

## 1. Camp



‘Kill it!’

‘Quick! Make it die!’

The girl perched on the top bunk was practically emptying a whole can of fly spray into the corner of the room while three others stood watching, their backs pressed flat against the wall. By the looks on their faces, the monster receiving the blasts must have been nothing less than a spiny-legged cockroach – like the ones that lurked around our bin in the middle of the night.

Each of the girls took turns screaming instructions.

‘Here it comes!’

‘Spray it! SPRAY IT NOW!’

I peered inside the door. A tiny brown spider about the size of a ladybird was huddled helplessly in the corner, making a feeble attempt to hold out its front legs while being drowned in torrents of Mortein Fast Knockdown.

‘You shouldn’t use so much,’ I said in my most encyclopedic voice. ‘The chemicals in fly spray are extremely poisonous. They can paralyse the muscles in your lungs, and when that happens you won’t be able to breathe.’

The screaming stopped, and the girls spun around. Four pairs of eyes stared at me while the ninja on the top bunk held the can at the ready.

‘What makes you the expert?’ muttered one of them.

I was about to tell them that I’d Googled ‘*Can fly spray kill humans?*’ only last week when Matt and Gus, my brothers, had chased me around the house with a can of Baygon. They’d told me I was exaggerating when I said fly spray could

kill people, so I'd Googled it to prove them wrong.

But the glares on the girls' faces made me swallow my words. I sighed and continued down the hallway.

The two girls in the second room were dressed all in pink. Pink T-shirts, pink shorts, pink socks. Even their sleeping bags were pink.

'Eww, pink. Gross,' I muttered.

The girls spun around. They were twins. Pink twins. I tried not to groan.

'What did you say?' one of them asked.

My face grew hot. I hadn't meant to say it out loud. 'Oh, pink, great,' I said, squeezing out a smile. 'Pink's my favourite colour.' Thank goodness Matt and Gus couldn't hear me. They'd pin me down and make me take it back.

The third room was dark and gloomy. Two sets of bunk beds were pushed against opposite walls, their mattresses thin and lumpy. A set of wooden drawers, a broken-handled cupboard, and a small dirty window finished off the miserable scene.

There was no fly spray and no-one dressed in pink. No giggling, no screaming. Just a tall, slim girl who was unpacking her bags in silence. She wore shiny black riding boots all the way up to her knees. Real horse-riding boots.

I stepped into the room. ‘Hi, I’m Charli Priestly,’ I said, stretching out my hand like Dad always told me and the boys to do. ‘Nice to meet you.’

The girl stopped unpacking. Long blonde hair hung like silk down her back, and her thick eyelashes made little verandahs over her frowning blue eyes. She didn’t shake my outstretched hand.

‘Mikaela,’ she said instead, glancing over my borrowed jodhpurs, dirty fingernails, unruly hair and slightly crooked, definitely not pretty, freckly face. I can’t be exactly sure when, but at some point in the inspection, her top lip curled. And not in a friendly way. ‘Do you jump?’

‘Well ... no, obviously, seeing as I haven’t ridden before. But, yeah, I’ll jump. As soon as I learn to ride.’ I pointed to the spare beds. ‘Anyone using those?’

Mikaela's eyebrows practically squished her nose. 'There's space in the room next door,' she said firmly. 'I don't share with beginners.'

I pursed my lips. No way I'd survive all that pink. 'Keep your hair on.' I pulled my bag into the room. 'It's not like I'll be a beginner forever.'

The website said there would be a gymkhana on the last day of camp, and I'd already promised Matt and Gus I'd be bringing home a trophy. I'd made a space in the trophy cabinet, beside their shiny hockey ones, and I didn't plan on arriving home empty-handed.

Mikaela had been inspecting the perfectly cut ends of her hair, but now she flung her ponytail behind her back as if she didn't really care. 'Suit yourself. But I won't be hanging out with you.'

I threw my pillow and sleeping bag on the empty top bunk, creating a cloud of dust, which made me sneeze. The wardrobe and the drawers were full of Mikaela's stuff, but I didn't complain. It seemed too good to be true. Thanks to Uncle Ralph's surprise birthday money, I'd finally made it to riding camp.

And now all I had to do was learn to ride. Once I'd done that, I'd convince Mum and Dad to buy me a horse, and then I could ride whenever I wanted.

When Mikaela and I finished unpacking, we joined the others around the big mango tree out in the yard.

'Welcome, everyone!' The camp owner, Mrs Bacton, flashed us a friendly smile, showing off her straight white teeth. 'Hope you're all excited!'

Excited? Just a bit. The website had promised that even the most *beginning* beginners would learn to ride at the week-long camp. My stomach was doing double pikes.

'We'll go meet the horses in a second, but first we need to talk through the rules.' Mrs Bacton wasn't much taller than me, but by the look of her strong brown arms, I guessed she did more than just read out the rules around here.

There were murmurs and shuffles among the

group. No-one wanted rules. Rules were for school.

‘Most important: everyone *must* stay within the boundary fence,’ she said, looking around our group. There were eight of us altogether – the pink twins, the four fly-spray fanatics, me, and my brand-new roommate, Mikaela.

‘Our neighbour, Mr Shearer, has had a bit of trouble with bats,’ said Mrs Bacton. ‘And we don’t want anyone getting hurt. So, no wandering off, please. If you happen to find a bat, absolutely no touching. Leave it where you found it and come get me.’

Bats? With horrible pointed faces and sharp yellow teeth?

My eyes flew to the sky. All I saw were hazy clouds.

Maybe the bats only bothered the neighbour?

‘Rule two: no mobile phones. If you’ve brought one along, hand it in to me.’

Mrs Bacton’s Akubra hat had sweat stains around the headband and chunks missing from the top.

She pushed it down low over her face as a couple of girls dug into their pockets.

‘Rule three: no unsupervised riding, and rule four: please stick in pairs at all times.’

The fly-spray and pink girls were already in pairs, leaving me and Mikaela the odd ones out. I tried to catch her eye, but she stood twitching her crop impatiently against her boots, and she didn’t look over.

Mrs Bacton smiled. ‘Any questions?’

I cleared my throat. ‘Yes, I have,’ I said in a loud, clear voice.

All eyes turned to me.

‘Where’s the first-aid kit, and who is the designated first-aid monitor?’

Mrs Bacton tipped her hat back and gave her head a scratch. Her black hair was damp and stuck to her forehead, as if she’d already done a full-day’s work. ‘Well, we have a first-aid kit up at the house, of course, and there’s a list of what to do in an emergency in the common room. If there are any problems, come and find me. Why? Is something bothering you?’

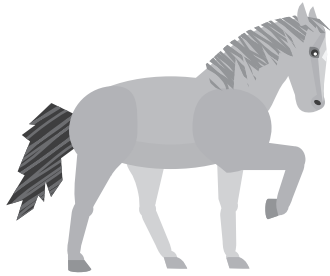


Yes, something was bothering me. A hundred things. Like the bats. Didn't Mrs Bacton understand how deadly they could be? According to the latest issue of *Horse and Rider* magazine, all horse owners were responsible for the prevention of a deadly bat disease called Hendra virus by vaccinating their horses. What was Mrs Bacton doing about it?

A couple of fly-spray girls started whispering, so I shrugged and said, 'No, not really. It's just good to know what to do in an emergency, right?'

'Yes, yes, I see. Okay, so, if there are no more questions, let's go meet the horses!'

## 2. Spud



Everybody talked at once on the way to the small yards near the stables. The horses were tied along the rails, their heads low and relaxed, their tails flicking left and right to swish away pesky flies. There were bays, chestnuts, a black one with white spots, and one beautiful palomino.

My eyes fixed on the palomino.

Its coat was the colour of shiny caramel, and its thick, creamy tail was crinkled and long, just like the pictures in my magazines. Plus, it looked the perfect height for me – not too tall, not too short.

Its eyes were big and brown and its muzzle looked soft and kind.

I grinned. It was exactly the sort of horse I'd dreamed of.

'Okay, everyone. Time to choose. That's Dancer, Tic-Tac, the little fella's Joey, and the spotty one's CJ. Over here we've got Oscar, Spud and Fry, and, of course, the palomino, Razz. We might have to chop and change a bit to make sure you're on the right horse for your ability, but today let's just get to know one another. Each horse has its name on its halter, so once you've chosen, grab the lead rope and follow me to the arena.'

I started towards the palomino. He was definitely the horse I wanted.

Mikaela was marching straight for him.

I quickened my step.

She was faster. In less than a breath, she'd grabbed his halter and was standing smugly beside him.

My shoulders slumped. Now what was I going to do?

I turned to check out the others. The little one called Joey seemed nice – but according to my research, horses with short legs were very uncomfortable to ride. Anyway, the ninja from the top bunk was already reaching for him.

The black horse with the spots might do.

Too late. Already taken.

In fact, all of the horses had a rider beside them. All except one.

The last horse was *massive*. His wide back was so big you could practically land a helicopter on it. His face was a giant square lump. His feet were like saucers attached to long, knobbly legs, and his mane and tail were messy, like the rest of him. But worst of all, instead of standing still when I reached for his lead rope, he jerked up his head and tugged the rope loose from the rail. Then he darted away and barged in between Razz and a skinny-looking chestnut.

My heart bungeed to my toes. This wasn't what I'd imagined.

'Hey!' shouted Mikaela. 'Shift your stupid

camel.’ She gave the big horse a shove, and he took a step backwards, pushing in beside Joey and another horse. All I could see was his giant grey backside, huge between theirs.

‘Ouch! Your horse stood on my foot!’ squealed one of the pink twins.

‘Get him away!’ cried someone else.

My feet turned into blocks of cement. Catching a horse was nothing like the instructions in my magazines. His head was bigger, his shoulders higher, and why did he keep stamping his hooves when I least expected it?

I looked around for Mrs Bacton. She’d have to find me a better horse. How would I ever learn to ride, let alone win a trophy, on this grey giant? Perhaps she could make one of the others swap. There were taller girls in the group; they might love a chance to ride him.

But the others were already leading their horses towards the arena.

I sat against the bottom rail of the fence and kicked my too-big borrowed boots in the dust.

I ignored the grey horse when he swung around and pricked up his over-sized ears.

Mrs Bacton ducked through the rails. 'You okay?' she said, crouching on her haunches beside me. 'You crying?'

'No!' I sniffed. 'It's just the dust.'

Mrs Bacton smiled. 'Good. Well, I see you've chosen a horse.'

'No, not yet. That one's way too big. Mikaela's much taller. I'd rather have the palomino, please.'

'Oh, I see,' said Mrs Bacton. 'Well, that's a shame, because you two would make the perfect match.' She put her hand over mine. 'Here, open up.'

When she dropped something sticky into my palm, I screwed up my nose and passed it back. 'No thanks. I hate licorice.'

'Not for you, silly, for the horse.' She pushed my hand back towards me. 'It's made of the same stuff as molasses. You know, the sticky goo we pour over horses' food? Show it to him and he'll come straight over.'

I frowned but held out my hand. Sure enough,

the massive grey sniffed the air and walked on over. He nosed my palm and gobbled up the licorice.

‘See?’ said Mrs Bacton, grabbing his halter. ‘Spud’s like any other thoroughbred. Loves his food!’ She gave his neck a scratch. ‘Especially licorice.’

Spud? That’d be right. He looked about as useful as a sack of dirty potatoes. He towered above me as Mrs Bacton passed me his lead rope. My stomach sloshed like a washing machine. He was huge.

‘Don’t be fooled by appearances,’ she said. ‘Old Spud’s a real gem. Let himself go now, of course, but he won a couple of biggies before we retired him.’ She scratched under his belly, making him stick out his neck like a cat. ‘Few years ago now, hey buddy?’

‘Biggies?’

‘Yes. Spud’s a retired racehorse. He ...’

My stomach ramped up to the spin cycle. A retired racehorse? She expected me – a complete beginner – to ride a *racehorse*?

‘I can’t,’ I said, handing her back the lead rope. ‘I need to swap for Razz, please.’

‘Now wait up a minute, young lady,’ said Mrs Bacton. ‘You’re judging him too fast. Spud mightn’t be the prettiest horse here, but he’s one of the best we have. He’s taught loads of kids to ride. If you look after him, he’ll look after you. Come on.’

She pushed the rope back towards me and showed me how to lead Spud by standing near his left shoulder and clicking him along. He smelt like green grass and licorice, and after all the fuss catching him, he was surprisingly easy to lead. He just sort of plodded along beside me, like a tall, gangly giraffe. His feet were so big they could’ve broken all my toes, but he didn’t even come close to treading on me.

‘That’s the spirit,’ said Mrs Bacton as we approached the arena. ‘You’ll get the hang of it. We’ll have you jumping in no time.’

Jumping? Surely she didn’t expect me to jump on this beast?