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opening extract from

My Perfect Pony: Here Comes the Bride

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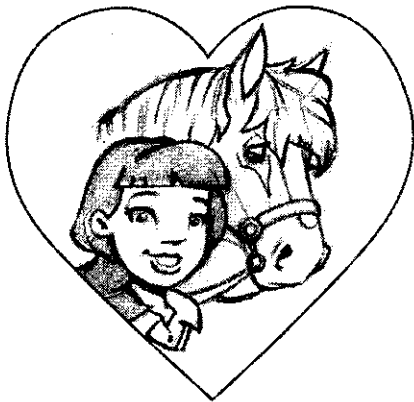
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Vicki's Riding School

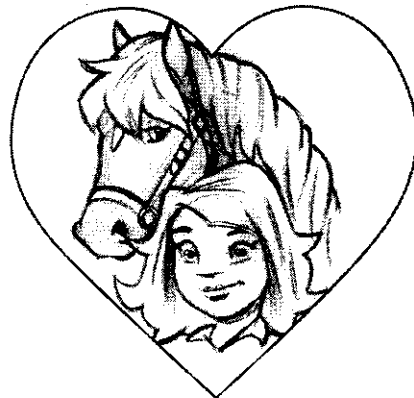
Vicki



Jess and Rose



Cara and Taffy



Amber and Stella



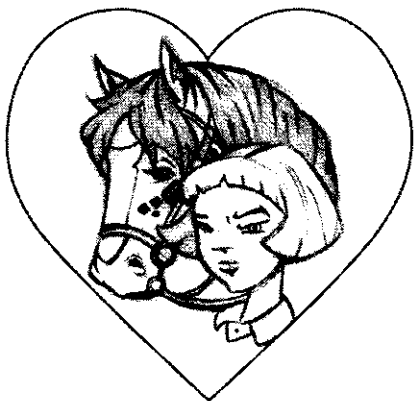
Sam and Beanz



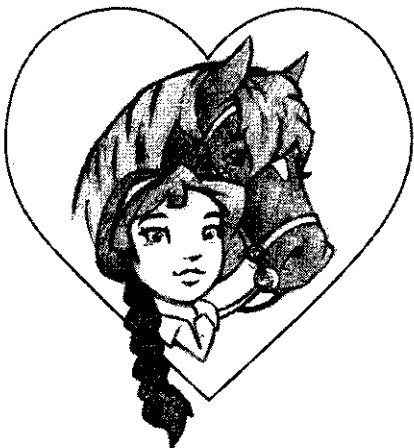
Mel and Candy

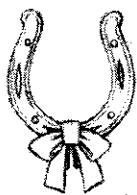


Henrietta and President



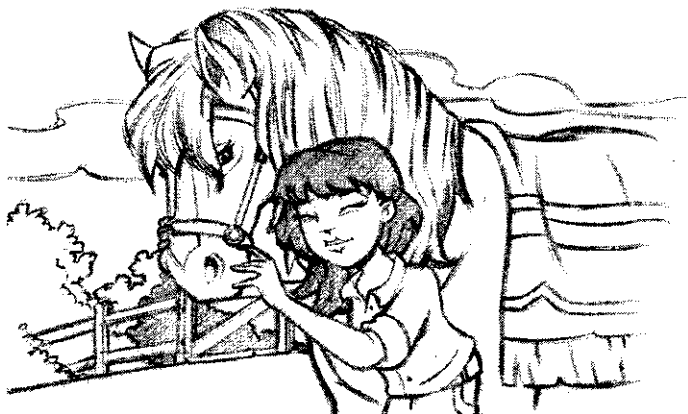
Darcy and Duke





Chapter 1

Jess buried her face in Rose's silver mane.
"You're the most beautiful pony in the
world!" she whispered.



Jess still couldn't believe how lucky she
was. Not only was she a regular helper at
Vicki's Riding School; she was also the

yard girl in charge of Rose, a lovely grey Connemara pony. A year ago Jess had had her first riding lesson at Vicki's and overnight her world had turned upside down. She had loved the lesson and the stables, and now she just couldn't get enough of ponies! Small ones, fat ones, naughty ones, nervy ones, even cheeky ponies – they were all brilliant.

Jess knew her mum would never be able to buy her a pony of her own, not unless she won the lottery! Mum hardly earned enough to keep Jess, her brother and herself going. But by doing a bit of overtime she scraped together enough money for Jess to have a riding lesson every other week.

Luckily for Jess, there were other girls just like her at Vicki's Riding School. They were Jess's age and they all loved ponies, so she had quickly made friends with them. Clever Amber, with her deep dark eyes and long black hair, was now Jess's closest friend.

Amber was so sensitive that she seemed to understand exactly what the ponies were trying to say. Then there was ginger-haired, freckly Sam, who was

the joker of the group; skinny

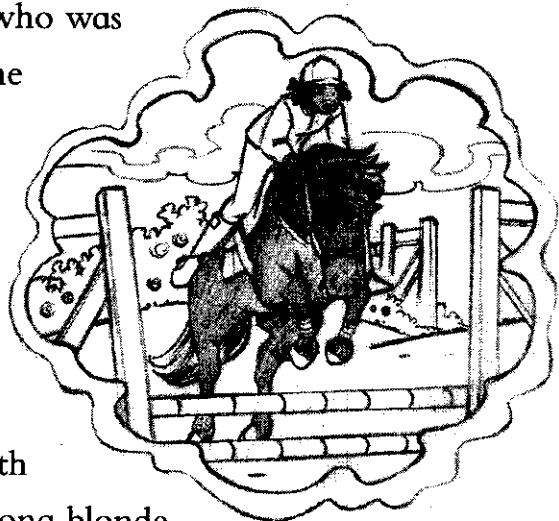
Mel, who was already an amazing show-jumper;

and pretty little Cara, with

big eyes and long blonde

hair, who was a nervous rider but never gave in to her fears. None of these girls owned a pony either but they were all pony mad!

When Vicki told Jess and her friends that she'd give them extra lessons if they helped her out at the stables, they jumped at the deal. Now they could spend all their free time down at the riding school, mucking out,



sweeping the yard and grooming the ponies.

Vicki had given each of the girls a pony to look after. Jess was given Rose, who she loved more than anything in the world. Amber looked after gentle Stella, the black Highland pony with a white blaze. Mel firmly handled Candice, the chestnut Arab (who everybody called Candy). Frisky Beanz, the skewbald New Forest cross, was just right for scatty Sam. And calm little Taffy, the palomino Welsh with his thick creamy golden mane and tail, was perfect for timid Cara.

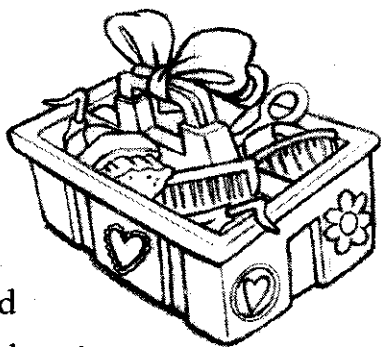
Vicki had two other ponies stabled at the riding school: she had learned to ride on them and couldn't bear to part with them. Greedy little Dumpling, a dark bay Shetland, and a light bay Dartmoor pony called Flora. Vicki also had her own stunning three-day-event mare, Jelly, a chestnut Irish-cross thoroughbred who had

qualified for Badminton the year before.

A sharp nudge in the tummy brought Jess out of her daydream. Rose tossed her head and neighed loudly.

“Sorry, sweetheart, I was miles away,” giggled Jess.

She bent to get the hoof pick out of the pink plastic tack box at her feet. It was her own tack box – she had saved up for months to buy it.



Jess had decorated it with pink pony stickers, pink ribbons and a big pink bow.

“Foot up,” she ordered.

Rose patiently lifted up one hoof at a time so that Jess could clean out the dirt and mud.

“Let’s make you even more beautiful,” said Jess.

“Rose looks pretty gorgeous already,” said a voice behind her.



Jess turned to see Vicki, the owner of the riding stables, standing at the open stable door. Jess secretly hero-worshipped Vicki. She was everything Jess wanted to be when she grew up. Tanned and slim, with thick dark hair and stunning silver-grey eyes, she always looked amazing. Vicki was living proof that you could work with horses and still be glam. Even in muck-stained jeans and a grubby hoodie, she always managed to look good, although she often had to work a fifteen-hour day.

As owner of the riding school, Vicki had to turn her hand to everything. She mucked out the stables, hosed and swept down the yard, groomed the ponies, took care of the tack, washed the horse blankets, tidied the muck heap, gave riding lessons and ran the office. Without Vicki's kindness Jess wouldn't have Rose to take care of. Vicki always said it was a fair swap in return for Jess's hard work. What Vicki didn't know was that she had made Jess the happiest girl in the world.

Vicki opened the stable door and patted Rose's shimmering silver coat. "You've done a lovely job on her," she said.

"I've been grooming her for more than an hour," Jess said shyly.

Rose pushed at Vicki's jeans pockets. Every pony in the yard knew that soft-hearted Vicki always carried mints around with her.

"Greedy girl!" she joked and ran a hand along Rose's silky mane. "She's as shiny as

my earrings. Well done, Jess.”

Jess smiled proudly. She'd told Vicki she'd been grooming Rose for an hour. In fact it was nearly three! She didn't mind though. Making Rose look beautiful was the best thing in the world. Picking out her feet, oiling her hooves and combing out her thick silver tail . . . None of it felt like work!

Vicki gave Jess the packet of mints and she held one out on the flat of her hand and offered it to Rose. The pony snuffled loudly as she took it, then crunched it noisily between her teeth. “Let's



hope Rose doesn't roll in the mud before her first lesson,” Vicki said, grinning.

Jess laughed. "She'll probably be covered in mud after her jumping lesson with the twins anyway," she said.

The twins, Bill and Ben, were the youngest riders in the yard. They were sweet but very noisy, and always arrived full of energy. They loved jumping in the outdoor school, but Rose usually came back covered in sweat and mud after they'd ridden her, and Jess had to start grooming her all over again.

"You might have to look after the twins next week," said Vicki.

"Won't you be teaching?" Jess asked.

Vicki shook her head. "I'm going to be chief bridesmaid at my best friend Sarah's wedding."

Jess's green eyes widened. "What, Sarah who helped out with lessons last year?"

"Yes, that's right. She's marrying a famous show-jumper and they've asked me to be their bridesmaid. I've been friends with

Sarah since we were six and started having riding lessons together.”

“Wow! Have you got a posh dress?”

Vicki nodded. “Fuchsia-pink silk, fuchsia-pink satin shoes and fuchsia-pink roses in my hair!”

“You’ll look beautiful,” said Jess.

Vicki frowned. “I’m really worried about leaving the ponies for the day though,” she said. “Saturday is our busiest time and it’s a lot to ask of you girls – to look after the place on top of all your other jobs here.”

“Don’t worry,” said Jess. “Susie will keep an eye on us.”

Eighteen-year-old Susie was the oldest of the helpers and had a BHSI qualification. When Vicki wasn’t around, she took charge. Sometimes, if Susie was in



one of her moods, she acted like she knew it all. But she always put the ponies first, which was why Vicki trusted her.

“Oh, I know,” said Vicki, “but I haven’t been away for a whole day for ages and I reckon I’m really going to miss the ponies.”

Jess laughed. “It’s only one day. Honestly, we’ll take really good care of the place and the ponies.”

“I know,” said Vicki. “It’s just me being an idiot.”

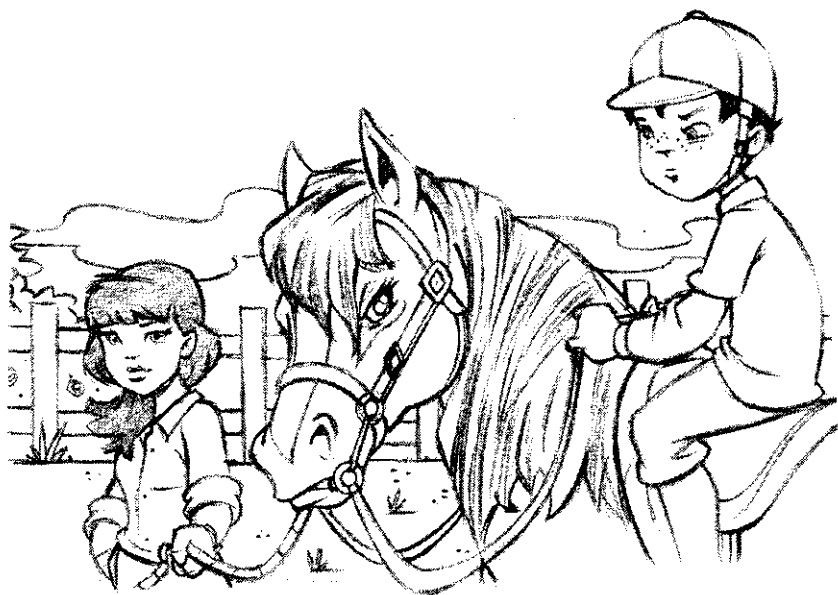
Just then the clang of the yard gate bashing against the wall made them both jump.

“Nine o’clock,” said Vicki, then added with a laugh, “First lesson of the day – let’s get a move on!”

Jess and her friends led the beginner riders round the yard while Vicki gave them their lesson.

“Bottoms down. Knees in!” she called out.

Jess was leading Bill on Rose. The pony was good with children but sometimes got impatient with their over-enthusiasm. Little Bill yanked too hard on her reins and Rose stopped dead in her tracks.



“Trot on!” yelled Bill excitedly.

But Rose wouldn't move. She whinnied loudly and shook her head.

“She’s telling you to show some respect!”

Jess said.

“What’s *respect*?” Bill asked.

“Treating her nicely. Try to handle her gently – and don’t yell at her so much,” Jess replied. “I bet you wouldn’t like it if somebody kept yanking at your mouth and shouting at you.”

Bill grinned. “Sorry, Rosie,” he said. Then, firmly but gently, he pressed his heels into the pony’s side. “Trot on,” he said softly – and this time Rose did!

Clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop. All round the yard she went, with her silver mane lifting in the breeze.

“Well done, Bill and Rose,” Vicki called out as they passed by. She winked at Jess as if to say, Well done for teaching Bill some manners!

All through the lesson Jess was thinking about Vicki. She wished she could make it

easier for her to be away from the ponies next Saturday. She'd do anything to make Vicki happy. She'd love to see her glammed-up as a bridesmaid, walking behind the bride and groom. But no way was that going to happen. Vicki would be at the church; Jess and her friends would be looking after the ponies. Then Jess had a wicked idea. Perhaps there was a way of looking after the ponies, making Vicki happy and seeing her as a bridesmaid too . . .