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opening extract from

How to Survive Summer Camp

written by

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Chapter One

I sat in the back of the car in my new T-shirt and my stiff new jeans and my pristine trainers and groaned. I kept dabbing at my new haircut. It felt terrible. Everyone would laugh at me. I thought about all these strange children at the summer camp. I peered down at the black lettering on my emerald green T-shirt. It said I LOVE EVERGREEN ADVENTURE HOLIDAYS. My new T-shirt was a liar.

'Are you all right, Stella?' Mum asked worriedly, turning round. 'Do you feel sick? You look a bit green.'

'To match my awful T-shirt,' I muttered, tugging at it.

'I think you look very fetching in your new outfit,' said Uncle Bill.

I didn't answer. I just pulled a face at his back. I couldn't stick my Uncle Bill. Which was a great pity, because he'd married Mum that morning.

I was the bridesmaid. Mum had bought me a

very expensive blue dress with puff sleeves and a long flouncy skirt. It had its own white lace pinafore and with my plaits undone and combed out Mum said I looked like Alice in Wonderland.

Only I didn't look like Alice at the wedding after all. I looked more like Humpty Dumpty, as bald as a boiled egg.

It was all a terrible mistake. Mum said I could go to a posh hairdressers and have my hair properly cut and styled the week before the wedding. She wanted to come with me but she had to work. I said I could go by myself, I wasn't a baby.

So I went after school and talked to this man called Kevin who looked like a rock star. He asked me how I wanted my hair cut. I decided I didn't want it too short. I measured a tiny amount with my thumb and finger. Kevin nodded and his scissors flashed. I screamed as they snipped. He hadn't understood. Before I could get away he'd snipped one side of my head to a stubble. He'd thought I wanted it that length!

He couldn't leave it like that, half stubble, half flowing golden corn, so he sheared the rest off. Mum cried when she saw me. Uncle Bill said he thought I looked cute, but he was only pretending.

I looked silly in the beautiful blue bridesmaid's dress at the wedding. I looked even sillier now in



my summer camp clothes. I was determined not to be really wet and cry, but I felt as if I might be going to all the same.

'Do try to cheer up a bit, darling,' said Mum, looking round at me again.

'Why should I cheer up?' I mumbled. 'It's not fair. You're going off abroad on your smashing holiday and I'm getting dumped in this horrible summer camp. I bet it'll be even worse than school. I know I'll hate it.'

'It's not my holiday, it's my honeymoon,' said Mum. But then she looked at Uncle Bill and whispered, 'Do you really think she'll be all right?'

I shook my head fiercely.

'Yes,' said Uncle Bill. 'Yes, of course she will. Most of my friends send their kids to summer camps and they all love it. They have a whale of a time.'

'I won't,' I said.

They didn't take any notice.

'I do wish all those other camps hadn't been fully booked,' Mum said. 'This Evergreen place does sound a bit . . . ' She searched for the right word.

I supplied it.

'It sounds a dump.'

'Now don't you be so cheeky,' said Mum, but she didn't sound cross, she sounded worried.

'I think it sounds a marvellous place,' said Uncle Bill. 'It's practically a stately home and it's got these huge grounds and a lovely swimming pool and—'

'Sh!' said Mum, but she was too late.

'I can't go!' I shouted. 'I can't go there, not if there's a swimming pool.'

'I promise you won't have to swim,' said Mum in her special you-can-trust-me tone.

But I couldn't trust Mum any more because she'd been mad enough to marry Uncle Bill.

'They'll make me. They'll throw me in,' I wailed, and I started crying like a baby.

Long ago when Mum was still married to Dad he had taken me swimming. I was only little and I was scared. Dad wanted me to jump in and splash and shout like all the other children. I didn't want to. I just stood on the side of the pool and shivered. Dad was kind at first but then he got cross. I got cross too so then he really lost his temper and threw me in. It was only the shallow end but it felt like Loch Ness to me. Dad hauled me out at once and laughed and tried to turn it into a joke, but I shrank away as if he'd turned into the Loch Ness monster himself.

I still had swimming pool nightmares. I'd never been swimming since.

'And you won't have to go swimming now,' Mum said, leaning over and dabbing at me with a paper hankie. 'I've written to this Brigadier who owns Evergreen. I've explained it all to him. No one's going to force you to swim, honestly. Anyway, you won't be *able* to go in swimming because you haven't packed a swimming costume, have you?'

'They could always make me swim in my knickers,' I mumbled tearfully.

I thought about the swimming pool at this summer camp. I imagined it very large, very blue, very cold. Then I imagined some sinister soldier man grabbing me and throwing me into the water.

'*Please* don't make me go.'

'Don't be so difficult, darling. You've got to go and that's that,' said Mum.

I didn't see why. I didn't see why I couldn't go to Europe with them. Mum kept saying I'd find it boring because they were just staying in cities and looking at lots of churches and galleries and museums, and anyway, it was their honeymoon. I thought they were much too old to have a honeymoon.

'Stop crying now, Stella. You don't want all the other children seeing you with red eyes, do you?' said Mum.

I used up three paper hankies blowing and mopping.

'Does it look as if I've been crying?' I asked anxiously.

'Not at all,' Mum lied. 'Hey, Bill—see those big gates on the right? I think we're there.'

I slunk down in the back of the car as Uncle Bill turned through the big gates and drove up the long gravel drive bordered by thick fir trees.

'It all looks very grand, doesn't it?' he said brightly. 'Look at all the Christmas trees, Stella. Why don't you sit up properly and see if you can see the house?'

I wriggled down further until my jeans nearly came up to my chin.

We turned a corner, the fir trees petered out, and here we were, at Evergreen. We stared at it in silence. It was great grey gloomy house with a tall tower at one end.

'It . . . it looks a little like a castle in a fairy tale,' said Mum desperately.

'No it doesn't,' I said. 'It looks like a prison. And I don't like that tower. I bet that's where they lock up all the naughty ones. Mum, *please*. Don't let them lock me up in this awful place.'

'Don't be silly, Stella,' said Mum, but she looked at Uncle Bill worriedly.

A big man came jogging round the corner of the house, a whistle bouncing up and down on his barrel chest.

'He'll tell us where to go,' said Uncle Bill, and he got out of the car quickly and called to him. The big man bounded across the drive towards us.

'Hello there. Welcome to Evergreen,' he panted. Little hisses steamed from his crimson nostrils.

'How do you do?' said Uncle Bill. 'Are you the Brigadier, by any chance?'

The big man shook his head, smiling.

'I'm the activities organizer,' he said. He spotted me cowering in the back of the car. 'You can call me Uncle Ron.'

I was sick of all these uncles. Uncle Bill forced

me out of the car to say hello. Uncle Ron patted me on my horribly cropped head.

'Welcome to Evergreen, sonny,' he said.

Sonny! I nearly died on the spot. He thought I was a boy.

'I'm a *girl*,' I said furiously.

Uncle Ron looked at me properly and then roared with laughter. His pale grey tracksuit was dark grey under his arms and he smelt.

'Sorry, Your Highness,' said Uncle Ron. 'What's your name then?'

'Stella Stebbings.'

'Ah yes. Stella. Jolly dee. Well, do you want to come through the woods with me to meet the other children? They're having a picnic by the poolside.'

'No thank you,' I said, backing away.

'We'd like to see the Brigadier first,' said Mum, getting out of the car and blowing her nose vigorously.

'I expect he'll be a bit tied up at the moment,' said Uncle Ron. 'But you can see his daughter, Miss Hamer-Cotton.'

There was a faraway sound of children shouting.

'Duty calls,' said Uncle Ron, and he jogged away.

Uncle Bill got my suitcase out of the car boot. Mum went up the steps to the front door and

rapped the lion's head knocker. She beckoned to me but I stayed down on the gravel path. I turned my back and wrote in the gravel with my toe. I HATE EVERGREE . . . The door opened when I was halfway through the N. I quickly scrubbed it out before anyone could see. I now had one brilliant white trainer and one very grey and scuffed.

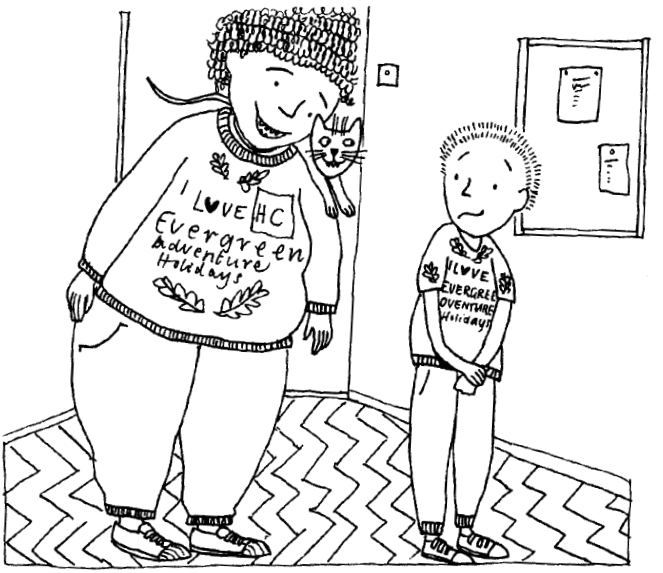
'Hello. Another new arrival at this time!' said an old lady in an orange overall. She shook her head at me. 'You're all behind like the donkey's tail. You've missed your picnic.'

'Can we have a quick word with the Brigadier, please?' said Mum.

'It'll be Miss Hamer-Cotton, dear. She takes care of all the new arrivals. This way, please.'

She led the way down the polished parquet corridor. My trainers squeaked and I left a little trail of dusty footprints. Orange Overall looked round and tutted, but she didn't say anything because I had Mum with me. I decided I didn't like her.

I didn't think much of Miss Hamer-Cotton either. She had very neat curled hair like rows of knitting and a powder blue tracksuit. It was meant to be baggy but her bottom filled it right up at the back. A little Siamese cat crouched on her shoulder and looked at me suspiciously. I held out



a hand to stroke him but he bared sharp little teeth. I changed my mind about wanting to make friends. Miss Hamer-Cotton had sharp little teeth too. They showed a lot when she smiled.

'Welcome to Evergreen,' she said, shaking hands with Mum and Uncle Bill. She just waggled her fingers at me, and then plucked at her tracksuit apologetically. 'Excuse my sports gear. I've been organizing a few team races. We always like to have lots of games the first afternoon and then a great big picnic tea.'

I was glad I'd missed this famous picnic. I wasn't a bit hungry anyway because of what I'd eaten in the Wine Bar after the wedding. Mum

said I could have absolutely anything I wanted so I did. I had cherry cheesecake, Black Forest gateau, sherry trifle, chocolate mousse, and lemon meringue pie. I'd never eaten five huge puddings in one go before. By the time I got to the chocolate mousse I felt a little odd and I could only toy with the lemon meringue pie, leaving all the pastry, but I still reckon it was a considerable achievement.

Mum asked to see the Brigadier and Miss Hamer-Cotton explained he was hopelessly tied up right now and did we have any little problems we wanted to discuss? So Mum got started on Stella's Swimming Phobia and I blushed and fidgeted and felt foolish. Orange Overall brought in a big tray of tea and biscuits. The tea was almost as orange as her overall. The milk had separated into little white lumps floating on the bright surface. I only risked one sip.

The Siamese cat had his own special little saucer of milk.

'So he doesn't feel left out,' said Miss Hamer-Cotton. 'He's my special little boy, aren't you, Tinkypoo?'

I spluttered and Mum glared at me. She asked if she could meet the rest of the camp staff but they were all down in the woods with the children having their picnic. They sounded a bit like those teddy bears.

'Can we have a little look round the house then?' Mum asked.

So we went to see the Television Room. It contained a television. The Games Room wasn't very inspiring either. Two lots of table tennis took up most of the room. There were some school chairs and a little table covered with tattered comics that looked years out of date and a pile of board games and some lumps of very old grey plasticine that made the whole room reek.

'Of course the children only use the Games Room in very bad weather,' said Miss Hamer-Cotton. 'We keep them outdoors as much as possible. You wait till you see Stella when you come to collect her. I can guarantee she'll be as brown as a berry.'

'I don't go brown, I go red and burn,' I said.

'Can we see Stella's bedroom?' Mum said quickly.

'We put all the children in cosy little dormitories,' said Miss Hamer-Cotton. 'It's much more fun. We've put you in the Emerald dormi, Stella.'

The Emerald dormitory wasn't my idea of cosy. It had six little iron bedsteads straight out of a Victorian orphanage story, six little chests, and one green mat on the vinyl floor.

'We like to keep things simple,' said Miss Hamer-Cotton. 'Well, if you say goodbye to Stella now she can get unpacked before the other children come back from their picnic.'

Uncle Bill bent forward. I was scared he was going to kiss me so I edged away. He ended up kissing the air next to my cheek.

'Have a lovely time, Stella. Don't worry. You'll soon settle down. I'll look after Mummy for you and we'll send you lots of postcards.'

Mum didn't say anything at all. She hugged me very hard, gave me one big kiss, and then rushed out of the room. Uncle Bill went after her. Miss Hamer-Cotton said, 'This is your bed and chest, Stella. All right? See you later on, dear.' Then she went out too.

I was left all alone, abandoned at Evergreen.