

Chapter 3

Brrrrrr!! The alarm goes off making me jump, even though I'm wide awake as I am just lying here in bed daydreaming. Stretching out an arm, I quickly turn it off. It's much too early for such an ear-splitting noise.

Six thirty in the morning, and I have a busy day ahead.

My first job is to do my usual paper round at 7am. I love it. Why? Well, for one thing it means more money to add to my pony bucket!

I spring out of bed and run across the room, pull open my curtains, and stand quietly for a couple of seconds staring out of the window. The weather is miserable. The nearby South Downs are covered in mist, but even this cannot put a dampener on today for me. I'm just too excited. I'm not due at the riding school until 9.00am. I have plenty of time.

Normally I'm as quiet as a mouse delivering the morning papers, not wanting to disturb people, but today I can't help it and sing loudly as I put the papers through the letter boxes. By the time I arrive home at seven thirty, the mist is clearing and for an October morning it's very mild and my spirits are soaring.

I gallop into kitchen and my breakfast is sitting waiting for me on the kitchen table. I grind to a halt. Oh no, now what am I supposed to do? I'm too excited to eat anything. I nibble on a slice of toast and naughtily as Mum disappears down the hallway, I put the remainder of my breakfast into the bin. I know my Mum all too well, she will continue to moan at me if I don't eat all of my breakfast. I can just hear her saying, *'You cannot go out on an empty stomach young lady,'* and would go on and on and on..... I mimic this in my head, moving my lips as I say the words, only just managing to stifle my giggles. Grinning, I shout out up the hallway "Lovely breakfast, thanks Mum!"

My riding school clothes are warming on my bedroom radiator. Mum does this with most of my clothes in the cold damp months, especially with my school uniform. It's a lovely feeling, as I am all warm and cosy as I get dressed. I grab them off the radiator and get changed.

I look in the mirror to check my appearance. "Wow," I say out aloud but not meaning to. "*How smart do I look?*" I hardly recognise myself. My smile turns into a huge grin as I pose at every angle possible, sideways, backwards, in fact nearly turning myself inside out. Suddenly, have a feeling I am being watched and turn around to see Mum chuckling away at my antics. She manages to blurt out in between her giggles, "You look very smart love."

It's now time for me to be on my way and Dad has joined Mum to say goodbye, each giving me a kiss.

"Enjoy yourself Emily and good luck. We'll look forward to hearing all about your day when you come home tonight. Please be careful," says Dad, with a big grin on his face.

I'm just about to leave through the front door when I hear Mum's voice. "Emily love, hang on, you nearly forgot your lunch box. I've made your favourite sandwiches."

"Thanks Mum, I don't know what I'd do without you," I reply as I trot back to get them from her.

"*Oh no,*" I groan to myself, how am I going to cope with this? You'll never guess what my favourite sandwiches are. Now it's your turn to stifle your giggles. They consist of cucumber, salad cream with lots of black pepper on the top. This could be very embarrassing for me on my first day. I wonder what the others are going to say at lunchtime when I pull out my favourite sandwiches. "Oh well," I grumble to myself, I'll have to deal with this later.

Jumping onto my bike I pedal like mad down the road, arriving promptly at the stables at 8.30am. I want to be early, I just hate being late for anything.

Padlocking my bike to the railings outside the yard I eagerly walk through the main gates, taking deep steadying breaths as I enter, holding my body upright with as much

confidence as I can manage. Walking up the pathway to the yard, my heart is now beating hard and turning around I anxiously double check that I've shut the gate properly.

Above the gate is a big sign saying 'Reception' in fancy black letters with an arrow pointing to a building off to the right. I head in that direction and I am now standing at the main reception ringing the doorbell. I take another deep breath. 'DING DONG', no answer. I have my finger poised ready to try again when a tall thin lady with mousy brown hair suddenly opens the door.

"Hello, can I help you?" she asks in a very friendly voice.

"Good morning, my name is Emily. I'm here to see Mrs Evans."

"Come in a second. My name's Jodie and I am the head groom here. Please take a seat," she says pointing to a chair in front of the desk. "Mrs Evans will be with you shortly." I look Jodie up and down. I think she is around 30 years old and seems a very nice lady.

I sit patiently and take the opportunity to look around the office. My jaw is agape as I glance around. Rosettes completely cover one wall. I've never seen so many. Moving my head slowly to look at the next wall, photographs of horses and ponies jumping various courses, taking part in gymkhanas, show jumping, and cross country. Some of the photographs are in colour, others are in black and white. I am now looking in the other direction to the far corner of the office a large oak, glass-fronted cabinet, catches my eye. To me the cabinet looks as though it's smiling, it is so bright and glistening. It's full of silver and gold gleaming trophies together with crystal bowls sparkling in the light. I slowly drift off into a daydream. I imagine one day having a big silver trophy sitting on my bedroom cabinet and rosettes covering my bedroom walls.

Suddenly, a voice startles me, and I jump back to reality instantly.

"Hello dear, I'm Mrs Evans, what a pleasure it is to meet you."

I look up and see a very slim middle-aged lady. She's wearing cream coloured jodhpurs and a very nice expensive looking riding jacket.

I can't help noticing she's wearing far too much make up. In fact, it's a big possibility she must have been in a real hurry this morning as her bright red lipstick is lop sided, and even worse, she has quite a bit of it smudged on her chin! I'm trying so hard not to laugh and try to focus on something else but decide the best thing to do at this present moment, is to look away quickly.

Mrs Evans holds out a thin right hand which I eagerly grasp and shake. She has a very strong handshake herself, and I think I can feel my bones being scrunched.

"It's so nice to see you have arrived here early, dear. I do like punctuality. I must say I am very impressed already young lady," she says in a very refined manner.

Suddenly I feel at ease and start to relax. This results in a big cheeky grin covering my face.

Mrs Evans continues, "Leave your bag down there under my desk, dear. I'll take you for a quick tour around the school and introduce you to some of our residents. After we have finished, Jodie will then show you what she would like you to do today."

I follow Mrs Evans out into the main yard, the smell of horses fills the air. *Mmmm, what a beautiful smell, I just love that smell, a perfect aroma, I wish I could put it in a bottle and carry it around all the time.* The sound of hooves on the concrete is music to my ears and in the distance, I can hear horses whinnying. The yard is already a hive of activity.

"We keep our big horses in this yard dear, twenty-four in total. In the bottom yard, where you'll be helping, we have twenty plus ponies, and another 12 ponies living out," explains Mrs Evans.

At this point I decide to turn away to hide my smile. I want to giggle every time she calls me 'dear.'

As I look around, wheelbarrows are dotted here and there. Some are full, others only half full and I hear happy voices chattering away whilst water buckets are filled, and feed buckets are washed out. One of the helper's waves to me and I eagerly wave back. I can't help smiling, I'm so happy.

Mrs Evans' walk is a lot faster than mine, so I have to keep jogging to keep up with her. We walk along a big wide concrete path surrounded by beautiful green fields. Two donkeys to the right catch my eye.

Mrs Evans speaks. "The two donkeys you see over there dear, are called Jack and Jill and they came to live here after their elderly owners sadly died. They are inseparable, and are around twenty years of age, which is very young in donkey years. Everyone here absolutely adores them. I'll tell you a very funny story, dear. The daughter of the previous owners told me one day, this was a few years ago mind you, their Great Nan came to stay. She was 81 years old and always loved to sit on a certain wooden bench outside the bungalow reading her daily newspaper. One day the daughter's youngest child, who was only 8 years old, was wandering around holding Jack on a lead rope. The child needed to use the toilet urgently, so he decided to tether Jack to the wooden bench where poor Great Nan was sitting. Jill was on her own in the paddock and suddenly she let out an almighty 'Eeyore'. Jack's head shot up in the air. He let out an almighty 'Eeyore' back to her and then took off at full speed galloping towards Jill. Unfortunately, Jack was still tied to the wooden bench which he was managing to pull behind him with Great Nan hanging on for dear life!"

I now have a picture of this in my head and cannot help myself and laugh out loud.

Mrs Evans totally ignores my outburst and continues, "Great Nan did in fact topple off the wooden bench, but thankfully no bones were broken."

I laugh again, this time louder.

Once again Mrs Evans ignores me and continues. “The ponies out in the field on the left live out all year round, dear. They are native breeds so are very tough and hardy. We bring them in every day to check they’re all fit and healthy. Sometimes when we have very wet weather, we take them to the indoor school and let them free, dear. They love to run and play and roll in the sand”.

Out of the corner of my eye I suddenly see a very scruffy looking pony. She is trotting around with the tip of her tail bone pointing to the sky and her tail flowing out behind her. Then she turns and is prancing, then dancing, then snorting, and just generally showing off. My heart is thumping. This is the most beautiful pony I have ever seen in my life.

“Mrs Evans,” I blurt out. “What’s the name of the pony who is prancing around?”

“That, my dear, is Ballerina. A very sad story. She has been here for about four months now. Janet a friend of mine rescued her. She was on holiday and was out walking her dogs one day and came across this poor mite who had been left all on her own in a field. There wasn’t any grass for her to eat, no hay and the water trough only contained dried up mud. She had brambles stuck in her tail and was very weak. To cut a long story short dear, after calling me, my friend managed to track down the owner. She offered him a small amount of money for Ballerina and informed him that if he didn’t agree to the deal, she would call in the animal welfare. He reluctantly agreed, signed some paperwork and handed over her passport. Janet then called me, and I drove to Hampshire with the trailer so we could bring her home. She really was in a pitiful state, very weak and it took us around an hour to coax her into the trailer. I called the vets on the way home and they were waiting for us when we arrived. Thankfully, my friend had found her just in time. She had worms coming out of her bottom dear, and her teeth needed to be rasped as the poor mite had sores in her mouth. She was also very underweight.”

I watch Ballerina, my eyes full of tears.

“She’s beautiful,” I quietly mumble.

“I totally agree dear, she’s a bit of a handful now though. She has fully recovered from her terrible ordeal and is now a very strong-willed pony. Not many people can get close to her because she likes to take the odd piece of flesh from your body, dear. I need to find time to work with her. The vet thinks she is around five years old, which does match up with the passport.”

“I could help you with her,” I blurt out from nowhere.

“Maybe in the future dear. Certainly not yet as I don’t want you getting hurt,” Mrs Evans replies.

Glancing over at Ballerina, I swear she winked at me. I must be imagining things and blink rapidly.

Mrs Evans is walking quickly again. I trot behind her until we eventually arrive at the bottom yard. The yard is set out in a beautiful big L-shape with a huge hay barn down the bottom of the long end. It’s very impressive. The barn stands tall and wide, and it’s full to bursting with sweet smelling hay and straw. I take deep breaths inhaling the beautiful aroma and wonder how many bales fit into the barn. Must be hundreds I think to myself.

“This is Orbit,” says Mrs Evans in a very fond voice. He’s eight years old and as you can see, he’s a palomino, dear. He’s a lovely little mover, sweet natured but also very cheeky. He’s a terrible show off and likes to prance around with his tail high in the air, a bit like Ballerina you saw earlier. He’s quite a character and a very good jumper.”

Moving from stable to stable, she continues to tell me all about the ponies, their ages and how long she has owned them.

There are so many. There’s Matty, Sunshine, Trigger, Jet, Snowy, Thimble, St. Christopher, Tinker, Gunner. Then I stop in my tracks. A beautiful bronze looking pony catches my eye. He’s very handsome. Mrs Evans informs me that his name is Sundance. What

a fabulous name. I have a picture in my head of him dancing around in the sun and smile covers my face.

I'm finding it very difficult to remember all the names, but much to my relief I notice each pony has a name plate on the front of their stable door. I can't stop thinking of Ballerina. What a beautiful girl she is, and what an awful time she'd had until she was rescued and came to live here.

Mrs Evans rushes off to teach a lesson, so Jodie takes over and gives me some jobs to do. I'm eager and can't wait to get started.

Introducing myself to some of the girls I'm happy to say they are all very friendly and we chat away. One girl in particular, called Kate, seems to share my sense of humour and we laugh about various topics as we continue working.

Everybody works very hard and there's no time to stop and have a rest if everything is to be done on time. It is soon lunchtime and Kate asks me if I would like to join her for lunch in the hay barn.

"That would be great, I'll just get my sandwiches. I left them in reception earlier."

Returning to the barn where Kate is waiting for me, we climb twenty bales high and settle down to have lunch. What a magnificent view of the yard. The smell of horses and ponies, hay and straw fill the air, and I think to myself how heavenly this is. To top it all, I can even see Ballerina happily grazing in the field. I have a warm loving feeling in my heart.

Here we go, I silently think to myself as I get out my lunch box.

"Is that Salad Cream I can smell?" asks Kate, sniffing the air looking like a sniffer dog.

"Correct, cucumber, salad cream, covered in lots of black pepper," I reply. "What have you got in yours?"

“Ready salted crisps with Branston pickle on the top,” she replies in all seriousness. We then fall about laughing and Kate nearly topples off the end of the bale she’s sitting on. We’re going to get on very well.

“Kate, do you know much about Ballerina? Mrs Evans has told me how her friend rescued her.”

“Oh, Ballerina? Yes most people here call her Bella for short.”

I interrupt quickly, “Bella, but Bella is going to be the name of my dream pony, when I eventually get her. How spooky is that?”

Kate continues, “I’m not sure this Bella is anyone’s dream pony Emily. Only Mrs Evans and Jodie can get near her. She likes to bite people. It’s possible someone has hit her over her head at some point because when anyone attempts to stroke her, she pulls her head away so fast and snorts. If you don’t move out of the way quickly enough, she will lunge at you. The lady who rescued her isn’t a horsey person, but she couldn’t bear to leave her where she was in that desperate state. She does pay for her keep though.”

“There’s just something about her that I love,” I reply. “We have 15 minutes left. I’m going to wander down to see her. Are you coming?”

“You go, I need to wash my hands. I’ll see you back in the yard,” replies Kate.

I wander down to the field and stand at the wooden post and rail gently calling to Bella. Lifting her head Bella looks straight at me. She takes a few steps towards me then stops. I continue to talk to her in a gentle voice. She comes another step nearer and puts her head high in the air and snorts. I turn my head slightly away from her. My heart is pounding, she is so beautiful. Her coat is a dirty cream colour and I sigh. The vision I have of my dream pony, is that she will be a golden dun in colour.

“Bella, come nearer to me. I’m not going to hurt you,” I say in a gentle voice. My head is still turned away from her, I continue, “You are the most beautiful girl I have ever seen in

the whole of my life.” I stoop down low. Bella is now only two feet away. I’m as still as a statue. She’s coming nearer. She puts her head over the fence to smell my hair. I can smell and feel her warm breath blowing gently on my head. I’m literally glued to the spot. Bella moves backwards, snorts and trots away. I’m grinning like a Cheshire cat.

My first day is amazing. I carry so many water buckets, my arms feel as if they’re going to drop off. Suddenly, I have a vision of arriving home a couple of inches shorter and dragging my hands along the ground, like an orang-utan because my arms have stretched so much with the heavy lifting. Mum’s face would be a picture. I can’t help myself and burst out laughing.

I’ve lifted countless bales of hay and straw onto wheelbarrows, and to be honest I’ve lost count of how many times I went from the hay barn to the stables and back again. I feel like a Yoyo. I hosed down the main yard and have blisters on my hands from so much sweeping.

I’m completely shattered at the end of my shift, and after saying my goodbyes and blowing a kiss to Bella, I very slowly cycle home. My arms ache, my legs ache, my back aches and I feel as if I have been thrown through a hedge.

Mum and Dad are waiting for me when I get in. They are eager to hear about my first day.

“Well? How did it go love?” asks Mum.

I tell them about the donkeys and of course, all about Bella. Mum has tears in her eyes as she listens, and then blurts out, “How can people be so evil to an innocent animal?”

Dad being Dad tells me to be very careful and to listen to Mrs Evans. He doesn’t want me getting hurt or bitten.

At last, it’s time for a nice long bath to help ease my aching bones and to change into something nice and comfortable.

It's all I can do to eat my dinner. My eyes are very heavy and start to close. I'm so very tired. Excusing myself from the table I hobble to my bedroom with every intention of reading a bit of my book before I go to sleep. Crawling into bed and opening my book....

I open my eyes and blink rapidly. The light is shining in through a gap in my curtains. My book is still open at the same page. I must have fallen asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow and hardly moved at all during the night.