



Early one morning, Amber was in the wash-box at Merryfield Hall Riding School, soaping her pony, Oscar's, tail, when her best friend, Molly, burst in with some news.

"Princess who?" Amber asked, looking up.

Molly was pleased to have grabbed Amber's attention.

"I don't know her name," she said. "But she's coming here! From somewhere far away, like..." She tried fervently to remember the conversation she had overheard between Jen, the owner of the riding school,

and Carol, who worked in the office. "The Middle East!" she said triumphantly. "And," she carried on quickly as Amber turned back to rubbing the soap into Oscar's tail, "she's coming TODAY!"

Amber was still listening. "But why? Don't princesses usually open or inspect things? We're not doing anything special, are we?"

"No," Molly had to admit. "Not that I've heard."

Amber emptied the bucket of soapy water and refilled it with fresh.

"Aren't you excited?" cried Molly. "I wonder what she'll be like?"

"Probably be wearing a tiara," said Amber, dipping Oscar's tail in and out of the clean water and squeezing the soap out as she did so.

"Oh!" gasped Molly. "Do you think so?"

Amber grinned. "And a ball-gown. Maybe glass slippers?"

“Now you’re being silly,” said Molly. “Though if I had a tiara, I’d wear it every single day.”

“It wouldn’t exactly fit under your riding hat!” said Amber. She checked her watch. “You’d better fetch Feather,” she advised. “Five minutes until our lesson.”

Amber took Oscar back to his stable and tacked him up. He looked lovely. His chestnut coat shone, and his mane and tail were creamy white once again.

It was the first day of the summer holidays. Amber planned to spend all day every day at the stables from now on. She loved working there, and the free lessons she received for doing so – together with her usual weekly one – would be a big help in achieving her ambition. This year she was old enough to take part in the One-Day Event that would be held as part of the summer show in the grounds of Merryfield Hall Hotel. As always, Amber wanted to win, but the competition

involved jumping, cross-country and dressage. The first two Amber had been doing for a while, but dressage was new to her and she was finding it difficult.

Amber arrived at the indoor arena as Molly appeared with Feather.

“Any sign?” said Molly as they mounted.

“Of what?” said Amber.

“The princess, of course,” hissed Molly.

Amber gazed around. “Can’t see a golden coach and six white horses,” she murmured.

Molly rolled her eyes. She kicked Feather forward. Amber followed. Kate was instructing them.

“Move your ponies on,” she said. “Get them stepping underneath you.”

Amber settled into her saddle. When they’d first been told about dressage, she’d thought it sounded boring. Anyway, all the riders in her group – Lydia, Jack, Donna and Molly – knew how to make their ponies walk, trot and canter. But then, as they’d

begun to have lessons, she'd realized there was a lot more to it than that. Dressage was about *how* you did those things; trying to achieve the same quality of movement in the arena that your pony used when he was free in the fields.

"Sit tall in the saddle," said Kate. "But deep so that your legs fall towards the ground. That's good, Lydia. Well done."

Lydia looks so relaxed, thought Amber. She envied the way Lydia could stretch her body upwards and her legs downwards, apparently so easily. Amber felt she was straining every nerve to obtain the correct position – and that only created tension.

The arena was marked out with letters. In the show, the rider had to complete a series of movements – making transitions exactly at the markers, not before, not after – and keep a consistent rhythm, neither hurrying nor dawdling. It was so difficult to get everything right.

“Let’s begin at the beginning,” said Kate. “One at a time. Enter at Marker A at a working trot and continue down the centre line to Marker C.”

There wasn’t really a line from A to C. You had to imagine it, and as the dressage judge would be positioned at C, it was important to make a good first impression.

Lydia started on Silver. “Plan your turn,” called Kate. But Lydia misjudged it and went way past the marker. Jack did well on Roger to begin with, then wobbled towards C. Donna on Sparkle completed the whole manoeuvre without a hitch. “Excellent!” said Kate. Donna smirked.

“Oh, it’s me,” said Molly. She urged Feather forwards.

“A little slow,” said Kate when Molly eventually reached C. “But accurate. Amber, off you go.”

Oscar leapt forward. Amber tried to hold him back a little as they swung into the

turn at A, but Oscar slowed almost to a walk. Quickly, Amber urged him on. Oscar responded, flew down the centre line, rounded the turn at C at speed, then stopped so abruptly that Amber fell forwards onto his neck. She heard the others laugh as she wriggled back into the saddle.

“Don’t worry,” said Kate. “Once Oscar settles to an even rhythm, he’ll be fine.”

Next it was the Serpentine. You had to ride the whole length of the arena, crossing from side to side in three equal loops.

“Follow my leader,” said Kate. Which worked well until Amber caught up and had to slow down. She and Molly ended up muddled together.

“That’s not fair!” shouted Amber.

“I couldn’t help it,” said Molly.

Donna laughed.

“Never mind,” said Kate. “We’ll do it again and you can go first, Amber. Then we’ll do some canter work.”

At the end of the lesson, Amber put Oscar away and fetched one of the large brooms to sweep the yard. Her loops in the Serpentine had been anything but equal, she reflected. She'd concentrated so hard on shape. The first one had turned out well but was far too big while the remaining two had become smaller and smaller. Amber knew she needed to have good shapes *and* size. It was no use having one without the other.

As she swept closer to the office, the door opened and Jen came out accompanied by a girl of about Amber's age.

"Ah, Amber," said Jen. "Just the person! Come and meet—"

She was cut short by an ear-splitting shout: "LOOSE HORSE!"

"Shut the gate!" yelled Jen, running to do it herself.

A large bay horse trotted briskly into the yard.

"It's Solomon," Amber told the girl. "He's

always getting out. If someone forgets to shut the bolt at the bottom of his stable door, he undoes the top one with his teeth. He likes to go for a wander.”

“Couldn’t that be dangerous?” said the girl, seriously. “And very careless of his groom.”

Amber stared at her. “Jen’ll be back in a minute,” she said. Who did this girl think she was with her airs and graces?

The girl held out her hand. “It’s very nice to meet you,” she said. “I’m Princess Rana. And you are...?”