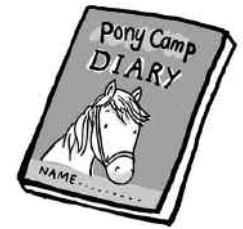




I'm at Pony Camp!
It's our free time after
lunch and I'm starting this
diary right now, 'cos I don't
want to forget all the amazing
things that have happened so far!



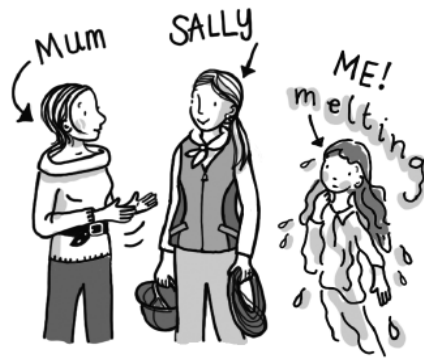
My mum was in even more of a tizz than usual because we ended up arriving late. As we only live about 30 miles away, I thought I'd be the first one here, but there were roadworks and then we got stuck behind a tractor for ages.

Anyway, when we finally got here Lydia, this lovely stable girl, welcomed us and told me she'd take my suitcase into the farmhouse so that I could go straight on to the yard and join the group. Mum came with me, and I was glad about that at first because when I saw all the other girls laughing and chatting I felt



really nervous. But then she started doing her usual thing of fussing and worrying – like asking Jody, who runs Pony Camp, whether there’s fruit on offer every day and when bedtime is because I need my rest. “And please do make sure she actually goes to sleep rather than staying up chatting,” she added, sounding really bossy.

Well, I was absolutely *melting* with embarrassment. Then Sally the instructor came out of the office and Mum started telling her that I absolutely must wear my body protector for every lesson. Sally gave her a big smile and said of course all the girls do, and that there are very strict rules and procedures in place to keep us all safe. But everyone was staring at us.



ARGH!



Even worse, Mum turned to me and said (loudly!), “Hannah, you know how anxious I am about you being away on your own. Promise me you’ll stick to everything we discussed.”

“I promise,” I mumbled. It wasn’t the first time she’d mentioned safety and healthy food and getting enough sleep. She’d been talking about it all week, saying how I have to be extra careful to look after myself, much more than the other girls, and not to take any risks while riding.

Just then, Jody offered Mum a cup of tea, so she gave me a hug and they went off towards the farmhouse (thanks goodness!). Sally started telling us what we’ll be doing this week and when I finally dared to look up from the floor I found that some of the girls were giving me curious stares. I tried to give them a smile, but my mouth just went all wobbly and my stomach felt all jangly. It wasn’t the best start to Pony Camp, was it?





You know that saying about wrapping people up in cotton wool? Well, if Mum could I bet she'd actually get a gigantic ball of it and cover me from head to foot! I mean, I understand why she's like this, because of me being ill all the time when I was younger – just with throat infections, but it was one after the other and I missed loads of school. I'm totally fine now, but Mum can't seem to stop worrying.



So anyway, Sally finished talking and popped into the office and everyone round me broke into excited chatter. No one spoke to me at first and I felt like bolting off to hide in a haystack. But then these girls called Millie and Laura came over and said I'm sharing a room with them. They're really nice and I hope we'll all be in the same riding group! Actually, it's *Millie's* room we're in because she's Jody's daughter and she *lives* at Sunnyside Stables (how lucky is that?!).



When Sally came back she got us *all* to introduce ourselves. There are two friends called Alice and Emma, who are both 9, and they're sharing a room.



And in the other room there are these cool-looking girls called Becki, Shamila and Freya. They've come together too, and they're all 11 and in the same class, and they're really excited about starting high school after the holidays.





Then Millie had to go back in and get on with her maths holiday homework, and Sally showed the rest of us around the yard. As we went round, she told us all this safety stuff, like where everything is, and where to go if the fire alarm rings, and about always putting away brushes, and never running or shouting. I wished Mum could have heard all that, then she might have stopped worrying so much!

I can't believe I'm actually here at Pony Camp! I mean, a whole week LIVING at a stables. I'm away from home by myself, I've got my own pony for the week, and I get to ride every day! It's a dream come true!



Speaking of MY PONY (who I will reveal in a min!), next we went into a barn with all these gorgeous ponies in pens. It was so exciting making a fuss of them and wondering which ones we'd be paired up with. Laura and I kept looking at each other and grinning. Lydia was



getting the ponies brushed down and tacked up ready for our lesson, and Sally said that from tomorrow we'll be doing all that for ourselves – I can't wait!



We stopped beside a beautiful strawberry roan pony with a cute stripe down her face, and Sally gave her a big pat and rubbed her cute pointy ears. "This is our lovely Hope," she said, and everyone went "aw" because she was so gorgeous. "It's her first week at Pony Camp," she went on, and then she said something really shocking that none of us were expecting. She said that Hope had come from a pony rescue centre because she'd been abandoned by her owner. Apparently he'd lived in a field in a caravan, and one day he'd moved on without her. Can you believe that? How could anyone leave a pony all by itself?!

By the time she was rescued, Hope's hooves had grown so long she could hardly walk, and



she was really bony from trying to survive on the tiny bit of grass left in her field. Of course, with no one to do the poo picking, the new grass couldn't grow properly, and trying to eat round her droppings gave Hope worm problems. *And* she'd got an eye infection, which must have been really painful. I felt so sick hearing all that and so sorry for poor Hope. So did everyone else, and we all made a big fuss of her.



Sally said that eventually someone spotted her and alerted the local shelter, the Bluebell Wood Horse and Pony Rescue Centre. Thank goodness they took her in when they did, or she might have gone blind from the eye infection or, even worse, not survived at all. Sally said she was so malnourished she probably



only had weeks left to live. The people at the rescue centre didn't know her name, of course, but she did so amazingly well in her recovery that in the end they called her Hope, to show that however bad things are, there is always hope that they'll get better. And now, after months of Sally working with her over at the centre, Hope has been rehomed here at Sunnyside Stables.



Of course, after hearing her story we all wanted her as our pony for the week, but Sally said she'd already decided which of us was going to ride her. I thought it would be Becki or Freya or Shamila, because they're the oldest and they seem really confident. But, back on the yard, Sally said *I was with Hope. Me!* I still can't believe it. When Lydia led her over to me I just couldn't stop grinning!





Everyone said how lucky I was, but they were all so excited about their own ponies that they didn't mind not getting Hope. Freya went absolutely nuts over her elegant grey Connemara, Charm; Becki got this glossy bay called Shine, and Shamila was paired up with a cute blue roan cob called Lucky.

Laura got a naughty little pony called Cracker, who made her laugh by butting her pocket straight away to check if she had any treats for him, and Millie has her own pony, Tally. Actually, Millie is a bit down in the dumps because it's her last week with him. She's trying out a new pony next week, and though she desperately doesn't want to stop riding Tally,

even I can see that he's too small for her. She came into the assessment lesson with us, just for the ride, and when she mounted up her heels were right off his sides!



As for the younger ones, Alice got a cute piebald called Prince, who Sally said was a real gentleman, and Emma was given the lovely Star.

While we were getting ready to ride (including putting on our body protectors, of course!), I started to worry that I wouldn't be good enough to have Hope as my pony for the week. I was thinking that because of what happened to her she'd probably need lots of special handling that I don't have the experience to give her. Sally must have noticed me looking anxious, because she came over and said, "You'll be fine, Hannah, there's no need to worry. You did want Hope, didn't you?"

Well, of course I did! I said a big YES and tried to push my worries away.

Then Becki asked Sally if we could go and visit the rescue centre during the week. Sally said that was a good idea and she'd see what she could do.



I'm so glad Becki asked (I'd wanted to say something myself but hadn't dared). I really hope we'll be able to go!

Then we all rode in together for the assessment lesson. Freya's amazing – she had Charm on the bit after about five minutes, going round in a really balanced, rhythmic trot. Laura, Emma and Alice did trotting to the back of the ride when the rest of us had a canter, but Sally said she'll soon have them flying round, and they all looked really excited about that.



When it was our turn to canter, I didn't push Hope on because I was trying not to squeeze her too hard. I didn't want her to think I was being mean to her, not after everything she's been through. So when she dropped back into trot again after a few strides I didn't try to get her going again.



“You'll have to give it some welly next time!” Sally called out afterwards, and I nodded, but I don't like the thought of kicking Hope on.

Poor Hope got so nervous when we were practising passing hand to hand and was really skittish, going sideways across the school away from the other ponies (thank goodness we were on the *inner* track!). Sally said me being nery and hesitant was *making* her like that, and I wanted to explain that I wasn't nervous myself, but I was just being careful for Hope's sake.



Shine did the same skittery thing as Hope when she next passed Charm, going sideways with her nose in the air. But Becki just rode on as if nothing had happened and next time there were no problems at all. “There you go, Hannah, that's the way to do it,” Sally called.

I wanted to say, “It's different for Hope, she's



probably *really* scared, because of what happened to her.” But of course I didn’t, because I’m not a speaking-up kind of person. Instead I just nodded.



Then afterwards, this awful thing happened. Sally came over to me in the yard and said, “Hannah, I have to be honest with you, I’m wondering whether you’d be better off with a different pony. You don’t seem to be very assertive with Hope, and that’s what she needs to get her going. I could try you on someone very forward-going, like Flame, where it’s more a question of holding her back than pushing her on. And there’s no harm in Hope waiting another week to join in the fun.”

I couldn’t say anything at all for a moment because I was so stunned. I hugged Hope’s neck and stroked her mane – even after one



morning, I felt like I just *couldn’t* be separated from her. She needs someone to look after her, and that person is me!



“No, please! I want to stay with Hope,” I managed to croak.

Sally smiled. “I thought you’d say that. Well, OK, you can keep her for the moment, but you will have to be more confident with her.”

“I’ll do better, I promise,” I mumbled, feeling really embarrassed. I bet Sally thinks I’m a rubbish rider after that lesson, when I was only trying to take care of Hope.

GROAN!

Now I’ve really got to prove to her that I can be confident and assertive, which isn’t exactly *me*, is it?! And I’m still scared of hurting or upsetting Hope. I just never want her to feel bad again, not for one minute, not after everything she’s been through.