



SARAH LEAN grew up in Wells, Somerset but now lives in Dorset with her husband, son and dog. She has worked as a page-planner for a newspaper, a stencil-maker and a gardener, amongst various other things. She gained a first class English degree and became a primary school teacher before returning to complete an MA in Creative and Critical Writing with University of Winchester. *A Horse for Angel* is Sarah's second novel for children.

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SARAH LEAN



A horse
for Angel

Illustrated by Gary Blythe



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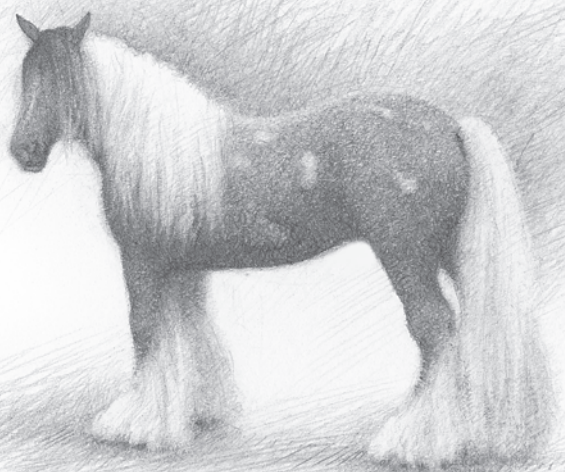


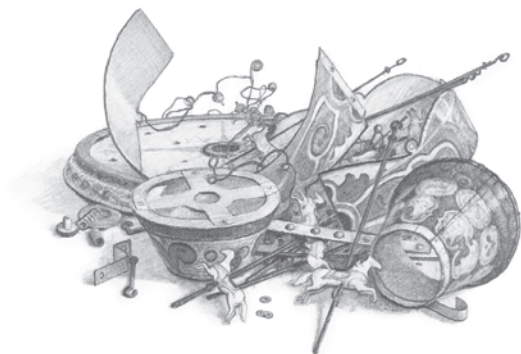
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For Mum





1.

MUM WAS LATE PICKING ME UP FROM DRAMA CLUB again. Which meant another twenty minutes of not wanting to be there. There was just me looking through the window as all the other children left.

Me and this boy called Jamie were extras and scenery painters, doing background colours. Which was just about all right with us, if we had to be there at all. So I thought if anyone was on my side

it would be Jamie. But he wasn't. Especially not when he told Mrs Oliver that I was out the back doing dangerous things with the wiring.



Mrs Oliver blew a fuse and said I should explain myself. I looked at her and took a breath and I was about to speak, but then I didn't know what 'explaining myself' meant. You can't explain yourself. You're just you. Even though what actually

happened wasn't like me at all. I'd never, ever done anything like that before.

The heat in my face made my eyes sting because I was suddenly thinking about what Mum would say.

"Well?" Mrs Oliver folded her arms.

"Well, what happened was this," I said, deciding to tell her the events like a story. "I finished doing the scenery painting, like you said, and Jamie and me had washed the brushes and we were just leaving them to dry and I found those lights... you know – the ones you were looking for? And they were in a bag with other things that needed fixing and the plug was missing and I knew how to join them to another set of lights. So I just did it, but I forgot to ask and... I didn't mean to do it."

"Nell Green, this is so unlike you," she said. "What were you thinking, playing with such dangerous things?"

Which was silly because it wasn't dangerous; the lights weren't even plugged in, so nothing bad was going to happen. And maybe that made me look as if I wasn't sorry enough.

So I said, "Sorry, Mrs Oliver, I won't do it again."

Mainly I was thinking, please don't tell Mum. Which made my face flush and prickle again.

"Who knows what might have happened?" Mrs Oliver said. "What would your mother say?"

Sometimes you wish people could read your mind.

It didn't seem to matter that there was now an extra-long string of lights for the scenery. Mrs Oliver didn't expect an answer though, because she turned on her heels and clopped across the wooden floor.

So there I was with my face pushed against the window, looking as far down the road as I could to watch out for Mum's car, hoping Mrs Oliver wouldn't see Mum arrive. But she did and they discussed the

incident through the car window. Now it was an *incident*, like some great big disaster.

I was belted in my seat, sandwiched between their conversation. Mrs Oliver said what an unusual skill I had, but that I should be discouraged from meddling with electrical things. Surely she meant fixing! Mum agreed instantly and gave me a look that said, *How could you?* Which was what I mostly wanted to avoid. That look.

“Maybe Nell needs more to do,” Mum said. “Something more challenging to keep her occupied, Mrs Oliver. A bigger part in the play perhaps?”

One little thing was now turning into a major drama.

Keep quiet, I told myself. From Monday there’s going to be two weeks of Easter holidays with Nana. Mum will be too busy with work and a conference, so there’ll be no after-school clubs, no appointments,

no waiting. Just me and Nana mooching about her house watching daytime TV, playing cards and computer bingo, safe and quiet. Nana doesn't drive and she won't take the bus because you never know who's sat on the seat before you or where they've been, so she can't take me to rehearsals. Hah! And Mrs Oliver was bound to forget.

Mum drove away, saying, "Do we need to have a talk?"

"No," I said. Because her betrayed face said everything.



2.

WAITING AGAIN. THIS TIME IN THE CAR WHILE Mum rushed into the supermarket on the way home. She didn't leave the keys behind, so I couldn't open the windows or listen to the radio. I could only hear something rumbling outside and my own sighing.

Waiting makes you sigh. And sighing makes a white patch on the window so you can write

HELLO backwards.

An old lady with a trolley stopped to read my message. So I smiled. But she frowned and walked on. So I wiped the window and watched a giant thundering yellow crane instead. It turned slowly in the sky, with a big chunk of concrete swinging on a thin wire below it. I didn't blink for ages. Just watched it sway.

Mum came out of the supermarket, carrier bags in both hands, her big black handbag containing everything-anyone-could-possibly-need (and probably a hundred more things as well) weighing down her shoulder. Her phone was crushed between the strap and her ear.

I watch her face for clues and can usually work things out and guess what she's decided. She has an are-you-listening-carefully face, a don't-question-me-I-know-what-I'm-doing face and a slightly smiley

making-up-for-what's-missing face the rest of the time. And I could tell two things by the way her eyes were fixed on me as she walked and talked. The two things I could tell were this: first, the phone call was about me; and second, I didn't have a choice.

“There's been a change of plan,” Mum said, swinging the shopping bags into the back seat. “You're going to Aunt Liv's for the Easter holidays.”

I wasn't expecting that.

“But I always stay with Nana in the holidays. Why have you changed it? Because I touched those stupid lights?”

Whatever she was about to say, she didn't.

“It has nothing to do with that.”

“Yes, it is. You've changed it because of what happened earlier.”

“That's not it at all. Nana's had to go up to

Leicester on the train to look after her cousin, who's had a fall. Aunty Annabel. You remember her?"

Nope. And if you fold your arms, you don't have to try to remember either.

"The one with the poodle," Mum said, and I could hear her trying hard not to make this about the incident.

I couldn't picture Aunty Annabel, just a trembling, pinkish poodle and a funny smell of ham.

"I thought you said it died."

"Yes, but you know who I mean."

"Why can't somebody else look after her? Why does it have to be Nana?"

Mum continued as if I'd said nothing.

"The decision's been made. When we get home, I want you to go up in the loft. There's a big grey suitcase up there that you're going to need."

I noticed we'd completely left out a whole

middle bit of the conversation where I could say I didn't want to go. Which is always part of Mum's master plan. Cut out the annoying middle bit and get to the point, or the next appointment. Never mind what I want.

"Start packing tonight," she said. "You can do the rest tomorrow when we get back from your maths tutor and before swimming club, then I'll drive you down to Aunt Liv's on Sunday."

I don't like drama club and I don't like the maths tutor either because her house smells of garlic. My swimming teacher says I swim like a cat, like something that doesn't want to be in the water.

My life is a list of mostly boring or pointless activities that I didn't choose, with a car drive and waiting in between. If you practise long enough, you don't have to care that everything has been taken out of your hands. That's what mums are for.

“So how was drama club? Apart from—”

“Fine,” I sighed.

When we got home, we ate cold pasta salad out of supermarket cartons. Mum had her phone glued to her head again and while she was talking she waved a finger towards the loft door in the hallway ceiling at the top of the stairs.