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Opening extract from

Fancy Dress Ponies

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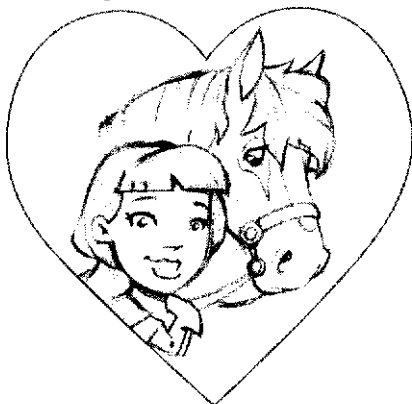
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Vicki's Riding School

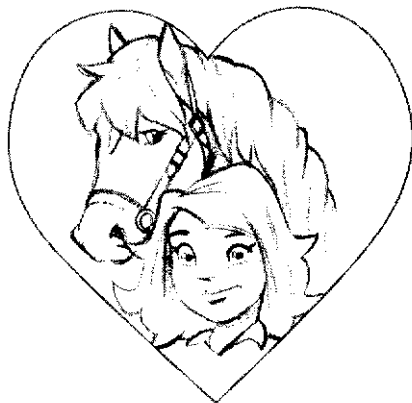
Vicki



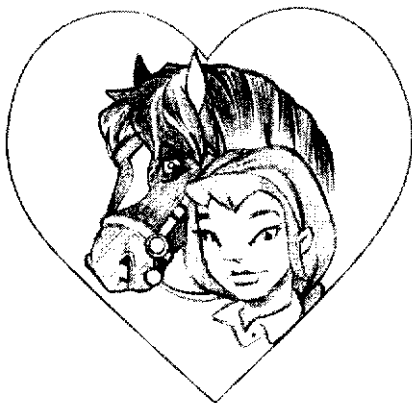
Jess and Rose



Cara and Taffy



Amber and Stella



Sam and Beanz



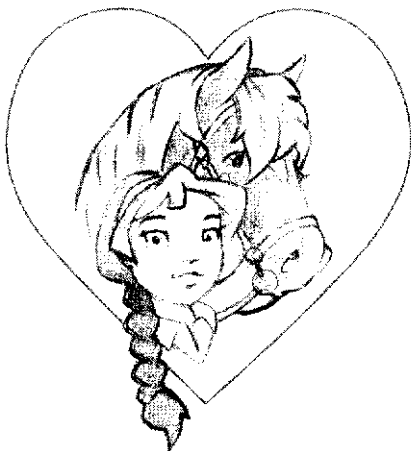
Mel and Candy

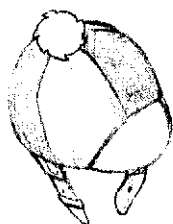


Henrietta and President



Darcy and Duke



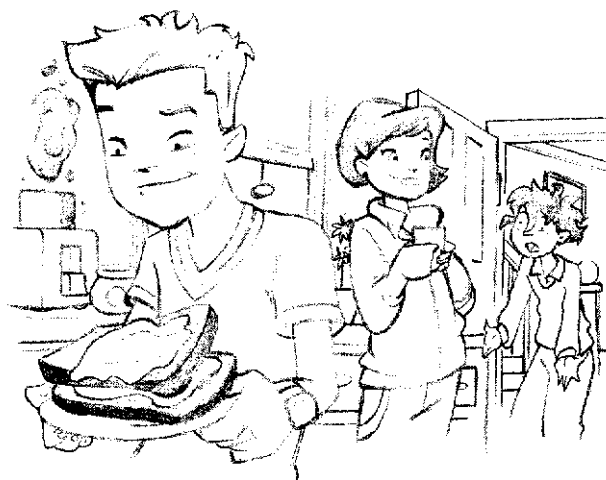


Chapter 1

Sam ran into the kitchen, where her big brother Alfie was busy burning toast.

“Mum, where’s my wellies?” she shouted.

Sam’s mum looked up from her cup of tea.
“Where they always are – in the cupboard under the stairs,” she said.



Sam dashed over to the cupboard, which was stuffed with bags, boots, shoes, gloves, socks and scarves. After hunting around a bit she went back to the kitchen with a smile on her face.

“Check this out!” she giggled. “I’ve found a pair but they’re different colours.”

Alfie took one look at his sister with a red spotty welly on one foot and a blue welly on the other and burst out laughing. “You’ve lost the plot, you have,” he said. “You look like a clown!” He laughed so much he spilled the milk from his cereal bowl all over the newspaper his dad was trying to read.



Sam’s dad shook his head and smiled at his two daft children. “She *is* a clown,” he chuckled.

Sam rushed back to the cupboard and poked about a bit more till she found the other blue welly. Running a hand through her spiky ginger hair, she skipped back into the kitchen and grabbed her lunch box.

“Have you got any carrots I can take for Beanz, Mum?”

“That pony gets better fed than me,” said Alfie.

Sam grinned at him. “Oh, poor old Alfie. I’ll bring you back some bran mash and pony nuts for tea tonight, shall I?” she teased.

Sam’s dad was now mopping milk off the paper with his hankie. He looked up. “Calm down, you two. And listen, Sam, just because it’s the holidays, don’t go mad. We all know how lively you and Beanz can be.”

Sam grabbed an apple from the fruit bowl and threw it up in the air. “Beans wouldn’t hurt a fly,” she told him.



Her dad looked at her. "I'm serious, Sam. He's a headstrong pony."

"That's why I love him to bits!" Sam said as she dropped the apple and dashed off to find her coat.

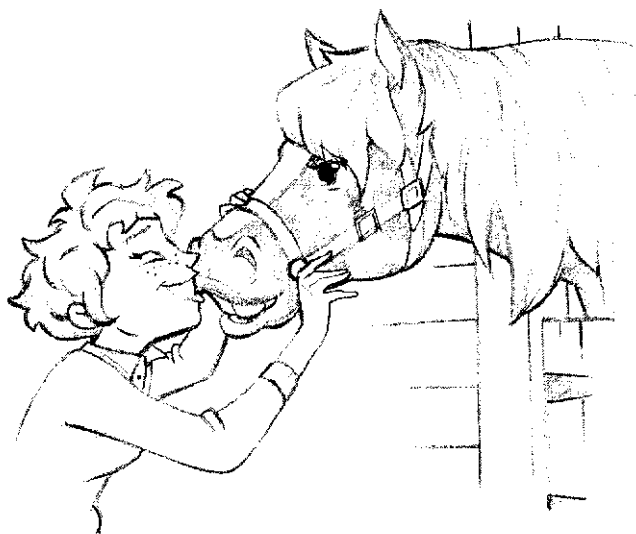
Sam ran all the way to Vicki's Riding School with a smile on her face. It was the start of the school holidays, it was a gorgeous day, and she was on her way to see Beanz, the skewbald New Forest pony she was in special

charge of. Like her friends at the riding school, Sam couldn't afford a pony of her own. She always worked hard at the yard though.

Sam and her friends, Jess, Amber, Mel and Cara, loved doing all the jobs at the yard. They enjoyed mucking out the stables, cleaning the ponies' tack, grooming them, hosing down the yard and even tidying the muck heap! As a swap, Vicki, the owner of the stables, gave them a free riding lesson every week.

Then, after they'd proved that they were really reliable, she'd given each girl a pony to look after as her own. Vicki had told all the girls that this would mean a lot of hard work for them but they didn't mind.

Vicki had given Sam the responsibility of taking care of Beanz because she had a special relationship with him. Preparing Beanz's feed and watching him stuff his face



made Sam smile with pleasure. He'd stick his head right into his feed bucket so he could lick every bit out and then kick it over to see if there was any food hiding underneath! Sam loved grooming him too, brushing his thick coat until it gleamed. And riding him was fantastic!

It was true that Beanz was frisky, especially during a jumping lesson. If Sam didn't concentrate hard, he would rear up and she'd fall off. But she never moaned. She was determined to improve her riding and worked

really hard at it. One day she wanted to be good enough to show-jump with Beanz. She had learned a lot from Mel, who was tough and brave and the most talented rider of all the girls. Mel was fearless when she jumped and had a grip of iron – she needed it to handle Candy, the lively Arab she looked after.

Cara, the smallest of Sam's friends at the stables, was nervous about everything – even ponies! Vicki had given her Taffy to look after. Sturdy Taffy was a little palomino Welsh with a creamy blond mane and tail and he had the sweetest nature. He was loyal and laid-back and he wouldn't hurt a fly. Getting to know Taffy had changed Cara's life. He had given her the confidence to start riding and now she was even learning to jump!

Lively Jess, who was the leader of Sam's group, looked after Rose, a graceful and good-natured grey Connemara pony with a stunning silver mane and tail.

Amber, who was the cleverest of the stable girls and the one who always seemed to understand the ponies, had been given gentle Stella to look after. Stella was a black Highland pony with a white blaze.

As Sam came running into the yard, Jess and Amber waved to her.

“Hey!” she called.

Hearing her voice, Beanz popped his head over his stable door and neighed loudly.

Amber’s warm dark eyes twinkled. “Beanz wants his breakfast,” she said. “He’s been calling for you for the last ten minutes, Sam. You’re later than usual.”

“Yeah,” Sam called over her shoulder. “I couldn’t find my wellies.”

“Not again!” laughed Jess and Amber.

“Coming, babe,” shouted Sam, running across to Beanz’s stable.

For Sam, opening Beanz’s door was the best start to any day. At the sight of her, he

neighed softly and moved closer for a cuddle. She stroked his velvety nose and held out a mint on the flat of her hand.

“Who loves you, gorgeous?” she whispered.

Beanz gently lifted his lips and took the mint, tickling Sam’s palm as he did so. He crunched noisily while she put on his headcollar and clipped his lead rope to it. She led Beanz outside, where he could enjoy the sunshine while she mucked out his stable.

The ponies were all tied up in a line outside their stables – pretty Rose, gentle Stella, skittish Beanz, spirited little Candy and sturdy Taffy. They, like the girls, were best friends. They all stood together munching their pony nuts and drinking from buckets of cool fresh water.

Inside the stables, the girls chatted to each other as they mucked out. Jess stuck her head over the stall that separated Rose from Beanz, her green eyes twinkling.



“Isn’t it great being on holiday?” she said to Sam.

Sam’s freckly little nose wrinkled as dust from the hay-net she was filling blew in her face.

“Brilliant! I want to spend every single second here with Beanz,” she said.

Amber, whose long shiny black hair was tied up in a ponytail, put her head over the half-open stable door.

“It would be cool to get out and do some shows though,” she said. “The ponies will get well fed up stuck in the riding school all summer. And that treasure hunt we did was wicked.”

“Good idea! Let’s ask Vicki if there are any competitions we can go in for,” Sam suggested.

Vicki always inspected the stables after they’d been mucked out. It was a relaxed time when she could chat to the girls and pet the ponies. With her slim figure, thick dark hair, tanned skin and stunning silver-grey eyes, Vicki was living proof that you could be glam and still be a brilliant horsewoman. Last year, when all the girls were new to the yard, Vicki had qualified for Badminton on Jelly, her fabulous Irish-cross thoroughbred. The girls who helped out at the yard completely hero-worshipped Vicki, who worked so hard taking care of her beloved ponies and horses.

The ponies hungrily nudged Vicki’s pockets for mints.

“Whoa there, greedy guts,” she laughed. She gave each pony a mint, then kissed them



one by one on the nose. "They all look really well cared for," she said to the girls. "You're doing a great job."

Mel ran her hand over Candy's silky chestnut coat and smiled lovingly.

"We've got six whole weeks to spend with them," she said.

Beanz stamped his foot and nudged Sam's bottom with his nose. "I think he wants to go for a roll in the meadow," Sam giggled.

Vicki checked her watch. "Sorry, not yet, the blacksmith will be here in a minute. You'll have to hold the ponies while he shoes them," she said to the girls.

The girls nodded. They all enjoyed watching their ponies get new shoes fitted.

“Who’s on the livery rota for this week?” Vicki asked.

Sam and Amber put their hands up.

“Can you two stay with President and Cleopatra while they’re being shod then?”

The girls nodded: they knew there was no way that snooty Henrietta Reece-Thomas and Camilla Worthington, who owned President and Cleopatra, would help out when the blacksmith came. Their rich parents paid a lot of money for Vicki and her yard girls to do all the dirty work their little princesses didn’t want to do. Henrietta and Camilla would never sink so low as to muck out their ponies’ stables or make their feeds! Sam and her friends always felt sorry for President and Cleopatra, who missed out on a lot of love and attention.

It wasn’t that Henrietta was ever mean to President, but she never seemed to love and cuddle him. It was a shame, because he was a

pony who liked a lot of affection; it made the yard girls sad to see him so unloved.

There was another livery girl at the stables called Darcy, but she wasn't like Camilla and Henrietta. She was rich but not spoiled and she adored Duke, her beautiful dark bay show-jumper. Even though Duke was at livery, Darcy mucked him out whenever she could and made his feeds and filled his hay-net. She enjoyed hanging around with Sam and her friends and they all liked her a lot.

Just before the blacksmith arrived, Sam remembered the question she wanted to ask Vicki. "Are there any summer shows coming up?" she said. "We'd like to take the ponies out somewhere in the holiday."

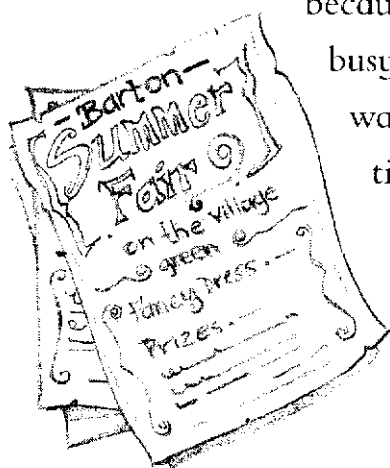
Vicki nodded. "There's a big show on at Barton next weekend," she said.

Amber, Jess, Mel and Sam grinned excitedly. Cara, who was nervous about anything new, chewed her fingernails.

“Do we have to do something that soon?” she asked anxiously.

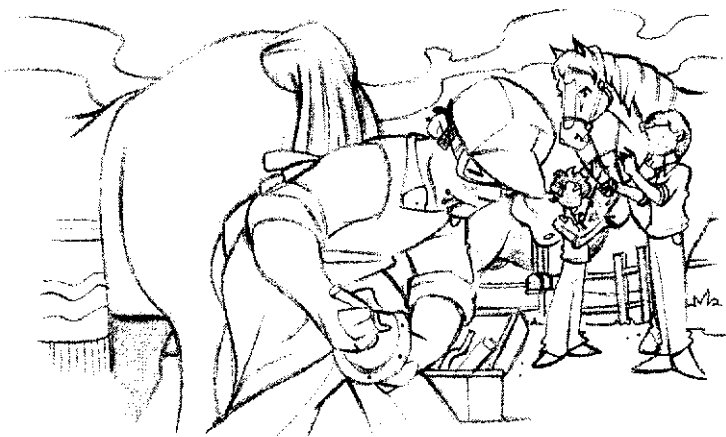
Vicki patted her on the arm. “Don’t worry, it’s a fun show. There are some leaflets on the desk in my office – help yourselves,” she said as she ran to open the gate for the blacksmith, who was just driving up in his van.

The girls found the leaflets but they didn’t get a chance to read them that morning



because they were so busy. The blacksmith was there until lunch time and the girls had a lot to do. They rushed around bringing ponies and horses into the yard, keeping

them calm while the shoes were nailed on and then walking them back to their stables.



After the blacksmith had gone, the girls turned the ponies loose in the pony meadow. They cantered around wildly, then rolled in their favourite muddy spot by the stream that gurgled through the meadow.

Sam shook her head as Beanz covered himself in mud.

"Sometimes I wonder why I ever bother grooming him," she grumbled.

Amber gave her a nudge. "Come on, Moody Bum, let's leave them to play. I'm starving," she said.

