

# Zombie ponies of Fairweather Farm

by Kyle Mewburn

## Chapter One - Twin brains

The night was as dark as a dragon's lair. Pale stars glistened like crystals in the crisp, still air. It was almost silent, too, as though the world was holding its breath. There were only three sounds disturbing the peace. The gruff snuffling of sheep grazing amongst the tussock clumps. The distant whisper of the creek slithering over stones. And Archie's regular: "Ka-Boosh!"

Pippa swung her torch around. "Do you *have to* do that?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

Archie's face was a grinning deathmask. "Of course. Everyone knows if you stand on a landmine you get blown up."

"They're not mines, they're cowpats. And you could avoid them... if you wanted."

"That's not much fun, Pip."

"Well, could you stop it for a while? It's annoying."

Pippa swung her torch back to the path and stormed away.

"All right," Archie said finally. Pippa could almost hear his eyeballs rolling in their sockets.

"So you're sure you've got the maggots?" Pippa asked for the hundredth time. At least that's how it felt to Archie.

"Yes," he said, jiggling his pack as evidence. "I said I did, didn't I?"

Pippa wasn't entirely convinced. Sure he had a container of some sort in his pack, but it wouldn't be the first time he'd brought the wrong one.

*Oh well, Pippa thought with a mental sigh, I guess it doesn't really matter if Archie remembered the maggots or not.*

It was enough just being out here, wandering the fields at night, when the world was cloaked in mystery. It was when she felt most connected to this land - the land their family had been farming for generations. She couldn't imagine ever leaving, even though she sometimes worried that might just happen if Dad's luck didn't change.

They'd walked the track to the creek so many times, Pippa was quite sure she could find her way blindfolded. But she kept her eyes peeled and her torch pointed firmly at the ground as she picked her way between the tussocks. The last thing she needed was to fall down a rabbit hole and break her leg again. Then Archie would have to run back to fetch Dad. And he'd have to come out on the quad to rescue her then drive her all the way down to the

valley so Doctor Mooney could set it in plaster. It would be nearly breakfast by the time they got back.

She knew Dad wouldn't be angry that they'd snuck out of the house again when they were supposed to be in bed. Summer in the High Country was too short to waste sleeping, he always said. The school holidays were even shorter. But she also knew he could do with a good night's sleep. And the last thing he needed right now was a bill for an afterhours call out.

She glanced over her shoulder at Archie, hoping he was being a bit more careful too. When she saw him hunched forward holding a long stick like a rifle, his torch jerking wildly from left to right, she sighed.

"What now?" Archie asked, bewildered. "I'm being quiet, aren't I?"

"Sometimes you're such a... such an *Archie*," said Pippa.

Archie smiled as if it was a compliment.

"Hurry up," said Pippa. "Bob will be getting hungry."

The field sloped away, falling towards the chuckling creek. In daylight the water was a weak tea brown, stained by its passage through the peat bogs. But now it was a black ribbon embroidered along the western boundary of Fairweather Farm.

They zig-zagged down the hill, following criss-crossing sheep tracks. Rabbits jerked upright as they were caught in a circle of torchlight. They looked more guilty than startled. Like they'd been caught doing something naughty.

Archie slowly subsided into silence. The track was becoming increasingly treacherous. It demanded all his attention. Grey boulders burst through the soil like petrified mushrooms. Jagged tentacles of bush lawyer draped over outcrops of schist, waiting to ensnare the unwary. One false step could end in disaster.

With a grunt of satisfaction, they tumbled onto a narrow beach. Speckles of fool's gold glinted amongst the gravel as Pippa swung her torch round to Archie. He'd already shrugged off his pack and was fumbling inside for the container. He withdrew it with a magician's flair and a smug grin.

"I told you I had them," he said, giving the container a gentle shake.

"I never doubted you for a minute," Pippa lied. "Come on."

Up ahead, they could hear the creek rumbling over the low concrete dam. The goldminers had built it to control the water's flow. In the process they'd created the best swimming hole in the valley. Pippa and Archie spent half their summers here, swimming, snorkelling or catching freshwater crayfish until way after the sun sank below the hills.

That's how they'd met Bob.

They clambered onto a large, flat rock jutting out over the creek. It was their favourite place in the entire world. It was a platform for dive-bombing and catching crayfish. It was the place the whole family came for summer picnics... at least they did, when their mum was still alive.

The stone was also the roof of Bob's home.

Archie opened the container and shone his torch inside.

"Look at these beauties," he said, fishing a large, pale maggot from the writhing mass and holding it between them.

Pippa whistled in appreciation. "They're huge. Where'd you get them?"

"Ummmm," said Archie.

Pippa cocked her head and gave him a quizzical look. "Well?"

Archie grimaced. One hand combing through his hair as though searching for fleas. "Ummmm, it's probably better if I show you."

"Seriously?" Pippa asked.

Archie nodded. Then began to squirm as Pippa studied him like a rat she was about to dissect in biology class.

She couldn't tell if he looked embarrassed, confused or scared? Which was kind of weird and deeply unsettling. Twins were *always* supposed to know what the other was feeling, weren't they? Up to now they always did, too. But not this time.

Before she could interrogate him further, a secretive splash spun their torches to the creek. They glimpsed a dark shape dissolving into shadow and a circle of ripples oozing across the silky black surface.

"Hi, Bob," Archie and Pippa said in a single voice.

"We've got some lovely maggots for you," Pippa whispered.

"Come and get it," Archie added. His fingers opened like a bomber bay, releasing its maggoty payload. As the maggot plummeted towards the creek, Archie started to make a high-pitched whistling sound. But Pippa's scowl clamped his lips together. Pippa was just *no fun* lately.

The maggot hit the water with a gentle plop then began drifting slowly downstream, like a tiny liferaft in a vast sea. It didn't get far. A shadow swept upwards and - *PLOP!* - the maggot was gone, replaced by ripples.

"Nice job, Bob," said Archie.

Now they had Bob's attention, Pippa extinguished her torch, then squirmed onto her stomach. "Hold your torch steady," she hissed, reaching down to gently submerge her hand.

Archie clenched his teeth. He knew what he was supposed to do. And she knew he knew. So why did she always have to pretend she knew more than he did? Who put her in charge anyway? And another thing - why did she always assume she could go first?

For once he kept his thoughts to himself. He didn't feel like another argument.

They held their breaths. Time stood still. The world shrank around them. Every nerve tingled with anticipation. This was the best bit. The waiting. Never knowing exactly when, or even if, Bob would appear.

Pippa's startled gasp announced Bob's arrival. As usual, she hadn't seen him approach. One second there was just water. The next, a huge unblinking face stared back at her. It always made her jump. Like if her reflection suddenly morphed in the mirror. It made her feel like she was in a fairy-tale. The witch's curse turning the handsome prince into an eel. Doomed to swim night's dark water waiting for a princess's kiss.

"Hi, Bob," she whispered.

Bob hung in the water, frozen by the light. His long, sinewy body moving just enough to keep him hovering in place. He was as long as Pippa was tall and as thick as her leg. His mouth opened and closed, revealing a row of pointy teeth. Pippa wasn't the slightest bit nervous. Bob had always seemed more like a kindly grandfather than an eel.

Pippa's hand inched slowly forward until her fingers were gently tickling the eel's smooth belly. Bob wasn't at all ticklish. It was impossible to tell what he thought about the attention. Pippa secretly imagined he enjoyed their

encounters. After seventy or more years alone, it surely must be nice to have company.

"My turn," whispered Archie, wriggling with impatience. They never knew how long Bob would hang around.

"OK," said Pippa. She gave Bob a farewell tickle then eased herself away.

Archie slid into her place, keeping Bob pinned by his torch until Pippa was ready.

As she fumbled for her torch, an ear-shattering shriek split the night.

Pippa and Archie bolted upright. Bob disappeared with a mighty flick of his tail.

"What was that?" asked Archie.

Pippa was too shocked to answer. Which didn't make much difference because she didn't actually *have* an answer. She'd never heard any sound like it. It sounded half cow, half human and half horse. (Which didn't add up at all, of course, but her muddled brain was in no condition to do the math.) Except it didn't really sound like any of them. At least none she'd ever heard before.

"Come on," said Archie, dumping the remaining maggots into the creek.

"Let's check it out."

He sprang off the rock and dashed upstream before Pippa had a chance to argue. She wasn't at all sure investigating was a good idea. The goosebumps



tingling across her entire body suggested it wasn't. But there was no stopping Archie, so she hurried in pursuit.

They kept their eyes peeled and their ears sifting the night for clues. The sound didn't come again. The night was determined to keep its secrets. As they reached the beach a *SPLASH!* echoed down the creek.

"Quick!" said Archie as the darkness swallowed him.

Pippa trailed further and further behind until she could just see his torch dancing a wild jig as he clambered over rocks. It wasn't cowardice that slowed her steps. She was just too busy trying to process the sound to make her feet go any faster. If she was by herself, she would have sat down until she'd worked out what the best plan of action was. But she wasn't alone. And there was no way she was going to let Archie run off by himself. Their mum had always trusted Pippa to look after him and she wasn't going to betray that trust now.

"Pip! Hurry up! I've found... *something!*"

There was no mistaking the doubt and fear in her brother's voice. That got her feet moving - too fast for caution. By the time she reached him, she'd scraped a shin and her jolted pinkie was throbbing painfully.

"What is it?" she huffed, catching her breath.

Archie looked pale. He didn't answer, instead swinging his torch towards a dark shape on the other side of the creek.

"It... it looks like one of the Howes' heifers," said Pippa.

"It is," said Archie. His voice sounded hollow. "And look at its head."

"But how..." Pippa's words vanished as her lips twisted in thought.

The heifer's head was a mess of blood and shattered bone. Like it had plummeted from a great height and smashed onto the rocks. Except... there were no steep banks or cliffs nearby. And if it had just fallen, where was its brain?

"Its brain..." Pippa finally managed.

"Yep," Archie agreed. "Another one..."

The last words were exhaled in a whisper, outspoken by the creek.

Pippa heard them. Or at least she thought she did. Though whether their meaning had been distilled by ears or their weird telepathy, she couldn't be sure. Her head whipped round to face him.

Archie didn't notice. He stared at the poor creature, lost in thought.

"We should go home," Pippa finally managed with a shiver as an icy finger ran down her spine.

"Yeah," said Archie.

They didn't speak again until they paused outside their bedroom doors.

"Hey, Pip," Archie whispered, "love you."

"Yeah, me too," Pippa replied with a tired smile.

Archie lingered in the hallway, his hand resting, half-forgotten, on the doorknob, until the sound of the lock on his sister's door clicking into place finally roused him. He nodded once - a nod of determination; decision made. Then disappeared into the sanctuary of his room.

## Chapter Two - Batter to worse

Archie's eyes sprang open, flinging him out of a deep sleep. Something had startled him awake. But what? He blinked at the ceiling as his sleep-weary brain searched for clues. He could feel Pippa's presence in the room beside him and knew she was awake, too. They always knew.

A muffled clattering drifted down the hall from the kitchen. He sniffed the air. That's right, it was Sunday. Which meant pancakes for breakfast. It was a tradition Mum had insisted upon once they started school. "I hardly get to see you otherwise," she'd explained, her voice perched on the edge of a smile as usual. Though they all knew it was more about keeping Dad from slipping out of the house at dawn just one day a week.

It was a tradition they'd kept going even through the worst of times. First Gran had taken over pancake duties, wandering across from her house next door. When Gran's failing hips increasingly kept her house-bound, the twins had assumed responsibility. Recently Prue had insisted on playing chef.

Archie's forehead crinkled in a scowl as he strained to decipher the noises coming from the kitchen. Something was... *different*.

He could make out Prue's voice, bubbling away in a constant, excited stream. Dad's gruff chuckling replies punctuated the clanking of pans and clatter of cutlery. Everything as usual, so far...

An unexpected intrusion of laughter hooked Archie's sheet, dragging him out of bed. He made a quick roll call of all the farm's inhabitants as he threw on some clothes, but failed to pin the voice on anyone.

As he stepped through the door, he instinctively glanced to his left.

Pippa shook her head then gently closed her door.

"Me neither," whispered Archie as she joined him outside his door.

They approached the kitchen as though it was the den of a sleeping bear. The laughter came again. It was too light to be Gran's or Auntie Max's. It could be one of the shearing gang that had taken up residence in the quarters the last few days. But it was unlikely Dad would welcome them inside. Especially not during Pancake Sunday.

Outside the kitchen door they paused to exchange shrugs. There was only one way to find out. They turned the knob and gave the door a gentle push. It opened with a horror movie *C-R-E-A-K*. They stood frozen in the doorway, strangely reluctant to enter, as five sets of eyes turned towards them.

Dad was standing guard beside Prue, perched atop a chair before the oven. "Hi, guys," he said. "I was just about to call. Breakfast is almost ready. Right, chef?"

Prue giggled as she spun towards them, leaving a trail of batter splotches. "I made pancakes for everyone."

"Careful, pumpkin," Dad suggested, raising one barrier arm to prevent a fall while the other gently pushed the dripping ladle back over the bowl.

"They're just about ready, don't you reckon?" He glanced back at the twins and chuckled. "Don't stand there like stunned mullets. Grab a seat, guys."

Archie and Pippa swapped glances then slid into their chairs.

A woman with a wild mass of curly dark hair offered a hand across the table. "I'm Stella. I'm an old friend of your dad's." She accepted the twins' timid handshakes, smiling like she'd won a secret bet.

"And I'm Mia," a girl with sun-kissed skin splashed with freckles offered, beaming at the twins across the table.

"And that," Stella continued, gesturing towards the pale, thin boy staring at the table beside her. "Is Nikau."

"Nik," he said, lifting his head enough to offer a pained smile, before returning to his study of the tablecloth. Though their sharp features were

obviously carved by the same DNA, Nik lacked the others' vibrancy. Like a photo fading into sepia.

"Mia is eleven and Nik is thirteen and Stella and Dad went to school together but they live in America now," Prue explained in a gush of words as she dragged her cooking chair over to the table. "And they're going to stay with us and Nik and Mia are going to go to Roxdale school and..."

"I think you've just about brought everyone up to date, pumpkin," Dad suggested as he placed a tower of pancakes in the middle of the table. "We'll all have plenty of time later to get to know each other. So let's eat."

\* \* \* \*

Breakfast passed awkwardly. Stella tried to start a conversation a few times by prodding one of her kids or asking the twins questions. But after receiving only one-word answers in response, she faded into silence. Dad was never a great talker anyway, but even he seemed uneasy about the lack of chatter. Apart from Prue's non-stop commentary, the kids ate in silence. Every now and then they'd steal a glance across the table and receive a shy smile in return.

"Well, I'm full," Dad finally declared, his voice a little louder than it needed to be. He heaved himself to his feet and wiped the last pancake

crumbs from his beard. "Right, you kids can tidy up while I give Stella a tour of the farm."

Pippa and Archie could only gawp. They always tidied up together. It was part of their tradition... wasn't it?

Nik and Mia stared at their mum like two kittens left in a dog pound.

"But I made all the pancakes!" Prue protested, her bottom lip a quiver.

Dad scooped her up in a massive bear hug and kissed her loudly on the cheek. "I didn't mean you, pumpkin. In fact, I was hoping you'd help me show Stella around. What do you reckon?"

Prue squealed and buried her head in Dad's beard.

"Now go get ready, pumpkin," Dad finally said, plonking Prue back on the floor. "Shoo!" As soon as she'd disappeared down the hall, Dad turned to the twins. He had his serious parenting face on. "OK, guys. Here's the deal. Nik and Mia are going to be our guests for a while and I'm relying on you to make them feel at home. After you've finished tidying up here, I want you to show them around. OK?"

"But, Dad," Archie said. "We were going to..."

"No buts, Arch," Dad said in a voice that put a fullstop on any protest.

"There's nothing you were going to do you can't do with Nik and Mia. Clear?"



Archie started to scowl, then surprised them all with a smile. "Yeah, we'll take them along. No worries, Dad."

Nik and Mia gratefully returned his smile. They didn't like the idea any more than Archie did. But there was no point making it harder than it needed to be.

Pippa remained silent, studying Archie with suspicion. She could tell he was up to something. And was quite sure their tagalongs weren't going to like it.

\* \* \* \*

The two quads bounced and jolted over the bumpy terrain. Pippa felt Mia's arms like a straitjacket around her waist. Archie roared ahead, enveloped in Nik's lanky embrace.

Archie had refused to say where they were going. But with every cattle-grid they clattered across, Pippa's hunch got stronger. By the time they skirted the colosseum - a circle of schist formations rising from the tussock like the ruins of an abandoned city - she knew her hunch was right.

If she didn't have to concentrate so hard just to keep up, she would have shaken her head in frustration at her brother's childishness. They could have

reached their destination in no time if they'd just stuck to the track. Instead, Archie had led them over the most difficult terrain on the farm. At breakneck speed, as well, as if they were being pursued by a herd of raptors.

Archie finally skidded to a halt at the edge of the steep gully that marked the boundary between their farm and the Howe's. Pippa rumbled to a stop beside him in time to see the twisted smile curling his lips as he removed his helmet. He dismounted and turned to face Nik who remained perched on the back, gripping the carrier.

"Fun, eh?" Archie said, offering Nik his most angelic smile. His face was dripping with sweat and painted with dust.

Nik's breath escaped in an explosion of air. Then he surprised them all by leaping off the bike with his arms pumping the sky. "That was so awesome!" he hooted. "Better than Disneyland even!"

Archie's smile melted. And it wasn't just the sun reddening his face. Pippa was glad her helmet obscured her smile. *One nil, Nik*, she thought.

Pippa removed her helmet and turned to Mia. "You okay, Mia?"

Mia shrugged. "Yeah, I'm okay. But I prefer riding horses."

"Cool," Pippa grinned. She was actually starting to warm to the idea of Nik and Mia hanging around a while. Especially Mia. Sometimes boys were just too full on. And Archie was full-on-er than most.

She started to make a joke, but halted when she saw Mia's nose crinkling in disgust.

"What's that terrible smell?" Mia asked.

Pippa spun round to face Archie. A question mark hanging over her eyes as she sniffed the air like a werewolf sensing blood.

"Yep," said Archie with unusual seriousness. "That's why we're here. C'mon."

As the twins' heads disappeared below the gully rim, Nik and Mia exchanged bewildered glances. Then followed... at a safe distance.

A faint track skirted the forestry block. They called it the forestry block because Dad always claimed logging it for timber was his retirement plan. But they all knew he wasn't serious. It was Mum's legacy. Most of the hills had been cleared centuries before, burnt off by moa hunters. Then farmers had moved in to finish the job. Being from the north, Mum never got used to the barrenness of the land. This patch of forest had been her sanctuary, the place she came to restore her spirits. They could almost feel her presence there still. Dad would never do anything to lose that.

The heat intensified as the gully dropped away. With no breeze to stir the air, the smell soaked them like decay. Nik and Mia held their noses and

marched on grimly. Was this a challenge? Or some kind of farm initiation? Whatever it was, they weren't about to give Archie any satisfaction.

A frantic buzzing rose around them. Getting louder. And louder. Like they'd stumbled upon a secret Formula One Grand Prix circuit. The smell was so putrid they could taste it.

"Ummmm, is this really necessary?" Nik asked, trying hard not to gag.

"You can go back if you want," said Archie.

"Can't you just tell us where you're taking us, Arch?" asked Pippa. "I'm just about to faint here."

Archie shook his head with a soldier's resolve. "No, you have to see it, Pip. It's important." He gave Pippa a wry smile. "Don't worry, sis. It's not far now."

The gully began to widen. A narrow stretch of grass appeared, wedged between the rocks and gorse. Fed by a thin vein of water trickling from a secret spring, it was an oasis of lushness in an otherwise faded landscape. Dad called it no-man's land. It was impossible to tell on whose side of the boundary this unexpected field sat. But that didn't stop the Howes from grazing it, claiming it as their own by default.

"Nearly there," Archie grunted, as he clambered up onto a rocky outcrop.

Nik's face was set in a grimace. Mia's was pale as thistle down. The smell was an almost solid presence. The buzzing so loud it seemed to be inside their heads. They hoped their ordeal was over soon.

A loud *GASP!* quickened their steps. They burst past a prickly gorse bush... and froze. The twins were statues on the rocky ledge, staring at the terrible scene below.

The gully floor was littered with the bloated corpses of a dozen heifers. Like the battle scene of a bovine war movie. Flies swarmed in thick, shifting clouds filling the air with the angry tremor of decomposition. The smell was a sickly blanket thrown over the dead.

"I was checking the possum traps up at the forestry block for Dad," Archie said, "Then I got a whiff of... *this*."

"So you decided to investigate," said Pippa, shaking her head.

"Course."

"What happened to them?" asked Nik, licking his dry lips.

"Dunno," Archie replied.

"Maybe they got a fright and stampeded over the edge... or something?"

Mia suggested uncertainly.

"I thought about that," said Archie. "But..."

"...but they couldn't have fallen that far," finished Pippa.

"They wouldn't be spread out like that either, would they?" Nik added.

"Nope. But just to make sure I went down for a closer look," said Archie.

"And all their brains were missing..." Pippa said, her voice barely a whisper. "Just like that poor creature last night."

"What?!" Nik and Mia exploded. "Their brains?"

"Yep," said Archie. "Someone did a pretty messy job of it, too. The skulls look like they've been cracked open with a sledgehammer."

"Someone? Or *something*?" asked Pippa.

"Your guess is as good as mine, sis."

"Nothing else is missing?" asked Nik.

"Nope. Just the brains. Waste of good beef, I gotta say."

"But why would anyone take the brains and leave everything else?"

"No idea... yet," said Archie. "But I'd really like to find out."

"Me too," said Pippa.

The twins were strangely delighted to see Nik and Mia nodding agreement.

## Chapter Three - Skin deep

The ride back to the house was sombre. They felt like soldiers preparing for battle. They were all lost in their own thoughts. Archie kept to the track and drove slow enough for Nik to keep up. Pippa had thought it only fair that Nik had a turn, too - once he'd assured her he'd ridden a quad before.

When Archie suddenly veered off the track, Pippa leant forward and shouted in his ear: "What now?"

"I need a swim," Archie yelled over his shoulder.

Pippa nodded. It was a good idea. The sun was roasting them. She was sweating so much she felt like she'd sprung a leak. Her t-shirt clung to her body like shedding skin. Every pore was soaked in the stench of the gully. She didn't really want to take that smell home with her.

Archie slid the bike to a standstill at the top of the bank. He tore off his helmet and stamped away, hollering like he was on fire.

Pippa stayed behind until Nik and Mia rumbled alongside.

"We're going for a swim," she said. "C'mon! You'll love it."

Before she turned away, she thought she saw Nik give his sister a reassuring pat on her hand. But maybe he was just prising her hand free from

around his waist? She didn't linger to find out. The sound of the creek was a Siren's call she couldn't resist.

Moments later the morning echoed with a loud scream then a massive - *S-P-L-A-S-H* as Archie dive-bombed into the creek. Pippa always worried such commotions might frighten Bob away. But so far the eel didn't seem to mind. At his age, maybe his hearing wasn't so good. Or maybe he'd just seen it all before.

"Man, that's better," Archie called to the others lining the bank. He was still wearing his t-shirt and shorts but had kicked off his boots and socks.

"Come on in, it's amaaaaazing!"

As Archie disappeared beneath the surface, Pippa stripped off her clothes and dove in. A trail of bubbles followed her underwater path upstream. When she finally reappeared, the water clung to her waist like a voluminous, liquid skirt. "Don't worry!" she called back at Nik and Mia. "The water's a bit brown but it's totally clean."

Mia slipped out of her boots and sat on the edge, dangling her feet in the cool water. Nik stood beside her, scratching his head. Finally he bent down and whispered something in his sister's ear. She slowly shook her bowed head.

Nik patted her shoulder, then hastily shed his clothes.



His dive pierced the water like an arrow, causing barely a ripple. Two breaths later his head bobbed to the surface. "That is amazing!" he hooted, his face set in a massive grin.

"Told you," said Pippa, returning his smile. But it faded when she glimpsed Mia over Nik's shoulder. "Is Mia okay?"

Nik glanced back, then shrugged. "She's fine."

Pippa didn't think Mia looked fine at all. But she resisted prying. After all, they'd only just met.

"Errr, ummm," coughed Nik, drawing Pippa's thoughts away from Mia. "Do you always swim... ummmm, naked?"

Pippa laughed. "Only out here. No point getting your togs wet when there's nobody around. Mum always used to say the only difference between humans and animals is we get embarrassed when we're not wearing clothes."

"I reckon sheep look bit embarrassed when they get shorn," said Archie, bobbing up beside them. "And I know cows are shy 'cos they always gotta hide. Got a hide! Get it?"

Archie flung his discarded clothes onto the bank then disappeared in a spray of water and laughter.

"You'll get used to it," said Pippa, shaking her head.

"Hey, Nik!" Archie suddenly called from the shallows at the far end of the swimming hole. "Nik!"

Nik turned to Pippa, a question carved in his forehead. She replied with a dramatic shrug. Who knew what Archie was up to?

While Nik swam towards Archie, Pippa headed in the opposite direction.

Nik's graceful freestyle turned into breaststroke as the water receded, before finally devolving into an ungainly amphibious crawl. Reluctant to stand, he sprawled face down in the shallow water.

"What is it?" Nik asked, craning his neck.

"Look, gold!" Archie cheered, shoving a large glittering nugget before Nik's eyes. "We're rich!"

"Wow! Amazing," said Nik. "That's the biggest piece of iron pyrite I've ever seen."

"Darn!" Archie grinned, sending the fool's gold skimming across the creek. "I heard city slickers were all gullible as."

"Weird," said Nik with a smirk as he stood. "I heard country kids were dumb."

"I guess there's always exceptions," said Archie, grunting as he hurled another stone.

"I guess," Nik agreed as he went searching for a flat stone of his own.

While the boys skimmed stones, Pippa lay beside Mia to dry off in the sun. Every few minutes Pippa stole a secret glance. But Mia's gaze never left the water. Pippa knew there was *something* wrong. Mia had been the outgoing and chatty one while they were doing dishes. Much moreso than her brother. Yet here she was, deep in her own thoughts, while Nik was gambolling naked in the creek.

"Are you okay?" Pippa finally asked. When Mia didn't respond, she hurried on: "I don't want to pry or anything. And, yeah, I know, why should you tell me anything anyway? We only just met. But, well, us girls have got to stick together, eh?"

Mia shot her a quick sideways glance through a curtain of dark hair, before returning to her intense study of the water. Except now her teeth were gnawing on her bottom lip.

"You know," Pippa said, "not being able to swim is nothing to be ashamed of. We could teach you..."

"I love swimming," Mia whispered without looking up.

Pippa's tongue darted out as though tasting the air. "You know you don't *have to* swim naked. It's not like a rule or anything. Most kids I know would rather swim with sharks than without togs."

Mia rewarded her with an almost giggle.

"We can all bring our togs next time if it makes you uncomfortable,"

Pippa continued. "It's no big deal. Really."

"It's not that, either," said Mia. Her voice barely a whisper.

"Ahhhhh," said Pippa, as a very different explanation dawned. She sat up, wriggled closer, then leant over to ask in a conspirator's whisper: "Are you having your period?"

Mia's blush enticed Pippa to drape a consoling arm around her. The thought of being kind of Mia's big sister filled Pippa with an unexpected warmth. "If you need anything, you know, like tampons or stuff, I've got heaps."

Mia finally met her gaze. Her face a portrait of despair.

"It's not that, either," she said.

"So what is it?" Pippa asked as a cold shiver tickled up her spine.

"It's... it's a secret..."

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to," said Pippa. "But I promise I won't tell anyone. Not even Archie." She could feel Mia hovering between confession and retreat. She knew she should probably leave it, for now, at least, but: "It doesn't really pay to keep secrets out here, you know. We rely on each other too much."

Pippa could tell by the flicker of hope in Mia's eyes, she really wanted to share. "Look, if you're staying with us for a while, we're going to find out sooner or later anyway. And trust me, when we do find out, it's not going to change a thing. Mum always used to say a secret was like a vampire. Once you bring it into the light, it turns to dust."

Mia's lips were trembling. Pippa couldn't tell if she was terrified, or on the edge of tears.

Pippa gave Mia a reassuring one-armed hug. "I'm here for you. Okay? Kind of like a big sister." She pushed to her feet. "Anyway, I need another swim. I'm melting here." Her arms swung forward, prelude to a dive.

"I'm.... I'm transgender..."

Mia's whispered confession froze Pippa in a half-squat. Her head swivelled slowly, as if Mia had begun ticking like a bomb.

"You're trans?" Pippa said, chewing thoughtfully on the revelation.

Mia gave a tentative nod. Then her face exploded in a smile as Pippa sprang from the rock, leaving a heartfelt - "Cool" - hanging in the air between them.

Pippa bobbed to the surface, treading water at the base of Bob's rock.

"So, sis," she said, "you coming in or what?"

A sudden shout drew Mia's gaze upstream. When she saw Archie and Nik approaching in a thunder of flying foam, her smile faded. "Maybe not today," she said with an apologetic shrug.

"Okay," said Pippa. "But if you're not coming in..."

One arm swept forward to send a shower of water over Mia.

"Hey!" Mia shrieked, ducking beneath a leaky umbrella of arms.

"Just... cooling... you... down..." Pippa cooed between splashes.

Mia started giggling in delight and relief.

"Wassup?" Nik asked as he drew near, concern bouncing his eyes between his sister and Pippa. "Everything okay?"

"I'm... just... being... helpful..." said Pippa, continuing her assault. "Right, Mia?"

"Very helpful!" squealed Mia.

"In that case," said Nik, powering a wave over Pippa, "I can be helpful too!"

"Me too!" called Archie, drenching his sister from the opposite side.

"Hey, two against one!" cried Pippa. "Not fair!"

Then the waterhole erupted as Mia dive-bombed into battle.



## Chapter Four - Cheesy, queasy detectives

"Right," said Pippa, unfolding a large map of the farm across the kitchen table.

"We need a plan of attack."

They'd returned home to find an empty house and a note: *Popped down to Roxdale. Back by tea. Make sure our guests are fed. Dad*

Perfect. There'd be no awkward questions or interruptions. Which meant they had the entire afternoon to solve "*The mystery of the vanishing brains*" - as Archie insisted on calling it.

After whipping up a pile of toasted cheese sandwiches, they gathered around the table, munching quietly as they studied the map.

"The first attack..." said Pippa.

"More like a massacre, I'd say," Archie interrupted.

Pippa gave him a stern look before jabbing at a spot tucked away in the north-eastern corner. Her finger left a greasy circle on the map. "...happened here. And the second one..." Her finger floated over the map like she was divining water, before landing on a squiggly blue line a hand's width west of the house. "...here." Her gaze swept around the table, past three grim faces.

"Any suggestions?"



Nik's thin frame bent forward. He studied the map like a crane searching for fish in the shallows. "This is the boundary, right?" he finally asked, his finger tracing a faint black line.

"Sort of," said Archie. "It's supposed to go through the middle of the gully, but the Howes kicked up such a stink Dad gave up arguing. So it's not the *actual* boundary, but it's become a sort of unofficial boundary 'cos that's where Dad put up the fence."

"So...," Nik continued, blushing lightly under Pippa's scrutiny. "None of the attacks actually happened on your farm?"

"No," said Pippa, somewhat surprised. Why hadn't she realised that?  
"Technically it's all on the Howes' farm. And it's all their cattle... so far."

"So if it's, you know, some kind of crazy vendetta or something," Archie said, scratching his chin in thought, "we're not the target. The Howes are. That's a relief."

"Do you know anyone who might have it in for the Howes?" asked Nik.

The question inspired dark chuckles from the twins.

"Try everybody," said Pippa.

"Yeah," agreed Archie. "They've had run-ins with just about the whole valley. If there's any drama around here you can bet anything the Howes are in the middle of it."

"They can't be all bad," said Mia. "Can they?"

"They can. And they are," said Pippa, her face scrunched with distaste.

"So that doesn't get us anywhere," snorted Archie.

Nik stared at the map in silence a moment, gently tapping his teeth with one long index finger. Before his parents had split up, Nik and his dad used to watch crime shows on TV all the time. It was always a race to see who would solve it first. His dad used to joke they should start a detective agency together.

"Hmmm, so if there's no way of narrowing down our list of suspects, maybe we should try to figure out how they got to the crime scene in the first place. The only way in is across the Howes' place or yours, isn't it?"

"They could have come up the creek," suggested Pippa, leaning closer. "Loads of fishermen do. They park their cars at the bottom of our drive then walk across the field. Dad doesn't mind. He even built a little ladder so they don't have to squeeze through the fence."

"They could come down the creek, too," said Archie. "If you parked up at the lake you could be down here in an hour tops."

"It'd take a lot longer in the dark," said Pippa.

"Yeah, I guess," said Archie.

"Why would they take the brains though?" asked Pippa.

"I dunno," said Archie. "Maybe they're just psycho?"

"I've been wondering about that too," said Nik. "It sure is weird."

"Here's an idea," Pippa said. "What if the Howes are doing it?"

Nik nodded enthusiastically. "That would explain how they got there. It'd be easy for someone to just drive there and dump them."

"What?" asked Archie, shaking his head. Had he heard right? "Why would they do that to their own cattle?"

"To cover up... something?" said Pippa.

"Yeah," said Nik. "Maybe the cows got some awful disease so they killed them and took their brains in case somebody wanted to do an autopsy."

"Are you serious?" said Archie.

"It makes sense," said Pippa. "Sort of."

"But it'd be *WAY* easier to just burn them or bury them," said Archie.

"Wouldn't it?"

The sharp truth of his words pricked their bubble of excitement. They deflated into silence.

"What if..." said Mia finally. The others turned to her in surprise. Until then she'd been silent, chewing her sandwich and studying the map. "What if it's not a person doing it..."

She looked at them sheepishly, expecting a storm of protest. But their mouths were hanging too far open to speak. The thought had crossed all their minds. They just hadn't spoken it aloud for fear the others would scoff.

Once said, it was difficult to ignore. And impossible to dismiss.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Right," said Pippa, mounting her pony, Doris. "If you see *anything* suspicious, *don't* investigate by yourself or do *anything* stupid." Her laser beam eyes locked on Archie. She held up the walkie-talkie. "Call us, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, sis," Archie replied with a less-than-reassuring grin. "No problem."

Pippa started to say something else but her words drowned in an engine growl of revving quads. With a salute and a holler, Archie roared away. Nik hesitated a moment, then set off in pursuit. Pippa could only shake her head and trust Nik was more sensible than her brother.

"C'mon, Mia," she said, kicking Doris into action.

Mia patted her pony's mane: "Let's go, Tinkerbell."

Everyone thought it was a good idea to split up. That way the two girls could follow the farm boundary from the swimming hole down to where it met

the road, while the boys could head uphill and explore the top sections. But now Pippa wasn't so sure.

They didn't really know what they were looking for. Suspicious tractor tracks leading away from the creek, or some other sign the Howes were involved? (Definitely. In fact, they'd like nothing better.) A forgotten scrap of litter or other evidence someone had recently traversed the creek? (Certainly.) More brainless heifers? (Hopefully not.) Tracks of a mysterious brain-eating beast? (Definitely not.) But it was a start. Kind of.

They walked in silence a while, just enjoying the sunshine, the gentle sway of their ponies, the fresh air... and the unusual quiet of Archie-free time.

"So did you like living in America?" Pippa suddenly asked.

"Yeah, it was cool," said Mia. "I was only two when we moved there, so it feels more like home than here, really. My dad's American, too, so I never felt like a foreigner or anything."

"So why'd you come back?"

Mia's head drooped as though it was made of steel and there was a magnet in her saddle.

Watching Mia out of the corner of her eye, Pippa felt her heart swell with unexpected sympathy. It was kind of weird how they'd only known each

other for a morning, yet she already felt so protective of her sort-of-sister. If only she'd learn not to be so nosy...

"When I told Mum and Dad I was really a girl," Mia began, her eyes glued to the horizon. "Dad said it was just a phase. But I was so unhappy being a boy, Mum said I could be whatever I wanted. Dad got really angry. He said I was being ridiculous and I was going to make fools of our family. But Mum was really cool. She even enrolled me as a girl at school..."

Her sentence dissolved into silence.

"I bet your dad didn't like that," suggested Pippa.

Mia shook her head. "Mum and Dad were *always* arguing about it. It got even worse when Dad started drinking..." They rode in silence a few moments, before Mia looked up. Her eyes were rimmed with tears. "It wasn't Dad's fault. He was just trying to protect me. There were lots of horrible things happening and Dad was worried about me, that's all. Then the government started making lots of laws against trans people, so Mum insisted we come back to New Zealand..."

"You miss your dad. Eh?" asked Pippa.

Mia had no more words. A single nod her only reply.

\* \* \* \* \*

When they reached the swimming hole, Pippa and Mia dismounted and hitched their ponies to a straggly tree. Pippa grabbed two apples from the saddle bag and tossed one to Mia.

"I'm not hungry, thanks," said Mia.

"It's not for you, silly," Pippa laughed. "It's for Tinkerbell."

Mia offered a sheepish smile. "I knew that."

The ponies crunched and slurped the apples with relish. (Not the pickle kind of relish - that would taste weird.) Then Tinkerbell nuzzled Mia's shirt.

"Tinkerbell thinks she might get a second apple," said Pippa, reaching into her saddle bag. When she fished out the walkie-talkie, the pony snorted with disappointment. "You're such a greedy guts, Tink." She gave both ponies a hearty pat on their flank, then set off down the bank. "C'mon, Mia."

"Sorry, no apples," Mia whispered, ruffling Tinkerbell's forelock. "Maybe later." Then hurried to catch up.

They followed the creek upstream until they were directly opposite the brainless heifer.

"Ready?" Pippa asked.

Mia took a deep breath, nodding with determination.

The creek was barely ankle deep, but slippery with algae. They picked their way across, carefully placing each step. Water seeped into their boots, soaking their socks. A gentle breeze drifted down the gully, carrying the smell downstream. But it was getting stronger with every breath.

By the time they reached the heifer, their noses were pinched tight.

The crime scene looked even grislier up close and in daylight. The heifer's empty skull lay in a halo of blood - a buzzing mass of flies in place of its missing brain. Smaller clusters of flies dotted the grass, perched atop scattered scraps of brain and splinters of shattered bone. The heifer's body was a bloated leather balloon, ready to pop.

Under a cloud of stench and angrily swarming flies, Pippa and Mia scoured the area, searching for clues. After circling the corpse twice, bent low to study each blade of grass, they stretched upright with grunts of frustration.

"Not a thing," said Pippa.

There were no footprints or tyre tracks. No scraps of paper or loose threads or other signs of human presence. There was no sign of the murder weapon or any evidence of foul play. It was like the heifer's brain had spontaneously exploded.



Pippa surveyed the area. Upstream the path ended abruptly in an avalanche of boulders. Neither the heifer nor the culprit could have come from that direction. So they headed downstream.

The grass soon dissolved into dirt, revealing a trail of hoofprints. Pippa knelt down and traced the hoof outlines with a finger. It was definitely a heifer hoof. Two arcs clasped together like praying hands.

Mia stood nearby glancing around, trying to be useful.

"That one looks a bit different," said Mia, pointing ahead. "Doesn't it?"

Pippa glanced ahead, then shook her head. It looked pretty similar to her. The heifer had obviously wandered up this path on its way to losing its brain. But as she got back to her feet, the sun etched the print with shadow.

It *was* different. With her face decorated in a frown, Pippa knelt to examine the second print. It looked like a pie with a missing slice. Or a stray Pac-man.

"What was a horse doing down here?" she wondered aloud. The Howes had an entire stable of horses, but they were too valuable to be left running free. No fence could keep them in. No creek would keep them from straying. "I guess one of them must have escaped." But then, why wasn't it wearing shoes?

Pippa rose with a sigh. Just what they needed - *two* mysteries.

Pippa gnawed on her thumbnail, trying to decide what to do next. The Howes would be furious if they spotted the girls on their land. They were constantly arguing with fishermen trying to reach the creek through Howe land, even though the fishermen had a legal right of way. That's why most local fishermen came in from the Fairweather Farm side.

On the other hand, it might be worth the risk. If they didn't find evidence of the heifer's killer along the way, they might at least spot the stray horse.

"Right," she finally said, decision made. "Let's go."

## Chapter Five - Canopy of worms

The two quads sped uphill in a cloud of dust, following the road that curled lazily through the property like a pale boa constrictor. They passed the turnoff to the stockyards and Uncle Paul's house. And another that ended at the dam which stored water for irrigation and fed the farm's mini hydro generator.

Further up, the road became a stark border between two different worlds. On one side, a carpet of green pastures unfurled downhill. On the other side, a stubbly beard of golden tussock disappeared in clouds.

Fences topped with barbed wire unwound on each side. Every few minutes the bikes juddered over a cattlestop, but they didn't slow until the forestry block came into view.

"Where to?" Archie yelled as Nik pulled alongside. "Back to the massacre or do we check out the gully first?"

Nik's stomach churned at the thought of facing the stench again.

"Gully!" he yelled back.

Archie revved his bike in reply. He veered off the road onto a narrow track that wound its way up the hill. As they passed the gully, he slowed.

"That's our boundary!" he yelled, his hand sweeping an arc from the stain of forest at the top, to the glimmer of creek at the bottom.

Nik nodded, but he wasn't really paying attention. His brain was too busy trying to absorb the vast emptiness unfolding to the horizon. There was

no sign of human presence as far as he could see. Anyone... or *anything*, could be hiding out there and nobody would know. Optimism seeped out in a sigh as the enormity of their quest suddenly hit him. They weren't detectives. They were just a bunch of kids playing a stupid game.

If they were sensible, they'd abandon their search and go swimming instead. It was scorching hot out in the open. Despite slathering himself in sunscreen, Nik felt his skin slowly reddening. And his head was cooking inside the helmet. Before he could suggest they turn back it, Archie took off again.

By the time Nik caught up, Archie had already dismounted and was sitting on a red wooden bench like a gnome on a toadstool. It was so unexpected and unlikely, Nik's face stretched in a grin.

"This was Mum's favourite place in the world," said Archie, his voice unusually quiet. "She used to ride up almost every day. She always asked if we wanted to come, but mostly Pip and me were too busy doing other stuff. Or playing X-Box. She never said anything, but I think she would've really liked us to come." He stared out across the patchwork hills. When he spoke again, his voice was heavy with loss and regret. "Now I wish I *had* come more often."

"What did she do up here?" Nik asked.

"I dunno," Archie shrugged. "Listen to the birds? Look at the scenery?"

They listened to the birds and looked at the scenery a while in silent tribute to Archie's mum. Finally Nik cleared his throat.

"How did your mum die?"

Archie snorted angrily. "Fell off a stupid horse." He leapt to his feet, putting a fullstop on further questions. "Enough gabbing. Let's go."

\* \* \* \* \*

Archie's mum hadn't planted all of the forest. There was a remnant patch clinging to this hill when she arrived. After surviving centuries of fire and generations of clearing, the steepness of the hill eventually saved it. It just wasn't worth the effort to erase the rest.

Each year she'd extended it a little further, planting native trees along the fringe until it doubled, then tripled in size.

The boys followed a faint trail. At first the trees barely reached their shoulders. But with each dozen steps, the trees loomed higher. The forest thickened around them. As they approached the forest's ancient heart, the sun vanished behind a cloud of leaves. The air cooled. The distant bleating of sheep and lowing of cows was swallowed by birdsong and the excited chirrup of fantails.

"What are we looking for?" Nik whispered.

"Dunno," said Archie. "I guess we'll know when we find it."

They continued in silence, their eyes scanning the forest floor.

"What the...!" Archie suddenly exclaimed. He halted so abruptly, Nik ploughed right into him.

"What is it?" Nik asked, peering over Archie's shoulder.

"Horse manure," said Archie, scratching his head. "At least it's the same shape as horse manure, but..." He knelt down and poked the pile with a stick. As one golfball-sized dropping split open, he gasped.

"What is it?" asked Nik.

Archie glanced up. "What does that look like to you?"

Nik bent forward. He'd seen manure plenty of times at Mia's pony club. And it always looked pretty much the same. Like nuggets of compressed straw. This manure - if that's what it actually was - was different. More like balls of dark mud. And right at the centre was...

"It looks like... like bone," said Nik. His face a mask of doubt.

Archie nodded. "That's what I thought."

"But how...?"

"Dunno. Must've accidentally swallowed it, I suppose."

"I suppose," Nik agreed, unconvinced. "So now what?"

"I guess we keep following the track," said Archie. "If nothing else we might at least find that stray horse before it does too much damage."

They found another pile of odd manure but no sign of the culprit. And, thankfully, no sign of any damage. The intruder was being unusually well-mannered.

Occasionally Archie made a small detour off the track to check one of the possum traps. Each time he came back empty handed, his frown deepened. Generally it was a struggle keeping up. That's why most farms chose to drop poison bait by helicopter. But Archie's mum refused to use poison.

"What's wrong?" Nik finally asked.

"Dunno," said Archie. "Something weird's going on. It's like..."

His words halted as the unmistakable stench of decay wafted past. Archie's head swivelled slowly as he sniffed the air like a bloodhound. Decision made, he barged ahead. Nik followed, grimacing in disgust.

After a few paces, he jolted to a halt.

"Well, that explains it," Archie grunted.

The possum had been dead several days. Its skin was already shrinking around a scaffold of bone. Its hollowed-out skull was a jagged bowl, squirming with maggots where its brain used to be.

\* \* \* \* \*

They found another brainless possum and another pile of weird horse manure before the track ended at the boundary fence... or at least it should have ended. Except a section of fence had been trampled flat. Like a herd of elephants had stampeded through it. On the other side lay the rotting corpse of a brainless hare.

The boys clambered through the tangle of wire, then continued downhill on the Howes' side of the fence.

As the ground underfoot became damper with leakage from the spring, they spotted horse tracks etched in the soil.

There were at least two tracks. Maybe more.

"Weird," said Archie.

"Which part?" asked Nik.

"The horses," said Archie. "They don't have shoes."

"Maybe they're wild?"

"Nah. There's no wild horses around here. They're not very big horses, either, by the look of it."

"Maybe they're donkeys? Or mules?"

"Maybe. I guess. But they'd be pretty big donkeys."



There was something troubling Nik, too. But he dare not mention it in case Archie thought he was crazy.

They followed the winding path down the gully. With each bend, one thing was becoming more and more obvious - the path was heading straight for the clearing where the cows had been killed. The trail was dotted with death. They found the corpses of two hedgehogs, five rabbits and a hawk. Each with their skulls smashed and their brains scooped out.

As the ground flattened, they got the first whiff of rotting flesh. Nik's stomach churned with the memory. There was no way he could face it again so soon. His body halted as if of its own accord, refusing to take another step.

It took Archie a dozen steps before he noticed. "What's wrong?" he asked, studying Nik with suspicion.

"There's... something I can't figure out," said Nik. Archie remained silent. Nik forced himself to continue, squeezing each word through a wall of reluctance. "Whoever... or *whatever*... is doing this, isn't fussy, is it? They don't seem to care what they kill. Do they? They're basically killing everything that crosses their path."

"Fair enough," said Archie. "So what's your point?"

Nik's tongue scraped along paper-dry lips. "We know the stray horses, or donkeys, or whatever, have been at every one of the crime scenes. Right?"

Archie nodded. His eyes narrowing as he glimpsed the destination of Nik's words.

"So how come..." Nik began.

He didn't have to finish.

"...none of the horses have been killed," said Archie.

As their eyes locked together, a spark of understanding flashed between them. They could almost read each other's mind.

"Let's go find the others," said Archie.

Nik felt a cold shiver run along his spine as he nodded agreement. Like someone had walked across his grave.

## Chapter Six - The other side of fear

Pippa and Mia rode downstream until they reached a stretch of shallow, slow-flowing water.

"You okay riding across, or do you want to walk?" asked Pippa.

"I can ride," said Mia. She leant forward to whisper in her pony's ear.

"We can do this, hey Tinkerbelle?"

Tinkerbelle snorted as though she was insulted by the question.

"Right, then," said Pippa. "Let's hope nobody sees us. Last thing Dad needs is the Howes kicking up another stink."

The ponies splashed their way through the knee-high water, pausing only briefly for a quick drink.

At the top of the bank, they surveyed the fields. The hills were a lush grass blanket tossed over a lumpy bed. A pattern of shadows were woven in every fold. Each summer, the Howes almost drained Lake Baskerville dry to irrigate their pastures. The local fishermen always complained, but their protests fell on deaf ears.

Pippa cocked her head and scanned the sky. Usually the air was buzzing with helicopters dumping fertiliser, or crop-dusters swooping low to spray the

encroaching gorse with poison. But the day was unusually silent. Luck was on their side.

After checking to make sure the coast was clear, they headed upstream - back towards the scene of the crime. From there they could follow the tracks and, hopefully, find the stray horse before it got its brain eaten as well.

Halfway there, the ponies suddenly began snorting strangely. Their ears flattened and their tails started swishing wildly like windscreen wipers in a hailstorm.

"What's wrong?" asked Pippa. Her head whipped back and forward, trying to find a reason for the ponies' distress. But there was no sign of anything unusual. Maybe they'd just been spooked by the hawk circling lazily overhead.

Mia stroked Tinkerbelle's mane. But the pony refused to be soothed.

Doris lifted her head and craned forward, her top lip curling to taste the air.

"There's nothing to worry about, Doris," Pippa said. "Come on!"

Doris pawed at the ground with her front hoof, refusing to obey.

"Okay, okay, suit yourself," Pippa muttered as she dismounted. She handed her reins up to Mia. "You stay here with the ponies. I'll walk to the top of the hill and see if I can see anything. Won't be long."

\* \* \* \* \*

The top of the hill was a lot further than it looked. Every time Pippa thought she was nearly there, the land would fall away again. After a while she started feeling like she was on the world's slowest rollercoaster.

The sun beat down, drenching her in sweat. There was nowhere to hide. The fields were a desert of grass. Mum had always insisted the twins wear wide-brimmed hats - or at least take one along on their adventures. "Heatstroke is the last thing you want, trust me," she always said. And they did trust her. Always, without question. But every day Mum's words seemed to fade a little more. Sometimes Pippa struggled to hear them at all.

At the top of each rise, Pippa paused to scan the hills and take a sip of warm water. As she slipped the bottle back into her pack, she glanced suspiciously at the silent walkie-talkie. Hopefully Archie wasn't doing anything foolish like... well, like she was.

Pippa kept her eyes peeled. But sometimes other senses are way more useful. Without the unmistakable smell of decay and the frantic buzzing of excitable flies, she might never have found the horse's trail weaving a tight, winding path uphill.

Actually, make that *two* horse trails. The brainless sheep corpse was a bloody island between two distinct sets of hoofprints. Both horses were unshod. They also had to be the luckiest two horses alive. They'd been at every crime scene yet had somehow escaped having their brains eaten.

Archie always joked horses didn't have brains. Which was just a dumb joke, of course. But maybe horses didn't have the *right kind of* brains? Or...

Pippa shivered, despite the heat. She was missing something. But what?

It was probably time to regroup. They should head back to the house and catch up with the boys. That would be the sensible thing to do.

She readjusted the straps of her pack, then pushed ahead. It wasn't far to the top of the next rise. It would be silly turn back now.

The hills seemed to be holding their breath. Pippa's laboured puffing sounded as loud as a steam engine. Her heart beat against her chest walls like an angry prisoner demanding release.

The track was dotted with brainless carcasses. Another sheep. A large ferret. A pair of Paradise ducks. At each crime scene, Pippa glanced back down the hill. Partly to make sure Mia was all right. Partly to reassure herself it wasn't *too* far if she needed to make a hasty retreat.

"Just a bit further," she whispered.

A sudden loud snort pricked Pippa's ears. The sound came again. There was no mistake. It was definitely a horse. And it wasn't far away.

Pippa doubled her pace, groaning with exertion. She burst over the ridge - and froze. Deep furrows split her forehead.

Two ponies were standing in the middle of the narrow plateau. Their heads were bent low over... *something*. A pile of straw? A mound of earth? Whatever it was, it was incredibly interesting. The ponies were nuzzling it with unpony-like intensity.

Pippa couldn't tell if they were grazing on it or trying to disperse it. Their heads swung in angry arcs. Their snuffling snorts of delight drifted lazily on the breeze.

Pippa crept closer.

With each step, her unease grew. There was something odd about the ponies. Something not-quite-right. It might have been their odd colouring. A kind of washed-out grey. Or the fact one of them was missing its tail. And the other seemed to be missing an ear. Or maybe it was the fact they didn't seem to notice her approaching. Ponies were generally super-aware of their surroundings, on full alert for predators.

Pippa turned her face to find the breeze. Yep, she was definitely downwind. The ponies would have smelt her ages ago.

She kept her eyes glued to the ponies, alert for any sign of fear. She didn't want to spook them. With each step she became more and more aware of a weird smell hanging in the air. Not decay, exactly. More like the time Mum left a load of wet laundry in the washing machine when they went to visit Gran. When they got home a week later, all their clothes were more mould than fabric. They had to throw everything out.

"Nice ponies," Pippa said, holding up her hands. "I'm not going to hurt you."

The closer she got, the more certain she was the ponies weren't very healthy. Their hides were covered in sores. Their backs were sagging arches of bone. And their manes were hanging half off, like fraying fringes of old stuffed toys. They really needed to see a vet urgently. If she could lead them back to the farm...

The ponies stopped browsing and slowly straightened.

"It's okay," said Pippa, trying to sound calm despite her trembling body. "It's..."

She glanced down. And the rest of her sentence was swallowed in a gulp of terror. The ponies weren't nuzzling a pile of straw or dirt after all. They were grazing on the brains of a freshly-killed sheep.



As the ponies lifted their heads, Pippa started backing away. She didn't know whether to sneak away or turn and run.

Then the ponies slowly turned to face her.

Pippa's hand flew to her mouth. The ponies' muzzles were drenched in blood. One pony's eye had popped out of its socket and was sitting in a deep crater where its nostrils used to be. The other was missing both lips, setting its face in a mad skeleton grin.

Pippa spun on her heels and took off.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pippa stumbled. Fell. Slid. Scrambled down the hill in a flurry of flailing limbs.

"What's wrong?" asked Mia, her wide eyes scanning the horizon.

Doris and Tinkerbelle snorted and stamped the ground

"Let's... get... out... of here," Pippa puffed, mounting Doris.

Doris let out a high-pitched neigh and reared up, nearly tossing off Pippa. But she yanked the reins. Hard. And kicked the pony into a gallop.

Mia had to fight hard to keep Tinkerbelle from following. The pony's neck rippled with tensing muscles as it spun in a tight circle.

A shrill, bugling neigh drew Mia's gaze. Two ponies were peering down at her. She waved and received a loud neigh in reply.

Smiling, Mia loosened her grip on Tinkerbelle's reins. The pony responded immediately by setting off back towards home.

Mia glanced over her shoulder one last time. She saw the ponies winding down the hill. But there was no sign of anything dangerous - as far as she could tell. Yet something had freaked out Pippa.

Pippa was waiting for her on the other side of the creek. One hand was wrestling with the reins, trying to keep her impatient mount from bolting. The other was fumbling inside her pack.

By the time Mia crossed the creek, Pippa was on the walkie-talkie.

"Archie! Archie! Where are you? Come in!"

The air crackled with static. Then: "Pippa! I was just going to call you. Me and Nik are heading back to the house. Where are you? Over."

"Archie! I've found out what's eating the brains! They're ponies! Over!"

She expected Archie to snort - did she really expect him to believe that? Instead the walkie-talkie remained eerily silent.

Mia stared at her in disbelief. Pippa wasn't serious... was she? It was some kind of joke. Ha ha! Except... why was her face so pale?

"Archie! Did you hear me? Over!"

The walkie-talkie crackled again. "Yeah, Pip. I heard you. Over."

"They're ponies, Arch! Ponies! Over."

"We don't think they're just ponies, Pip," Archie replied. "We think..."

Pippa and Mia held their breaths.

"We think they're zombie ponies."

The girls' breaths exploded in gasps of surprise.

"Over."

## Chapter Seven - Headless chickens

The girls returned to a tornado of activity.

Dad and Prue were scurrying around the yard rounding up the chickens. Trying to, anyway. Though it was hard to tell whose side Prue was on. Her giggling delight in each chicken's escape from Dad's clutches suggested her loyalties were rather divided.

They spotted the boys digging up potatoes in the garden. When Archie noticed them riding past, he held a warning finger to his lips. Pippa nodded agreement. There was no point worrying Dad. Not yet.

Stella was returning to the house carrying a basket of vegetables and herbs. She beamed at the girls as they pulled alongside.

"Have a good ride?" she asked, her head ping-ponging between them.

"Yeah, great," said Pippa.

Mia couldn't erase her frown before she nodded.

"Is everything okay, sweetie?" Stella asked, her eyes sliding suspiciously towards Pippa.

Pippa felt her face darken. She started to protest, but Mia cut her off.

"We had a great ride," she said. "We're just tired, that's all. Hey, Pippa?"

"Yeah, exhausted," said Pippa.

Stella studied them a moment before turning away with a shrug.

"Dinner won't be long," she said.

A loud squawk drew their gazes towards the chicken muster. The sight of Dad lying on the ground swearing at an escaped hen, sparked a hearty laugh from Stella.

"Assuming the chickens don't keep outsmarting your dad," she whispered to Pippa. Her eyes were sparkling with secret pleasure. "Poor man."

Pippa couldn't help but grin.

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time the girls had unbridled and fed the ponies, Dad was on his way to the kitchen swinging two headless, plucked chickens.

"Poor chickens," said Mia.

Pippa shrugged. "At least they have a good life. Better than living in a cage."

"I guess," said Mia.

Both girls kept glancing nervously towards the track leading down to the creek. There was no sign of the zombie ponies. Yet. Maybe zombies didn't like water? Or maybe they were just never in a hurry.

They started back to the house, but Archie and Nik cut them off. They herded the girls behind the wood shed, away from prying eyes.

"Did you see them?" Archie asked, shifting the bucket of potatoes from one hand to the other. His face was streaked with dirt.

Pippa nodded. "They saw me, too."

"What did they look like?"

"They were gross," said Pippa.

As she described the ponies in gory detail, Archie's eyes gleamed with excitement. She couldn't tell what Nik was thinking. He wore a mask of concentration.

By the time she was finished, Mia's face was as pale as her brother's.

"So what do you think?" Pippa asked.

"Cool," said Archie

"That sounds like zombies all right," said Nik.

"But zombies aren't real," said Mia, turning to her brother. "Are they?"

Nik chewed the question like a piece of tough steak. What could he say? He didn't want to worry his sister, but there was no point lying, either.

Before he could decide what to say, a shout intruded.

"Hey, guys!" Dad called. "Where are those spuds? We haven't got..."

They heard boots scrunching on gravel. He burst around the corner, then

jerked to a halt. His gaze swept suspiciously around the huddle of kids. "What are you guys up to?"

"Nothing," Pippa and Archie replied in unison.

Dad's eyes narrowed as he shifted his attention to Nik and Mia. But they only offered tight smiles in return. Shaking his head, he grabbed the bucket of potatoes from Archie's grasp. "Okay. Just don't get Nik and Mia into any trouble. Clear?"

The twins nodded. "Clear."

Dad turned away with a sigh. "Dinner will be ready shortly," he called over his shoulder. "Might be an idea to tidy yourselves up first, eh?"

They watched him in silence until he disappeared from view. Pippa started to say something, but Archie held a finger to his lips. He scampered across the gravel and peered around the corner of the shed. He waited until Dad kicked his boots off outside the front door before returning to the others.

"Coast is clear," he said.

"So, now what?" Pippa asked.

"I guess we probably need to set up some kind of alarm system," suggested Nik. "Just in case the zombies follow you here."

"Why would they follow us?" asked Mia. Even though she'd seen the ponies doing exactly that, she hadn't told the others yet.

Archie held his arms out and rolled his eyes back as far as they would go.

"Zombie eat brain," he said in a voice like a groan.

"Nik's right," said Pippa. "We can't take any chances."

"I've got a better idea," Archie said. He waited until he had the others' full attention before offering them an evil grin. "We set a trap and catch them."

Pippa nodded. Then both twins turned to Nik. They could almost see the cogs ticking over inside his head. Finally he nodded too.

They turned to Mia. But she could only offer a frown in reply.

\* \* \* \* \*

The twins devoured their dinner as though they hadn't eaten for a week. Nik and Mia picked at their meals, suspicious of eating something that had been running around in the garden only a few hours before.

Dad tried to encourage them. "You won't get healthier food anywhere," he said, holding up a drumstick. "Everything's totally organic and fresh out of the garden."

"They're probably just over-tired," Stella suggested, studying them with concern. "They're not usually this picky."



Nik and Mia smiled in weak apology.

"Probably just not used to country air," said Dad, winking. "And keeping up with these two is a bit of a challenge, I can tell you." He beamed at the twins with obvious pride before turning his attention to Prue. She had been unusually quiet all dinner. "We've had a big day ourselves, hey, Pumpkin?"

Prue stifled a yawn as she nodded. "We went into almost every shop in town and everyone thought Stella was really nice and then we had fish and chips and ice cream and then we went to the Oval and watched the people putting up the tents for the gymkhana and then Mister Howe wanted to talk to Dad so me and Stella went to feed the ponies and..."

"And then we came home," interrupted Dad. "I think it's about time you were off to bed, Pumpkin. What do you say?"

Unusually, Prue didn't protest. She swallowed another yawn as she pushed herself away from the table.

"Now go wash up and clean your teeth," said Dad. "I'll be in shortly to read you a story. Okay? Now say good night."

"Good night," Prue yawned then shuffled out of the kitchen.

As soon as she was gone, Dad turned to the twins. His eyes were slits of suspicion. "So what did you guys get up to?"

"First we went swimming," said Pippa.

"Then we came home and had lunch," Archie continued.

"And then me and Mia went riding."

"And me and Nik rode the quads up to the forest."

"And?" Dad asked. He was quite certain that wasn't the entire story.

"And then we came home," said Pippa.

"Is that all?" asked Dad. His eyes swept the table. Four heads nodded.

Scratching his beard, Dad glanced at Stella. She smiled in reply. Well, if she wasn't concerned: "Now about sleeping arrangements. Stella and I thought if Arch and Pip could share one room, then Nik and Mia could sleep in the other and..."

He halted as the twins exclaimed in protest.

"Can't Mia sleep in my room?" asked Pippa. "Archie snores."

"Do not," said Archie.

"So does Nik," said Mia.

Nik blushed but didn't protest.

"Okay, okay," said Dad, one hand conducting them to silence. "If Nik and Mia don't mind..." When nobody complained, he laughed. "That's settled then. Girls in one room, boys in the other and Stella sleeps over at Gran's until we get the guest rooms sorted."

The four kids beamed like they'd won the lottery.

"Right," said Dad, stretching to his feet. "I'm taking Stella over to Gran's to get her settled. You guys tidy up and get yourselves off to bed. I'll see you in the morning."

The kids stayed silent behind conspirators' smiles.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sinking sun was painting flames across the distant hills when they heard Dad's clumping footsteps on the porch.

"All set?" Pippa whispered. One by one, the others nodded. "Right," she continued, swallowing a dry glob of doubt. "Action stations."

Archie eased the bedroom door open and peered along the hallway. He heard Dad in the kitchen, laying the table for breakfast. With a twitch of his head, Archie disappeared through the crack. Nik was close behind. They crept to Archie's room and slipped into bed.

Pippa went to blow out the candle, but hesitated when she noticed Mia chewing her bottom lip. "You okay?" she asked.

Mia nodded.

Then the room dissolved into shadows.

Just in time, too. They heard Dad's tip-toeing footsteps padding closer. He paused to listen outside Pippa's door before sneaking past.

A loud snorting sound rumbled through the wall. Pippa rolled her eyes. Archie's snoring sounded so fake, Dad was sure to get suspicious.

She held her breath. When she heard Dad's bedroom door click closed, she deflated like a leaking tyre.

The two girls lay in bed staring at the shadows playing across the ceiling as the night whispered around them.

A sudden dog's bark made Mia jump. She wasn't used to so much quiet. Pippa's eyes narrowed. Her body tensed. But there was no second bark.

It wasn't long before a symphony of snoring resounded through the house. The girls threw back the covers. By the time they reached the kitchen, Archie was rummaging through drawers.

With a grunt of satisfaction, he pulled out a long ball of string. "That should do it."

"Right," said Pippa. She waited until the others huddled closer. "Mia and me will get Doris and Tinkerbelle ready while you and Nik organise the bait." She lifted the walkie-talkies from the table and went to hand one to her brother. But decided to give it to Nik instead. "Check in every ten minutes. Okay? And if

anything happens..." Her gaze swept around the circle before landing on Archie. As usual, he was only half listening. "...don't do anything stupid."

The accusation hung silently in the air. By the time Archie noticed, he had three sets of eyes watching him with suspicion. His mouth opened in mock outrage. "What? Me?" When he realised nobody was buying it, he grinned and gave his sister a stiff salute. "Yes sir."

"Any questions?" Pippa asked.

Archie and Nik shook their heads. Mia chewed her bottom lip.

"Mia?" said Pippa.

Mia's face crinkled as though she'd swallowed a maggot.

"Ummm," she finally said, her voice barely a whisper. "What are we going to do if we actually catch them?"

It was a question they'd all secretly asked themselves. But so far none of them had a good answer.

\* \* \* \* \*

Doris and Tinkerbelle were not happy about being woken in the middle of the night. They would have been even unhappier if they knew they were being used as bait. But Pippa didn't tell them that bit.

Despite the girls' cooing and whispered assurances, the ponies snorted and nickered and danced a shuffling waltz. It took ages for the girls to put on their bridles and lead them into position.

They found the boys at the gate of the holding pen. Archie was huddled under the spotlight of Nik's torch. Obviously Nik didn't consider Archie's activity worth watching, because his head was turned determinedly away.

"Everything ready," Pippa whispered as she peered over her brother's shoulder. When she heard Mia gasp, she chuckled: "Don't worry. They're dead."

The severed heads of the two chickens they'd eaten for dinner didn't look dead. Their eyes were open and their beaks were moving as Archie secured the last knot.

"That should do it," Archie said, standing. "What zombie could resist a chicken brain snack?"

"Right," said Pippa. "So when the zombies turn up, Arch and Nik will lure them into the pen. Then Mia and me will lead Doris and Tinkerbell out into the open at the back of the yard. If the zombies want to reach them, they'll have to go through the drafting race. So we just have to wait until they both go in, then shut the gate. Got 'em!"

"Yeah, Dad reckons the drafting gates are tough enough to stop a bull," Archie agreed. "And the race is too narrow for them to turn around."

"Any questions?" asked Pippa.

Mia slowly raised her hand. "Ummm, what if the zombies aren't after Doris and Tinkerbell? What if they're after us?"

Archie scoffed. "We'll soon find out, won't we?"

He turned away, taking the light with him. In the darkness Nik gave Mia's shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

"Right," said Pippa. "Action stations."

## Chapter Eight - Brain drains

The night wrapped the farm in a dark, starless blanket. Lightning flickered on the horizon, crackling like fireflies trapped in a cloud jar.

Nik glanced nervously at the lightshow again.

Archie chuckled beside him. "Don't worry. It's only a heat storm. They don't usually come this way."

Nik snorted, too embarrassed to reply. He'd imagined he was invisible in the darkness. Obviously not.

"Anything yet? Over," Pippa's whisper suddenly crackled over the walkie-talkie.

"Nothing. Over." Nik replied.

"How long have we been waiting? Over."

Nik glanced at the luminous dials of his watch. It was almost one o'clock.

"Nearly three hours. Over."

"I don't think they're coming. Over."

"Doesn't look like it. Over."

"I guess they can't cross creeks after all. Over."

"Makes sense... I guess. Over."

"Right. We'll meet you back at the house. Over."



"Okay. Over."

The walkie-talkie crackled once, then fell silent.

"Well that was boring," said Archie. He stretched into a loud yawn.

"Time to hit the sack."

Nik started to wind in the chicken heads. But Archie tugged the string from his hands and dropped it into the dirt.

"Leave it here," he said. "Something will eat it. C'mon. I'm beat."

The girls were waiting in the kitchen. Pippa greeted them with a shrug. Mia looked like a zombie herself. She could barely keep her eyes open.

Nobody spoke apart from whispered "good nights" outside their bedrooms.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pippa awoke with a start. The darkness was a blindfold pulled tightly over her eyes. She slipped the torch out from beneath her pillow but didn't turn it on.

"What is it?" Mia murmured.

"Shhhh!" said Pippa.

A sudden whinny drifted through the window. It was coming from the direction of the holding pens.

Pippa's ears pricked up as it came again. It was Doris. She didn't sound afraid, just a little excited. The girls had been too tired to return the ponies to their stalls after their failed zombie hunt. Pippa was sure the ponies would be safe there. But she'd forgotten Doris was jittery by nature. Being in an unfamiliar place at night would make her even moreso.

Pippa threw back her covers and stood. Mia started to follow, but Pippa halted her. "I'm just going to take Doris back to her stall. She's getting a bit jumpy out there."

"What about Tinkerbelle?" Mia asked.

"She'll be okay," said Pippa. "Go back to sleep. I won't be long."

The house gently ticked and creaked around Pippa as she crept outside.

Doris was waiting for her at the rails. The pony's nickered greeting sounded a little like a reprimand. About time you showed up.

Tinkerbelle was standing beside the gate on the opposite side of the yard. She nickered a greeting but didn't come closer.

"Sorry, Doris," Pippa whispered, as the pony nuzzled her hair. "C'mon, time for bed."

She reached for the bridle, but Doris pulled away with a snort.

"Don't be grumpy, Doris," Pippa huffed. "I said I'm sorry."

Doris wheeled away and trotted over to Tinkerbelle.

"I should just leave you out here," Pippa muttered under her breath.

"Might teach you some manners."

But she already knew neither was going to happen.

She squeezed between the rails and headed towards the ponies.

Halfway there a low, gurgling whinny stopped her dead in her tracks. It sounded like it was echoing up from a deep, dark drain. The ponies began to snort and paw at the ground. Pippa spun around, her torch slashing the night.

The whinny came again. Closer this time.

Pippa rushed back to the fence and leapt up. A weak beam of torchlight swept down the creek path. What was that? A sound like something heavy being dragged uphill. She tried to hold her torch steady. But it wouldn't stop quivering.

Two shapes slowly separated from the shadows.

Pippa gasped. Frozen, she stared in terrible fascination.

The zombie ponies hauled themselves closer. Each step a stumbling, dragging confusion of limbs. Their rasping breaths sounding like Darth Vader with a stuffed nose.

With a chorus of weird, muffled whinnies, Doris and Tinkerbelle bucked and kicked the air.

Pippa leapt into action. She sprinted across the yard and threw open the gate. "Go on!" she hissed, waving the ponies through. Doris and Tinkerbell trotted into the field, then bent to graze.

*Stupid ponies*, Pippa thought. But at least they weren't trapped.

She peered back down the path. The zombies had changed direction. They were detouring around the yards, heading towards the ponies.

Pippa raced back across the yard and threw herself under the fence. Rolling and sliding, she slipped under another two fences. She bounded up and sprinted alongside the drafting race before dropping to the ground once more. Grunting with exertion, she commando crawled into the holding pen.

The chicken heads were still there.

*Thanks, Arch*, she thought. He was never good at tidying up after himself. Just as well, this time.

A hedgehog was nibbling on a bloody thread of sinew. It snorted in annoyance as Pippa snatched its meal away.

The zombies were almost level with the pen. There was no time to lose.

Pippa swung the chicken heads like a lasso. Slowly letting the string slip through her fingers. Lengthening with each turn. Until the heads were almost hitting the ground.

Faster. And faster. The string began to whistle.

Then... *H-E-A-V-E!*

Pippa flung the heads with all her might. Her torch guiding their flight.

The heads hit the ground with a dull thud. They bounced once. Twice.

Then slid to a halt.

Pippa groaned. She hoped to land the heads right in front of the zombies. Instead, they'd landed a dozen paces behind.

She rubbed her face roughly, trying desperately to think of a Plan B.

A sharp snort snapped her to attention. Pippa's eyes widened. The zombies had stopped. One lifted its head to sniff the air. Then, like toy horses with nearly-dead batteries, they ever-so-slowly turned.

Pippa snatched up the string and began to carefully wind it in. Trying to keep the heads just one pace ahead. Fearful the zombies might lose the scent of blood and brains and turn back.

The zombies followed with the speed of sleepwalkers.

"Keep going," Pippa whispered. "Not far now."

The pen narrowed like a funnel. By the time cattle reached the drafting gate, they'd be forced to proceed in single file. Fences became solid walls keeping bovine eyes from straying or being frightened by unexpected movement. Once inside the race, there was no way out.

Pippa backed away, keeping the heads just out of the zombies' reach.

She felt something squish beneath her feet. And suddenly she was falling backwards. Her arms flailed like the blades of a crashing helicopter. But it was no use. She hit the ground. Hard. Her breath exploded in a loud grunt, jolting the string from her grasp.

Vital seconds ticked by as Pippa lay in the dust, too winded to move. She could hear the zombies heaving themselves closer. The smell of mould and decay soaked the air.

Groaning, Pippa rolled over on her side. The string was lying just out of reach. She rolled sideways and snatched it up. Then began furiously winding in the loose string.

Too late! Pippa snorted in frustration. The zombies had already reached the chicken heads. How was she supposed to lead them into the race without any bait?

But the zombies didn't pause to devour the chicken brains. They didn't seem to notice them. Their hooves trampled the heads into the ground as they stalked closer.

Pippa's eyes sprang wide with fear. The zombies weren't following the chicken brains after all. They were following her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pippa scabbled backwards. She had to get into the drafting race. And quickly!  
It was her only hope.

Her back pushed up against the gate. Cold metal bars pressed into her spine. She slid upwards, keeping her eyes firmly locked onto the zombies. One hand slipped between the bars and felt for the end of the bolt. She tugged. It didn't budge. She tugged again. With her arm twisted awkwardly behind her back, she just didn't have the strength to shift it.

The zombies snorted and wheezed closer.

Pippa spun away and tugged at the bolt with all her might.

She felt a cold breath against her neck.

The bolt started to slide. Slowly. Too slowly.

It slid free with a gentle clank. There was no time to lose. Pippa flung herself against the gate. It shook, but didn't open.

Her head whipped sideways. Why...

Her mouth turned to sand as she realised the gate opened outwards.

One zombie stretched forward and snorted wetly in her hair. The other shuffled alongside, cutting her off.

Pippa rattled the bars in a blind fury. She wasn't going to die quietly.

As a dribble of saliva rolled down her neck, Pippa's face scrunched up in fearful expectation.

"Nice ponies."

Pippa froze. The zombies snorted and gurgled.

Mia's voice intruded again. "Nice ponies."

Pippa heard the zombies' hooves scuffing the ground. But she dared't move a muscle. Not yet.

The zombies turned. One dragging hoofstep at a time.

Finally Pippa hazarded a peek.

Mia was inching closer. Her hands outstretched in welcome.

Pippa could only watch on like a dummy as the zombies lumbered towards Mia. She felt numb. As if her brain had already shut down in expectation of being devoured. Dad was going to be so annoyed when he discovered she'd let the zombies eat Mia's brain.

Mia didn't look afraid at all. She stood bravely encouraging the zombies towards her.

With the zombies distracted, Pippa sprang forward. Skirting the pen, she darted past. "C'mon, Mia," she called as she sprinted towards the house. It was time to wake up Dad. They'd been foolish to imagine they could handle the zombie ponies alone. Dad's shotgun was the only solution now.



Pippa's chest puffed like bellows. Each step exploded in tiny showers of gravel. She kept twisting her neck around. Where was Mia?

Pippa stumbled to a halt. Panting loudly, she stared back towards the yard. Her torch poked feebly at the darkness.

*C'mon, Mia, where are you?*

A rattly, gurgling whinny got her feet moving again.

She sprinted back to the yards. Maybe Mia had fallen. Or had met some other unexpected fate. Hopefully she wasn't too late.

As the yard narrowed, Pippa slowed. What if it was a trap? Maybe zombies were cleverer than she imagined. Maybe...

Pippa's eyes narrowed. What was that sound? If she didn't know better, she'd imagine it was giggling.

She inched her way forward. The torchlight a blind person's cane, sweeping the uncertain ground. Her heart slowed to a monotonous thud. She tried to swallow, but it caught in her throat.

Another step. Then another.

She halted with a gasp as she spotted Mia. Her skull unchomped. Her brain uneaten. She looked so small and fragile beside the zombie ponies. But her face was lit with joy as she gently stroked their muzzles.

## Chapter Nine - Wake up breakout

Nik lay in bed with his eyes closed, listening to the alien morning. Birdsong and scratching cicadas instead of honking traffic. The gentle creaks and groans of an old house settling deeper into the soil each day instead of the muffled thuds and muttering of an apartment block trembling into hectic life.

He breathed in the peace and quiet, filling his lungs.

*I could get used to this*, he decided, allowing a smile to curl his lips.

"You right there?" Archie asked.

Nik's eyes sprang open. When he saw Archie propped up in bed watching him, his cheeks flushed pink.

"Mia was right," Archie said with a grin. "You do snore like a champion."

"Sorry," said Nik.

Archie laughed. "Doesn't worry me. Mum always reckoned I could sleep through the end of the world."

Nik glanced at his watch. Then stared at it with suspicion. It claimed it was only six o'clock. Yet the sunlight streaming through the window wasn't the shy kind of early morning sun he was used to. It poured inside, demanding attention.

"I've got to use the bathroom," Nik said, rising.

"You mean pee?" suggested Archie, inspiring another blush.

Nik scuttled into the hallway. Which way was the bathroom again? He glanced left. Then right. Then...

His heart skipped a beat. The door to Pippa's bedroom was ajar. One of the girls has probably just gone to the bathroom, his brain reasoned. But some darker instinct whispered more gruesome possibilities.

He quickly padded down the hall and eased the door open. Both beds were empty. He cocked his head and listened. The house was graveyard silent. No flushing toilets. No footsteps. No snoring, even.

Pee forgotten, he scurried back to Archie's room.

Archie knew something was wrong right away.

"Mia and Pippa are gone," said Nik, tossing on clothes.

Archie sprang to his feet. He was still wearing his t-shirt and shorts from yesterday. The boys raced down the hallway. Prue's door was closed but they could hear her singing softly to herself inside. Dad's door was ajar, too, his bed empty. But there was nothing strange about that. He would have been out on the farm at the crack of dawn.

They stood on the back porch, surveying the morning. The girls could be anywhere.

"I guess we might as well start back where we finished," suggested Archie. Knowing Pippa, she'd probably had a hunch in the middle of the night and headed off on some spontaneous quest. And she thought *he* was the reckless one.

The scene at the yards left them scratching their heads. The chicken heads were trampled into the dirt on the other side of the enclosure. The drafting gate was gently swinging on its hinges. The ball of string was unravelling beside a squished cowpat. But there was no sign of the girls.

"Weird," said Archie, winding in the string. He swung the chicken heads between them. "They're totally squashed."

"But their brains haven't been eaten," said Nik.

The two boys studied the heads in silence. What did it mean?

"Archie! Nik!" A hissed whisper intruded.

They spotted Pippa waving over a fence at the back of the pens. They backtracked towards the house then circled the yards to reach her.

"What happened?" asked Archie.

"Where's Mia?" Nik asked, scanning the pens.

Pippa beamed. "We caught the zombies!" she said. "C'mon!"

She didn't linger for questions, taking off towards the stables.

The boys swapped confused glances, then hurried to catch up.

Though Pippa had described the zombies in gruesome detail, seeing them close up was a whole new level of grossness. Flaps of skin flaked off in leathery sheets. Rotting patches of flesh oozed with stinky black gunk. Both zombies were missing teeth and various other pieces. One had a gaping hole in its chest. Archie peered through into a dark cavity of flies and decaying organs.

"Cool," Archie finally whistled.

Nik's mouth moved but no words came. He was as pale as a bleached sheep and thankful he hadn't eaten breakfast yet.

"How...," Archie began.

Pippa cut him off. She quickly recounted last night's drama. When she reached the part about Mia's timely intrusion, the boys studied Mia with a mixture of surprise and admiration.

"So...," Archie said, watching the zombies with suspicion. "They're not dangerous then?"

"I don't think so," said Pippa. "They didn't try to eat our brains. Or Doris's or Tinkerbell's brains either."

Archie could hear Doris and Tinkerbell munching hay in the next stall. They seemed unusually relaxed about their zombie neighbours.

"Maybe the zombies just didn't think it was worth the effort," Archie suggested with a grin. "They didn't try to eat the chicken brains either."

"They just wanted company," explained Mia, gently stroking the muzzle draped over her shoulder. When her hand came away with a piece of clinging flesh, she quickly wiped it on her jeans. "Didn't you, Zeus?"

"Zeus?" Archie asked.

Mia replied with a firm nod. "And that's Isadora. They were just lonely, that's all. They wouldn't hurt a fly. "

The others gave her a dubious look. But there was no point arguing.

"Maybe they still have pony instincts," suggested Nik. "So people and ponies are sort of off limits. Or something..."

His argument dissolved as the twins eyed him sceptically. It didn't make a lot of sense, he knew. Ponies didn't usually eat *any* creature's brains.

Zombies certainly did, though. And they weren't famous for being fussy.

"So how did they become zombies, then?" asked Archie.

"You have to be bitten by another zombie, don't you?" said Pippa.

"But how does the first zombie get zombified?" Archie said.

"In comics it's always radiation or something," said Nik. "But there's nothing like that out here... is there?"

Archie wandered around the zombies, carefully checking them out as though he was thinking of buying them.

"Hey, what's this?" he suddenly asked, pointing at a stained flap of skin hanging from a zombie flank. He grabbed the edge gingerly between two fingers and lifted it back into place.

"That's the Howes' brand," said Pippa, peering over his shoulder.

"Sure looks like it," said Archie.

"So if they're the Howes' ponies," said Pippa, frowning in concentration, "then whatever happened to them, probably happened on the Howe farm."

The others nodded in agreement.

"I sort of remember reading something once about zombies always returning to the scene of their, well, *death*," said Nik. "It's like some kind of homing instinct."

"So if we let them go, we can follow them and find out," said Archie. He spun round with a grin splitting his face. But it quickly faded when he saw the serious look on his sister's face. "Why not?"

"Because if we let them go, they're going to kill more innocent creatures," said Pippa. "That's why not."

"I guess," said Archie. "But if we're not going to let them go, what are we going to do with them?"

Pippa and Nik scratched their heads. Neither of them could meet Mia's gaze.

"If you ask me," Archie continued, "I reckon killing them would be the kindest thing."

"No! You can't!" Mia protested.

"I agree," said Pippa, turning away.

"Technically," said Nik, "they're already dead. So we wouldn't be killing them. More like putting them out of their misery." He kept his eyes firmly on the twins, refusing to meet Mia's look of betrayal.

"Being a zombie can't be much fun," said Archie.

"It'll be all over in a second," said Pippa. "Dad's a good shot."

"I'll look after them!" Mia protested.

"How?" asked Pippa. "Where are you going to get fresh brains from?"

"Maybe they eat other things too."

"Like what?"

"They haven't touched the hay," said Archie.

Nik rested a heavy hand on Mia's shoulder. "Sorry, Mia, but they're right. And I think you know it, too."

Mia started to protest, but the words died on her tongue. She bowed her head, nodding.



"Look, Dad won't be home until dinnertime anyway," said Pippa, swallowing heavily. "So maybe we should have breakfast and put our thinking caps on. You know, in case we're missing something. Maybe there's a Plan B."

"Or we could just call dad and tell him right away," said Archie.

Pippa gave her brother a scowl of disapproval. Then turned to Nik.

"So what do you think, Nik?"

Nik squirmed and tugged his ear. His eyes bounced between the twins, then landed on his sister. That decided it. "I guess there's no hurry."

"Right," said Pippa. "Let's bolt the stables then go eat."

\* \* \* \* \*

Stella was waiting for them on the porch. Arms folded straitjacket-tight around her waist, her face set in a frown of concern.

"Where have you been?" she called as they approached. "I was just about to send out a search party." She didn't wait for an answer. Instead, she turned to the twins. "What would your dad say if he knew you'd left Prue alone in the house?"

Pippa grimaced. "Sorry. We forgot about Prue."

"Yeah. We were in kind of a hurry," said Archie.

Stella's scowl deepened. "What could be so important that you couldn't wait until someone was here to look after your little sister?"

The twins could only gape like goldfish. Nik stared at the ground.

"Don't blame them, Mum," said Mia. "It was my fault."

Mia's confession sent her mum's eyebrows rocketing upwards. She'd been so convinced the twins were trouble, it hadn't occurred to her to look for answers elsewhere.

"I woke up really early and nobody else was awake, so I snuck away to see the ponies," said Mia. "And when Pippa woke up and saw I was gone she got worried so she woke up the others to help search for me. Sorry."

Stella sighed, then turned to the twins. "And I'm sorry for jumping to conclusions."

The twins responded with a shrug.

Turning back to Mia, Stella continued: "Promise me you'll never wander off alone again. Okay?"

"Yes, Mum," said Mia.

"And that goes for you, too, Nikau. Am I clear?"

"Yes, Mum," Nik muttered at the ground.

Stella returned her attention to the twins. "As for you two. Your dad trusts you to look after each other. And that goes double for your little sister. He's got enough on his plate without worrying about your safety. Okay?"

She held their gaze a moment, then her face softened into a smile.

"C'mon, breakfast is ready. Hope you all like scrambled eggs."

\* \* \* \* \*

The kids shovelled breakfast down like they were stoking steam locomotives with coal. They were surprisingly ravenous after yesterday's adventures. And not so surprisingly in a hurry to return to the zombies.

They washed the dishes and tidied everything away without complaint. Then stampeded towards the door.

"Not so fast," Stella called, halting them in their tracks. "Nobody's going anywhere until we've sorted the guest rooms. Clear?"

The rest of the morning passed in a shambles of carrying and cleaning. Each time the kids passed each other in the hallway loaded with boxes, they rolled their eyes. Talk about bad timing.

By the time the two guest rooms had been emptied of everything but a bed, a cupboard and a bedside table, the house was an oven. Everyone was dusty, exhausted and soaked with sweat.

"So who wants ice cream?" Stella suddenly asked, offering the kids her warmest smile. She'd been surprised and delighted by how hard they'd all worked. Without grumbling, either.

"Me!" cheered Prue.

The others swapped conspirators' glances.

"Well?" Stella asked.

"Ummm, is it okay if we go swimming instead?" asked Pippa.

Stella scanned four hopeful dirty faces. "Suit yourselves. Prue and I are having ice-cream. Right, Prue?"

"Yay!" cheered Prue, rushing off towards the kitchen. "Ice cream!"

The kids raced out the door and set off towards the stable.

"Don't forget to put on sunscreen," Stella called at their backs. "And take a hat!"

"That took *forever*," huffed Archie. "What time is it?"

Nik held up his watch. "Just after eleven."

"So has anyone thought of a Plan B?" asked Pippa.

"Don't need to think about it," said Archie. "Dad's gotta put them down. End of story."

"I agree," said Nik. "We can't let the zombies loose, and there's no way we can keep them. They're already dead, so we're really just being kind."

"Mia?" Pippa asked.

Mia sighed. "I guess."

"Right," said Pippa. "We're all agreed then. But I've been thinking. Maybe we *should* call Dad after all. The sooner we put the zombies out of their misery, the better." The others nodded solemnly. "In the meantime, I think we should put them in the drafting yard so they don't panic. Or try to escape. It'll make it easier for Dad, too. Agreed?"

Now the decision had been made, they suddenly felt like they were going to a funeral. Their steps dragged as they approached the stables.

Mia noticed the unusual silence first. She broke into a run. Pippa was close behind. The two boys swapped puzzled glances, then hurried in pursuit.

The stable doors were lying in splinters on the ground.

With mounting dread, they crept inside.

The gate of the first stall was hanging limply from buckled hinges. The zombies were gone, leaving an ear and a long strip of leathery skin as souvenirs.

The second gate was broken, too.

Mia and Pippa inched forward, then turned to ice. Their hands flew to their mouths, stifling screams. There was no sign of Doris and Tinkerbell. Just an empty stall and a floor scattered with blood-drenched hay.

They'd imagined the zombies hadn't eaten the ponies' brains because of some pony instinct. But they were wrong. It wasn't pony instinct. It was pure zombie instinct. They never wanted to eat the ponies' brains. They wanted to make two more zombies for their zombie herd.

## Chapter Ten - Smelling a rat

The quads roared along in a cloud of dust.

Pippa's knuckles were white around the handle grips. Her face set in grim determination. She could feel Mia's hands trembling against her waist. The ponies' demise had left her feeling racked by guilt and sobbing with grief. Pippa was sad, too. But for now there was no place in her heart for grief. There was no room for anything but anger.

Nik was doing his best to keep up. But his cautious nature made him slow down or detour around each pothole, while Pippa jolted and juddered straight through. Archie was riding pillion. One hand locked around the carrier while the other held binoculars. At the top of each rise, Archie scanned the hills, searching for any sign of the zombies.

The zombies had several hours head start. It was impossible to know in which direction they'd gone. Or how fast they were moving. They could be anywhere. The kids could only hope Nik's theory was right and the zombies did have some kind of homing instinct which would draw them back the way they'd come.

Pippa skidded to a halt back at the place they'd forded the creek just yesterday. Though it seemed such a long time ago now.

Nik slowly pulled up beside her.

"Are you sure you want to do this, sis?" Archie asked. "If one of the Howes spots us..."

Pippa's quad lurched forward with a fart of exhaust, leaving Archie shaking his head. The quad rumbled down the bank then surged across the creek in a plume of spray.

Nik waited until the other quad was safely across before following.

Pippa wasn't waiting. She powered up the other bank and disappeared from view.

"C'mon, Nik!" Archie yelled into his ear. "Step on it or we'll lose 'em!"

Nik licked his lips, tightened the strap of his helmet, then set off in pursuit.

By the time the boys caught up, Pippa and Mia had already dismounted their quad and removed their helmets. Mia was guzzling water from the flask. Pippa was scanning the hills, one hand shielding her eyes from the blazing sun.

"That's where I found them," Pippa said, pointing to a spot halfway up the hill. "Give me the binoculars."

She snatched them from Archie's grasp. "Thank you, too," he said, rolling his eyes.



The boys took their chance to stretch and drink some water while Pippa inspected the hills with forensic precision.

A sudden grunt drew the boys' attention.

"Up there," Pippa said, handing the binoculars to Nik. She kept her finger pinned to a spot a little higher up the hill while Nik fumbled the binoculars into focus.

"I don't see anything, except...," said Nik. He was expecting to spot the zombies, or a clue to their location. But all he could see was grass and... Wait a second. Those two grey lumps. He thought they were just rocks, but maybe... He adjusted the binoculars. "... two dead sheep."

"Exactly," said Pippa. "And I'm sure they weren't there yesterday."

"Let me see!" said Archie, taking the binoculars.

"They're up there somewhere," said Pippa. "I can feel it."

"So what now?" asked Nik.

It was a long, steep climb up the hill with no shelter from the fuming sun. The heat and the short night were starting to catch up with him. He could feel a leaden heaviness seeping into his limbs like poison.

Pippa put on her helmet and started the quad. "We follow them, of course."

"But what if it's just a wild goose chase?" asked Nik. "What if they're not heading anywhere special but just wandering the hills looking for more victims?"

"We'll find out, won't we?" said Pippa.

She didn't wait for a reply.

Nik's brow furrowed in thought as he watched the quad roar away.

There was one more unanswered question ricocheting through his brain - what were they going to do if they actually found the zombies? When he finally turned, Archie was beside him, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

"No arguing with Miss Bossyboots," he said. "C'mon. I'm driving."

\* \* \* \* \*

The climb up the hill seemed endless. The quads were getting hotter by the minute. Nik felt like an ant being tormented by the magnifying glass sun. Any second he would burst into flames.

His knees were already an angry red. He regretted wearing shorts, despite the heat. His t-shirt clung to his chest like a clammy second skin. It didn't help that he needed to press himself tightly against Archie's back to keep them from toppling backwards.

The quad finally heaved over the rim of the hill. Nik leaned back with a sigh of relief. Pippa and Mia were standing beside their quad in the shade of a lone gum tree. Their faces glowed like beacons. As Nik watched them pouring water from their bottles over their heads, he was surprised he didn't see steam.

The boys dismounted, hunched over like neanderthals. With grunts and groans, they slowly stretched upright.

Archie didn't wait for Pippa's command. He handed her the binoculars before collapsing in a heap at the base of the tree with his water bottle.

Mia and the two boys were too hot and exhausted to talk. They sipped their lukewarm water and watched Pippa scanning the hills. The tree was miserly with its shade, but it was still a relief to be away from the prying sun.

"Looks like we're on the right track," said Pippa, sagging to the ground beside Mia. "There's dead sheep all over the place." She gulped a huge mouthful of water. "We're close. I know it." She poured more water on her head then got back to her feet. "Better hurry before we lose them."

The boys exchanged glances, then Archie cleared his throat.

"Are you sure that's a good idea, Pip?" Archie asked. "I mean, we're seriously trespassing already. If anyone spots us..."

"You can go home if you want to," said Pippa, donning her helmet. "But I'm not letting them get away again."

Mia leapt to her feet and hurried to mount the quad as Pippa turned the ignition. The boys stayed where they were, their feet firmly planted in the ground.

"So it's just us girls, then!" shouted Pippa above the engine roar. "See you back at the house!"

Without a word, the boys got back on the quad and gave chase.

\* \* \* \* \*

They wound a zig-zag path down the other side of the hill. A brainless carcass lay at almost every bend, like markers in a ghoulish Olympic slalom. Some of the corpses had already been reduced to piles of skin-covered bones. Others were distinctly fresher.

There was no doubt they were on the right path.

Pippa was so busy watching out for more carcasses, she nearly drove right off the cliff. She skidded to a halt so suddenly, the force nearly sent Mia sailing over the edge.

"You okay?" Pippa shouted, glancing over her shoulder to check on her passenger... and to make sure Nik hadn't seen her dangerous manoeuvre.

But Mia wasn't listening.

"Look!" she said, pointing down into the gully.

The gully was an open wound in the hillside, infected with rubbish. There were piles of torn garbage bags. Jumbles of plastic containers and steel drums. Tangles of rusty fencing wire. Shattered bricks and concrete. Car wrecks and bald tyres.

Flocks of seagulls wheeled in squawking circles like tissues caught by the wind.

"Yeah, it's not pretty," said Pippa.

"It's terrible!" said Mia, surprised and slightly confused by Pippa's disinterest.

"All the farms have their own dumps," Pippa shrugged. "It's not ideal, but what else can you do? Garbage trucks don't come anywhere near here."

Mia could only stare. Was Pippa serious?

"What's up?" called Archie, pulling alongside.

"I was just explaining to Mia it's pretty normal having a dump on the farm," said Pippa. She couldn't understand why Mia was upset. And she didn't like the way Nik was looking at her one bit.

"It's totally normal," Archie agreed. "What else are farmers supposed to do with their rubbish?"

"Is *that* normal, too?" asked Nik, pointing down to the gully entrance.

Three heads turned to follow his finger.

Like a rubbish glacier creeping down a mountainside, it was impossible to tell how thick it was directly beneath them. It slowly thinned as it tumbled downhill, becoming little more than a scatter of debris.

Beyond the terminus, pools of oily liquid glistened like melted rainbows. A thin ribbon trickled downhill, flanked by a strip of grey, dead land.

"What kind of stuff are they dumping here?" asked Archie.

"Only one way to find out," said Pippa.

\* \* \* \* \*

Whatever the liquid was, there was little doubt it was toxic. The smell burnt their noses, bringing tears to their eyes.

"I'm not sure we should be poking around in this stuff," said Nik. "Who knows what it is?"

"I agree with Nik," said Archie. "Besides, who's to say we're going to find anything? Whatever container this stuff was in could be buried under a tonne of rubbish by now."

Pippa was trying to tip over a rubbish bag with a stick. She halted to look back at the two boys. Then her gaze drifted up the gully.

"You're right, I guess," she said, admitting defeat. It would take a team with a digger to excavate the mess. She glanced around. Then jerked to attention. "Where's Mia?"

The boys spun in slow circles. But there was no sign of Mia.

"Mia!" Nik called.

"I'm here!" came a muffled reply. A moment later her head poked out of the rubbish. "I think I've found something."

The others skirted the rubbish pile, treading gingerly around each toxic puddle. They found Mia standing atop a large metal drum. It was the kind Dad used to collect all the old engine oil to take to the recyclers. Except this one was rusty and leaking badly.

But the label was still clear enough to read. It was just three letters stamped in red as dark as blood beneath a skull and crossbones: DDT.

"Wasn't that stuff banned ages ago?" asked Archie.

"Yeah," said Pippa, frowning. "Grandad told me about it once. In the old days all the farms used it to kill gorse and stuff. But when he discovered how dangerous it was, he decided to make the farm organic. Lots of farmers kept using it but, until the government banned it."

"I doubt the government told them to dump it in a gully," said Archie.

Knowing the Howes, they were probably trying to save money.

"Let's see what else they dumped," said Pippa.

In no time they'd uncovered several more dripping drums of DDT, a couple of barrels of old oil, and a pile of containers with all manner of complicated chemical names.

"Looks like most of it's been here for ages," said Pippa.

Mia's sudden scream set the others scrambling. When she ducked out of sight, Nik surged forward. His head whipped wildly from side to side, on the look-out for danger.

He found her sitting on an old tyre, hunched over. She barely noticed the others as they gathered around her.

"What's wrong?" Nik asked, puzzled. "Why did you scream?"

Mia glance up, blushing. "Sorry. I got a fright, that's all."

Her hands were clasped together on her lap. As the others loomed closer, peering over her shoulder, she gently unfolded them.



"Urgh!!" groaned the twins.

"What is it?" Nik asked.

"I think it's a rat," said Mia.

The others leaned closer, blinking away their confusion. The creature didn't look like any rat they'd ever seen. It was almost hairless, with just a few tufts of fur on its head. Its two front legs were deformed, its tail was a stump, and its eyes were sealed shut.

"Poor thing," said Mia.

"It's disgusting," said Archie.

"I think it's evidence," said Nik.

Pippa nodded. "Me too. I think it proves the zombies definitely came from here."

"It doesn't actually *prove* anything," said Nik. "But, yeah, it looks like we might have solved the zombie mystery."

"We still haven't found the zombies," said Pippa. "And I reckon that's more important at the moment."

"Yeah, but this is their home... sort of, isn't it?" said Archie. "So if they're not here, they could be anywhere. Right?"

"They've gotta come back sometime," Pippa said with little conviction.

"We should stay here and wait for them. Or maybe set a trap."

"What if they don't come back?" said Archie.

Pippa had no answer to that. Her brain whirred with hare-brained schemes, but they were all too muddled or vague to be helpful. Her confidence and energy were rapidly draining away, too. What she needed was a swim and some food, and a nap. Then maybe she could think straight again.

"I vote we get out of here," said Archie. "This place stinks."

"I agree," said Nik. "Who knows what terrible chemicals we're breathing in."

"Okay," said Pippa. "I could do with a swim. C'mon."

They trudged back towards the quads. Mia trailed behind. When Nik glanced back, he saw her hands clasped suspiciously together against her belly.

"Leave the rat, Mia," said Nik.

Mia's mouth gaped open. Then, with a sigh, she crouched down and returned the squirming pink rat to the ground.

## Chapter Eleven - Puzzling pieces

Mia was combing her fingers through her hair before putting her helmet back on. It would be a tangle of epic proportions if she didn't.

"What's that?" she suddenly asked, her fingers freezing on her head.

Archie didn't hear. He was already sitting on a quad, helmet on, hand at the ignition. Pippa was standing beside the other quad slurping water.

"What's what?" asked Nik, pausing from adjusting his helmet strap.

"Shhhh!" Mia hissed.

"It's just a sheep or something," said Pippa, shoving the bottle into her pack.

"It isn't!" said Mia. "Listen!"

They held their breaths as seconds ticked slowly by.

"Hurry up," said Archie. "What are we waiting for?"

Nik threw one leg over the quad and wriggled into place behind Archie.

Shaking her head, Pippa began to tie the pack to the carrier: "Nope. I didn't hear..."

Her words evaporated as the sound came again. Louder this time. It sounded like a lame whinny.

Mia didn't wait for the others. She dropped her helmet and began scrambling over the rubbish mountain. Pippa and Nik were close behind.

Archie stayed on the quad, too tired to move. He watched the others disappear from view, one by one. As Nik's head sank into rubbish, Archie yanked off his helmet and hurried in pursuit.

He spotted the others halfway up the gully. They were standing in a clump, heads bowed as though at a funeral. At first he thought they were gathered around a pile of bleached garbage bags. But as he neared, the garbage pile moved.

Archie gasped. It was one of the zombie ponies.

By the time he reached them, Mia was kneeling beside the zombie's head, patting the last strands of its mane.

"Poor Zeus," she whispered.

The zombie jerked its head at Archie's approach. Some instinct made Mia whip her hand away - just in case. She lost her balance and fell backwards. She found her feet again and gave Archie a fierce scowl.

"What?" Archie asked innocently.

"It's dying, I think," said Pippa. For some reason she couldn't help but feel sorry for the poor creature. After all, it wasn't the pony's fault it was a zombie.

"Technically it's already dead," said Nik, holding up a hand against Pippa's protest. "But yeah, it sure looks like it's done for."

Archie couldn't understand why the others seemed so sad about a dying zombie. Wasn't the whole point of chasing them to try and kill them? One zombie down meant one less zombie to kill.

He drifted away to survey the scene, looking for clues that might lead to the other zombies' location. He found one zombie leg. Then another. He picked them up and returned to the others.

"You sure it's dying?" he asked, holding up the trophy legs. "Maybe it just can't go anywhere anymore."

The others stared at the legs like they were walking by themselves.

Pippa scratched her chin. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Do zombies even die?" asked Archie. "Maybe they just fall to pieces and rot away."

"It's possible, I guess," said Nik. "I mean, technically they're already dead, so..."

"So I guess we just leave it here," said Pippa. "One zombie down..."

Mia gaped at her in horror. "We can't leave it to die slowly. That's cruel!" Before Nik could interrupt, she raced on. "I know it's technically dead, but..."

but it could be lying here for ages and ages. Maybe forever. That's a terrible way to die. Nothing deserves that. Not even a zombie."

"But what else are we supposed to do?" asked Pippa.

"Maybe we should tell Dad," said Archie. "He can put it out of its misery."

Pippa glared at her brother. "Yeah, tell Dad we've been trespassing on the Howes' property. Good idea. We'll be grounded for the rest of the summer. And then what? There's no way he's going to trespass. He's going to tell the Howes and they're going to be furious. And there's no way they're going to let Dad come here and see their toxic dump. "

"Chill out, sis," Archie huffed. "It was just an idea."

"So if we're not going to tell your dad," said Nik, "what *are* we going to do?"

They turned their attention back to the zombie. Mia was by its side once more, trying her best to soothe it. The zombie nickered lightly. For a moment they almost forgot it was a zombie.

Archie took a deep breath. "Okay, I'll do it."

"Do what?" asked Pippa.

"Put it out of its misery, of course," said Archie, rolling his eyes. "We all agree it's for the best, right? So I'll do it. It's technically dead already, so I won't actually be killing it... technically."

"But how...," Pippa began.

Archie shook his head. "You don't want to know, Pip. Just leave it to me."

\* \* \* \* \*

Nobody spoke on the way to the swimming hole. They were all lost in their own thoughts. But their mood quickly lifted as they stripped off and dove in.

They knew they'd done the right thing. The *only* thing they could do. Now they were happy to just forget about the zombies for a while.

Well, three of them were. Pippa wasn't quite ready to forget. Her limbs felt like they were made of stone. Everything was her fault. It was her fault Doris and Tinkerbelle had been turned into zombies. It was her fault so many innocent animals had their brains eaten. And it was her fault Archie had blood on his hands. (Okay, it might only be zombie blood... if zombies even had blood, but still... it couldn't have been easy or pleasant.)

If they'd just told Dad about the zombies in the first place instead of racing off by themselves, the zombies would be dead already and the ponies would be in their stalls happily munching hay. How stupid she was to believe it was all some big adventure and they could solve the mystery by themselves like the Famous Five.

But swimming always revived Pippa's spirits. Even in the bleakest times - like when Mum died. She'd spent days floating in the water like a dead log, staring up at the infinite sky while her tears turned the water salty. The swimming hole was a special place now. She always felt close to Mum when she was there.

While the others splashed and dived, Pippa drifted across the water like an iceberg. She let the coolness seep into her bones while the sun warmed her face and her sadness flowed away downstream.

There was nothing she could do to change the past. Like Mum used to say: *What's done is done*. The future, on the other hand, was something she *could* change. If she could just figure out how.

*I wonder what Bob would think?* she wondered as she floated above the eel's home. *He'd probably say it was too eely to know what to do...*

The thought painted a pale smile on her face.



"What are you smiling about?" asked Archie, glancing down from the rock.

"Nothing," she said, standing.

"So what now?" asked Nik.

"I'm starving," said Archie.

"Me too," said Pippa through a yawn. She clambered onto the rock and quickly dressed. "Right. First food. Then a nap. And then..." The sentence hung there, unfinished. What *should* they do? Tell Dad? Call the police? "...and then we'll see, I guess."

\* \* \* \* \*

They returned home to find another note. This time it was from Stella.

*Hi guys. Prue wanted to go watch the gymkhana preparations, so we've gone into town for the afternoon. I'm sure you can look after yourselves until we get back. Won't be too late. In the meantime, try to stay out of trouble.*

*Love Mum (Stella) xxxooo*

So they had the whole afternoon to come up with a plan.

They made themselves sandwiches for lunch. The twins demolished the leftover chicken while Nik and Mia decided to stay vegetarian a while longer. They gulped down a whole bottle of ice cold soda, then opened another.

"So anyone got any brilliant ideas?" Pippa finally asked, tinkling ice cubes in her glass.

"I still think we have to tell Dad," Archie mumbled around a mouthful of sandwich.

"Or maybe not," said Nik, blushing lightly at the others' stares. "I mean, if the zombies fall apart anyway, maybe we can just leave them alone and let nature take its course." The twins gaped, dumbfounded, while Mia's stare grew wider. Before they could interrupt, Nick hurried on: "I know it's not a perfect plan and there are loads of variables but just hear me out. Okay?"

The others shrugged their agreement.

Nik continued. "So far the zombies have only killed stuff on the Howe farm. Right?" Three heads nodded slowly in reply. "And they only came across the creek because they knew there were ponies they could turn into zombies. Right?"

"That's my fault," said Pippa with a grimace. "If we didn't ride after them..."

"We don't know that," said Nik. "Maybe they knew all along but didn't come until they needed more zombies."

"Yeah, maybe," said Pippa, unconvinced. "I guess."

"So what happens if we *do* tell your dad? Assuming he believes us, he's not going to go onto the Howes' farm without their permission, is he?"

"If he asked them they'd probably say no anyway," said Archie.

"Exactly," said Nik. "So what actually happens if we just leave the zombies to slowly rot away?"

"Some more of the Howes' stock will get killed, I guess," said Pippa.

"And whatever else crosses the zombies' path," Archie added.

"But is that actually such a big deal?" Nik insisted. "The sheep and cows are going to be killed sooner or later anyway, aren't they?"

"Yeah," said Archie. "The Howes will be sending most of them off to the works in a couple of weeks. If I was a cow I'd probably prefer to get my brains eaten by a zombie any day. It'd be a lot quicker."

"And it's not like the Howes miss them," snorted Pippa. "They haven't even noticed the dead stock yet."

"It'd serve them right if the zombies ate some of their profits," Archie agreed bitterly.

"And the other things they kill are all pests anyway, right?" said Nik.

"Yeah, the zombies are doing us a favour really," said Archie.

"So is it such a bad thing to just leave them to die?" said Nik

Mia had been gaping at her brother the whole time. She could hardly believe her ears. "But that's cruel!" she finally blurted. "We have to find them and put them out of their misery."

"How are we going to do that, Mia?" asked Nik gently.

Mia's mouth opened but she couldn't find an answer.

"We can't risk trespassing again," said Pippa.

"We were lucky we weren't spotted the first time," said Archie.

"Dad would get in heaps of trouble if the Howes saw us," said Pippa.

"So would we," Archie added with feeling.

"And what happens if we *do* find them?" asked Nik, meeting Mia's stare with a steely resolve. "Do you expect Archie to kill them all? Or would you want to do it?"

Mia's head drooped forward. "No."

"Cool, that's decided then," said Archie. He gulped a huge mouthful of soda then burped loudly. His face beaming.

Pippa wasn't about to celebrate yet. She could tell by Nik's face there was more to come. "But?" she asked.

Nik squirmed. "But we can't really be sure it's a good idea until we figure out a couple of things."

"Such as?"

"Well, how long zombies live, for a start."

"And?"

"And if there are any more ponies nearby they can turn into zombies."

\* \* \* \* \*

The internet wasn't at all clear about how long zombies lived. Some sites claimed it was just weeks. Others months, or even years. It depended on so many things, like the weather or how it got turned into a zombie.

They thought they knew the cause - the Howes' toxic chemical cocktail. And the weather was definitely on their side - zombies decayed a lot faster in hot weather. But the rest was just guesswork.

They also didn't think there were any ponies nearby. Mrs Howe was a keen rider, but she only rode thoroughbreds. And zombie ponies couldn't turn horses into zombies... could they?

That made two maybes. Probabilities, even. If only they could be sure.

Everyone was quiet at dinner. Except Prue, who talked non-stop, as usual. The kids were exhausted after their adventures. Stella was exhausted after a day looking after Prue.

Dad wasn't tired, but he'd been lost in thought since he'd got home. The twins guessed he'd had another run-in with the Howes about the new fence. The Howes had been trying to get Dad to pay half the cost of the stretch along their shared boundaries. Dad was a good neighbour and would happily share the costs of the fence... if it was a normal fence. But the Howes were planning to run deer on their farm next year, so the fence was very expensive. Dad had tried to compromise, but the Howes said he had to pay or they'd take him to court.

Dad couldn't afford the cost of a deer fence. And he couldn't afford lawyers, either.

Stella had brought home an apricot pie for dessert. She put it in the oven to heat up then went to get the ice cream from the freezer on the back porch. Prue leapt out of her seat and tagged along.

"Dad," Pippa suddenly asked. "Do the Howes have ponies?"

Dad roused himself from his thoughts and gave her a confused look.

"What? Why do you want to know?"

"It's nothing, really. It's just... well, I didn't think they had ponies, but I thought I saw a couple in one of their paddocks. So I was just wondering... That's all."

"That so?" said Dad. He scrutinised Pippa. He knew there was more to it than that. But she didn't flinch. "Yeah, well, as far as I know they've always kept a couple of ponies for when their grandkids visit... or at least they *used to*. Funnily enough, I was having a yarn to Steve Bentley the other day... he's been shoeing the Howes' horses and stuff for donkey's years... but when he asked about the ponies, they told him they'd sold 'em just that morning. Steve only told me 'cos he didn't really buy their story. Said he would've heard about any sale. He thought it was a bit weird and wondered if I'd heard anything."

The four kids were trying hard to conceal their excitement.

"Where'd you see them exactly?" Dad asked, studying Pippa intently. "I might just have to check it out myself."

"Right down the bottom of the farm," Pippa lied. "You know. The paddock the fishermen aren't allowed to cross."

Dad nodded. "I know the one." He started to rise, plate in hand.

"Ummm, Dad?" Pippa asked innocently.

Dad cocked an eyebrow.

"Ummm, when did you talk to Mister Bentley?"

Dad scratched his beard. "Must've been Thursday. Why?"

"Nothing," said Pippa.

As soon as Dad turned away to deposit his plate in the sink, Pippa held her hand towards the others, fingers outstretched. "Five days," she mouthed.

They exchanged satisfied smiles. The last two pieces of the puzzle had been solved. The zombies only survived five days. And the Howes no longer had any ponies that could be turned into more zombies.

The second zombie would be falling apart any moment now. Which left Doris and Tinkerbell who'd been zombies for nearly a day already.

Four more days and the zombie drama would be over...

...as long no ponies crossed their path.



## Chapter Twelve - Dragging

The next few days seemed to drag by as slowly as, well, a zombie. Each morning and afternoon, the kids set off on quads to patrol the boundary between their farm and the Howes'. Two of them headed uphill, two down. They scanned the shimmering hills, slowly melting in the sun as they searched for any sign of the zombies' whereabouts.

Perhaps the heat had sped up their demise. Were they already dead?

When the sun became too hot to bear, they retreated to the swimming hole. At night they played zombie video games.

Each evening Pippa crossed a new day off the kitchen calendar

"So what's with the crosses?" Dad asked on the third day.

"Nothing," said Pippa with a shrug.

"Really?" said Dad. He had his Dad face on, so Pippa knew he wasn't going to be satisfied with that.

"It's...", Pippa glanced around the room, looking for inspiration. When she spotted Nik stooped over his cereal, she smiled. "It's just that we bet Nik he couldn't go four days without saying actually."

Nik's head jerked out of his breakfast. "Hey, I don't say it *that* often."

"Yes you do, actually," said Mia, smiling.

"I reckon!" agreed Archie.

"Ac...," Nik bit his tongue on his reply, then smiled sheepishly. "Yeah, maybe I do."

When Pippa slipped out to go to the bathroom, Dad followed.

"Hold on, Pip," he said, halting her in her tracks.

When she turned to face him, she noticed he still had his Dad face on. She didn't speak, just waited. Dad became more uncertain with each ticking second. It occurred to her he was acting on Stella's suggestion. He seemed to be doing that a lot lately.

"Ummm," said Dad, stretching to rub the back of his neck. "I was just wanting to ask you about something."

Pippa silently waited. Though she felt sorry for her Dad's awkwardness, she didn't really want to make this any easier for him. The last thing they needed was adult prying.

"How's it going with you and Arch and the other two? Everything ok?"

Pippa smiled. "Yep. It's fine."

"I mean, I know it's not exactly what you and Arch wanted... having two city kids dumped on you like this... but, well, me and Stella go way back and... they've been having a bit of a hard time of it lately, so..."

Pippa rested a reassuring hand on Dad's arm. His words faded into nothing.

"It's fine, Dad. Really. We're having loads of fun together. It's absolutely no problem at all."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Totally."

Dad exhaled a mighty sigh. "Good. But you *will* tell me if there's ever anything wrong, eh?"

"Yes, Dad."

\* \* \* \* \*

Saturday finally arrived. If the kids were right, the zombies would soon start falling apart. Enough, at least, to prevent them killing too many more creatures. By the end of the day, the danger would be almost over.

Everyone was very chirpy at breakfast. The sense of doom that had been hanging over the kids was starting to lift. Tomorrow they could start to *really* enjoy the holidays.

Dad was feeling more relaxed too, now he'd finally had that long chat with Pippa. He'd started coming back to the house for breakfast each morning after Stella suggested it would be good for them all. Though the twins enjoyed seeing him a bit more, it was going to take a while to get used to the new arrangements. And the daily interrogations.

"So what are you guys getting up to today?" Dad asked.

"Just hanging out," said Archie to a chorus of nodding heads.

"Okay, then," said Dad. "Stella and Prue are coming out with me this morning to help get the shearing gang settled. Should be back by lunchtime. Then we thought we'd wander down to the gymkhana. Why don't you all come along? It'll be a lot of fun, I reckon."

The four kids exchanged glances.

"Nah, thanks," said Archie. "We're too old for gymkhana."

"You sure?" Dad asked, his gaze sliding to the other side of the table.

"Nik? Mia?"

"No thanks," said Nik. "Horses aren't really my thing."

Mia squirmed in her seat. She'd love to go to the gymkhana but...

"No thanks," she said. "I'll stay here."

"Suit yourselves," said Dad.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pippa and Mia lazed under a tree and half-heartedly scanned the hills. After three days with no zombie sightings, they were both almost convinced the zombies were dead. Or lying in the sun, slowly decomposing. Though Mia was doing her best not to think about that last possibility.

"Mia?" Pippa suddenly asked, propping herself up on one elbow.

Mia roused herself out of her daydreams and waited, blinking.

"Do you think your mum and my dad...," Pippa continued, picking each word with care. "Do you think they're... together?"

Mia smiled. "Yeah. I think so."

"And you're... *okay* with that? I mean, you know, thinking about your dad and all."

Mia's brow furrowed in thought. She'd been avoiding questioning her own feelings on the subject. So what *did* she think about it?

Mistaking her scowl for annoyance, Pippa hurried on. "Sorry. You don't have to answer. I was just being nosy. That's all."

"It's okay," said Mia. "I don't mind." She took a deep breath. "I think... I think I'm okay with it. I mean, Mum told me she and your dad got together when they were at agricultural college. She said it felt like they were soul-mates. She was sure they'd get married and come back to your dad's farm and start a family."

Mia paused to share a rueful smile with Pippa. If things had taken a different path, they might have been sisters.

"But then she met my dad. He was an exchange student over from the States for a year. I guess they fell in love and... and that was that. They lived up

north a while. That's where Nik and I were born. Then Dad got a job offer back in the States, so we packed up and moved to the city."

Pippa felt a sudden surge of grief as she digested Mia's story. Sometimes Mum's absence was almost a physical pain. Her loss stained both the past and the future. All those things she'd never experience now. Like the secrets shared between mothers and daughters.

With an effort, Pippa dragged her thoughts back to the present.

"Don't you worry about your dad being back home all alone?" she asked.

Mia grimaced as though the question was a splinter.

"I love my dad," she said. "And I miss him, sometimes. But him and Mum... they haven't been getting along for ages. So it's kind of a relief, too." She smiled. "Besides, I haven't seen Mum this happy for ages. And I think if she's happy, then I'm happy too."

"Fair enough," said Pippa, returning Mia's smile, magnified. "Dad hasn't been happy since Mum died. It's really great to see him smiling again." She glanced at the sun, then stretched into a yawn. "Oh well, no sign of the zombies again. Might as well head back for lunch."

\* \* \* \* \*

The smell of baking bread lured the girls towards the kitchen. They threw their boots off at the door, then hurried inside. The aroma was so heavy with memories, Pippa almost did a double-take when she saw Stella, instead of her mum, standing by the oven.

When Stella saw the look on Pippa's face, she laughed.

"I know. I look a mess," she said, glancing down at her paint-spattered dungarees. "If your dad had mentioned the quarters might need a lick of paint before we left, I might have worn something different. Or at least not my favourite dungarees. Oh well, that's just how your dad is, I guess..."

"How am I?" Dad asked, a grin splitting his face as his frame filled the doorway. "I can feel my ears burning."

"I wasn't telling them anything they don't already know," said Stella. "Now go wash up. And fetch Prue. She's in her room last I heard. Lunch is almost ready. We're just waiting on Nik and Archie."



They traipsed into the bathroom and lined up to wash their hands.

"How was your morning, girls?" Dad asked as he dried his hands.

"Okay," said Pippa. "We just hung out and talked, didn't we, Mia?"

Mia nodded and offered a smile.

"Great," said Dad. He turned to leave, but halted. "Hey, Pip. Those ponies you saw. What did they look like?"

Pippa took her time washing her hands before turning to face Dad.

"Ummm, kinda grey. Why?"

Dad shrugged. "Nothing important. It's just I had to pop into town this morning to pick up some paint and I spotted two ponies walking down Domain Road. But they weren't grey. So obviously not the same ones."

Pippa's mouth suddenly filled with cotton wool. She felt a thick chunk clogging her throat. "Ummm, ponies?" she finally managed.

"Yeah. Prue was convinced it was Doris and Tinkerbelle. I had to persuade her they just looked alike. Spitting images they were, too, except kinda worn out looking," said Dad, shaking his head at the memory.

"Hahahahaha, that's weird," said Pippa, forcing a smile onto her lips.

"I reckon they must've got loose from someone at the gymkhana. When we go down this arvo I'll ask Terry to put it over the loudspeaker."

"Can we come to the gymkhana?" Pippa piped up.

Dad blinked away his confusion. "I thought you guys were too old?"

"Don't listen to Archie," said Pippa. "I think it'd be great to show Mia and Nik what an old fashioned country gymkhana is like. You'd like to go, wouldn't you, Mia?"

"I love horses," said Mia, nodding furiously.

"Sure," said Dad. "That's settled then. Stella will be stoked."

They returned to the kitchen. Archie and Nik were just coming through the door.

"Looks like we're all going to the gymkhana after all," said Dad.

"Yay!" cheered Prue.

"What?" said Archie, turning towards his sister. "But..."

"It'll be more fun than hanging around here like *zombies* all day," said Pippa, desperately hoping her brother would read the signals in her eyes.

Nik's eyes widened at the mention of zombies. "Cool," he said.

Archie's mouth gaped open as he tried to decipher his sister's signals. Sometimes their twin radar was about as useful as a candle in a snowstorm.

Pippa rolled her eyes. "We're going to the gymkhana, Arch. Trust me, you want to come."

## Chapter Thirteen - A pony for your thoughts

The Roxdale gymkhana was a highlight on the local calendar. For horse lovers, anyway. For those who didn't like horses, it was an equine nightmare. There were horses everywhere. Horsey people from around the district thronged the local Sportsground.

Most of the entertainment was centred on the main Oval - a patch of brittle grass encircled by a dirt horseracing track. Inside the main gate loomed the rickety old Main Stand, with enough shaded seating to keep the entire town out of the sun. Built from local timber by the early settlers, it had been re-painted numerous times in whichever colour the local council could acquire cheaply. Which was how it came to be such a sickly blue. The clock in the central tower had been stuck on seven minutes past three since before the twins were born.

The fields around the Oval were a carnival of colour. On one side, multi-hued tents showcasing local products and crafts sheltered in the shade of an ancient hedge. On the other side, a gypsy camp of fast food vendors laid siege to a piping merry-go-round of endlessly bobbing ponies. The aroma of

hamburgers, hotdogs and candyfloss mingled with the smell of generator exhaust.

The kids sat in the back of Dad's ute with growing impatience. It seemed to take forever to find a car park, even with the help of the white-coated parking attendant directing traffic like an angry octopus. As soon as Dad cut the engine, they leapt off.

"Hey!" Dad leant out his window, calling them back. He held out a hand, enticing Pippa closer. "Here. Have fun. But try to stay out of trouble. Okay?"

Pippa took the money and shoved it into her jeans pocket. "Thanks, Dad. We will."

"If we don't see you sooner," Dad called at their retreating backs. "We'll meet back here at five."

There'd been no sign of the zombies along the road into town. Either they were taking a detour to avoid the main gates. Or they'd fallen into a ditch to rot away.

"Right," Pippa said, halting just out of sight. "I guess the best thing to do is find some ponies and hang around until the zombies come. Agreed?"

Mia nodded eagerly.

"I think I'll take a wander first," said Archie. "You never know, I might find something." He didn't wait for the others to agree. After sitting in the ute for so long, he badly needed to stretch his legs.

"I'll come too," said Nik.

They quickly dissolved into the crowd.

"Boys," Pippa said, shaking her head before offering Mia a toothy grin.

"Looks like it's up to us girls to save the day again. C'mon."

They strode past a line of stalls displaying the entries in a long list of competitions. By the end of the day prizes would be awarded for best meat pie, fruit pie, chutney, jam and preserve. Largest cabbage, longest cucumber and weirdest carrot. Most scented rose, most colourful bouquet and prickliest cactus. There were more prizes for cake decoration, flower arrangements and embroidered cushions. Mum used to say it'd be easier if they just gave prizes to everyone.

The girls wound their way through a maze of temporary corrals in the shadow of the main stand. The front pens were abuzz with activity as riders prepared their mounts for the upcoming event. Some riders wore jeans and leather chaps, with checked shirts and wide-brimmed hats. Others were decked out in breeches, jacket and riding boots as shiny as a bull's eye.

Some horses stamped and snorted like elite athletes, hyping themselves up for their moment under the spotlight sun. Others looked down their noses at passers-by as their hides were combed and manes braided. The smell of manure mingled with the scented mist of hair-shining sprays.

A burly man with a large moustache and a clipboard, stood sentry at the front of the pens, ensuring the programme kept to its tight schedule. He seemed to be the only one able to decipher the garbled announcements echoing from the loudspeakers. With a barked command he'd open the gate to wave the next contestants through, before meticulously ticking another box on his clipboard forms.

By the time they found the pony enclosure, Pippa's stomach was grumbling. "You stay here," she told Mia. "I'll go and get us something to eat. Hot dog okay?"

Mia climbed up the fence and sat on the top rail to watch the pony preparations. While the horses were entered in all manner of races and jumping events, the ponies were vying for just one prize. Best dressed.

Fifteen ponies nickered and preened as riders added the finishing touches... with finicky help from their hovering mothers. One pony wore a top hat and tails. Another was a multi-coloured unicorn. One rider was Cinderella,

her pony a bulging pumpkin coach. Another was Bo Peep riding a sheep. There were only two boys in the competition. One was a knight on an armoured charger. The other a clown riding an elephant whose ears kept slipping sideways.

Mia smiled to herself as she imagined what she and her pony might wear to such a fancy occasion.

Lost in daydreams, she didn't notice the burly clipboard man approaching. His barked: "Ponies ready!" almost sent her toppling backwards.

The riders hastily mounted and set off in a snaking line behind the clipboard. They strode towards the Main Stand entrance.

Mia held onto the top rung and craned her neck. Where was Pippa? Mia so wanted to watch the pony parade. But she didn't want to lose Pippa.

A hoarse nicker yanked her attention towards the carpark. Her face froze in a portrait of surprise. There was Tinkerbell! Plodding between rows of parked cars, taking out everyone's wing mirrors along the way. There was no doubt where she was going. She was a zombie guided missile on a collision course with the costumed ponies.

Mia felt a shiver run down her spine. It was up to her to save the ponies.



A spare bridle had been left hanging over the fence like a skinned snake. She snatched it up and raced to intercept zombie Tinkerbell.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pippa kept her eyes peeled for the boys as she wove through the crowds towards the hotdog vendor. A few times she caught a classmate's eye. She waved, smiling, but didn't slow or detour. She was starting to think the zombies might never turn up. It was a long way from the Howes' farm to the Oval.

But she didn't think it was a good idea to split up. Just in case.

When Pippa reached the vendor's van, she gave a grunt of frustration. There was a long queue, curling in tight circles like the road up to the farm. She didn't want to leave Mia alone too long. But her stomach was grumbling louder every minute.

She stretched up on tip-toes and scanned the area. There didn't seem to be anything happening yet. With a shrug, she joined the queue.

\* \* \* \* \*

Archie thought there was no chance the zombies would make it to the Oval. Not in this heat. He was convinced they were lying in a paddock somewhere, slowly falling apart. So there was no reason to hang around watching dress-up ponies all day.

"Where are we going?" asked Nik, glancing over his shoulder. Back towards the stadium. He heard snatches of cheers and laughter. The activities were well underway. It sounded like everyone was having fun. So what were they doing in the carpark?

"You'll see," said Archie.

At the end of the carpark Archie halted. His arms swept out in a dramatic arc. "Ta da!"

Parked in a field along the back fence were a row of shiny vintage cars.

"Cool," said Nik. He wasn't especially interested in cars. But he was even less interested in ponies.

"There's a big rally tomorrow," said Archie. "It's pretty famous."

The field was deserted. The owners all in the stand, watching the activities.

Archie wasn't about to let the opportunity go by. He poked and stroked and fiddled with one car after another. Every few minutes he'd whistle or give a satisfied grunt.

Nik kept glancing towards the stand. He wasn't at all sure they should be touching anything. He couldn't disguise his relief when they came to the end.

"We should check the perimeter," Nik suggested. "There's no way the zombies would come through the gates. So maybe there's another way in."

"Knock yourself out," said Archie, yawning. "I'm going to find Pip and get something to eat. I'm starving. I'll meet you back at the ponies."

Nik hovered in indecision. Part of him agreed with Archie - the zombies were most likely dead, or dying. But he knew he couldn't relax until he was certain.

He set off along the fence in a stride that was almost a jog. At the mention of food, his stomach had started protesting.

He wasn't sure what he was supposed to be looking for. But when he found a section of shattered fence, his whole body lurched. The snapped and

splintered rails were lying *inside* the Oval grounds. Which could only mean one thing. The zombies were already there.

## Chapter Fourteen - Ponymonium

Mia approached Tinkerbell with a friendly hand outstretched. She wasn't afraid of the zombie. The other zombies hadn't tried to harm her, and they didn't even know Mia. Why should zombie Tinkerbell be any different?

So why was her hand shaking?

The pony looked in surprisingly good condition. Apart from a few bald patches on her back and a threadbare mane, it didn't seem to be missing too many bits. If it wasn't for the unsettling greyness and eyes like empty holes, nobody would suspect she was a zombie.

Mia inched closer. "It's okay, Tink," she crooned. "Nobody's going to hurt you."

The zombie let out a rattling nicker in a plume of foul breath. Mia almost gagged. Tinkerbell might look okay, but there was something terrible rotting inside her.

Up close, the zombie looked much worse. Its tongue hung uselessly from its mouth like a deflated balloon. Its stomach was swollen, the skin stretched tight as a drum. And a gaping hole, crusted with blood, stained its neck.

*That must be where the zombie bit her,* thought Mia.

"Poor thing," she said. She went to stroke the pony's neck. Instead of firm muscle and skin, she felt a squelching sponginess. She yanked her hand away, leaving finger-shaped indents in the zombie's hide.

The zombie didn't respond. It didn't even seem to be aware of her presence. It plodded on, at a death-march pace, one hoof in front of the other.

The costumed ponies were lined up behind the Main Stand, waiting to enter. They were nickering and shaking their manes, obviously oblivious to the zombie stalking towards them.

Mia slipped the bridle over Tinkerbelle's snout. The bit made squelching sounds as it slid into an almost toothless mouth. The buckles bit into the zombie's feeble skin as she pulled them tight.

"Come on, Tink," she said, gently tugging the reins.

The zombie ploughed ahead.

Mia gave the reins a sharp tug. Then gasped as the leather slashed the zombie's neck like a knife. A dark wound opened, oozing black liquid as thick as tar.

"Sorry, Tink," Mia soothed, caressing the zombie's face. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

The zombie took another step.

Without warning its head jerked upwards, tugging the reins from Mia's grasp. It wheezed in a rattling lungful of air, then let out a breathy whinny.

Mia snatched the reins and tugged. She dug in her heels. But it was no use. It was like trying to stop a tank with a lasso.

The ponies at the rear of the procession started stamping the ground.

The zombie's pace quickened as it closed in on its unsuspecting victims.

Mia searched frantically for some way to slow it down. Her face was set in a mask of despair and impending doom. She knew she should yell. Warn the others before it was too late. But if she did, Tinkerbelle was a goner.

In desperation, Mia leapt onto the zombie's back. Maybe the extra weight would be enough to halt it.

The zombie groaned to a standstill.

Mia grimaced in sympathy as she heard its spine crack. She felt ribs splintering between her thighs. She splayed her legs, expecting the zombie to crash to the ground any second.

It let out a death-rattle wheeze. But it didn't collapse. It dragged itself forward another step.

As they reached the other ponies, the zombie lifted its head. Its almost toothless mouth opened wide, preparing to bite. It lunged forward.

With a squeal, Mia jerked the reins with all her might. She heard something snap. Then the reins loosened in her grasp.

A sudden squawk of static echoed around them. The clipboard man gave a shout as he waved the ponies on their way.

The zombie shook its head, then followed.

Mia knew Tinkerbelle had almost used the last of her life-force. She would soon be dead. If Mia could keep her from biting another pony, she could die in peace and the zombie invasion would be over.

Easier said than done.

\* \* \* \* \*

The hotdog guy was taking forever.



*He'd be a lot quicker if he didn't flirt so much, Pippa thought.*

Each time the queue slowed down, she thought about abandoning it and going back to Mia. Each time she cocked her head and listened. Reassured, she decided to stay a bit longer.

With each passing minute, her sense of relief grew. It was all a wild goose chase, after all. The ponies Dad saw were just some random ponies escaped from the gymkhana like he said. The zombies were probably long dead.

One thing that certainly wasn't dead, was her appetite. She was starting to get tetchy. She felt like screaming: "Hurry up!"

The queue inched forward. The smell of hotdogs wafted around her. She could almost taste them. She swallowed a pool of saliva then licked her lips. Just three more customers. Should she buy hotdogs for the boys? Nah, they could get their own.

She took another step and craned her neck a last time.

There was no sign of the boys. And no whiff of trouble.

A small wooden box was placed on the ground in front of the vendor's window. With her best smile painted on her lips, Pippa stepped up and placed her order.

"Okey dokey," the hotdog guy said, turning away.

Pippa couldn't help feeling a little snubbed.

While she waited for her hotdogs, a weird sound reached her above the din of the merry-go-round. Her eyes narrowed as she waited. Her senses tingling. There it was again. She couldn't decipher its mysterious code but some instinct told her it was Archie. And he was in trouble.

"Hey!" the hotdog guy called after her.

"I'll be back," Pippa yelled as she plunged into the crowd.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nik was breathless and puffing furiously by the time he reached Archie. Unable to speak, he grabbed Archie's shoulder and spun him around.

Archie had been staring, mesmerised at the merry-go-round. He wasn't actually watching it. He was sniffing the air while trying to decide what he should eat. The sudden hand on his shoulder almost made him leap out of his skin.

"Hey!" Archie huffed, spinning round.

"The... zombies...," Nik wheezed between breaths. His face aglow.

"What?" asked Archie. "Are you sure?"

Nik nodded. "I saw one.... back there..."

Archie's head whipped from side to side. The carpark looked deserted. As quiet as a ghost ship. It was a no-man's land of nothing happening.

Then a familiar dragging sound drew his eyes to a fancy horsefloat parked on the edge of the carpark. It was the float Mrs Howe used to transport her thoroughbreds to shows. It was painted with the Howe crest and had a small bedroom in the front.

Archie kept his eyes glued to the front of the float. Waiting for the zombie to appear.

"How do we stop it?" asked Nik.

"Maybe we can tether it to something," suggested Archie.

"I guess," said Nik, unconvinced. A zombie that could walk right through a solid timber fence could surely snap any kind of restraint. But he didn't have any better ideas. So... "I'll go find something. You stand guard in case the zombie changes course."

Archie stayed rooted to the spot, staring with grim fascination as zombie Doris heaved into view. She had been having a very rotting time over the last few days. Two hooves had dropped off, leaving her to hobble along on stumps like a peg-leg pirate. Her skin had peeled off her back in huge strips, draping her knees in a skirt of leather. Shattered ribs poked through flesh as flimsy as a veil. She had so many bits missing, Archie was astounded she was still alive, let alone walking.

He felt a wave of pity. And regret. If they'd just told Dad right away...

"Will this do?" Nik asked, offering a coil of thick rope for Archie's inspection.

"It'll have to," said Archie. "Let's go."

Doris didn't complain when Archie looped a lasso over her head. Nik secured the other end to the towbar of a truck.

"That should hold it," said Archie, nodding with satisfaction.

Nik wasn't so sure.

The boys watched the zombie plod forward. It reached the end of its tether. The rope became taut, anchoring the zombie in place. Its hooves scraped across the ground in a zombie moonwalk.

"See," Archie said through a grin.

One of the zombie's hooves dug deeper into the ground. Finding traction, it heaved itself forward.

As the rope bit deeply into the skin of Doris' neck, Nik groaned in pity. Instinct threw his hands out. He so wanted to cut the rope or loosen its hangman grip. But he forced himself to watch, helpless.

Archie's grin had faded, too. It was hard to watch the zombie's deathly desperation. Even for a country boy.

The zombie heaved again.

The boys gasped. The truck was moving!

Pippa suddenly appeared beside the merry-go-round. She took in the scene in a flash. Leaping over the rope fence, she raced to the truck and stepped up onto the towbar.

The zombie heaved once more. The rope slicing deeply into its neck. Black liquid oozed from the wound. Then -

*SNAP!!*

They heard the zombie's spine crack. Then the guillotine rope did the rest. The zombie's head flopped backwards, then toppled to the ground. But its body didn't stop. Free from the tether, it half plodded, half stumbled forward. Heading straight for the merry-go-round.

The young children riding the merry-go-round saw the zombie's headless torso heading towards them. Not knowing what it was, they weren't scared. They pointed and laughed each time it swung into view. Coming closer. And closer.

The zombie didn't falter. It stumbled into the merry-go-round. Kicking and clawing at the ride's revolving base, it tried to clamber onboard.

It toppled forward.

Pippa's hands flew to her eyes as one of the circling steel ponies sliced through the zombie, then sent the two pulped halves skidding onto the grass.

The kids approached the carnage with caution.

There was no flicker or twitch of life. There was no blood, either. Just shattered fragments of mummified flesh and a patch of grass stained black.

"It's dead all right," said Archie.

They stood around the remains, heads bowed. The zombie had once been a pony. Their pony. Doris. Now it was dead. It deserved respect.

With a sudden gasp, Nick jerked upright. "Mia!"

It sent a jolt of electricity through the twins.

Doris was dead.

But where was Tinkerbell?

\* \* \* \* \*

The costumed ponies circled the show ring to rapturous applause. Slow enough so zombie Tinkerbell managed to keep up. Just. Despite the fact her legs were starting to drag heavily.

Mia wished the other ponies would walk a little faster. Each time Tinkerbell caught up with the pony ahead, she lunged forward to bite its rear.

Each time Mia tugged and fought the reins, pulling the zombie's head wide of its target.

Tinkerbell's lunges were getting more desperate with each circuit. As though some dark zombie instinct knew her time was running out. She was determined to make another zombie before it did.

Mia could feel the zombie getting weaker. Its body trembled with every step. She half-expected it to collapse any moment.

Yet somehow it kept plodding ahead.

Finally the ponies halted, forming a line before the judges.

Mia gripped the reins with all her strength. She hoped it would be enough to keep Tinkerbell from another assault.

The zombie shuffled into line beside the others, then shuddered to a halt. Its final breath escaped in a rasping sigh.

Mia tensed. Maybe it was a trick. A trap.

The zombie didn't move. It stared ahead, lifeless as a statue.

The three judges strolled along the line of ponies, scrawling notes on their clipboards.



Mia chewed her lip, wondering what to do. Or say. As the judges approached.

"A very impressive makeup job," a tall, wispy man with slicked back hair chuckled. "How'd you get it looking so... dead?"

He strolled around Tinkerbell, gently prodding and poking her.

"Look at this wound," an older woman with blue hair chirped, running a hand over the zombie bite. "So life-like."

"A shame you didn't go to more effort on your own costume, young lady," a heavily made-up woman wearing a mayoral sash and a fancy hat tut-tutted. "What are you actually supposed to be?"

Mia shrugged.

The tall man returned to the other judges. "Sterling effort," he said, offering Mia a grin. "Outstanding."

Mia replied with a smirk. If only they knew...

"A shame about her costume, though. Don't you think?" the mayor said with pursed lips. "And you should really be wearing a helmet."

"But look at her pony," the man said, circling the zombie again. "Every inch is a work of art. If I didn't know better I'd be totally convinced it's a real zombie pony."

Chuckling, he slapped Tinkerbell's bloated belly.

"Could lose a bit of weight there, old girl," he said.

Mia felt something rumbling deep inside the pony.

"I wouldn't do that if I was you," she said.

"Nonsense," the judge said, giving Tinkerbell's belly another hefty pat.

"She doesn't mind. Do you, girl?"

The rumbling was getting stronger.

"Seriously, I wouldn't do that," Mia repeated.

The judge wasn't listening. He was too busy chatting to the other judges, while his hand slapped Tinkerbell's belly again. And again.

As the rumble became an earthquake, Mia leapt off. She fled across the ring, leaving the judges gaping in her wake.

"My goodness," the mayor said. "How..."

The zombie exploded in a geyser of milky liquid and maggots.

Spluttering, swearing and retching, the drenched judges scurried away.

Fifteen hands flew to cover fifteen contestants' noses. But the smell quickly soaked through the fleshy veils, turning faces green.

The startled ponies scattered and reared away. Cinderella got tossed off. She landed with a painful thud on her backside and began to wail. The knight vomited down his pony's flank as it cantered away.

The ring erupted in ponymonium.

The crowd cheered, imagining it was all part of a funny play.

While the remains of zombie Tinkerbell sagged in the grass like a burst waterbomb.

## Chapter Fifteen - Good grief

Mia didn't stop running until a hand hooked her shoulder.

"Hey!" Pippa said, spinning her around.

At the sight of Mia's face, streaming with tears, Nik draped a brotherly arm around her shoulder.

"What's wrong?" Nik asked gently.

"It's Tinkerbell," Mia sniffed. "She's... she's..."

"Dead?" Archie suggested unhelpfully.

Mia buried her face in her hands as her tears became a torrent.

"Technically..." Nik began.

"Yeah, yeah, we know," snorted Pippa, trying hard not to cry. "She was already dead. But she was still Tinkerbell."

"I know," said Nik. "Sorry."

Between sobs, Mia told them what had happened.

"Gosh," said Archie. "That's even worse than what happened to Doris."

Pippa glared at her brother. Sometimes...

"How... how did Doris... how did she... die?" Mia sniffed.

Nik calmly recounted their adventure. Archie kept interrupting to add gruesome details to his story - much to Pippa's annoyance.

When his story ended, they stood in a circle of silence. Each in their own thoughts. Grief and relief swirling in a weird cocktail of emotions.

"So I guess it's all over then," said Archie, unable to disguise his disappointment. "Now what?"

Pippa shrugged. "I guess we try to enjoy the gymkhana."

"I don't know about anyone else," said Nik. "But I'm starving."

"Me too," said Archie. "I'm so hungry I could eat a horse."

"I wouldn't say that too loudly around here," said Pippa with a grin.

"C'mon, I've got a couple of hotdogs getting cold."

\* \* \* \* \*

While the gymkhana carried on, organisers held an emergency meeting in the Clubhouse to discuss events. But after half an hour of confused debate, they decided they couldn't decide anything. Nobody had witnessed the drama behind the merry-go-round. And those who had been at the pony parade couldn't agree on what they'd actually seen.

The burly clipboard man couldn't shed any light on the matter. Fifteen ponies had been entered in the parade. All had been accounted for. There was no official zombie entry. And nobody recognised the rider of mystery pony number sixteen.

The volunteer fire brigade whisked away the pony remains and hosed down the crime scenes. The local policeman was called to inspect the corpses. It was clear the ponies had been dead a while. They were little more than worn skin and brittle bones. Which left little hope of identifying the owners.

In the end they agreed it must have been some sophisticated holiday prank cooked up by bored high school students. Many questions remained. Like how did they manage to smuggle in the dead ponies? How did they make the dead ponies move? And how did they all escape unseen?

But such questions were perhaps better left unanswered.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was just before five o'clock when the kids sauntered to the carpark. When they saw Dad and Stella standing beside the ute, arms folded across their chests, they swapped nervous glances. This didn't look good.

Prue was fast asleep on the front seat.

"So," said Dad, watching them through narrowed eyes. "Who's going to tell me what's been happening?"

Four mouths swung open like whales sifting plankton. Then closed again.

There was clearly no use in lying.

"Well," said Pippa, glancing at the others. They nodded encouragement.

"It all started just before Nik and Mia arrived..."

Pippa's story unwound like tangled barbed wire. Occasionally she paused to allow one of the others to contribute a detail. Several times Dad's mouth opened, then closed again, question unasked. Stella's frown deepened with each detail, especially those relating to her children's part in the adventure.

When the story ended, the kids stared at their parents. They expected a flood of questions, accusations and reprimands. Did they believe the story? Were they angry or relieved?

Dad and Stella considered them in silence.

The kids shuffled nervously in place as the silence extended.

"So?" asked Archie, unable to bear the suspense.

Dad slowly nodded. "Well, that certainly clears up a few things."

The kids gawped in surprise.

"I happened to go to the stables a few mornings ago," Stella explained.

"Prue wanted to show me Doris and Tinkerbell..."

"You didn't really think you could keep two missing ponies and a broken stable door secret for long, did you?" asked Dad.

"But why..." Pippa began, bewildered.

"Why didn't I ask you about it right away?" said Dad.

Pippa could only nod.

"Well, I... I mean we... thought you were all old enough to take responsibility for your actions," said Dad. "We knew something had happened."



But it was your call whether to tell us or deal with it yourselves. That's what growing up is all about."

"You should have told us sooner," said Stella.

"We wanted to," said Archie. "But, you know..."

"We thought you wouldn't believe us," said Pippa.

Dad gave her a stern look. "I'll always believe you, Pip. No matter what. And I'll always be there for you. For all of you. Try to remember that next time." His face split into a massive bearded grin. "Right, let's get home. I reckon I've got a few loose ends to tie up before dinner."

\* \* \* \* \*

After dropping them back home, Dad took off again. He didn't say where he was going, but the twins thought they had a good idea. Dad returned in time for dinner. A smug smile just visible beneath his beard.

"What did you tell the police?" Pippa asked excitedly.

"Do they want to talk to us?" asked Nik.

"Are we in trouble?" asked Archie,

"When are they going to arrest Mister Howe?" said Pippa.

The questions made Dad squirm.

"Shhh," said Stella. "Let your dad speak."

"I didn't go to the police," Dad admitted, blushing slightly. "I went to see Jack Howe."

"But...," Pippa was almost too bewildered to speak. "But he'll just cover everything up!"

Dad shook his head. "No he won't. On the way to his place I detoured to that dump you told me about and picked up some evidence. Besides, you can't hide stuff like that. It's easy enough to test the soil."

"But what about Tinkerbelle and Doris?" Mia piped up. "And the other poor ponies?"

"Yeah," said Pippa. "Someone's got to be held responsible. Isn't that what you always tell us?"

Dad squirmed as though a spider had dropped down his shirt.

"Things aren't always that simple," said Dad. "Look, Mister Howe has agreed to clear up that dump and dispose of those nasty chemicals... properly this time. So nothing like this can ever happen again. It's going to cost him a packet, I can tell you." Dad paused to let the news sink in. "He's agreed not to hassle me about that fence anymore, either. So it's win-win. For all of us."

The four kids stared in disbelief. And disappointment.

"I know it's not a perfect solution," Dad continued more firmly. "But, well, that's just how it is. End of conversation. Now somebody pass the salt."

\* \* \* \* \*

The kids were too tired to talk. And zombie video games seemed suddenly boringly fake, now they'd seen the real thing. So they hung out on the couches on the back porch, watching the sun set.

The world felt different somehow. More complicated. But also somehow more exciting. Chasing zombies had certainly made these holidays memorable.

Pippa dragged her attention from the sun and considered the others with new eyes. They felt like a family now. Better than family even. Like best friends. It was funny how quickly adventures brought people closer.

She was surprised to see Archie smiling to himself.

"What's so funny, Arch?" Pippa asked, studying her brother with suspicion.

"Nothing," said Archie with a grin. When his evasion drew the others' attention, he chuckled. "I was just thinking for the first time ever I'm kinda looking forward to going back to school. First thing Mrs Gilchrist always does is gets us to write a story about what we did over the holidays."

He paused as smiles began spreading across the others' faces.

"I can't wait for her to read mine."