

ESME PEPPER



JACQUELINE
WILSON

Illustrated by Rachael Dean



PUFFIN

PUFFIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Puffin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com

www.penguin.co.uk www.puffin.co.uk www.ladybird.co.uk



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published 2026

001

Text copyright © Jacqueline Wilson, 2026
Illustrations copyright © Rachael Dean, 2026

The moral right of the author and illustrator has been asserted

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright.
Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes freedom
of expression and supports a vibrant culture. Thank you for purchasing
an authorized edition of this book and for respecting intellectual property
laws by not reproducing, scanning or distributing any part of it by any
means without permission. You are supporting authors and enabling
Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for everyone.
No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the
purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance
with Article 4(3) of the DSM Directive 2019/790, Penguin Random House
expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception.

Set in 12.5/20pt Baskerville MT Pro
Typeset by Six Red Marbles UK, Thetford, Norfolk
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

HARDBACK

ISBN: 978-0-241-68407-8

INTERNATIONAL PAPERBACK

ISBN: 978-0-241-68408-5

All correspondence to:
Puffin Books
Penguin Random House Children's
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW



Penguin Random House is committed to a
sustainable future for our business, our readers
and our planet. This book is made from Forest
Stewardship Council® certified paper.



ONE

The bell rang. Home time! I jumped up, grabbing my school bag, and tipped my chair straight over.

‘Esme Pepper!’ said Mrs Parsons, sighing heavily. ‘What on earth do you think you’re doing?’

‘Going home, miss,’ I said. And then I muttered, ‘Obviously,’ which wasn’t wise.

‘Please don’t talk back to me like that, Esme. And how many times have I told you, I’m not “miss”, I’m Mrs Parsons,’ she said snippily.

‘Sorry, Mrs Parsons. I’m just in a hurry,’ I said, picking up my chair and straightening it behind my desk. One of the

legs looked a little bit wonky, but I hoped it was nothing to do with me.

‘I’m sure the whole class is in a hurry, but now you’re the one holding everyone up, Esme, because you didn’t wait until I said you could all stand up and go,’ she said, folding her arms and shaking her head at me. ‘Now you can sit down again and wait quietly until I’m ready to say you can leave.’

She was unbelievably strict. She was like that with all of us, but particularly me. Mum said she’d come down to the school and have it out with her, but I didn’t think that was wise either. I had a feeling she’d only make the situation worse. Mum had a habit of falling out with people. Never me though. She’s the best mum in the whole world to me. That was why I was so desperate to get out of school today. She’d promised she was getting me a big surprise – and I was pretty sure what it was going to be!

I was fizzy in my head with excitement, wanting to jump up and down, but I knew that would irritate Mrs Parsons even more. In fact, she might just keep me in all by myself out of spite. So I said in my head, ‘*Calm down, Esme!*’ and I managed to sit down meekly on my chair and murmur, ‘Sorry, Mrs Parsons.’

I think it annoyed her even more that I was doing as I was told because now she had no reason to keep telling me off. She

waited several beats, her chin up hopefully for further signs of protest, but I stayed sitting where I was, though my legs were so fidgety I had to rock the chair a little bit.

Disaster! The chair collapsed under me, I fell to the floor, yelling a very rude word indeed, and the whole class roared with laughter. Mrs Parsons treated me as if I'd done it on purpose and was very, very angry. You know, purple face, spittle coming out of her mouth, hands clenched. I bet she wanted to unclench them and go smack-smack-smack but teachers aren't allowed to do that. Mum said she used to get whacked quite a lot when *she* was at school, but that might just be one of her stories.



She often made things up. I was a little bit worried that she mightn't really have this magnificent surprise waiting for me. But she wouldn't play a trick like that on me, would she? She loves me to bits; she tells me that every single time when she kisses me goodnight.

Eventually Mrs Parsons started to run out of steam and let the class go – except me. Some of the kids laughed at me or pulled faces as they went out the door, but my friend Rose made a sad face at me, sticking out her bottom lip in sympathy. I really, really *liked* my new best friend forever Rose.

‘Can I go too, Mrs Parsons? Please?’ I said. ‘My mum will be waiting for me.’

‘Well, I can't help that. You shouldn't be such a little troublemaker, showing off and being silly and deliberately breaking school property. I've a good mind to send you straight to Mrs Chambers,’ she said.

My heart started thumping under my yellow sweatshirt. Mum says it's a silly colour for school uniform because it shows every little stain and it makes me look sallow. Sometimes she treats me to a makeover and gives me beautiful pink cheeks, but the one time I went to school like that I was sent to the cloakrooms to give my face a scrub. You're not allowed

make-up in our primary school, not even lip gloss to stop your mouth getting chapped.

Then my unglossed mouth opened wide because Mrs Chambers herself came hurrying into the room in her striped trouser suit, looking anxious.

‘Oh, thank goodness!’ she exclaimed. ‘There you are, Esme! I’ve been looking for you in the playground. Mrs Parsons, may I have a little word?’

She went over to her and started murmuring in her ear. I tried my hardest to hear what she was saying. I just heard my name, and my mum’s name, and then the dreaded words *Social Worker!*

Mum and I hated social workers. Long ago one came and took me away and I didn’t get back to live with Mum for ages and ages. Well, I wasn’t going to let it happen to me again! I was out the classroom door like a rocket while Mrs Chambers and Mrs Parsons were still huddled up in the corner.

‘Esme! Esme, come back here at once!’ Mrs Parsons called after me.

‘It’s all right, Esme,’ Mrs Chambers cried down the corridor. ‘Come and sit in my office and have a cup of tea with me. And a chocolate biscuit! You’re not in any trouble, dear.’

Dear??? Mrs Chambers never called anyone dear! Who was she kidding? Things weren't all right, they were all wrong, wrong, wrong. I ran right out the main entrance and across the playground, peering frantically for Mum waiting at the gate.

I couldn't see her! Nearly all the other mums had collected their children and gone. My mum didn't seem to be anywhere.

'Esme! Esme!' Mrs Parsons and Mrs Chambers were charging across the playground towards me.

I couldn't let them catch me. I had to clear off home and warn Mum. Maybe we had to do a runner again. That's why she wasn't here – she was hastily packing up our stuff. I hoped she'd be packing my surprise present too, though it might be a bit big.

I started running even harder up the road, after one quick look round. Mrs Parsons was already gasping and holding her side, but Mrs Chambers was surprisingly speedy and was gaining ground. I'd seen lots of crime series while staying up late with Mum, so I knew exactly what to do. I dived down the nearest little alleyway, ran like mad, vaulted a wall – well, I had to have several attempts and I scraped all my legs, but I got over eventually. I couldn't stop to examine my poor knees, I just had to keep running, down another

alleyway, then left, then right, then out into another road. I wasn't even sure I knew where I was by this time, but I didn't seem to have a large stripy-suit head teacher panting after me any more.

A lady stopped to see if I was all right because now I had blood dribbling into both my socks, but I pretended I was trying to catch up with my elder sister and had to get going. I wished I did have a sister or a brother who could watch out for me at times like this. But it was just Mum and me, and we managed fine most of the time.

We'd manage fine *this* time. Mum would have our bags packed ready and we'd rush out, get to the station, select a town at random and then we'd start a new life somewhere. Like we'd done before. I so hoped I could take my present. I didn't care if we had to leave most of my clothes behind or any of my other stuff. It might mean starting at a new school though, and that made a pain in my stomach because I wouldn't be able to see Rose any more.

It took such ages to make new friends at schools. Perhaps I needn't bother with school any more? I could read and write and do sums so I didn't really need to go, did I? I could hang out with Mum all day instead.

I really, really wanted Mum now. I couldn't get enough breath to keep running because I'd started to cry like a great big baby. And I was pretty sure I was lost. But then it was OK when I got to the end of the road because I suddenly saw the vape shop on the opposite corner, and knew I just needed to hurry past it, then turn right down Elm Street and then I'd be in Chestnut, where we lived now. It was easy-peasy. I wiped my face with the cuff of my sweatshirt and started off again.

I was at our house in ten minutes. Well, it wasn't *all* our house – we just had the attic rooms at the top – but they were the best rooms because we could see way over the rooftops. I rang our bell at the side of the door. We had a little nameplate: AMY PEPPER, ESME PEPPER. I was so proud that I was on it too. I rang the bell again. And again. I knew it would take Mum ages to come down and let me in, so I didn't worry. But she didn't arrive. So she wasn't at home then.

But there was no need to panic. Maybe she'd got held up buying my surprise present. She was probably making her way home with it right this minute. And I knew where to find our spare keys. They were kept under a flowerpot at the side of the house in case of emergencies. I went to look.

Yes, there they were. I grabbed them so tightly they hurt my palm. I opened the front door and galloped up the first flight of stairs, the second flight, the third and last, and then staggered breathlessly to our own flat door.

I let myself in and ran round the living room and the bedroom and the little bathroom and kitchen but there was no sign of Mum. And no sign of my present either, though I searched high and low.

‘Come home quick, Mum!’ I said out loud. ‘There’s a social worker coming for me!’

My voice sounded strange in the empty flat. I bit my lip hard to stop myself crying again. I dabbed at my knees with a tea towel. They weren’t half hurting now. I turned on the cold tap, drank some water, and then mopped my knees some more. There was a half empty packet of biscuits on the draining board. I stuffed one into my mouth whole, then another and another but they couldn’t seem to help the hollow feeling inside me.

Calm down, Esme! I said again inside my head and tried to believe that Mum was on her way home from the shops with my present and then we’d be off. We could get a taxi to the station, and we’d be on the train and finding a

brand-new place to live long before any social workers could catch me.

But what if they'd caught *Mum*? I wasn't daft. I knew Mum had been buying an awful lot of treats for us when she still hadn't got a job. She'd tried working in a pub but she could only work at lunchtimes – she wouldn't leave me on my own at night. She was a *good* mum. She stuck it for a bit but it was rubbish money. She did cleaning but she kept breaking her nails and it made her back ache. She couldn't work in a shop or an office because then she'd have to sign all sorts of employment stuff and she might get traced from the last time we did a runner.

So maybe she'd started taking stuff again. My heart was banging hard inside my chest, even though I gabbled *Calm down!* over and over again. Maybe she'd taken my present and then got caught because it was so big and bulky? So that made it my fault, didn't it?

I was really, really crying now – but then there was a sudden knock on the door that shook the breath out of me. I clamped my hand hard over my face so I couldn't sob any more. I stood absolutely still, trying to tell myself that I'd imagined the knock on the door because I was so nervy. But it came again, five rapid knocks in succession. I wrapped my fingers over my

thumbs and stood there, clenching, willing them to go away with all my might.

Then a voice rang out. ‘Esme? Esme, come to the door at once, dear!’

It was Mrs Chambers! If I craned my neck to look at the door, I could see a glimpse of her lips at the letter box. I imagined her lifting a stripy leg and forcing it through, and then the other leg, and all the rest of her, squashed flat as a pancake but ready to catch me. I felt a little bit of sick rise in my throat but I managed not to heave. I was being silly. She couldn’t possibly get in. Even so, I ran as silently as possible into the bedroom and dived under Mum’s bed. It was pretty dusty and horribly uncomfortable, but surely I was safe here.

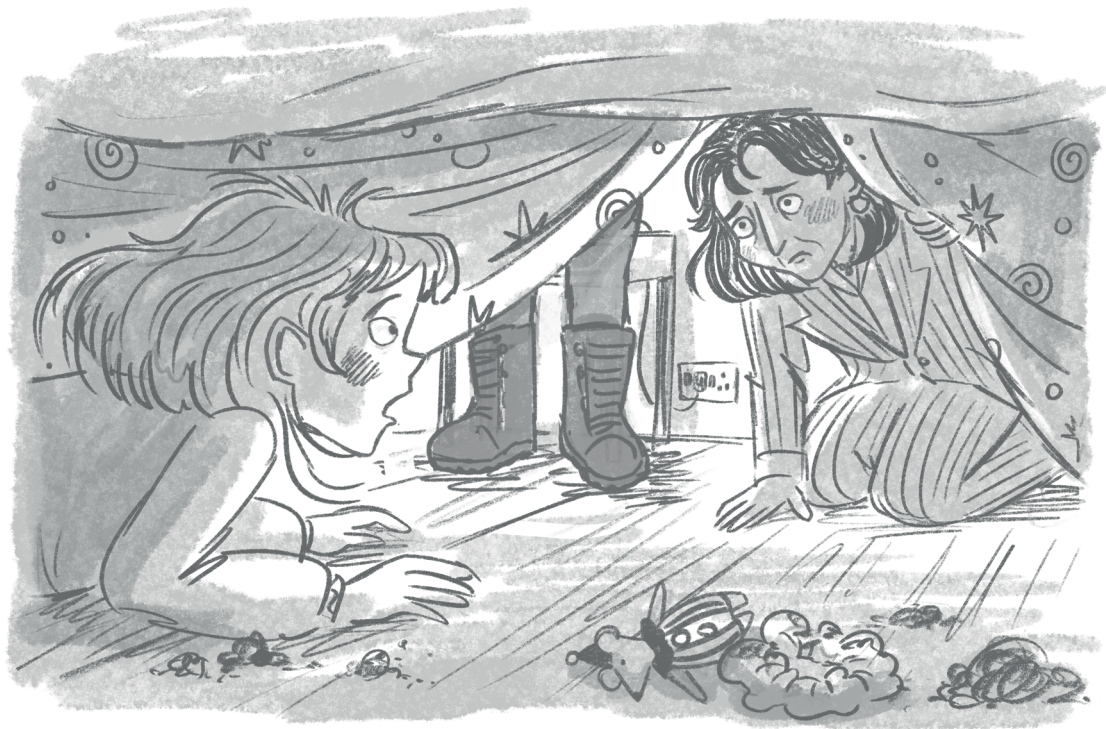
I waited, while Mrs Chambers kept calling, her voice sweet and cloying at first but getting increasingly impatient.

‘Answer the door at once, you silly girl! We’re just here to help you!’

We’re??? Did she have Mrs Parsons with her? She was quite hefty. Maybe they could batter down the door together? But then I heard thuds coming up the stairs and a strange voice saying, ‘It’s OK, the chap downstairs is the landlord – he’s given me a spare key.’

Oh no, oh no, oh no. Why couldn't grumpy old Mr Rogers mind his own business? He didn't like Mum and me and always moaned on and on about the rent whenever he saw us. No wonder he'd grassed on us. I heard the key in the lock and then the door was open and two sets of feet came rushing into our flat. I saw Mrs Chambers' stompy boots and stripy trousers cuffs, and some stranger's Docs. All the better to trample me.

I lay rigid, breathing as shallowly as possible, trying to convince myself they'd never look under the bed. But it was the very first place they looked! I saw Mrs Chambers' face as she lifted the trailing sheet.



‘Oh, Esme,’ she said, and she suddenly sounded very sad. It was somehow more frightening than all the shouting. ‘Come on, dear, out you get.’

‘No!’ I said, through gritted teeth.

‘Well, you can’t stay there for ever!’ said Mrs Chambers.

‘Yes I can,’ I argued, like a two-year-old.

‘Out you come, pet,’ said the other voice. I heard a little groan of effort and then I saw her face. She was young and very pale, though her long droopy hair was surprisingly bright, pink one side and turquoise the other. She smiled at me anxiously. I didn’t smile back. I didn’t know what to do. I was trapped. She was there ready to catch me this side – and the bed was pressed against the wall so I didn’t have anywhere else to roll.

I started coughing with the dust and then couldn’t stop.

‘You sound as if you’re suffocating under there. Let’s get you out,’ she said, and she tugged at my arm. She seemed very strong for a floppy sort of girl. I had to roll towards her or she might have pulled my arm right off.

‘That’s the way,’ she said, and she winkled the rest of me out. ‘Well, you’re in a right pickle!’

I knew my face was all tears and snot, and my yellow sweatshirt and navy school skirt were covered in powdery grey

dust. The girl with the multi-coloured hair brushed me down and Mrs Chambers found a J-cloth and wiped my face.

‘There now. Let’s have that cup of tea!’ she said. ‘You’ve led us quite a merry dance, young lady! I haven’t run like that since I was hockey captain at school!’

I had a terrible image of Mrs Chambers wielding a hockey stick. Perhaps the girl brushing the dust off me was imagining it too, because there was a smirk flickering on her face. Who on earth was she? She couldn’t possibly be Mrs Chambers’ *daughter*, could she?

‘I’m Alesha,’ she said, as if she could read my mind. ‘I’m your social worker.’

I jerked away from her. ‘I haven’t got a social worker!’ I insisted.

‘Well, you’re going to have to put up with me just for now,’ she said.

‘I don’t *want* one! Where’s my mum? What have you done with her?’ I asked desperately.

‘Your mum’s had to go elsewhere for a little bit,’ said Mrs Chambers, putting on the kettle. She had the cheek to peer into our cupboard and brought out a packet of teacakes. ‘Aha!’ she said.

‘You can’t touch them! They’re my mum’s favourites,’ I said. ‘What do you mean, she’s had to go away? She wouldn’t go anywhere without me! I go everywhere with her!’

‘Well, she’s had to this time, dear. I don’t think your mum would mind if we opened the packet of teacakes. We don’t want them to go stale. I think you could do with a bite to eat, dear,’ said Mrs Chambers.

Mum would never ever do a runner without me, I knew that for certain. So how come they’d go stale? Teacakes last for ages!

‘Is Mum ill?’ I asked, my chest so tight I could barely get the words out.

‘No, I promise you she’s not ill,’ said Mrs Chambers. I stared at her. I didn’t like her one bit, but I didn’t think she was a liar.

‘So where *is* she?’ I shouted.

I looked at Alesha. She had this weary look on her face. Then of course I realized. Mum’s luck had run out.

‘She’s been nicked again, hasn’t she?’ I said.

‘Oh, Esme!’ said Mrs Chambers. She shook her head at Alesha, who took no notice.

‘Yep, I’m afraid so,’ Alesha said sadly.