

LEVELED BOOK • Y

Born on Sable Island



Written by Katherine Follett
Illustrated by Roberta Collier Morales

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Prologue

This scrapbook tells the story of my sister and me on our surprising trip to Sable Island. The skinny island sits **isolated** all by itself, miles out in the ocean, off Nova Scotia. My name is Dani, short for Danielle, and I like to take photographs. My younger sister's name is Mimi, and she draws amazing pictures. We both like new adventures. Our trip to Sable Island surpassed even our big imaginations. We never suspected our two-week school break would be so magical and personal. We hope you'll enjoy sharing it with us!

Love,
Dani and Mimi

Sunday, 18 February

We sat around the Halifax airport forever, waiting for permission for our very small plane to take off for Sable Island. Mom repeatedly checked all her gear and her watch. Dad seemed disappointed because he had to remain at home alone. Jans, a Norwegian **zoologist** who works with Mom, concentrated on his laptop. Mimi and I just felt slightly stunned that we were flying off to the middle of nowhere.

When we were little, we had always begged Mom to bring us along on her scientific **excursions**—studying walruses in Greenland, tracking seals from a converted trawler in the Atlantic—but she always said her work wasn’t for children. We were all shocked when Mom waved a newly arrived official letter of permission at us. Who knew she’d even asked anyone?

“This is different,” she said. “Grandma and Grandpa used to bring me to Sable when I was young. I felt like I owned the whole island—and it’s always been the place where my heart lives.” Mom almost never talked in misty, poetic terms so Mimi and I were dying to know how an island stirred these feelings. All we knew about Sable was that it’s a million miles from **civilization**, and we’d read that herds of wild horses live there.



Just before our plane landed on the beach airstrip, I caught a glimpse of Sable Island below us—a long, curved finger of pale brown sand jutting out into the gray-green Atlantic Ocean. From the air, I thought it looked like the loneliest place on Earth.

An older, barrel-chested man named George helped us unload our gear into a big, faded truck. George was one of the few permanent residents of the island and he offered to show us around. Show us what? All we could see were sand **dunes**, waves, a few sleepy seals, and a couple of weathered old buildings. This was definitely not a vacation resort. Mom, Mimi, and I shared one big room in a drafty bunkhouse that had no kitchen. The wind rattled the windows. I wasn't sure how much I liked Mom's Sable Island.

Monday, 19 February

On our first morning there, Mom got up at about 5:00 a.m. and said, “You do what George says,” then took off with Jans in a helicopter loaded with cameras and antennas and all kinds of weird-looking stuff. They need all that equipment just to count seals?

After breakfast, we convinced George to show us the best pathway down to the beach. Almost immediately, we saw a group of plump seals sunbathing on the sand. I must have gotten too close with my camera because suddenly they went flopping into the ocean, shouting and grunting, and then floated around, staring at us like we’d said something rude. We left them and walked for miles along the beach, looking for horses.



Tuesday, 20 February

Mom left extra early this morning. During breakfast, George suddenly looked up and asked if we'd found any shipwrecks on our beach walk yesterday. Shipwrecks?

"This island is called the 'graveyard of the Atlantic'" he said. "We get pounding storms, roller-coaster seas, and blanket-thick fog. Before anyone invented storm warning systems, or radar, more than three hundred ships were smashed to pieces on the **sandbars** all around here. Occasionally, a heavy storm will wash away a layer of sand, and you'll spot the mast or ribs of an old sailing ship poking up like a wooden skeleton. Then he nodded, said "a-yep," and shuffled away to fix the water heater.

Mimi leaned close and said, "George is weird!"

We decided to search for the wild horses again until lunchtime. We found more sand and more seals, but no horses, and no shipwrecks.

Shipwrecks on Sable Island

The first recorded shipwreck on Sable Island happened in August of 1583. The ship *Delight* broke apart in a bad storm and almost one hundred men died. Fourteen others survived and went back to England, where their story was published. Sable Island's reputation as a "graveyard of ships" had begun.



Wednesday, 21 February

Everything changed today. When we woke up, our room was an eerie, hazy color. Fog—as thick as our sweaters. We followed the crunchy sand path to the station office, step by careful step. The path would appear and then disappear again into the shifting grayness. I knew my hair would frizz.

Mom sounded frustrated. “The helicopter can’t fly in this fog,” she said. Then she and Jans huddled over a computer, analyzing their charts. We heard her say, over and over, how amazing the seal count was this year—how many pups, how many different kinds of seals. Mimi finally whispered “Let’s go,” and we left Mom inside with her complicated seal charts.

We picked our way along the path to South Beach. The fog was so enveloping that it was like walking around draped in a curtain. We didn't see the hoofprints until we were right on top of them. In that unbroken white place, it felt strange to talk, so we just pointed at the imprints and started to follow them.

I admit that I still didn't expect to see actual, live horses. No smart, wild island horse would be out walking in this thick fog, would it? We just kept following hoofprints because they were the only things we could see.





Suddenly we heard a snort and saw a shadowy, dark shape blocking our path. We froze. The shape moved closer, and a **muzzle** poked out of the fog toward us. Another snort. The **inquiring** muzzle became a broad, shaggy face. Soft, dark eyes glinted beneath a long and **unkempt** mane. The horse watched us, its breath huffing and swirling the fog around its head.

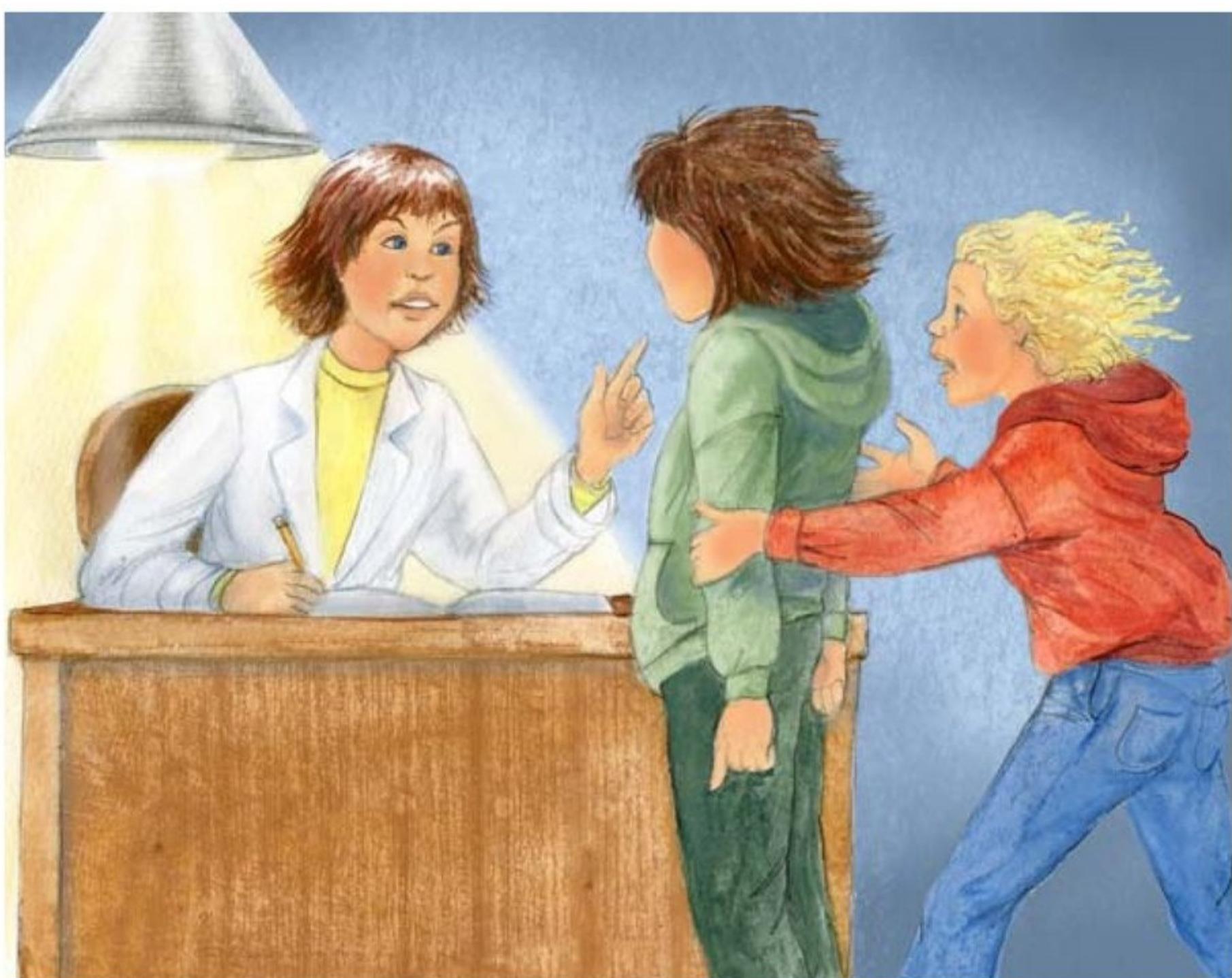
Behind it loomed other shadowy shapes. The first horse came closer, but we kept still. It tossed its head, as if it had decided something critical, and the shapes slipped away, back into the fog.



We wanted to stay *right there*. We scrunched down behind a grassy dune and waited to see if the horses would come back. After a few minutes, I thought I heard a soft, snorting sound over my shoulder, but I didn't dare move. Then I heard chewing—loud, clumpy chewing, on my right. First we saw the outline of one shaggy head, and then another. Now there were five or six horses right around us, each contentedly tearing up tufts of damp dune grass. The one to my right stopped chewing and nearly bumped my boot, and I noticed that my leg was blocking a tasty-looking clump of grass. I shifted over, and the horse blinked as if to say “Thank you” and kept eating.

We realized that it was getting late, and we had to walk back. I could hardly wait to tell Mom and George. I burst through the office door and ran right up to Mom. “Mom, we found the wild horses! They came right up to us and were eating right near our feet!” I cried.

Instead of being excited, Mom looked annoyed. “They aren’t really wild horses, you know,” Mom said. “You can’t believe all the old stories about the first horses escaping from a wrecked ship. They’re just regular farm horses that were left here on the island. There are hundreds of them, now, in several small herds. They just get in the way,” she said, shaking her head.



"All you ever think about is what you like!" I shouted. "We found something wonderful and magical, but you don't care at all! All you care about are your stinky seals!" I knew Mom would be angry, but Mimi and I stomped toward the door. Stephan, one of the other scientists, was standing there. Mom had said he was from Haiti. Haiti is nowhere near Nova Scotia.

"Wait. If your mom says okay, you can come with me tomorrow. I have to check on the horses and I'll show you the ponds where they usually shelter," he said quietly. We hesitated a moment, then just shrugged past him and kicked sand all the way to the bunkhouse. That night, I eventually slept, but Mimi stayed awake for hours. She wanted to capture what we saw on our magical day.



Thursday, 22 February

I was still in a dark, smoldering mood when Mimi and I walked over for breakfast. George was dropping marshmallows into mugs of hot chocolate, and Stephan had waited for us. "My work is similar to your mom's," he said. "Instead of seals, I track the health and behavior of the island's population of horses. You can come with me and watch them while I make my notes," he said, "and bring your heavy jackets. George says there's a storm coming in this afternoon. We'll want to be back before it hits." It was a warm, bright and sunny morning, and I couldn't imagine it becoming a stormy day. Stephan's winding route took us along a narrow little sidewalk of sand that followed the base of the clifflike dunes. There was a gap between two dunes like a secret doorway, and we turned inland toward a big pond.



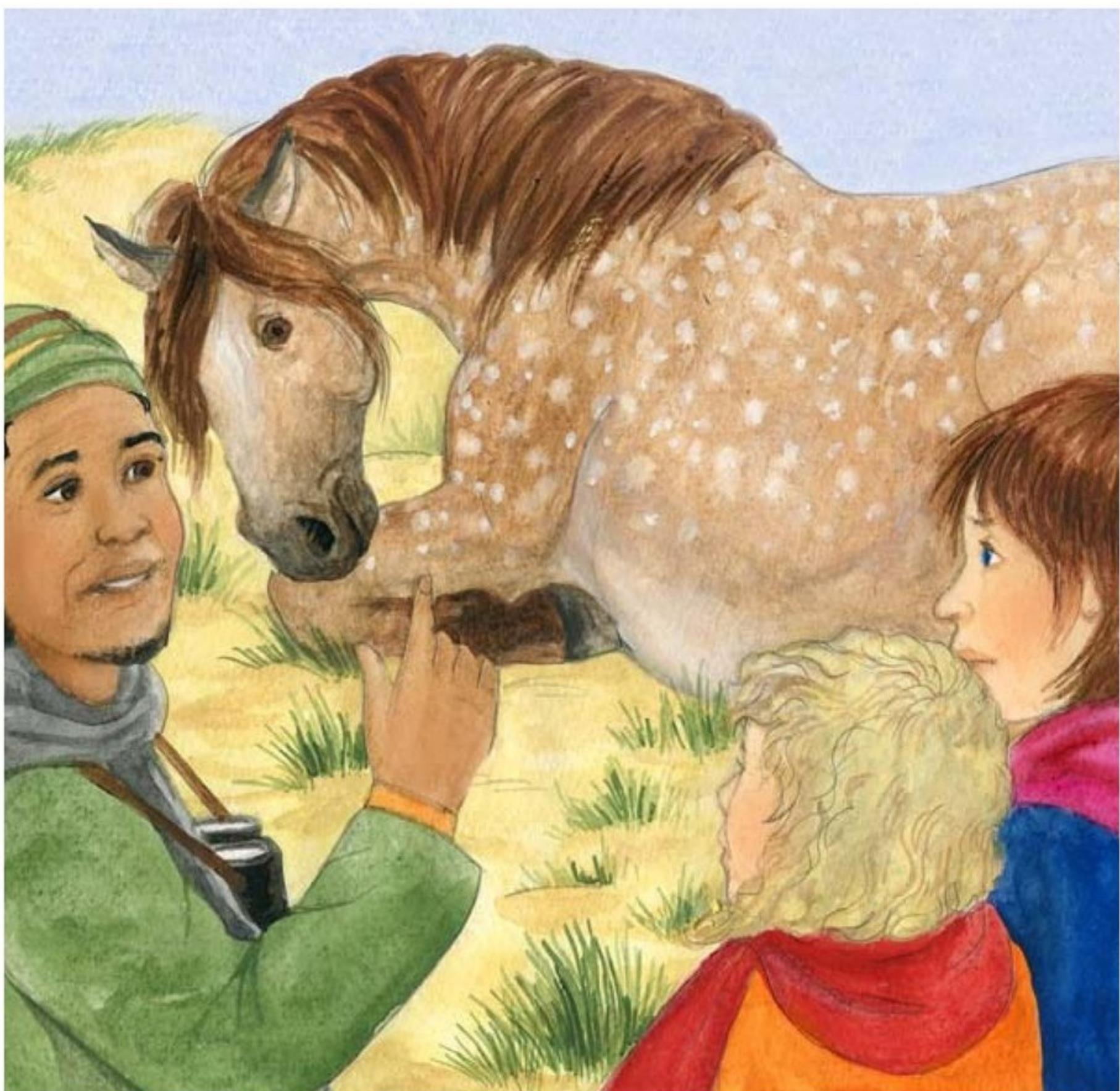


We followed Stephan to a narrow little valley where the grass was thick and green around a shimmering pond. There were dozens of horses all around, with a few lying in the warm sun, as if it were a spa. I asked Stephan why some of their bellies were so big. "They're pregnant," he said. "Their **foals** will be born in a couple of months."

We stayed in the little valley for a long time, photographing and drawing the horses, while Stephan took notes in a thick binder. Some of the horses walked up to us again, staring curiously before wandering off.

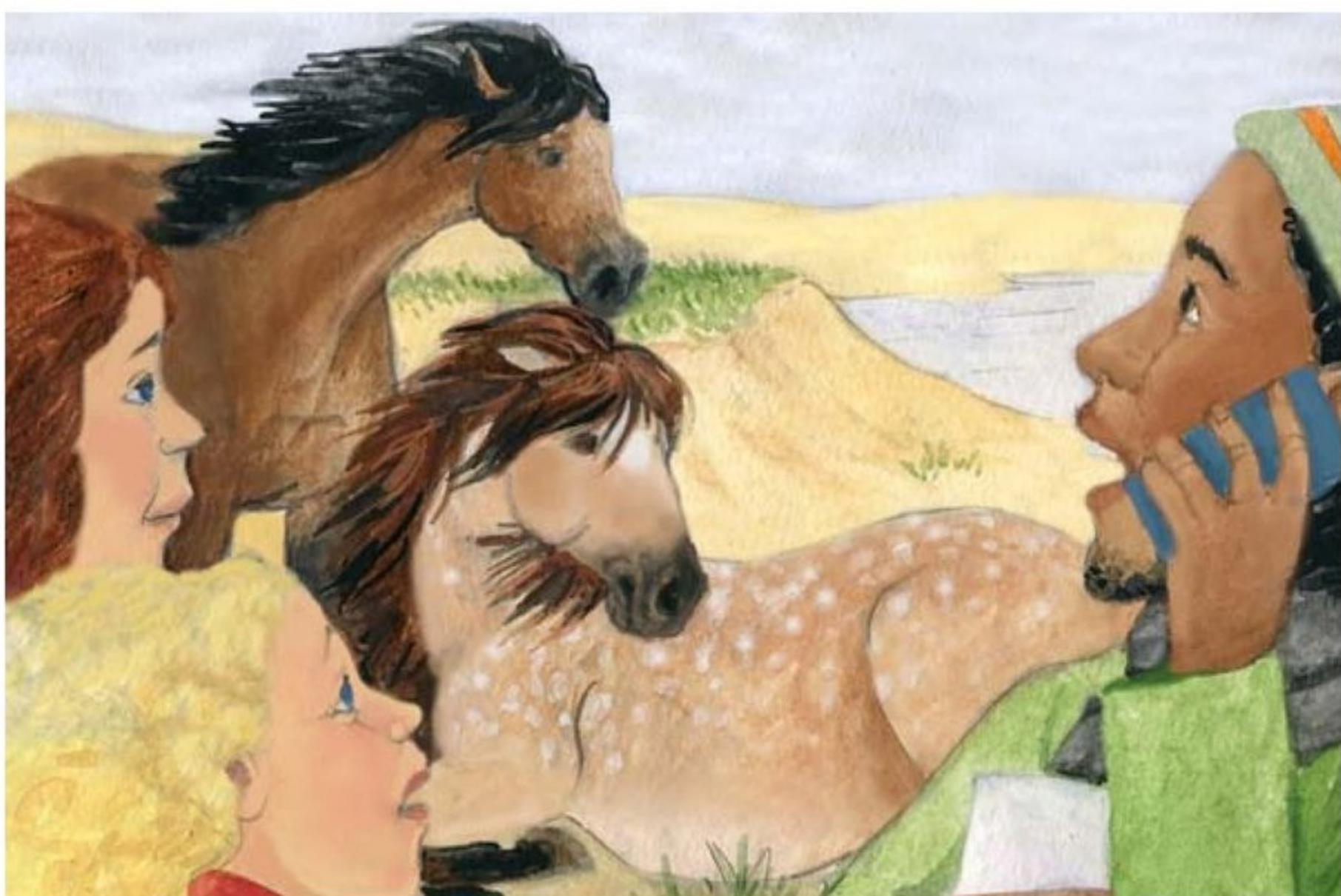
Stephan kept raising his binoculars to watch one horse in particular. She was one of the big-bellied ones, with pretty pale spots across her sides. She kept pacing back and forth, shifting her feet, lying down and getting up, over and over.

"She seems **distressed**," Stephan said. The horse approached him cautiously and stopped. She suddenly dropped to her knees, and Stephan motioned for us to stay back. "She might be sick, or she could be having her foal already," Stephan said. "Stay back a little. Don't touch her," he said.



I'd been watching the speckled horse so closely that I hadn't noticed that Mimi was shivering—even in her heavy jacket. The wind had become more forceful, and the clouds looked darker and fatter. The speckled horse's skin shivered, and she let out a sound like a heavy sigh. Other horses would walk over and stand by her, as if comforting her. Stephan's radio crackled, and suddenly Mom's voice cut through the noise. "Are my girls still with you, Stephan?" she asked. "There's a strong storm approaching fast. You all need to come back to the station," Mom said.

"We're near the West Ponds. We've been watching a horse that seems to be having trouble," Stephan told her. "We'll leave right away," he said, nodding toward us.



"We can't just leave this poor horse out in the storm!" Mimi insisted. "Doesn't Mom care even a little bit about a horse having its baby at the wrong time?" But Stephan patiently urged us to start back. It was difficult walking, and as we approached the opening in the cliffs, it was obvious we couldn't go that way. The wind had whipped up enormous waves that covered the beach in gulps, digging dangerous-looking hollows in the towering sand.

"We'll have to go back across the island and return to the station along the South Beach path," Stephan said, worriedly checking his watch. "It's almost high tide. This is bad timing."

We zigzagged back through the dunes while howling walls of wind stung our faces and eyes with whipping sand. The sky to the southwest was stone black, and the waves had piled up so high that South Beach was covered as well. "This storm is too severe," Stephen said. "We'll have to find a sheltered spot here in the valley," he said.



We retraced our way back to the valley where the horses were. Right in the middle of an open space, exposed and **vulnerable**, lay the speckled horse. She panted heavily, her sides heaving with her struggle. “Can’t you help her?” I choked.

“She must be having her foal,” Stephan said, shaking his head. “Remember, we aren’t allowed to interfere with the horses, no matter what happens. We have to find a sheltered spot and get out of this wind.” He led us to a dip behind a tall dune, where he dug a little hollow for us to sit closely together. Rain spattered down just as we settled against the sand, covering ourselves with our scarves and jacket hoods. We could still see the speckled horse struggling to stand in the blowing rain. Other horses came and stood around her, as if using their bodies to shelter her from the storm. Two of them dropped to their knees alongside of her, their backsides facing the wind.

The hard rain became wet snow, coming down so thickly that we couldn’t see the speckled horse. “I know it’s hard to just sit here and not do anything, but we can’t, not even to save them,” Stephan said. “The rules are meant to preserve their true wild nature. The horses sometimes live through tragedies, but they will also live through miracles.”



We remained crouched behind that dune, trying to protect ourselves while the poor horse struggled to have her foal. Then, without making a sound, a heavy shape appeared over us. Another horse lay down in the snow, right in the path of the wind. Its long mane blew almost over our toes. "Mimi, look," I said quietly, nudging her ribs. She wiped her eyes and saw the horses, now perhaps half a dozen of them, gathered around us.

"They're keeping us safe," Mimi said quietly, "just like they're watching out for the mother horse." As if to agree, the horse lying closest to us let out a soft whinny and shook its heavy mane. With the sturdy horses sheltering us, everything now seemed bearable.

Just as quickly as it had begun, the snow stopped, and the dim sky grew brighter. We could finally see the open space where all the other horses had gathered, their heads lowered over a shape on the ground.

The mother horse was half sitting up. Next to her was a tiny, dark body, all folded up in pointy angles. The mother licked it, but it didn't move. Then she gave it a nudge with her nose. Its big knees jerked, and a little head popped up on a long, thin neck. Stephan laughed. "The foal is alive—they both made it!" Gently, the mother encouraged her foal to stand but the tiny bundle swayed on his knees and shook his head.



Our concentration was disrupted by mom's research helicopter swooping in to land. Some of the horses startled, and ran away. Mom tumbled out and ran toward us. "Girls, you're all right!" she cried, trying to gather us up in an awkward hug. "I'm sorry I scared the horses," she said into Mimi's hair. "And I didn't mean to ignore you," she added, looking over at me. "I just didn't understand that the horses matter to you in the same way that the seals matter to me," she said. She smiled proudly at me, and it seemed as though she really did understand.

We named the new foal Miracle and watched him take his first determined steps. Everything felt newly born and fragile to me, not just the little foal. It seemed so unlikely that any of us should be there at the time—yet, right then it was as if we all belonged on Sable Island.



Glossary

civilization (<i>n.</i>)	an organized society that has a stable food supply, government, social structure, culture, written language, and religion (p. 5)
distressed (<i>adj.</i>)	caused to feel extreme sorrow, anxiety, or pain (p. 17)
dunes (<i>n.</i>)	hills of sand formed by wind (p. 6)
excursions (<i>n.</i>)	short journeys that are usually taken for pleasure; outings (p. 5)
foals (<i>n.</i>)	newborn or young horses (p. 16)
inquiring (<i>adj.</i>)	curious; seeking or asking for information (p. 11)
isolated (<i>adj.</i>)	far away from other people or things (p. 4)
muzzle (<i>n.</i>)	the part of an animal's face that sticks out and contains the nose and mouth (p. 11)
sandbars (<i>n.</i>)	long ridges of sand formed in a shallow body of water by currents and tides (p. 8)
unkempt (<i>adj.</i>)	messy; not combed or cared for (p. 11)
vulnerable (<i>adj.</i>)	able to be hurt easily (p. 20)
zoologist (<i>n.</i>)	a biologist who studies animal life (p. 5)

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Editor's Note:

Born On Sable Island is a fictional story and our characters are not intended to represent real people. Currently, only a handful of people are year-round residents of Sable Island.

Early in the year, after most seal pups have been born, a photographic seal count is conducted, usually using a camera mounted on a helicopter. The goal is to photograph and account for each seal, so that any major increase or decrease in the number of seals, or a significant change in their location, can be tracked.

The wild Sable Island horses are usually counted in early summer, but their welfare is monitored throughout the year. They live in small, individual herds scattered across the island and can be hard to find, and count accurately, when the island is covered in fog. Sable Island horses have their own life cycle and most island foals are born in May and June. It is unusual, and can be life-threatening, for a mare to give birth too early in the year, but it happens a few times each year.

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