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Chapter 1



"Bother," said the Princess as the book she'd been balancing on her head crashed to the floor.

Miss Stringle picked it up and sighed as she looked at the title. "Not again, Princess Aurelia. Perhaps you would find waving lessons easier if you practised more instead of reading these silly pony stories."

"But I like them. And I like to be called Princess *Ellie*."

Miss Stringle sighed again. "I've told you before. That is not a suitable name for a princess." She held out the book. "Now, stand as tall as you can and try once more."

Ellie straightened her head, balanced the book carefully on top of it and set out across the room. The skirt of her frothy pink dress swirled around her legs as she walked.

"No, no!" shouted Miss Stringle. "Dainty steps. Not big strides."

Ellie slowed down.

"Now wave," said Miss Stringle.

Ellie raised her right hand slowly and waved at an imaginary crowd.

"And smile!"





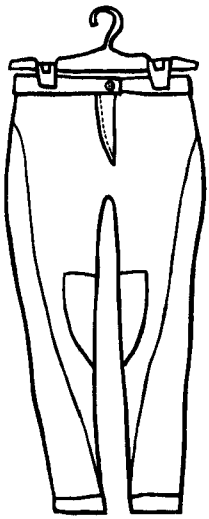
Ellie pulled her lips back and showed her teeth. She didn't feel like smiling. She felt very foolish. No one in her pony books ever had to do anything like this. They had masses of friends, went to ordinary schools and spent all their spare time having fun with their ponies. All the things that Ellie wanted, but couldn't have. Sometimes Ellie hated being a princess.

She reached the other side of the room with relief and let the book slide off her head. "I've finished," she said, as she caught it neatly. "Can I go now?"

Miss Stringle smiled. "Of course you can, Your Highness. Have a lovely ride."

Ellie raced out of the palace classroom and up the spiral staircase to her bedroom. It was probably the pinkest room in the entire world. Her father, the King, had planned the decorations when she was born and he was convinced princesses liked pink.

Ellie didn't. She had managed to cover the pink walls with pony posters and bookcases full of pony books. But there was nothing she could do about the rose pink carpet, pink striped curtains and pink four-poster bed.



She threw off her dress and grabbed her pale pink jodhpurs from a cupboard. As she struggled into them, she glanced at the clock. She didn't want to be late. George was always cross when she was late.

Then she remembered. George wasn't there any more. After caring for the royal horses for forty years, he had retired to the seaside. Today she would meet the new groom for the first time.

She pulled on her shiny black leather riding boots, thankful that no one in the kingdom made pink ones her size.



"It will be strange without George," she thought. "I wonder if the new groom will have as many rules." George had hundreds of them, most of which began, "Princesses don't..."

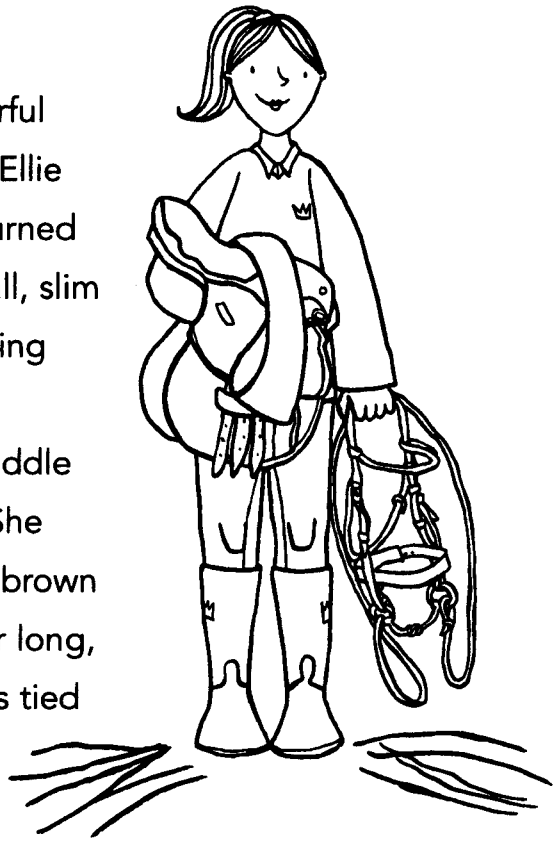


Ellie pushed her everyday crown on her head and picked up her hard hat. She paused for a moment to straighten its gold and pink silk cover. Then she ran out of the room and down the back staircase to the stables.

To her surprise, there was no sign of the new groom. But there was a new horse. A beautiful grey thoroughbred looked out of the stable where George's horse had lived. She walked over to him and stroked his neck. His coat was as soft as velvet. The horse whickered gently and nuzzled her pockets in search of titbits.

"Hello."

The cheerful voice made Ellie jump. She turned and saw a tall, slim woman walking towards her carrying a saddle and bridle. She had friendly brown eyes and her long, dark hair was tied back in a ponytail.



"I see you've met my Gipsy," said the woman as she put the saddle on the stable door. "I'm Meg. I'm the new groom. And you, I imagine, are Princess Aurelia."

Ellie nodded nervously.

"That's a real mouthful of a name," continued Meg with a smile. "Are you always called that or do your friends shorten it?"

"I like to be called Ellie," she replied, bravely. She didn't mention that she hadn't any friends or that everyone else insisted on calling her Aurelia or "Your Royal Highness".

"All right then. Ellie it is." Meg grinned and pulled a sheet of royal notepaper from her pocket. "This note from your father says you want to ride Sundance today."

"Yes, please," said Ellie, hardly able to believe what she'd just heard. Meg was the first person to ever call her Ellie. Maybe everything would be different now. Maybe she could have as much fun with her ponies

as the children did in her books.

"Then you'd better get him tacked up. I'll see to Gipsy and then we can be off."

Meg went into Gipsy's stable leaving Ellie open-mouthed with shock. George had never let her do anything in the stables. Although she had four ponies of her own, she had never been allowed to look after them. She knew tacking up meant putting on the saddle and bridle. But she had absolutely no idea how to do it.

