! That was amazing!” gasped Amy, coming to a halt and leaning forward to give Gracie a pat.

“Well done!” cried Leah, “your first jump!”

Rosie was smiling, too. “Right, let’s have a couple more goes over this, and then I’ll put it up a bit,” she said.

Rosie ended up raising the jump twice, in fact, because she said that Amy was doing so well. Both girls got the giggles when Leah knocked a pole down because she was busy chatting, but a stern look from Rosie soon got them back on track. At the end of the lesson, as they walked their ponies round to cool off, feet swinging out of the stirrups, Leah’s little brother Adam appeared by the fence. “Back in the beginners’ group, are you?” he called to his sister. “That figures!”

“It’s always good to brush up on your skills, idiot!” Leah answered back. Amy

scowled. Even *she* found Adam annoying.

Once the girls had untacked and turned out their ponies, it was time for Amy’s mum to collect her. Leah walked her to the car park and Amy made a big fuss of Rufus before getting in the car.

“See you tomorrow,” she called out of the window. “I can’t wait to see Oscar!”

“Neither can I!” Leah called back. “See you there!”



“Who’s Oscar?” Mum asked Amy later, over pizza and salad back at the B&B. “Not a boy, I hope!”

Amy giggled. “No, he’s a puppy!” she told her. Then she explained about Oscar and Carrie. “Leah and I have been invited to visit him tomorrow,” she finished. “If that’s OK with you, of course. I mean, I’ll be here to help with the guests and chores all morning.”

Mum glanced at her, and smiled. “Of course it’s OK, darling,” she said. “I want you to have a good summer, not just be stuck indoors cooking and cleaning all the time.”

“I don’t mind,” Amy insisted. “I know how hard you’re working to get the business off the ground.” It was great that the B&B was fully booked, but it did mean that most days Mum was on her feet from six in the morning until she went to bed.



“Thanks, love,” said Mum. “As soon as we’ve had this I’m going to set up the breakfast things for the morning, ring a couple of people back about their bookings and then have a bath and go straight to bed. Everyone’s here on holiday relaxing and I’m working harder than I’ve ever done in my life!” But she was smiling as she said it. “It’s worth it, though,” she added. “Our own business, by the sea! I’ve already started to get thank-you cards from some of our first guests – that definitely keeps me going, knowing that people have enjoyed themselves. I feel like I’ve really settled into our new life here,” she said. “I hope you have too, darling. I mean, you seem happy, but I know it’s a long way from your dad...”

“I do miss him,” said Amy, “but we’re going on holiday together for a whole week soon, and I know he has me to stay every

chance he gets. And I love being here in White Horse Bay.”

Mum grinned. “You’re turning into quite a country girl,” she said, pointing out a big mud splat on Amy’s top.

Amy smiled. “It’s great being on the yard with my friends, and Gracie and the other ponies. And Rufus, of course.” Speaking of Leah’s big, shaggy dog made her think about Oscar again. “Oh, Carrie’s so lucky to have a new puppy!” she said, with a sigh.

Mum frowned. “Is that a hint? Amy, you know I’m far too busy and exhausted for a dog, and seriously, think about it, you’re not here in the week during term time and at the weekends you’re often at your dad’s...”

“Calm down, Mum!” Amy cried. “I wasn’t hinting. Well, maybe I was, but I know it’s not practical for us to get one at the moment. Honestly, I do.”

“Good,” said Mum, “so long as that’s clear.”

But as she reached for the last slice of pizza, Amy thought to herself that while she really *did* understand why they couldn’t have a dog, it didn’t stop her desperately wanting one.