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The Meadow Vale Ponies: Mulberry and the Summer Show

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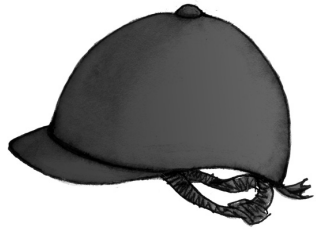
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Chapter 1

Sam held onto the cold steel of the gate of the barn and tried to ignore the butterflies in her stomach. All around her the stables were noise and bustle. People ran up and down with ponies and horses on their way to lessons, instructors bellowing orders as loose reins were gathered up and wayward stirrups run up out of harm's way. In half an hour, Sam was going to have to get a pony from the barn and make her way down to her first proper lesson and ride in front of lots of people. She went hot and prickly all over at the thought of

it and swallowed hard.

'Your sister has been our star rider in the Pony Club for some time now,' said Miss Mildew, the head riding instructor and owner of the stables, the day her mother signed her up for her first set of lessons at Meadow Vale Riding School. 'I expect to see great things from you as well.'

Sam had cringed as Miss Mildew had looked down her thin nose at her. She thought of her big sister Amy and her room full of rosettes and trophies, her neat blond pony tail floating like a banner as she soared over jumps. She wasn't Amy.

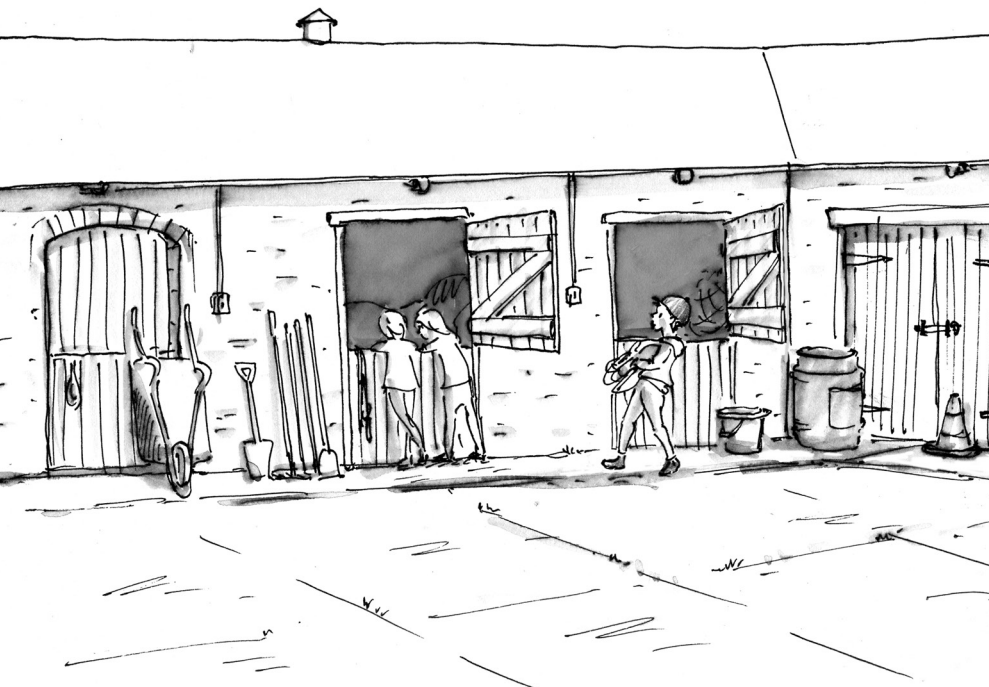
The truth was that while Sam was as horse mad as the rest of her family, they also scared her. A lot. She loved to

ride her mother's horse—big, chubby Velvet. Velvet never went faster than Sam wanted and always stopped when she asked. Velvet was safe and gentle and kind. Her mother told her that other horses and ponies were kind and gentle as well, and that she would feel a lot braver once she started riding lessons and learned to ride on all the different ponies at Meadow Vale.

But just the thought of riding other ponies made her want to run to Velvet's stable and hold onto one of her legs so tight that Miss Mildew wouldn't be able to prise her off. She could never be like Amy, who seemed to spring lightly onto the back of every animal and ride them beautifully, no matter how naughty or cheeky the pony was. Every time she

thought of getting on a strange animal, she thought of all the things that could go wrong. They could bolt, rear, buck her off, and she would be left on the ground with a broken bone. She would never be able to stay in the saddle.

Tears pricked at her eyes, which were hot and dry from lack of sleep. She scrubbed at her face with the back of



her hand and sneaked a quick look over her shoulder. A huge chestnut-coloured horse was walking through the yard, his rider sitting casually in the saddle, just one hand on the reins. The animal was bad-tempered, putting his ears back and snapping his teeth as other animals passed him by. A trio of girls rode past on their way out on a hack, their horses



prancing and mouthing at their bits, their steel-shod hoofs slipping on the concrete. Janey, one of the riding instructors, was settling herself in the saddle of her black and white mare, Lucy, as the horse leapt and spun with excitement.

'Lucy's a bit fresh. She hasn't had a gallop in a few days,' laughed Janey when she spotted Sam's worried face. 'Off we go!' She winked as Lucy jittered and hopped out of the yard. Janey stuck to her back like glue.

Sam swallowed and turned back to the cool shadows of the barn, trying to block out the sounds of the riding school. Directly in front of her was the little herd of Shetlands that the tiniest children rode. To the right were the huge cobs that adults learned to ride on,

and to the left were an assortment of ponies of different colours and sizes that the older children used. The kings and queens of the yard, the horses only the experienced riders were allowed to sit on, and the horses owned by liveries like her mother's, were kept in the grid of stables behind her. An army of children helped out at the weekend and holidays in return for free rides. They mucked out, carried water, and brushed the coats of these animals until they gleamed. At the entrance to the yard was the huge outdoor arena where lessons were held in good weather; to the back, the indoor arena with its soft sand surface. Between the two was a hive of stables, tack rooms, store rooms, and feed rooms that served the needs of 80 animals. The whole place

swarmed with people. Meadow Vale was a small country in its own right and half of its population, including Amy, would be making its way down to the outdoor arena in twenty minutes to see the new kids ride in their first class of the term. If she made a fool of herself, then Sam knew she would never fit in here.

She sighed and looked at the little herd of Shetlands, who contentedly munched on their hay. Perhaps if she burrowed in amongst them no one would notice she was missing?

Just then, she was shoved hard from behind and her chest hit the top bar of the gate, the dull *clang* scattering the Shetlands.

'Oh, I'm terribly sorry, I didn't see you there,' a silky voice purred in her ear.

'But you are rather insignificant so it's hardly my fault is it?'

Sam looked up into the beautiful brown eyes of the biggest bully on the yard, Cecilia Jones. Cecilia and Amy hated each other with a passion and neither could bear to lose against the other in a competition. Cecilia was as dark as Amy was fair, with long, chocolate brown hair that rippled down her back. Right now Cecilia's pretty face was cold and scornful as she looked down her nose at Sam, arching one perfect sweep of an eyebrow.

'Hmmm, what do we have here?' drawled Cecilia, while her friends sniggered behind her. 'Ladies, it seems we are honoured to have the great Amy Grey's little sister on the yard. Come to

do Mummy and big sis proud, have we?' Cecilia bent down and narrowed her eyes at Sam. 'Be careful you don't fall off and break your neck.' She straightened up, flashing a cold smile. 'Good luck. We'll all be watching you.'

Sam gazed after the slim back and the bouncing chocolate curls as Cecilia and her friends made their way to the outdoor arena, the last dregs of her confidence draining out through her feet.

'What a brat!' said a voice somewhere by her knees. Startled, she looked around but couldn't see anyone nearby.





The Shetlands had gathered near the gate again, chewing on their mouthfuls of hay, the crunch of their jaws loud in the barn.

Sam sighed and looked at her watch. Time to get her pony.

