

CLARE
BALDING



The Racehorse
Who Wouldn't Gallop

Illustrated by TONY ROSS



PUFFIN

The Folly Farm family



Charlie



Mrs Bass



Mr Bass



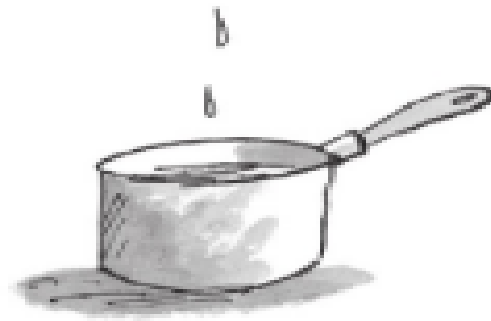
Harry



Larry



Joe



Chapter 1

Charlie Bass woke early, partly because her window didn't have any curtains and partly because Boris the Border terrier was licking her face.

Boris wasn't technically allowed to sleep on Charlie's bed. He spent every evening curled up neatly on an old blanket in the corner of her room, not far from the saucepan that collected the drips that found their way through the roof when it rained. But every night, as her mother closed the

door after kissing Charlie goodnight, Boris slipped off the blanket, silently jumped up on to the bed and curled neatly into the curve of Charlie's body where he stayed until it was time to give Charlie her morning wash.

'Boris, get off!' said Charlie, playfully pushing his head away.

Boris just wagged his tail as if she'd said, 'Oh, Boris, you *are* brilliant!'

Sitting up in bed, Charlie stared out of the window, trying to remember the details of her dream. She had been riding again, so fast it had made her eyes stream. In the clouds, she imagined she could see the shapes of horses, a whole herd of wild grey ponies from the Camargue, galloping on a beach in France.

The walls of Charlie's bedroom were papered with posters of horses: the Olympic gold-medal-winning dressage horse Valegro dancing on the spot, the showjumper Hello Sanctos clearing an impossibly high wall and a big grey event horse stretching over the Vicarage Vee at Badminton.

Above her rickety chest of drawers (which had a couple of knobs missing and one stuck on with chewing gum) was a picture of a palomino pony from a calendar she had been given for Christmas two years earlier. Charlie didn't know its name or where it came from, but she looked at it every day and imagined owning a pony like that. A pony she could call her own. A pony she could build a partnership and a relationship with. A pony only she would understand and who, given time, would understand her too.

Charlie knew that she could be a top-class rider if she was given the chance, but so far she had only ever ridden a cow. Her dad told her it was the same thing, but she knew that it wasn't. Charlie couldn't imagine a life that wasn't surrounded by cows and chickens and pigs and large muddy fields. Her family lived on a farm at the end of a long and bumpy drive in the middle of nowhere. They were five miles from the nearest village, twenty miles from the nearest town and it was so dark at night that the stars were bright and clear.



Boris licked her again and Charlie ruffled his head, sniffing. He had clearly been rolling in the muck heap again.

‘Come on, Boris, you stinky boy, let’s get going,’ she said. ‘We’ve got eggs to find and pigs to feed.’

Charlie had been christened Charlotte Elizabeth Bass, but her father thought that sounded a bit formal, so had called her Charlie from day one. Along with her older brothers, Harry and Larry, Charlie worked on the farm before and after she went to school.

Charlie’s mother Caroline was copy-editor for a major publishing firm. It meant that she read the first drafts of non-fiction books, checking them for spelling, grammar and factual errors. She read at least a book a day, sometimes two, and was a mine of information on subjects from bee-keeping to Buddhism, trees to trampolines, ancient mythology to modern art.

She had fallen in love with Charlie’s dad, Bill Bass, at the Three Counties Show, where he was

showing a cow. It didn't win the main prize (in fact, it came last), but, when Charlie's mum went to commiserate with him afterwards, she was bowled over by his charm.

'I realized it was your dad who should've won first prize. He was gorgeous,' Charlie's mum had told her once.

Charlie's dad worked every hour that the sun was up – and some hours when it wasn't. He milked the cows at 5 a.m. and again at 5 p.m. every day of the year. They had to be milked in a particular order because cows are very keen on routine and all have individual personalities and quirks. Bill liked to talk to them as he attached them to the milking machine, addressing them by their names. He had chosen simple, easy-to-remember names, while his wife had called several after characters from books. Charlie and her brothers had thrown in a few celebrities for good measure, which meant that the herd was quite a mix . . .

So Princess Anne was milked first every morning, followed by Windy Bottom, Creamy and Hermione

Granger. Madonna waited patiently for her turn towards the end, while Jane Eyre and Moll Flanders always produced huge quantities of milk.

Harry and Larry were supposed to help out with the milking, but they weren't very good, so Mrs Bass had persuaded her husband to employ a teenager called Joe. He had come to the area when his father, a well-known jockey, had died after a bad fall. The Basses had welcomed him with open arms, and they soon discovered Joe was a very hard worker. He had quickly become like one of the family.

Charlie spotted him through the kitchen window as he stepped out of the milking shed for a breath of fresh air, and hurried over to him with a cup of tea.

'Oh, that's just what I need. Thanks, Charlie,' said Joe. He seemed relieved to see her.

Charlie slipped her arms round his waist and gave him a hug.

'Joe . . . I know it's the anniversary of your dad's accident today. Mum says to tell you that she's

made your favourite breakfast and you're to come in as soon as the milking's finished.'

Joe looked down at Charlie and blinked hard. She knew what to say and exactly how to say it.

'Thanks, Charlie, and say thanks to your mum too. We'll be there in ten minutes. We've only got Nancy Drew and Taylor Swift left to do.'

'So what was the best horse you ever saw?' asked Charlie as the family tucked into a full English breakfast at the kitchen table. Her mum wasn't the best cook, but what she lacked in technique she made up for with enthusiasm.

'Well, it was when my dad was working in Newmarket,' replied Joe, carefully cutting off the burnt bits from his sausage. 'There was a horse called Lightning Bolt who was so fast they had to use two other horses to stay with him on the gallops. One to lead him for the first half and another one to jump in halfway and lead him for the last four furlongs because nothing was quick enough to stay with him for the whole mile.'

Charlie loved to talk about horses with Joe. He hadn't ridden since his dad had died, but he had lived close to the huge yard in Newmarket where his father had been Head Lad, the trainer's second in command.

After incessant begging, Joe had helped Charlie learn to ride on a very forgiving dairy cow called Ermintrude. It's not easy to ride a cow, particularly without a saddle or a bridle, but Charlie had natural balance and strong legs so she could stay on for hours. Joe was impressed.

'Right, that's enough about horses,' said Charlie's mum. 'Time for school.'

'Muumm,' moaned Charlie. 'Do I have to go?'

'You need a proper education,' Mrs Bass replied as she poured fresh milk into a chipped mug and pushed it across the kitchen table.

'What for? There aren't any exams that will help me do what I want to do.'

'Even professional riders have passed their exams,' said Mrs Bass. 'And, if you get good grades, we could see about finding you a pony to ride.'

Charlie grinned. 'All right then.'

This wasn't the first time her mum had mentioned getting a pony, and the vague promise was normally enough to get Charlie to school. But deep down she knew that it didn't matter how many exams she took, or whether she passed or failed them. A pony cost money to buy and money to keep and, unless they won the lottery, her parents did not have any money to spare. Charlie might not have been much good at maths, but these were sums she could do with her eyes closed.

The school bus stop was at the top of the rutted, muddy lane that led to Folly Farm, and Harry and Larry pushed and shoved each other all the way down it, kicking a pebble between them and fighting to be Harry Kane making his debut for England. At the end of the lane, Larry booted the stone towards Charlie, who ignored it.

'Come on, Thunder Thighs!' shouted Harry to Charlie. 'You should be good at this.'

'Yeah,' taunted Larry. 'With legs like yours, you could be a good footballer.'

'Or a rugby player.'

'Or a tree.'

The boys bent over in hysterical laughter.

'You remember when we put her in goal when she was a toddler?' asked Harry. 'She wasn't too bad until you hit her in the face with a deadly strike. That made her cry.'

'Yeah,' said Larry. 'Then Dad had to put that old riding hat on her head to protect her. Mind you, she saved a few shots with those big legs. I suppose you were better than nothing, Charlie!'

Charlie's cheeks burned as she tried to block her brothers out. She always wanted to join in their games but they told her she couldn't because she was a girl. She held her satchel tightly, hoping nobody would notice what was in it.

'Morning, Harry; morning, Larry!' said Mrs Wheeler as the bus pulled up. 'Morning, Charlie my love. How are you today?'

'I'm fine, thank you, Mrs Wheeler,' replied Charlie, trying to slip by quickly.

'Now, that bag of yours is moving, isn't it?' said

Mrs Wheeler gently. 'Who have we got today – is it newborn chicks or ducklings, or is it Boris again?'

Charlie reluctantly opened her satchel to reveal Boris's sweet black-and-tan face.

'Mrs Wheeler, please let me take him to school. He'll sit under my desk and he won't move and I promise you he'll be really good and we've got double maths and he's really good at numbers. *PLEEEASE!*'

Mrs Wheeler smiled. She liked Charlie and she had a soft spot for Border terriers, but she also knew the rules.

'Sorry, love, you know you can't take him to school, especially not smelling like that. Now send him home, there's a good girl.'

Charlie kissed Boris on top of his head, lifted him out of her satchel and set him down on the ground.

'Go on then, go home and I'll see you later.'

With a friendly bark, Boris bounded off down the path back to the farm.

Charlie sighed. 'Right, well, I suppose I'd better get it over with . . .'

*

Charlie was in Year Six, at the primary school beside the 'big school' her brothers attended. As soon as the bus stopped, she ran off to find her best friend Polly. They spent their first lesson of the day – history – drawing pictures of horses and, when the teacher asked them to explain what they were doing, Charlie said, 'Horses were invaluable in every war until tanks came along, Mr Dawson. I was just explaining to Polly the different sizes of horse and how they were used for different jobs. This one is jumping over a trench. See?'

She pointed at a drawing of a horse clearing a ditch, hoping Mr Dawson wouldn't notice it was clearly being ridden by a girl and that she was not in uniform.

'Ah, yes,' said Mr Dawson. 'Very good, Charlie. But if you could concentrate on the subject we're studying today, which is the Black Death, that would be lovely.'

Charlie sighed. History might have been more interesting if they could study the use of horses in medieval England and whether they were immune

to the Black Death, but just talking about humans all the time was *so* dull.

When the bell rang, Charlie headed out into the playground. She normally kept to herself at break time. Apart from Polly, the other girls were scary. They all had long hair, which they played with incessantly, wrapping it round their fingers, putting it up and pulling it down, tying it sideways, backwards and on top of their heads. They all talked about music and boys and clothes and things that Charlie didn't really understand. And they teased her. A lot.

'Here she comes, the girl who looks like a cow!' shouted Vanessa Veasey.

The group around her started laughing.

'She smells like one too!' said Serena Tucker. The rest of the girls fell about laughing.

'And look at her hair,' added Vanessa spitefully. 'What do you call that style?'

Charlie ran her hands through her short blonde hair and tried to make it look less like her mother had put a bowl on her head and cut round it – which was exactly what she had done at the weekend.

'Just ignore them,' said Polly, taking Charlie's arm and leading her to the other side of the playground. 'I think your hair is cool. You look like Rita Ora.'

Charlie didn't know who Rita Ora was, so Polly had to show her a picture on her phone. Charlie didn't have a mobile phone, which at her school was almost like not wearing clothes. Everyone else had one and they were always updating to the latest version. They all had Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp accounts, and they talked to each other using Snapchat, which Charlie always thought was odd as they could just as easily walk across the playground and have a conversation.

'I wish Larry hadn't told everyone about me learning to ride on a cow,' sighed Charlie. 'Nobody ever lets me forget it.'

'You should be proud of yourself,' replied Polly, giving Charlie a hug. 'It must be much harder than learning on a pony. You should come over to my house sometime and try riding Munchkin. I bet you'll be brilliant.'

The thought of riding a real pony cheered Charlie up for the rest of the day, until it was time to go home and take Boris for a long walk in the woods. She told him about the hateful things the girls had said and he wagged his tail sympathetically.

'I knew you'd understand, Boris,' said Charlie, scratching him behind the ears. 'I can't tell anyone else. Mum and Dad would want a meeting at the school and that would only make it worse. And if I told Harry and Larry they'd probably just join in. I know what you're saying.' She looked at his dark eyes, smiling brightly at her. 'Keep going: get through tomorrow and the next day and the day after that. Until I'm old enough to become a jockey – and then I can do what I like!'

Boris ran in a circle round her, barking his approval.

