



A MESSAGE FROM CHICKEN HOUSE

I've always loved those classic 'bears as best friends' stories, from Pooh to Paddington. It seems to me that animals bring out the best in us and that sometimes we all need a paw to point out what we can do to face up to our problems – as my dog Barbara often shows me! It's the same in Sarah Horne's brilliant *Panda at the Door*, even if the results are hilariously unpredictable . . . This is a glorious, witty and wise new favourite panda for us all!

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Barry Cunningham'.

BARRY CUNNINGHAM

Publisher

Chicken House



PANDA AT THE DOOR

Written by Anna Wilson
with Sarah Horne



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For Diana





CHAPTER 1

Some UnBEARable News

‘I love to laugh! Hahaha!’ Pudding hummed to herself after another practically perfect day as the Star Attraction of Edinburgh Zoo. It might not have been obvious to anyone passing that a panda could be an entertainer, but if you stopped and watched, you’d soon agree that Pudding was spectacular at making children smile. ‘All. Day. Long!’

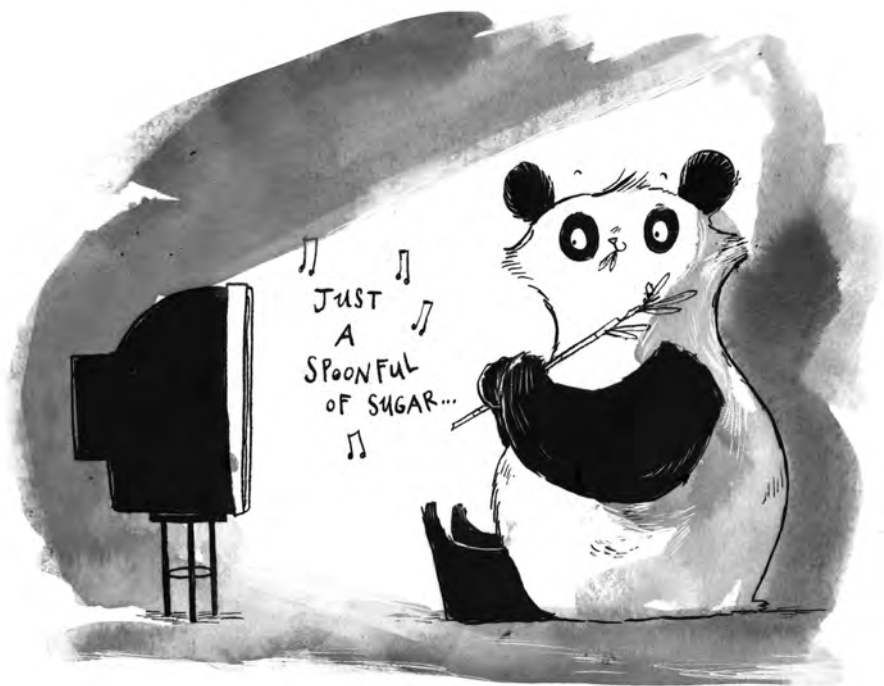
she sang, as she waved goodbye to the people who had come to see her. She carried on blowing kisses long after the crowds had disappeared. 'Come back tomorrow!' she called into the chilly evening air. 'It's been lovely having you!'

When it was clear that she was all alone again, Pudding went back into her pen. She sat down with a sigh and turned to her favourite end-of-day pastime: watching the *Mary Poppins* DVD that her keeper, Gerald, had given her when she had first arrived at Edinburgh Zoo as a young cub. He had thought it would make her feel less lonely. And it had.

For a while.

Pudding adored Mary Poppins. She





adored Gerald as well, of course. Both of them, in their different ways, had taught her so much about life. One had taught her how to be polite and cheerful at all times, and the other had taught her how to be a Star Attraction. (One had a a magic umbrella and the other had ginger moustache. No prizes for guessing which was which!)

But neither of them could take the place of a real family.

Pudding sighed again as she watched Mary Poppins fly through the sky with her magic umbrella. 'One day,' she whispered sadly, 'if I practise hard enough, maybe I will be able to fly away like you, Mary Poppins, and find a family to live with. A family who needs me.'

BEEP!



Pudding knew that the beep of Gerald's watch meant bamboo. And sure enough, right on time, here was Gerald with her tea.

'Hullo, Gerald!' Pudding called out. 'Hasn't it been a

supercalifragilisticexpialidocious day?’

‘Hmph,’ the keeper grunted as he unlocked the panda’s pen, struggling under the weight of armfuls of glossy green bamboo shoots. A panda could eat almost her body-weight in leaves every day, so this was something Gerald did often.

‘Let me help you with those.’ Pudding took the bundles from him.

Gerald mopped his brow. ‘Thanks, hen,’ he said. ‘Och! Ah’m absolutely knackered. Ma flamingos have been givin’ me the run-around today.’

‘Poor you! What naughty birds,’ said Pudding. ‘Why don’t you sit down and have a rest?’

‘Rest!’ Gerald grumbled. ‘If I sit down, hen, I’ll ne’er get up again! I’m no’ gettin’ any younger – eighty-three next birthday!’

‘That *is* very old.’ Pudding nodded.

‘Thank you very much!’ Gerald pretended to be

offended. 'But I'd better no' let the bosses see me sitting down on the job. They're muttering about moving me on as it is.'

Pudding chewed thoughtfully on an especially delicious shoot. 'I suppose I'm not getting any younger either,' she said. She had no idea how old she really was – all she knew was that she had arrived in a crate a long time ago. 'Does *anyone* ever actually get any younger?' she asked, more to herself than to Gerald. 'If that really did happen, I'd be a wee cub and you'd be nothing but a tiny baby.' She chewed some more bamboo. 'I hope the zoo aren't thinking of moving *me* on. Unless . . .' The stalk fell from her mouth as she was struck by a sudden idea. 'Unless it's to find me a family? I should so love to be a nanny with a bag, a hat and an umbrella, just like Mary Poppins. D'you think I'll ever get the chance?'

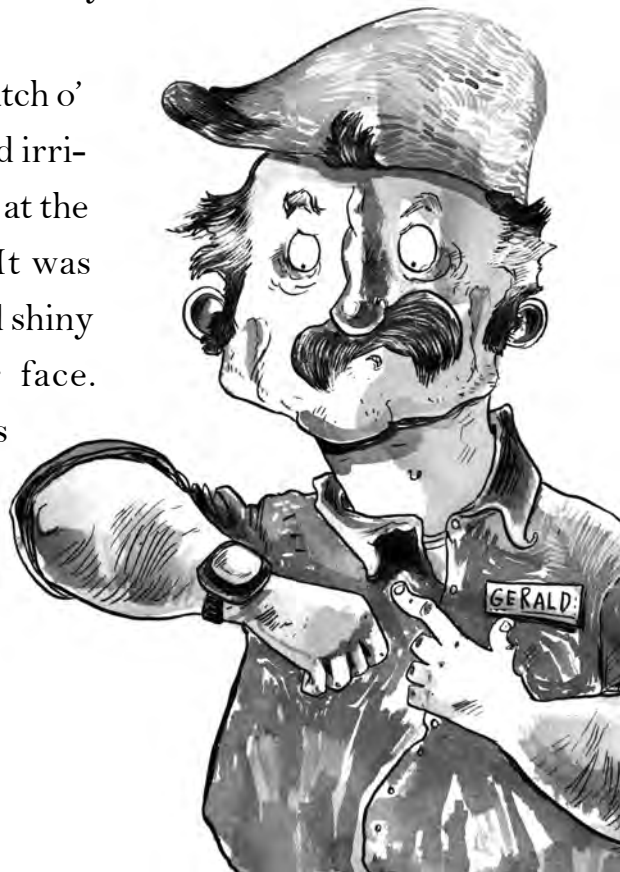
'Eh?' Gerald wheezed. 'A *nanny*? Who's ever

heard of a nanny *panda*? A nanny *goat*, maybe!’ He gave a gruff sort of laugh. ‘Yer heid’s full o’ mince, wee lassie!’ Gerald reached over and tickled her behind the ears.

Pudding had no idea what he was talking about. How could someone’s head be full of mince? And if goats could be nannies, why couldn’t she?

BEEP BEEP!

‘Och! This new watch o’ mine,’ Gerald growled irritably. Pudding peered at the gadget on his wrist. It was very smart – black and shiny with a rectangular face. (Black was Pudding’s favourite colour. Her second favourite was white.) The bosses



had given the watch to Gerald for working at the zoo for sixty years – three times a panda’s lifetime.

BEEP BEEP BEEP!

‘Will you *stop?*’ Gerald muttered again.

‘Sorry,’ said Pudding. ‘Did I say something wrong?’

Gerald laughed. ‘Not you, soft lass! This bletherin’ watch. Sending me messages, telling me how to take care of you, when to feed you – as if ah dinnae ken after sixty years!’ He sucked his teeth in annoyance.

‘Try not to be cross, Gerald.’ Pudding patted his hand. ‘It’s not good for you.’

‘You’re a wee sweetie.’ He smiled at her. ‘Which makes this all the harder to say—’

BEEP BEEP BEEP
BEEEEEP!



‘Gah! Stupid thing!’ Gerald cried, tugging his watch off.

‘I don’t think your watch is listening, Gerald,’

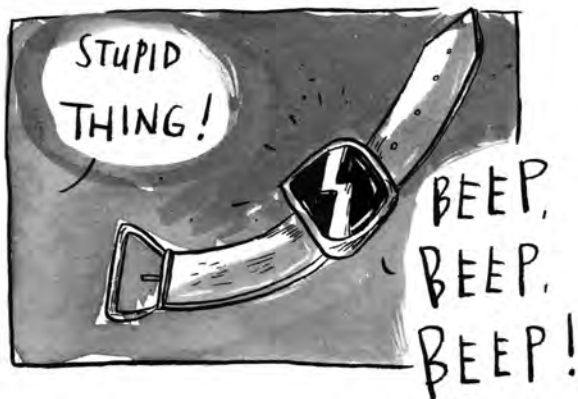
Pudding said, trying to be helpful.

BEEEEEEPPP!!

‘Grrrr!’ Gerald’s eyebrows became one long caterpillar frown. He stuffed the watch carelessly into his pocket.

‘Why don’t you just read whatever it’s telling you, Gerald? It might be an important message,’ Pudding said.

‘It’s nothin’ . . .’ Gerald faltered. ‘Now, how about you tuck into your tea and I’ll get you some clean fresh bedding?’



Pudding knew that in spite of Gerald's complaints, his watch had proved useful from time to time. There had been that incident with Larry, the blue-bottomed baboon, for example, who had stowed away with a man in a van. Thanks to the tracking device on Larry's right foot, and the 'Find My Ape' app on Gerald's watch, the keeper had been first on the scene.

Pudding shook her head. Humans could be such dafties. Anyway, whatever the zoo was worried about, that was Gerald's problem. Pudding had a show to practise – and, as everyone knows, *practice makes practically perfect*.

'Tomorrow, Gerald, will be my BEST,' she raised a paw above her head, 'my most EXCITING,' she turned her feet to three o'clock, 'most WONDERFUL,' she looked skywards and hitched up an imaginary skirt, 'Panda Show EVER!'

‘That’s right, lass,’ Gerald mumbled. He hung his head. ‘You make it yer best show, because it may be yer last.’

Pudding stopped in mid-dance and stared at him. ‘I beg your pardon. What do you mean?’

BEEEP! BEEEP! BEEEEP!

‘Och, PIPE DOWN!’

‘I can see you’re upset, Gerald, but there’s really no need to be rude.’ Her keeper was behaving very strangely, Pudding thought.

‘I wisnae shouting at you, hen. It’s ma watch – and those bossy bosses trying tae tell me ma job!’ He was gabbling now. ‘If they had let me set up the adoption scheme sooner, I could have saved you instead of sending you away—’ Gerald stopped abruptly. ‘Aaagh! Did I just say that out loud?’

‘Adoption? Saved me? *Sending me arway?*’ Pudding echoed.

Gerald's face went bright red. He had the look of a strangled ostrich.

'Gerald? Sending me away? *Where?*' Pudding demanded.

Gerald shuffled his feet. 'We-ell . . .' he said.

'Well, *what*, Gerald?' Pudding insisted.

Gerald cleared his throat. 'You know that it's not possible for you to be a nanny, don't you, Pud?' He patted her shoulder. 'You're a panda. A bear. You cannae live with a human family.'

'Why ever not?' Pudding asked with a small but fierce frown.

Gerald shook his head. 'It breaks ma heart to tell you.' He had tears in his eyes. 'You're a wee panda, darlin',' he said, 'rare and wild. But that's all you'll ever be. And pandas need to have cubs so there are more pandas in this world. Where would we be without bairns?'

‘What are you saying, Gerald?’ Pudding tried a growl, hoping it would persuade her keeper to answer her properly.

‘The management – the bosses,’ Gerald muttered, glancing around as if there might be spies listening in. ‘They’re sending you to . . .’ he dropped his voice a notch lower, ‘*China*.’

Pudding’s jaw dropped. ‘China? Where’s that?’ She’d heard of china plates and china teapots, but she had never heard of a *place* called China. ‘I don’t understand. Have I done something wrong? I—’

Gerald took her paw. ‘It’s nothin’ you’ve done,’ he said,



sighing. 'It's the way o' things. I'm sorry, I really am. More than I can say.'

Poor Gerald, Pudding thought. He looked so sad.

'Ah'm gonna miss you so much, lass,' he continued. 'But there's nothin' I can do. I'm an auld man and no one listens to me.' He let go of her paw. 'Bye-bye, hen,' he said. 'I'll see you in the mornin'. One last time. Who knows, maybe the wind will change and bring better things our way?'

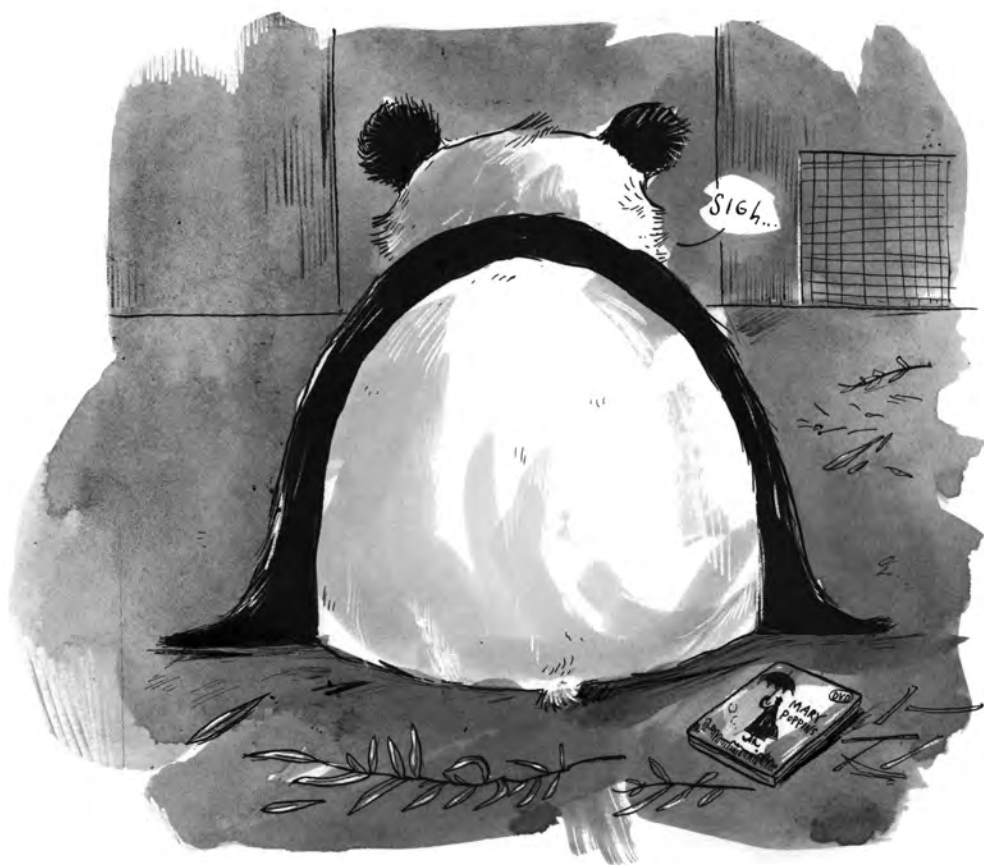
And with that, Gerald turned and walked out.

Pudding sat hunched on the cold concrete floor. Not even a bottom as plump and furry as hers could soften the chill that was running through her. How long had Gerald known about a plan to send her away? How many times had he come to feed her since he'd known – and he had said NOTHING?

As if in reply, there was a muffled sound from underneath the stack of newspapers that was her bed.

Gerald's watch! It must have fallen from his pocket.

Pudding rummaged around and found it. *I'll see*



what those messages say for myself, she thought. Perhaps it was all a silly mistake? After all, Mary Poppins always says you should never judge things by their appearance. But as she read and re-read the messages, finally she had to accept it: it wasn't a mistake. It was true. All of it. Every single last word.

Well, I won't go! she fumed to herself. They can't make me. I'll run away first!

BEEP! The watch pinged again. Pudding stared at the tiny screen. It was blinking to say that there was a new message, but this one wasn't from any horrible bosses – it was from someone called Callum Campbell.

Dear Pudding. I don't



know why I am writing this. But whatever, I need your help . . .

Pudding blinked and rubbed her eyes. She couldn't believe it! *A message for me – from a child in need?* It was as if Mary Poppins had answered her most heartfelt wish! She closed her eyes and clasped her paws to her big warm heart, feeling it skip a beat. A child had come to her rescue. They could rescue *each other!*



All she had to do was escape.

But *how?* She'd never tried escaping before. Pudding opened her eyes and went over to her barred door. 'Grrrr!' She tried to pull the bars apart, but they refused to budge. Then she blinked again, this time in amazement, as the door swung open all by itself.



‘Oh!’ Pudding cried. ‘Gerald, my dear friend – you’ve set me free!’

Out she crept into the night, and a strange breeze filled the trees as she took her first steps out into the city to find the boy who needed her.

Who knows, she thought, maybe the wind really is changing . . .





