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Opening extract from

Tilly's Pony Tails Books 1-3

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One

"When I was a girl, about your age," said Tilly's mum, as she ran the brush through her daughter's long dark hair, "I was mad, absolutely mad, about ice skating."

Tilly turned her head, curious to know more.

"Ice skating?"

She tried to picture it: her mum at an ice rink, gliding gracefully on a pair of blades. Doing turns and jumps.



"Oh yes. I loved it," said Tilly's mum. "Almost as much as you love horses, Tilly."

To say that Tilly Redbrow loved horses was perhaps a bit of an understatement – desperately, wildly, crazy about them more like. You only had to take a peek in her bedroom to see that she was horse and pony mad. Every inch of wall space was covered in posters of the best breeds from around the world.



She spent as much time as she could exploring websites. Her favourites were www.girlshorseclub.com and www.ponybox.com. Here, she could read blogs and manage her own online equestrian team, losing herself in a world of horses that was all hers.

Scattered over the floor of her room were copies of her favourite magazine, *Pony*, which her dad bought for her once a month, from the big newsagent in the next village.

Tilly liked to gaze at the photographs of other *Pony* readers. These were girls who really did have their own ponies: Helen Davis from Somerset and her dappled grey Connemara, Prince, jumping a water ditch; Lucy Nicholson from Oxford clearing a round on her 13hh pony, Featherboy. Tilly wished it could be her in the photos.

At night, when she lay in bed, just before falling asleep, she would imagine galloping across the open prairie, or through the countryside, being carried away by her favourite fantasy horse: a mysterious black stallion called Magic Spirit.

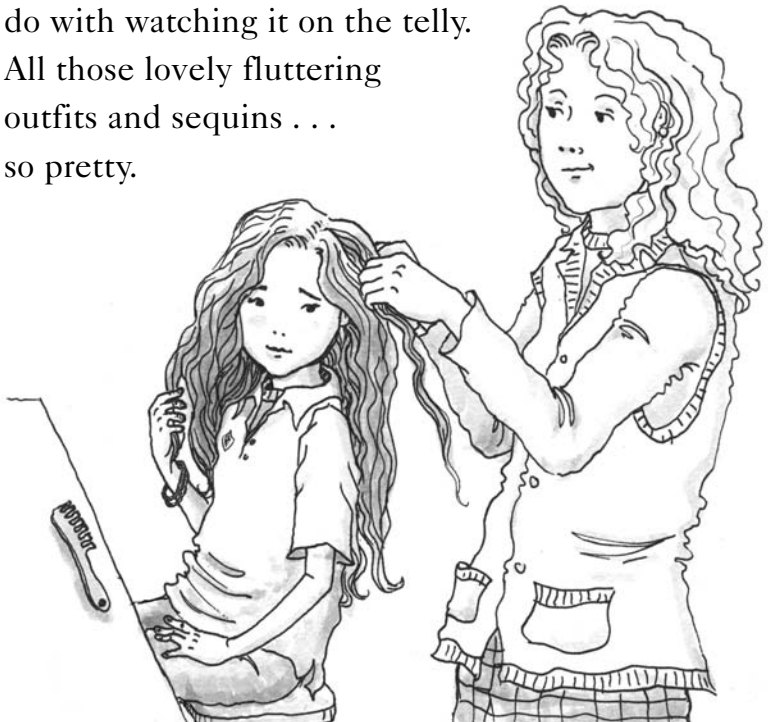
"Tilly! *Tilly*!" said her mum, bringing her back to reality. "Do you want bunches or plaits?"

"Plaits."

"Always plaits," said her mum, as she started weaving sections of Tilly's dark hair, which was too long for Tilly to do herself. She refused to get it cut. It had been long ever since she could remember. It reached all the way down her back, and it was a pain to wash and look after, but she liked it.

"So did you have your own ice-skates then?" Tilly asked, when her mum had finished.

"Goodness, no. Far too expensive. Nanny Gwen and Grandpa Pete couldn't afford luxuries like that, so I had to make do with watching it on the telly. All those lovely fluttering outfits and sequins . . . so pretty.



And I had lots of books and posters – just like you. I used to sit for hours looking at pictures of figure skaters and thinking to myself, why can't that be *me*? Oh well, too late now, I suppose. Silly ideas, eh?"

But in her heart, Tilly's mum knew they weren't just silly ideas.

She looked at Tilly's thoughtful reflection in the mirror, and knew how much her horse daydreams meant to her. She wondered how she could make these daydreams come true.

"How about some breakfast?" she said. "I've got some fresh bread from the bakers'. Maybe later we can make a cosy nest in the lounge, with blankets and cushions, and watch *The Horse Whisperer* again?"



"Okay," said Tilly. "But I'd better take Scruff for a walk first."

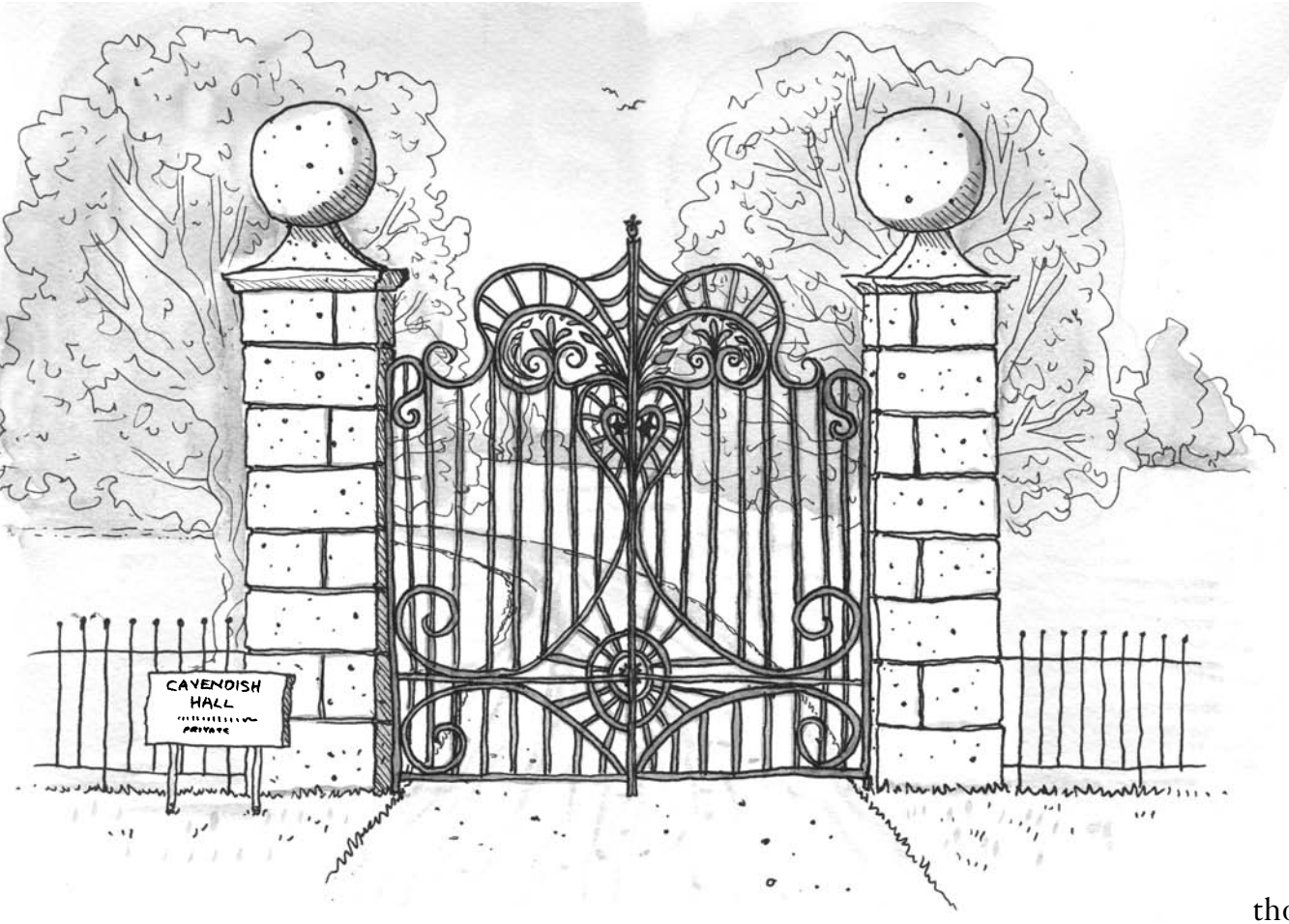
Scruff was the Redbrow family's dog, a long-haired Jack Russell, and he was

full of energy. The more exercise he got, the better. As soon as he heard the door opening he scampered towards Tilly, wagging his stubby tail.



Lower Norbury was a small place – a pub, a meeting hall and a post office, surrounded by a few stone cottages. Although it was much quieter than the nearby town of North Cosford, Tilly loved living there. She always enjoyed taking Scruff for walks down the main street on a sunny afternoon, smelling the flowers and listening to the birds.

Sometimes riders passed through, usually from Cavendish Hall, which was the exclusive boarding school and riding centre on the outskirts of North Cosford. Tilly had driven past it many times, stared up at its grand iron gates, longing to know what it was like inside. She'd heard that the pupils who went there were able to ride every day.



No one from *her* school, Heathwell High – where her dad taught – no one from there, as far as Tilly knew, was remotely interested in riding.

If only, she thought.

Suddenly three ponies emerged from the lane: two chestnuts and a bay. Their riders

were all girls, about Tilly's age, dressed in neat jodhpurs and designer t-shirts, with sleek blonde ponytails flowing from under their riding hats. They were definitely Cavendish Hall girls.

Tilly and Scruff stopped to admire the ponies. The bay, in particular, moved gracefully and his silky coat glistened in the sunlight. What a beautiful, magnificent creature, she thought. As the pony passed by, he stopped and leaned his nose towards her, gently sniffing at the bracelet around her wrist. The rider immediately apologised:

"Sorry. Don't worry – he's usually very good-natured. He won't hurt you or anything."

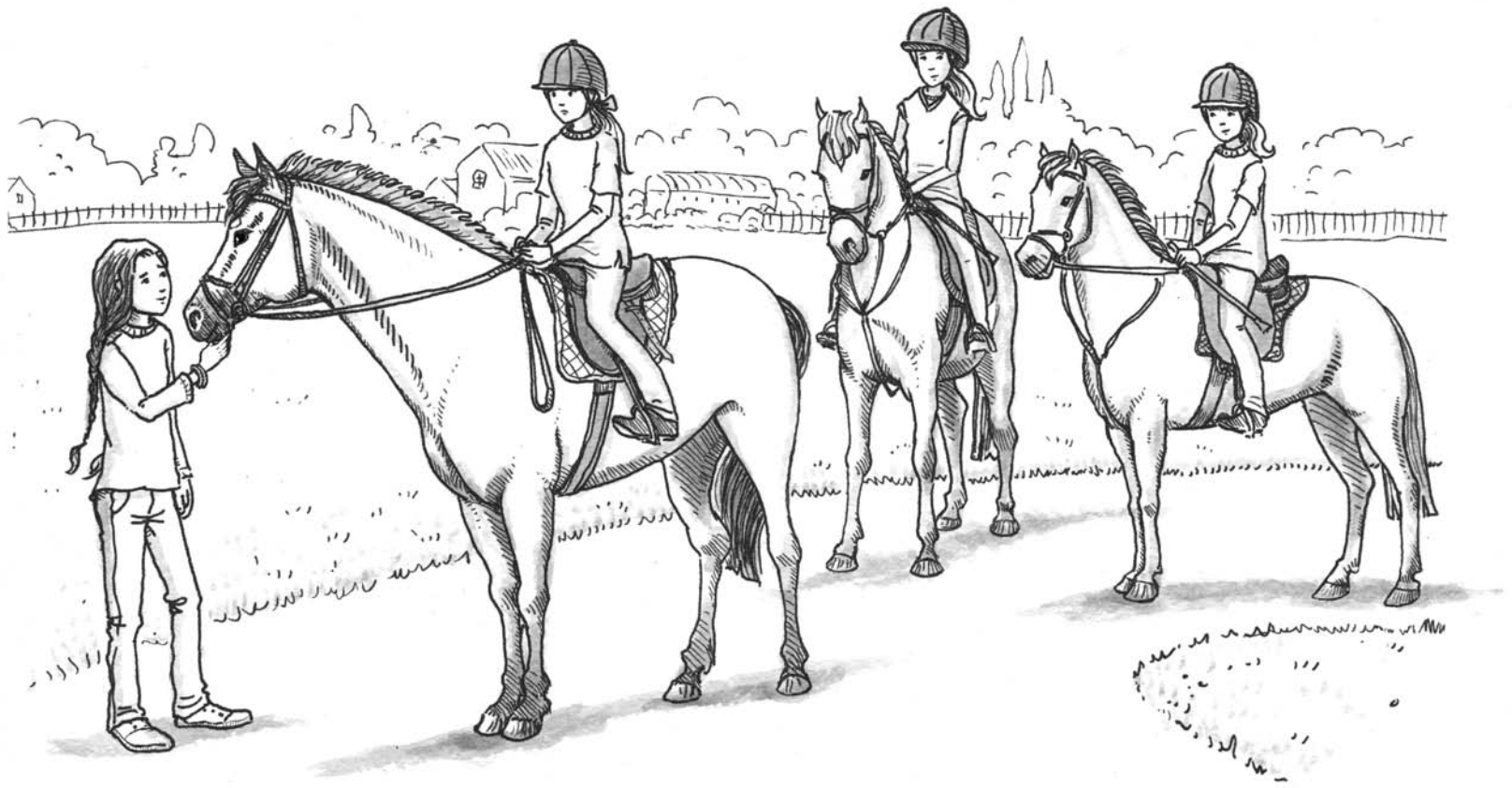
"I know," said Tilly, smiling. She reached out to the pony and stroked the white star on his forehead. He moved towards her, and started nuzzling her hand, as though her touch was blissful and soothing.

"What's got into you, Blaze?" said the rider impatiently. "He doesn't normally fuss over strangers. I *am* sorry."

The other two ponies came up behind them, their riders whispering together.

"What's she doing?" whispered one of them, loud enough for Tilly to hear. "Come on. Let's go, or we'll be late for our dressage lesson."

With that, the group trotted on, leaving Tilly alone at the roadside. How lucky they are,



she thought, as she watched them disappear round the corner. And as she and Scruff ambled home, she kept asking herself, why can't that be me?



"So what's up, Tiger Lil'?" asked Mr Redbrow. He was the only person who called Tilly by her real name, Tiger Lily. He always knew when she was upset, because she would go very quiet and sit playing with her special bracelet.

"That old thing will break if you're not careful," he said, watching her twist it round and round her finger. It was strange looking, made from woven horsehairs – black, plaited like Tilly's hair, and linked with a small silver clasp. Tilly had worn the bracelet all her life. She'd had it since birth, but no one knew where it came from – and there was little chance of finding out, because when she was very young, Tilly had been adopted.

For as long as Tilly could remember, she'd been a Redbrow, and was happy to be so; but that didn't stop her from sometimes wondering who her mother and father were. And who *she* really was. The horsehair bracelet was her only link to the past, but it couldn't tell her anything.



Despite being happy with the Redbrow family, Tilly knew she was different. For a start, her thick, dark hair and olive skin made her stand out. Everyone in her adoptive family was fair and freckly, with tall, solid figures. Tilly was small and delicate. Her brother, Adam, who was born three years

after the Redbrows had adopted Tilly, was taller than her already.

Tilly loved Adam, but he got on her nerves too. He was noisy and messy, and always hogged the computer. He would spend hours playing *Dungeons and Dragons* when Tilly wanted to chat online, or look up new pony websites. And he had an annoying habit of rushing to the computer table, just when he thought Tilly might do the same.



Tilly's dad sat down on the step and began tickling Scruff's ears.

"Did you see those three lovely ponies go through the village today?" he asked, hoping this would cheer her up.

Tilly just stared at her trainers and nodded.

"I was talking to Tom Cracknell from the post office earlier. He said that the girls who ride them are three of the best junior show jumpers in the county. They go to Cavendish Hall and practise every day after school. There's been quite a lot of chatter about them in the local paper. Perhaps we should go along one day and watch them practise?"

"Everyone always goes on about the Cavendish Hall girls," said Tilly sulkily. "They're probably not *that* good."



"Oh, come on, Tiger Lil', don't be like that – what have they got that you haven't, eh?"

Their own ponies, for a start, thought Tilly.