

SILVER BROOK

YUMNA
AND THE
GOLDEN HORSE

Yassmin Abdel-Magied



HODDER CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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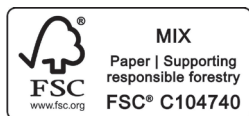
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Oh Allah, please don't let me die!

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.



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?'

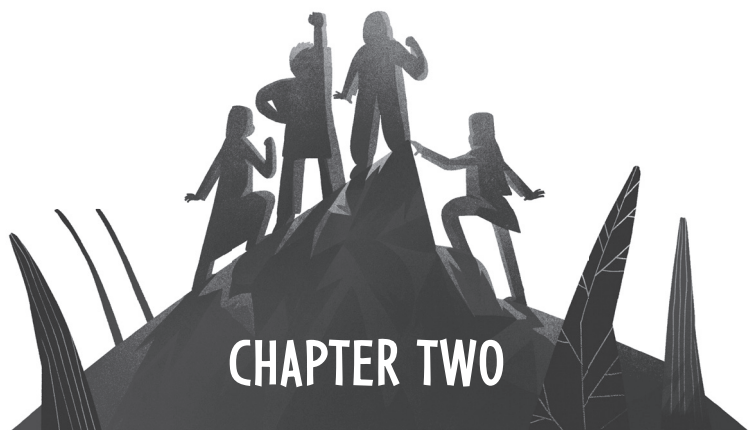
Yumna's eyes widened, and she shook her head.

'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.'



Nafisa's knuckles rang impatiently against the wooden front door. 'Knock knooooock!'

The house was small, like Yumna's, and the front garden was mostly concrete, with a few meagre weeds pushing up through the cracks. One corner of the yard held the remnants of a failed vegetable garden, old branch stubs sticking out of the soil like the bones of a skeleton rising from the dead. A small BMX bike with a missing front wheel lay rusted against the low wall. Yumna wandered around the square, making mental notes as she stepped over discarded toys. Nothing much had changed since the last time she'd visited, but that was only yesterday.

She turned her attention to the sky, clasping her hands behind her back like she assumed a serious detective would, and assessed the gathering clouds.

‘Do you think it will rain before we get to the hall?’

Nafisa rolled her eyes, ignored the question and knocked on the door again.

The sounds of rustling, a couple of loud thuds and some exasperated shouting was audible through the door. Sadeeqa had seven siblings and, as the eldest daughter, she was her mother’s right-hand woman, responsible for maintaining order. Whether much order was ever maintained, though, was a separate question. Yumna hoped it was OK in there. Was that Sadeeqa yelling, or one of her brothers?

‘Sadeeqa, c’mon. We’re going to be late!’

Nafisa’s frustration was spilling over. The ends of her recently straightened hair were curling up, and she was shifting her weight from one foot to the other. Yumna sniffed theatrically. Could she detect the smell of rain in the air? Wasn’t that a thing? She was sure she had read in a book in the shop earlier that camels could sniff out ‘microbes’ that led them to water up to fifty miles away. She was no camel, but . . . Yumna sniffed again. That wasn’t rain, that was—

‘Can you smell that?’ Yumna grimaced. Now that she had detected the scent, she couldn’t get the acrid note out of her nose. ‘Smells like someone died . . .’

Nafisa whirled around. Her lips were pursed in annoyance, but why? Yumna looked closer. There was colour on Nafisa’s

lips that hadn't been there this morning, the glint of eyeshadow on her lids. *Weird*. They were only meant to be going to choir practice, the same local choir they had been a part of for years. There was nothing special about it, not that Yumna knew. But Nafisa seemed to have gotten done up. Who for?

'Oh . . .' Yumna corrected herself. 'Like someone died of *pleasure*, because it smells so good . . . ?' This was why she avoided commenting on what she noticed!

Before Nafisa could retort, the front door jerked open an inch, before snapping shut. Yumna pricked her ears, noticing the sound of a rattling chain and metal sliding against metal. Moments later, Sadeeqa opened the front door again, an apologetic expression on her round, beautiful face.

'Sorry, girls.' She shook her head and glanced down at her clothes. She was wearing a loose, dark brown abaya with a feathery light brown pattern across the shoulders and back. Yumna hadn't seen this outfit before. Was it new, or a hand-me-down from her mother? Sadeeqa was also wearing a shiny black hijab and black trainers. On anyone else, it would have been a weird look, but Sadeeqa managed to make it look cool. Yumna glanced down at her own shoes, dirty white joggers she'd had for over a year. She had hoped she would have grown out of them by now, but she hadn't done much growing.

‘I thought the twins were old enough now to have their own baths, but apparently not,’ Sadeeqa said, stepping out and locking the door behind her.

Water was pooling around Sadeeqa’s feet, dripping off the edge of the abaya’s bottom seam. It dawned on Yumna: this wasn’t a new outfit. It was the same beige abaya Sadeeqa always wore, except now it was dark brown because it was soaking wet!

Nafisa scrunched up her nose. ‘So, you decided to get into the bath with them, didja?’ She shook her head. ‘You can’t go like that.’ Nafisa crossed her arms and turned her back on Sadeeqa.

‘Aren’t you going to be cold?’ Yumna added.

Sadeeqa nodded up to the sky. ‘Can’t you smell that? Rain!’ She flashed her pearly whites and jogged down the crooked footpath to the road. ‘You’re both gonna be as wet as I am soon. C’mon!’

Sadeeqa was right. By the time the trio arrived at choir practice, Yumna couldn’t just smell the rain, she could feel it pouring down her back and pooling into her shoes. They trudged into the dimly lit hall like soaked cats, squeaking and mewling in the cold.

To call Shington Hall an actual hall was generous. It was more a small cottage, originally home to the post office,

then an antique shop, and now a community centre. The floors were dark mahogany with walls of rough brick and flaking plaster. Nafisa said it smelt like old people, but Yumna didn't mind it so much. She felt like Shington Hall had character, and maybe a secret or two.

'Girls! You're late.' Their singing teacher bustled towards them, handing each girl a thick, warm towel as she ushered them towards their seats. 'Come on, get dry quickly now, you'll catch your deaths!'

The three rows of chairs set out in the centre of the room were empty.

'You could have started without us,' Nafisa said. Mrs Hardy's face tightened at the barb, but she stayed silent. Sadeeqa elbowed her mouthy friend.

'What? I'm just saying . . .'

Yumna slumped into a seat and studied her shoes, wishing she had brought a book. This wasn't the first time they had been the only ones to turn up to rehearsal; membership of the choir had dwindled since the Pickwood family had moved away, taking half the choir with them. She looked around her at the tired posters on the walls, the wilting folding table in the corner holding a teapot and biscuits, the cups and saucers from 1983. At least the podium was new, or new-ish. It had been donated to the choir in the early 2000s. Newer than the crockery, but still from before Yumna was born.

‘Sorry we’re late, miss,’ Sadeeqa said as she folded the towel, placing it on a chair in the front row. Yumna was sitting on hers, not wanting to soak the seat.

‘It was my fault. I had some trouble getting the twins into the bath.’

At the mention of the twins, Mrs Hardy’s face relaxed. ‘Ah, the twins. How are they doing, those darling boys?’

Yumna glanced at Nafisa, who had sat beside her and fallen into her phone. If her hunched shoulders were anything to go by, Nafisa was worked up about something. She had been acting catty all the way from the bookshop to Sadeeqa’s place. Well, cattier than usual, and that was saying something.

‘Are you all right?’

‘Yeh, whatever.’ Nafisa looked up, glaring at Sadeeqa and Mrs Hardy in conversation. ‘Just can’t believe I ruined my hair for this nothing night.’

‘But it’s choir. You love choir.’

It was true. Choir was perhaps the only activity Nafisa enjoyed unironically. She had the ‘voice of an angel’, as Mrs Hardy often gushed. The choir was less a group effort, and more a collection of backup vocalists to Nafisa’s solo show. This was why Mrs Hardy put up with Nafisa’s behaviour – she was key to any chance they had of qualifying for the County Choral Festival.

Yumna bit her lip. ‘Were you meant to meet someone, Naf?’

Nafisa’s eyes widened. ‘Where the hell did you hear that?’

Yumna shrugged. ‘I didn’t hear anything, I just guessed.’ It was the eyeshadow that had given her away. Yumna never saw Nafisa waste an application of her most precious palette, the pinks and the yellows blended into each other like a glorious sunset on her lids. Yumna silently congratulated herself for her excellent detective skills.

‘Who is it? I won’t tell anyone, I promise!’

Nafisa shook her head, spraying Yumna in cold droplets.

The front door swung open, letting in a howl of cold air. Umbrellas were lowered, rain jackets removed, and the remainder of the choir straggled in.

‘Oh good, you made it!’ Mrs Hardy was quick with the towels, but this lot had been much better prepared. The elderly couple, a pair of retired doctors, took their usual seats in the front row, and the family from down the road – not the rich part of Eastbourne Lane, but not the poor part either – also made themselves comfortable.

‘You can tell me,’ Yumna tried again, but Nafisa was ignoring her now, staring straight ahead.

‘Right, that’s eight of us here now, enough to start,’ Mrs Hardy declared, straightening out her blouse. Her voice seemed to gather strength as she stepped behind the lectern

and flicked her fingers, drawing them all up to their feet. Mrs Hardy seemed to transform when she took the podium, as if the role of conductor gave her a sense of power.

‘Let’s warm up our voices, shall we? Start with La . . .’

As the room filled up with the sounds of *la la la la la la*, Yumna stole another glance at her cousin. Was she holding on to a secret, a mystery to be solved? Did it have anything to do with the creepy monster in the fields?

The trio split ways for the walk home, Nafisa heading east, Sadeeqa and Yumna west. They walked together in comfortable silence for most of the way, avoiding puddles and humming.

‘Mrs Hardy reckons I could qualify,’ Sadeeqa said quietly, as they rounded the corner of her street. ‘For Taekwondo.’

Mrs Hardy was not only the choir conductor, but the owner of the village bed and breakfast. She knew everyone in the county, knew all the gossip and doled out information like sweet treats. If she thought Sadeeqa could qualify, it was likely she’d heard such a titbit from a reputable source, like maybe the coach who had been spending the last week in the BnB.

‘I thought you already qualified?’ Yumna said.

‘Not for the GB Olympic team.’

Whoa, Yumna thought. The national Taekwondo team.

She knew her friend was good – Sadeeqa had been doing the martial art since she could walk and was the best fighter her age in the county. She made the sport look effortless. But Yumna didn't realise her friend was *that* good. *Mashallah*.

'That's incredible . . .'

'Yeah, but, I don't think my dad will let me,' Sadeeqa said, as she unlocked her front door. 'He's obsessed with me becoming a doctor, not *needing one*, as he always says.'

Yumna tutted. She wouldn't let her best friend miss a chance like this. 'We will find a way. He's gotta let you.'

It all seemed so wild, Yumna thought, as she dropped Sadeeqa home and walked home in the cool night. A light breeze tickled her skin. Her best friend, training for the Olympics?! Her cousin, good enough for County Choir? They were doing what they wanted to be doing, reaching for their dreams. But what about her? Shuffling down her street, Yumna noticed the light in Mr Turner's house go off. He was turning in for the night. Her eyes glanced over the woods behind their houses, the familiar shapes of the trees, and—

What was that?

Yumna wished she had laser vision or a pair of binoculars. There was something there, moving between the trees.

Crouching, Yumna scuttle-walked through Mr Turner's garden to get closer. No, the shape didn't look like a giant figure. It looked like—

'Kareem?' Yumna called out. What was Sadeeqa's older brother doing, creeping around in the woods by her house? And he wasn't alone.

At the sound of his name, the young man, who had been staring at something on the ground, ran.

But that wasn't the strangest part. Kareem wasn't alone. There were two other people who took off, running alongside him. A teenager she didn't recognise . . . and Nafisa.