

# Chapter 1

## The Hoof Prints



“That’s like the hundredth time you asked that question!”

Lei ignored Ying, and her dad’s face appeared in the gap between the seats.

“Keep watching, Lei. Look!”

She turned back to the window. As they swung past a bend in the road, a huge field dotted with brightly coloured



tents came into view. The sign by the entrance read “Hilltop Hideaway”. *It sounds magical!* thought Lei, as she scanned the field for her cousins. Was that Cora she could see jumping out of a car with a guitar case in the distance? And Isabelle, trailing a rucksack as she walked down a gravel path?

Their car bumped along the pebbly

campsite road, all the way to the far edge of the field. Sure enough, there were Lei's aunts and uncle, holding up tent poles and plastic sheets with confused looks on their faces. As soon as the car stopped, Lei unclipped her seat belt and jumped out, and was immediately bowled over by two sets of arms hugging her. She knew who it was without having to look – her cousins, Isabelle and Cora!

“Hurrah, you're here!” shouted Cora. “I can't believe I got here first even though I had to travel the furthest!” Cora lived in Australia with her mum and dad. But the families always spent a week of the summer holidays together, and it was the three girls' favourite time of the year.

“It took AGES to drive here from



the airport,” said Lei. Her family lived in San Francisco, although her mum was Chinese and her dad was English. “Ying was carsick, so we had to keep stopping!”

Isabelle grinned, and her bright green eyes flashed like jewels. “But you’re here now. Come on, let’s explore!”

Lei looked over at her parents getting

out of the car. “Is it OK if we have a look around?” she asked.

“Go ahead,” her mum replied, walking towards the pieces of tent. “This will keep us busy for a while!”

Isabelle's mum nodded, then smiled and passed Lei's mum a giant bunch of tent pegs.

Lei looked at the plastic sheeting strewn across the grass. “Should we help?” she offered.

“No, no,” said her dad. “I think we have it covered. Go have fun!”

“Just be back in time for the barbie,” Cora’s dad added. “I’m doing my special chook sauce!”

The three girls linked arms and skipped across the hilltop field. As they ran down the slope, a circular blue lake set amid grassland came into view.

“I know barbie means barbecue in Australia, but what on earth is a chook?” asked Lei. “It sounds weird!”

Cora laughed. “It’s the Australian word for chicken. I guess it is a bit weird. But then don’t you call a handbag a purse in America? That’s just silly!”

The girls giggled together. Even though they lived on different sides of the world, as soon as they saw each other it was like they'd never been apart.

As they drew closer to the lake, Isabelle flung herself into a cartwheel, kicking up the glistening white sand. When she stood up straight again, her fiery red hair curled out from her head like springs.

Meanwhile, Lei threw off her flip-flops and began sprinting to the water. She might have been the shortest of the three

cousins, but she could outrun both of them. “I’m going in,” she called over her shoulder. “Who’s coming?”

Cora, the tallest, bent down to untie her shoelaces, hearing the splash of the







water. “Hey, Lei. What’s that in your hair?” she asked, noticing something pink between the silky dark brown strands.

Lei beamed. “Hair braids! Mom did them for me, by wrapping thread around my hair. She wouldn’t let me dye my hair pink like Ying,” Lei told her cousins. “She says I’m too young. So this was the next best thing!”

“It’s ace!” said Cora, picking up a braid and examining it. Then she tugged



at her bobbed blonde hair. “Maybe I can ask Mum to do one for me.”

“You should!” said Lei as she shoved her feet back into her pink flip-flops.

“Though your hair is pretty as it is.”

“What’s that over there?” asked Isabelle as she joined them on the sand. She pointed at a cove behind them. It looked like a cave set into the hillside. Around its edge, yellow and purple flowers sprang up among the green grass of the hill. “I wonder what’s inside...”

Isabelle skipped up to the cove, beckoning Cora and Lei to follow. “Mum said this area is magical,” she told her friends as they walked inside. “Do you think there’s magic in here?”

Cora frowned. "I don't think Aunt Phoebe meant real magic, did she?"

Isabelle didn't reply. She was staring

at the rocky ground at the back of the cove. “Are those hoof prints?”

Lei followed her gaze. “Yes!” she said. “But they’re really small, like they belong to a pony. Duke’s are much bigger.” All three of the cousins loved horses and ponies, but Lei was the luckiest because she actually had her own horse!

“But what are they doing in here – in the rock?” Cora ran over and crouched down to look closer.

Lei followed her and gasped. “Hey, look, there are three sets back here. One for each of us!” The other hoof prints were bigger – one set was almost double the size, as if it had been made by a large horse. Lei, who had small feet, jumped into the smallest hoof prints.

Next to her, Isabelle copied Lei, nestling her feet into the medium-sized



set. “You try it too, Cora,” Isabelle called over her shoulder.

Cora stood up and put her bare right foot into one of the largest hoof prints, then her left. The rock was smooth, and somehow warm, too. The warmth seemed to shoot through her body – through her legs, stomach, arms and head.

“What’s happening?” yelled Lei, as the cove was filled with such dazzling white light that the girls had to close their eyes.

“It’s magic, see!” said Isabelle. She squeezed her eyes shut as hot tingles zipped all over her skin.

*Something* was happening, that was for sure. As the warmth continued to surround her, like the perfect bubble bath, Cora wondered if it really could be magic.