



One

Tilly Redbrow was mad about horses. Her favourite way to spend time was at Silver Shoe Farm. In fact, it was like a second home to her. Ever since Tilly helped rescue a mysterious horse called Magic Spirit, she had been a regular visitor.





As often as she could, Tilly would be there, helping Angela, who ran the stables.

Over the months, Tilly learned how to groom and muck out. She'd made new friends called Cally and Mia, and helped them to care for Rosie – the pretty strawberry roan pony they shared. But what Tilly liked most of all, was spending time with Magic Spirit. She had a special friendship with him. Tilly was the person Magic Spirit trusted most, and although he'd been underweight and unhappy when he'd arrived at the stables, he was growing stronger and healthier by the week. One day he was going to be a fabulous horse.

Tilly loved helping to care for the horses, but what she was really looking forward to was learning how to ride. Every time she saw people getting ready in the yard, saddling up and heading out on some



of the forest hacks, or going to the indoor school for lessons, she longed to be doing the same.

☆ The chance of a ride was all she could think about as she sat down for breakfast, twiddling the horsehair bracelet she'd worn all her life. It was Saturday, so the whole family were at the table, chatting and taking their time.

“Good morning, dreamy,” said Tilly’s mum, passing her the cereal. Tilly always chose muesli with chopped banana, followed by a big glass of orange juice.





Mr Redbrow looked up from his newspaper and smiled.

“Morning, Tiger Lil’. The weather’s going to be lovely today. What about a fishing trip to the river with me and Adam?” he asked, with a wink.

Adam was Tilly’s younger brother. He was busy flicking bits of toast across the table. He was annoying in the way that little brothers sometimes can be.

All Tilly wanted to do was spend the day with the horses. It was the first hot day in May, and she knew the stable yard was going to be buzzing with activity. Adam just grinned at her and poked out his tongue.

“But I guess you’ll be going to Silver Shoe Farm,” her dad continued, as if he was reading her mind. “Adam and I will have to go fishing on our own. You know, some parents complain that their children sit around doing nothing at the weekend! Not you though, eh, Tilly? You’re always doing something – as long as it involves horses!”



Tilly caught her dad’s eye. Despite what he said, she knew that really he was happy for her, and proud of her hard work. He understood what horses meant to her.

“Oh, look,” said Tilly’s mum, studying the date at the top of the newspaper. “It’s nearly the end of the month. Not long till your birthday, Tilly. Perhaps you’ll want a sleepover? Have you thought about what you want for a present yet?”

Tilly had a huge list in her mind: another year’s subscription to *Pony* magazine, a pair of canary yellow jodhpurs, a copy of *Pony Ranch!*

game for her PC, a grooming kit, a riding helmet, a pair of gold earrings in the shape of horseshoes, a quilted night rug for Magic Spirit, riding gloves and a raspberry-coloured gilet . . .

She shut her eyes and reeled off the list. Then she decided to go for the big one.





“Riding lessons – at the farm. It would be extra great if you could get me those!”

“Hmm, we’ll have to see about that,” said her mum, exchanging glances with Mr Redbrow.

Underneath the table, Tilly had her fingers crossed.

Just then, her phone buzzed. She pulled it out of her pocket and checked the message. She knew straightaway that it would be from either Mia or Cally.

PERFECT DAY. IF U R NOT AT THE FARM BY 10AM
THEN U R A LOSER! LOVE MIA XXX

Tilly laughed.

“Dad,” she said, as she swallowed a mouthful of muesli. “If you’re taking Adam fishing soon, then can you give me a lift to Silver Shoe Farm on your way?”


“Whatever you say, Tiger Lil’.”

“Thanks, Dad!”



They drove along the now familiar leafy lane that led to Silver Shoe Farm. Eventually they pulled up at the five-bar gate and Tilly said goodbye to her dad and Adam. She marched across the yard, straight to Magic Spirit’s large stable, which was more like a barn, situated at the back of the yard. Sure enough, there he was, happily munching some hay.


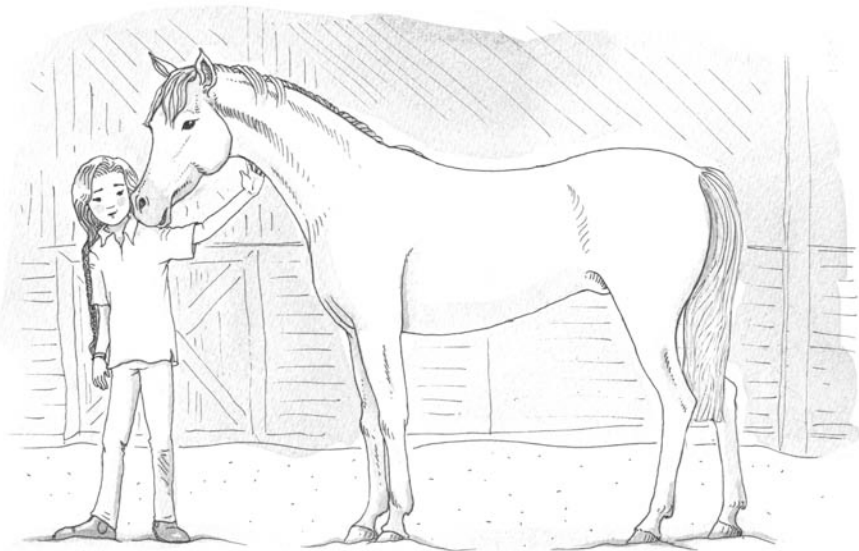
“Hello, boy!” she said. She couldn’t believe how well he was looking. He had



put on weight, his coat was getting its shine back and most of the sores had gone. Tilly remembered going into his stable for the first time. Back then his coat had been matted and filthy. His eyes had been wild and his whole body tense. He had startled and nearly knocked her over. Today, he was peaceful and relaxed. It was almost as though he was a different horse.

Magic Spirit looked up at Tilly and immediately came towards her. His ears pricked forward at the sound of her voice.

“You do look handsome,” she said, stroking his neck proudly. Magic Spirit nuzzled her shoulder.



Duncan, Angela's head boy, appeared in the doorway with some mucking out tools.

“Hello, guys. I thought I'd find you in here, Tilly. I saw your dad drop you off. Just in time . . .”

Tilly saw that he was holding a shovel and bucket.

“Do you think you'd be able to muck out Magic Spirit's stable and then give him a brush down?”

“Sure,” said Tilly eagerly.

“You can tie him up outside.”

“Where's his head collar?” asked Tilly, noticing that Magic Spirit wasn't wearing one.

“I've got a smart new leather one,” said Duncan, handing it to Tilly. “Do you want to see if it fits?”

Tilly approached Magic, chatting away and telling him what she was about to do, as if he understood her every word. She knew he didn't like sudden movements around his head, so she reassured him by rubbing his favourite spot at the base of his wither.



Before putting the head collar on him, she undid the clip attached to the strap under the throat, and let the headpiece out onto the last hole so it would be easier to get on. Then she slipped the noseband over Magic's nose and quietly pulled the headpiece over his ears. Once it was in place, she clipped the throat strap back and adjusted the buckle, so it was two holes tighter, but not too tight. She had seen from pictures that head collars were fitted more loosely than bridles.

Magic Spirit stood very still, and even helped a little by lowering his head.

"That's it," said Duncan, watching her. "Gently swing the head strap behind Magic's ears, but be careful not to drag it over his eyes, ears, or nose."

Duncan clipped the lead rope to the ring on the underside of the halter and offered it to Tilly. Her stomach filled with butterflies. She reached for the rope, but she was so excited and overwhelmed by the thought of actually leading Magic Spirit



by herself, she could hardly move. She just stared at him adoringly.

"Go for it," urged Duncan.

He showed her how to hold the rope, avoiding looping it around her own hand.

"If the rope is looped around your hand you risk getting rope burns if he pulls away," he explained. "Now, stand at his shoulder and give him his cue. I usually give one click and then say 'walk on' which he seems to respond to. Although he doesn't seem to have been broken in yet, he's obviously had some experience of being led in the past."

"How old do you think he is?" asked Tilly.

"He's a four year old – still young." Duncan had looked at Magic's teeth once he'd become calm enough to handle. "That's how you judge a horse's age," he explained.

Tilly positioned herself at Magic Spirit's shoulder, and smiled at him. He gave her a little nod, as if to say, 'I'm ready'. In her

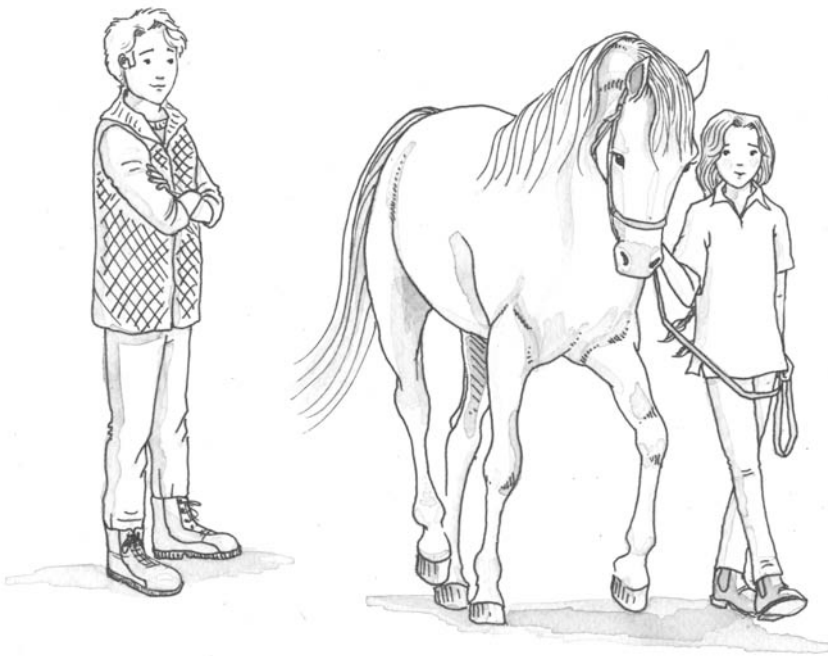


head she counted to three then clicked once and spoke out loud:

“Walk on, boy.”

It was clear that Magic Spirit understood. He walked forward without any further prompting.

“That’s perfect,” said Duncan, behind them. “You’ve got such a good way with horses, Tilly.”



As they walked together into the sunlight, Tilly beamed with pride. The smell of honeysuckle and freshly-mown grass drifted towards them.

Even though it was only a short distance to the tie-up ring on the far wall, Tilly’s confidence grew with every step and it felt as though they’d covered a large amount of ground.

“Whoa, boy!”

Together Magic Spirit and Tilly stood still, and Duncan caught up with them.

“Great. Now, allow a length of rope so that he’s free to move and look around, not too long . . . and then I’ll show you how to tie him safely.”

Duncan took the rope from Tilly and demonstrated a quick release knot. Tilly watched closely, but she was still a bit confused.

“Don’t worry,” laughed Duncan, seeing the expression on her face. “It takes practice. If you join the Pony Club and get some riding lessons you’ll learn all the

skills you need. But if you're not sure about something, you can always ask. It's better to ask than take a risk."

Tilly wondered what the chance of getting lessons would be. Maybe for her birthday? She hoped her mum and dad would agree that it was a good idea – she'd do anything. Everybody's chores for a week, a hundred hours of homework . . . she'd even sell some of her old My Little Pony toy collection (which she had started when she was five) – it didn't seem quite so cool, now that she had the real thing standing next to her!