

1

The First Day

“Why is there nobody here?” Once again, Ruby rattled the door handle, but Room A 32 was clearly locked. “Is this even the right room?”

Her Auntie Leslie frantically dug around in her bag for the letter from the school administration, which had arrived a few days ago. ((S20/Letter))

“Yes,” she gasped, breathless. “It says Room B 32.”

“B,” Ruby repeated. “Not A. We’re in the wrong part of the building.”

“Oh, bugger!” Leslie smacked her forehead with her palm. “I totally got that mixed up. Come on, we can still make it!”

She rushed off down the long hallway, Ruby racing after her into the western wing of the Bickerick Primary School, which Ruby was supposed to attend from today onwards.

The bell rang as they reached the staircase. The last few students who had still been hanging around in the corridors had disappeared, classes had started.

Although Ruby loved her aunt dearly, she could have cursed Leslie right now.

But she was even angrier at herself. She knew how chaotic Leslie was. Why hadn’t she checked the details in the welcome letter instead of relying solely on her auntie?

And that’s what she got for it: now she would be late on her very first day at the new school.

When they finally found the right classroom, they were both soaked with sweat.

After Ruby knocked on the door, Auntie Leslie quickly smoothed Ruby’s long brown hair and adjusted her school uniform – a navy blazer over a white blouse and a pleated plaid skirt.

“First impressions are crucial,” Leslie explained.

Ruby grimaced. Exactly. That’s why the least you could do was be on time on your first day. ((S12/Clock))

The door in front of them suddenly swung open. A plump woman with red apple cheeks stood on the sill.

“Well, if it isn’t our new student,” she said, beaming at Ruby. “I’m Mrs Blunt. A warm welcome to 4a!”

Being the new girl wasn’t fun. Twenty-eight pairs of eyes stared at Ruby as Mrs Blunt introduced her.

Auntie Leslie had slipped away at once, but not before explaining to the teacher that it was her fault they were late.

“Ruby is from Berlin and has only just moved to Cornwall,” Mrs Blunt was saying now. “Luckily, she already speaks English. Your mum is English, isn’t she, Ruby?”

“That’s right.” Ruby’s voice sounded thin and wobbly because she was nervous and still out of breath. “I’m sorry I was late.”

That would never have happened to her mum. Laura Finnegan was the exact opposite of her chaotic sister. She was determined, reliable and always on time. Unfortunately, today of all days, she had a job interview at a bank in Plymouth and couldn’t come with Ruby on her first day of school. That’s why Leslie had stepped in, but she had already been late to pick Ruby up this morning. And then they had hurried to the wrong room on top of that.

“Not a problem at all,” Mrs Blunt said. “It’s always hard to get your bearings on your first day.”

Ruby was assigned a seat in the first row, next to a girl with short blond hair and round glasses.

“Amanda will show you everything,” Mrs Blunt promised. “And of course you can always ask me as well.”

She taught English and following her was quite difficult. There were so many words and technical terms that Ruby wasn’t familiar with, although she had always spoken English with her mother. When the bell finally rang for the break, Ruby’s head spun with the effort.

“Come on, let’s go outside,” Amanda said. “Then you can meet the others, too.”

In the schoolyard, everyone crowded around Ruby, looking at her as curiously as if she were Amanda’s new dog. At least nobody was trying to pet her.

“Why did you move to Bickerick?” a red-haired boy named Simon, whose face was covered with freckles, wanted to know. “Berlin is a lot cooler than this place. We went there last summer, it was awesome!”

What was Ruby supposed to say? Of course Berlin was cool. But it was also much noisier and busier than Cornwall. Ruby had been excited instantly when her mother suggested moving to the small town where her Auntie Leslie had a café and where Ruby’s grandparents lived as well. They had always spent the summer holidays here together. Ruby loved Cornwall – the green hills, the open fields and the ocean that was only a stone’s throw from Bickerick. ((S5 + possibly other scattered ocean vignettes))

Four weeks ago, her mother had bought a small house on the edge of town. The tradespeople should have been done renovating it by now, but because Auntie Leslie had organised the whole thing, naturally nothing was finished.

Laura had thrown her hands up in horror when she and Ruby had arrived last Thursday. There was so much still to be done! No matter, now they were here and it would all work out somehow.

“Don’t you miss your old friends?” Madeleine asked. She sat one row ahead of Ruby and Amanda in the classroom, had a jolly round face and wore heart-shaped silver earrings.

Ruby shrugged. What sort of question was that? Of course she missed her friends, most of all Leonie and Cara. And she had better not even think about the riding stables. Although – that sparked a thought.

“Can anyone tell me where I can go horse riding around here?” she asked.

In Berlin, Ruby had spent every free minute at the riding stables. She had been riding since she was six and already had her Class 4 Riding Badge. ((Illu 5/Badge)) Her mother had promised that she would be allowed to ride in England as well.

“Of course we know a riding stable!” Amanda exclaimed.

“The best ever!” Simon added. “The Ocean Ranch.”

“We all go there,” Madeleine said.

“Well, not quite,” another girl chimed in.

Ruby had already noticed her in the classroom earlier because she was so pretty. Her large, dark brown eyes contrasted strangely with her light-coloured hair that she wore loosely tied back. A few strands of hair were curling down onto her forehead.

“True.” Amanda pushed up her glasses with her index finger. “But then you’re a special case, Grace.”

“Why?” Ruby asked.

“Grace is a pro,” Amanda explained. “She’s already riding tournaments.”

“Really?” Interested, Ruby looked at her classmate. If she had stayed in Berlin, she would have participated in her first tournament in the fall as well. “And where do you ride?”

“At Hegarty’s.” Grace wasn’t looking at Ruby, instead staring past her shoulder so that Ruby couldn’t help turn her head. But there was no one there. “That’s a riding stable as well. But for pros, you know.”

“You’re better off with us at the Ocean Ranch, Ruby,” Simon said. His ears were protruding quite a bit, she only noticed now. “You live in Bickerick, too, don’t you? The riding stables are up on the cliffs, very close to town.”

“Sure, go for it,” Grace said. “If all you want to do is hop around a bit. But if you actually want to learn anything ...”

She interrupted herself because the school bell was ringing now. Break was over. Grace threw back her head, turned on her heel and simply walked away.

“They’re all soooo conceited at Hegarty’s.” Simon wrinkled his freckled nose. “Don’t go there. The Ocean Ranch is much better.”

Next up was maths. Ruby actually really liked the subject, but she had huge trouble focusing on the lesson, and this time it wasn’t the new English words at fault. She couldn’t help but think about the two riding stables the entire time. Hegarty’s. And the Ocean Ranch.

Ruby definitely didn’t want to just hop around, as Grace had called it. Her former riding instructor, Ms Hilchenbach, had been really strict, not tolerating the slightest mistake. And that was a good thing, otherwise you got into lazy habits you’d never be able to shed later on. Hegarty’s apparently shared the sentiment. Unfortunately, Grace seemed to be pretty snobbish. Would Ruby be able to be friends with her?

“Ruby?” The maths teacher’s voice interrupted her thoughts. “Do you perhaps know what the solution is?”

Startled, Ruby looked at the blackboard. Luckily, the problem Mr Sinclair had written on it was really easy.

“35,” she said.

“That’s correct.” Mr Sinclair nodded, satisfied. “And I was afraid you hadn’t been paying attention.”

It had still been raining around midday, but the sun came out just in time for school to end, shining into the classroom through the rather dirty windows.

Auntie Leslie had promised to pick Ruby up from school. However, she was nowhere to be found, neither in the hallway nor in the entrance hall. She'd probably forgotten about it, as usual.

Ruby pulled her mobile phone from her bag and saw that the battery was empty. Well, great. Looked like she would have to wait. Even though it was ridiculous, since it would take her no more than fifteen minutes to walk home on foot. The path went straight across the fields.

Ten minutes later, Leslie still hadn't showed and Ruby was tired of waiting. She would simply leave, she decided. She could always call her aunt on the landline once she got home.

2

Sponge Cake

There was no place in the whole wide world more beautiful than Cornwall.

The meadows were so lush and green you couldn't help but envy the cows standing around in them, ruminating. Little white cream clouds drifted across the blue sky and the air smelled enticingly salty, like the ocean.

It was really silly that Auntie Leslie was picking her up. Ruby had only been walking for a few minutes and could already see the old elm trees behind which her house was located. Tomorrow, she would definitely ride her bicycle to school.

Behind her, she suddenly heard the patter of hooves. Two riders were charging down a hill at full gallop. Riding the first horse was a man with a beard, his dark hair tied into a top knot. He was followed by a young blond woman on a black Quarter Horse. They were now crossing the path and flying off across the wide field.

Ruby looked longingly after them until they had disappeared behind a broad rise.

The riders had come from the cliffs and that was where the Ocean Ranch was – or so Simon had said this morning. Perhaps you could even see the riding stables from the crest of the hill. Maybe she should take a quick look?

Ruby glanced at her watch. It was just after half past three now, still pretty early. She would be long home by the time someone started to miss her.

Ruby gasped when she reached the top of the rise. Not just because she was out of breath. The view was simply breathtaking.

In front of her lay the cliffs, rugged and white. And behind them stretched the sea. ((S11 + S2 + potentially some other suitable scattered ocean vignettes)) It was turquoise and glittered in the sun as if this wasn't England but the South Pacific.

On top of the cliffs stood a house of thick grey stone with a crooked thatched roof. A few wooden buildings were grouped around it, one of them long and flat. And directly next to it was a large paddock on which a handful of horses were grazing.

Originally, Ruby had planned to turn right around, but there was no way now. She had to take a closer look. She raced along the meandering farm track, crossing an ancient stone bridge under which a stream burred, then it was uphill again, pretty steeply. When she reached the buildings, she was truly out of breath.

There was nobody around except for a lot of animals. In the middle of the yard, a huge German shepherd lay in the sun. Ruby wasn't usually afraid of dogs but this one looked really dangerous. Its head was almost as big as a cow's.

Admittedly, it made no move to attack her. Its eyes were closed and it didn't even seem to notice her.

On a strip of grass in front of the barn, chickens and a few geese were pecking. ((Illu 2/Peacock)) A peacock with a dishevelled tail strutted past the sleeping dog and rabbits were nibbling in an open enclosure next to the stables.

Just now, a cat was strolling across the corner of the building into the yard. Or rather, it was limping into the yard. It only had three legs.

A door stood open in the long wooden building. Ruby kept an eye on the German shepherd as she moved slowly towards it. However, the dog paid as little attention to her as it had to the other animals.

Hmm, now she could detect the aromatic smell of horses. The best smell ever.

"Ruby! Full on! I didn't think we'd see you here today!"

Simon came out of the stable pushing a wheelbarrow filled with wet bedding. He was beaming all over his freckled face.

"Hi. That ... uh ... I didn't plan to," Ruby stammered. "I saw two people on horseback and wanted to see where they came from."

"That was Patrice and Kelly, they went down to the beach," Simon said. "They own these riding stables."

"Hello!" Now another boy was stepping from the stable. He was a bit taller than Simon and really good-looking. His dark hair fell softly onto his forehead, gleaming almost blue in the bright sunshine. And he had the blackest eyes Ruby had ever seen.

The boy wore jeans, a T-shirt and rubber boots, the same as Simon. Ruby, on the other hand, was still in her stupid school uniform. At least she had taken off her tie earlier and put it into her backpack.

"This is Amir," Simon said. "He's also at our school. But he's a year ahead of us."

"And what's your name?" Amir asked.

"Ruby."

"Ruby is from Berlin," Simon explained. "She only just moved to Bickerick. And she wants to ride. Don't you, Ruby?"

"Exactly." Ruby nodded.

"Then you'll have to come back tomorrow," Amir said.

“That’s right,” Simon said. “Riding lessons are Tuesdays at four.”

“What do you mean – riding lessons?” Ruby asked.

“Well, that’s when we ride the horses,” Simon said, a little confused. “Amanda and Madeleine will be there as well. Would you like me to show you the riding stables?”

Ruby looked at her watch. Quarter past four, so late already! ((Illu 12/Watch))

“Let’s do that tomorrow,” she said. “I really need to get home.”

Before Ruby could unlock the front door, it was flung open from inside.

“Ruby!” Laura Finnegan was completely frantic, that much was immediately obvious. Her face was very pale, only her cheeks glowed red. “Where were you?”

„I ... uh ... Leslie forgot to pick me up. So I walked home.”

“School ended at three. It’s now half past four!” Her mother ran her hands through her blond hair. “I tried to meet you on the farm track and couldn’t find you anywhere.”

“I took a little detour to a riding stable,” Ruby whispered.

“You went to a riding stable?” Laura stared at Ruby in disbelief, as if she had admitted to having been to the moon just now. “Without letting me know? Are you insane, Ruby? I was this close to calling the police!”

“What’s that about the police?” To Ruby’s relief, Auntie Leslie was now hurrying from the house.

“Nothing,” Ruby said. “I’m back now.”

“Whew, I’m glad!” Leslie pulled her niece towards her and gave her a hug.

Ruby’s mother wasn’t as easily appeased. “Honestly, Ruby, I could ...”

“Calm down, Laura,” Leslie said. “It was all my fault. And luckily nothing happened.”

“Except me almost going crazy,” Laura sniffed angrily.

“I suggest we go inside,” Leslie said. “We’re having sponge cake that Granny specially made for us. How was school, Ruby? Were they nice to you or do I need to smack someone?”

Ruby laughed. “No, all good.”

“That’s good to hear.” Leslie put an arm around her, pulling her towards the kitchen.

“And you, Mum?” Ruby asked over her shoulder. “How was your job interview?”

“Alright.” Laura sounded a bit calmer now. “I think they’ll take me.”

In Berlin, Ruby and her mother had lived in a trendy new-built apartment. The small house in Cornwall was the exact opposite: it was over a hundred years old, the shutters rattled, the wooden floors creaked, the stairs were worn and all the walls were sloping. But it was super cosy.

At the moment, however, chaos reigned supreme. Moving boxes were piling up in the kitchen, next to them paint buckets, rolls of paper and a ladder. One wall had already been painted yellow, the other still featuring remnants of wallpaper.

While Leslie put the kettle on the stove, Laura opened one of the moving boxes and took out three plates. “They wanted me at the bank straight away, but I want to start next month at the earliest. There’s still a lot of work to do here.” She threw her sister a reproachful look because it had been Leslie’s job to organise the renovations. But Ruby’s aunt didn’t even notice.

Laura and Leslie looked very similar – they were both tall and slim, with bright blue eyes and blond hair. However, Laura always wore hers pinned up while Leslie’s curls were flying every which way.

The two sisters dressed very differently, too. Laura loved elegant clothes, while Leslie favoured colourful skirts, long dresses and crazy hats.

Both sisters had been born in Bickerick and grown up here but then Laura had moved to Germany for university where she had met Ruby’s father, Tom. However, she had never married him. Tom was a guitarist and had been touring the world with a rock band for years now.

He and Ruby often skyped and when he had a bit of money, he sent her wacky gifts. Most recently, she had received pyjamas with a skull print. Very cool, but too bad you could only wear them at night.

“I couldn’t even imagine working in a bank,” Leslie declared, spooning loose fruit infusion into a big-bellied teapot. ((Illu 8/Teapot)) “But we can’t all do the same thing or the world would be really boring.”

She herself had tried out at least ten different occupations before opening a jazz café in Bickerick that was going surprisingly well.

“But now you, Ruby.” Leslie poured the water over the fruit infusion. “What are your new classmates like?”

“They’re great,” Ruby said. “There’s a lot of kids doing horse riding in my class.” She threw a furtive glance at her mother who was simultaneously pulling the corners of her mouth down and her brows up. “Do you know the Ocean Ranch?” she asked Leslie.

“Of course.” Leslie poured the tea, adding milk to her mug even though it was fruit infusion. She really had strange taste. ((S1/Mug)) “But I’ve never been there.”

“The owners are Kelly and Patrice,” Ruby said while Laura distributed Granny’s sponge cake onto the plates. ((Illu 7/Cake)) The thick, soft cake base was filled with cream and decorated with cherries. Yum!

“I know,” Leslie said. “The two of them often come to the café. They’re from Canada. Patrice Dufresne used to be a very successful competition rider.”

“Used to be?” Ruby asked. The man she had seen on the horse had been no older than thirty at most. “Is he old?”

“No, he’s quite a bit younger than me.”

“So why doesn’t he ride tournaments anymore?”

“No idea. Maybe he doesn’t feel like it anymore.” Leslie shoved a piece of cake into her mouth. “His girlfriend is an equine therapist, by the way,” she explained, mouth full.

“What on earth is that?” Ruby wanted to know.

“Equine therapists bring people into contact with horses to help them with various issues. Kelly specialises in children.”

“And Patrice now works as a riding instructor?” Laura enquired.

Ruby had already polished off her first piece of cake and took a second one. Grandma’s sponge cake simply tasted too good. And Ruby was really hungry, the food at the school canteen having been pretty average.

“He only gives lessons on the side,” Leslie explained. “He mostly works as a horse whisperer.”

“A horse whisperer?” Ruby’s mum repeated. “You mean he talks to horses? And that’s a proper job?”

“He basically does the same thing as Kelly,” Leslie said. “Except with horses instead of children. He gets distressed animals to trust humans again.”

“By whinnying to them?” Laura asked sceptically. “And you can make a living that way?”

“Well, he obviously does,” Leslie responded. “But I can’t tell you how much he makes. You’ll have to ask him yourself.”

“He’ll be at the riding stables tomorrow at four,” Ruby said. “That’s when the riding lessons are held.”

“The tilters are coming tomorrow at four.” Laura put a third slice of cake on Ruby’s plate because the second one had also disappeared by now. “I can’t.”

“I’m perfectly fine going by myself,” Ruby said. “There’ll be a few kids from my class there as well.”

“Yeah, but I’d actually like to come along for the first lesson and have a look at this guy,” Laura declared.

“Patrice is alright,” Leslie said. “You don’t need to worry. But if you like, I can go with Ruby. I’ll use the opportunity to take a look at the riding stables, I’ve been wanting to do that for while anyway.”