

Ferret

on the Loose

Heather Gallagher

Illustrated by Benjamin Johnston



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*To Richard, for always
believing. HG*

*For DJ and HJ ... where it
all began. BJ*



‘Ferrets, take your places!’ Race caller Fred Plummer’s voice boomed through the Upton Community Centre.

Lucy lifted her horseshoe pendant to her lips and kissed it for luck. She wasn’t sure if it really was lucky, but that’s what her best friend, Penny, had told her when she had given it to her on her tenth birthday last year.

She was also wearing her lucky red-and-blue striped undies. The rest was up to Flash.

Lucy opened the door to her ferret’s cage and grabbed him before he could escape.



‘Remember what we practised,’ she whispered, stroking his fur. She knelt down and placed Flash into the opening of a plastic pipe.



Elisha Muggins bobbed down alongside of her, flipping a long blonde plait across Lucy’s face.



‘Make room for Bad Boy,’ said Elisha, shoving a jet black ferret into the pipe next to Flash’s. ‘He’s going to win, you know.’

‘Is that right?’ said Lucy.

‘Do you think Brownie’s got a chance?’

‘His name’s Flash, Elisha.’

‘Yeah, I can see why!’

Flash was in fact a brown ferret with white ‘socks’ and a white streak on his head.

‘I wanted a horse,’ Lucy said.

‘Huh?’

‘I wanted a horse for my birthday, but instead I got a ferret. Flash was the name I would have given my horse.’

Elisha laughed.

‘Giddy-up there, Brownie!’ she taunted, as the loudspeaker crackled to life again.



‘Everyone in place?’ boomed Fred. ‘And ... racing!’

Ten ferrets were pushed into action by their owners. As the furry creatures disappeared, their owners ran ahead to the first viewing area, which was a clear section in each pipe.

Elisha stood on Lucy’s foot, craning to see Bad Boy. But it was Flash’s head that emerged first.

‘And Flash is in front, followed by Bad Boy Butch,’ called Fred.

‘Come on, Flash,’ Lucy screamed. ‘Come on, boy, move!’

But Flash had stopped to stare at the frantic spectators. Bad Boy Butch streaked through the viewing section and continued

through the pipe. A white ferret in the pipe next to Bad Boy’s also raced past.



‘Uh oh, Flash has stalled,’ called Fred, ‘and Bad Boy Butch and Snowy have hit the front. Out of the next pipe is Sadie, followed by Little Devil. Wait, Sadie’s stopped too ... ahem ... for a little nap.’



‘Flash!’ Lucy moaned, resisting the urge to tap on the pipe. ‘Move!’

She pulled a Yumdiddly chocolate bar from her pocket, holding it up for Flash to see.

‘There’ll be a Yumdiddly for you at the finish,’ she yelled.

Flash wrinkled his pink nose, sat down and began licking the clear plastic.

Lucy groaned. She put the chocolate bar back in her pocket, but Flash stayed where he was, pawing at the side of the pipe. Lucy ran to the end of the pipe and got down on her hands and knees.

‘Flash!’ she hollered into the pipe. ‘YUMDIDDLY!’

‘And in the third leg it’s Bad Boy Butch still in front, now closely followed by Sable,’



Fred yelled.

Elisha already had her face pressed into the opening of Bad Boy’s pipe.

‘MOVE IT, BAD BOY!’ she screamed, and then leapt backwards.

Bad Boy Butch shot out of the pipe like a furry cannonball. He launched himself at his mistress, climbing all over her before nestling around her neck like a scarf.

‘Yay, Bad Boy!’ said Elisha, pulling him off and hugging him. ‘I knew you could do it!’

Next out of the pipes was Sable, Li Chen’s ferret. Finally, Lucy heard Flash galloping down his pipe.

‘YUMDIDDLY!’ she continued to yell into the pipe. ‘YUMDIDDLY!’

Above her, Elisha was holding Bad Boy



Butch victoriously in the air.

‘Bad Boy rules!’ she yelled.

Then she looked down at Lucy, narrowing her green eyes. Flash had reached the end of his pipe, but was hanging upside down from the opening, taunting Lucy.



‘Flash better get used to eating Bad Boy’s dust!’ Elisha teased.

Before Lucy could respond, Bad Boy bit



Elisha and she dropped him with a squawk.

‘Ouch!’

Lucy hid a smile. ‘Good one, Bad Boy!’ she thought.

‘He’s not finished until he’s out of the pipe,’ said Mr Olfart, the founding father of the club and Sadie’s elderly owner.

‘I know that!’ said Lucy, brushing red curls from her forehead in frustration. ‘Flash, let go!’

The temptation to pull him out was almost overwhelming, but Lucy knew that would automatically disqualify her.

‘Will you let go?’

Mr Olfart patted his thin hair, which was combed across his balding scalp, as Flash finally trotted out.

‘Flash is in pretty good shape,’ he said. ‘He



might even be in with a chance next week – unlike Sadie.’

The club had been holding regular training races for the past two months, in the lead-up to the Fearless Ferret Fete. Sadie had been making a habit of going to sleep in the middle of the races.

The fete was an annual fundraising event for the club and the highlight was always the Fastest Fearless Ferret Race. Like a premiership cup, there was a gold trophy that the winner got to keep until the next race. Lucy had dreamt of that trophy, engraved with her name on its side.

Flash was in good shape. He was fast: really fast. The problem was he was so unpredictable. Would he be good enough to



beat Bad Boy on the day? And what about Sable, who was now suddenly a contender after coming second today?

‘Thanks,’ said Lucy. She’d never really warmed to Mr Olfart. He liked to pin the other owners down and drone on forever about ‘the good old days’. ‘Sadie’s looking ...’ she searched for the right word, ‘relaxed.’

Mr Olfart frowned. ‘Hmm. A bit too relaxed, I’m afraid.’

Lucy sighed with relief as Penny walked up.

‘Hey, Luce!’ Her friend had come straight from her riding lesson and was still dressed in cream jodhpurs and a matching t-shirt. ‘How’d Flash go?’

‘Okay,’ said Lucy. ‘He came third.’

‘By a nose,’ said Mr Olfart.



The girls stared at him as he turned back to Sadie's pipe, trying in vain to get her to come out.

Lucy kicked a stone along the footpath as the friends walked home together, Flash's cage bumping at her side.

'Third's not bad,' said Penny.

'It's not great either,' said Lucy, 'especially when the race is next weekend!'

'There's still time,' said Penny. 'You'll just have to pump up the training.'

At that moment, Elisha cycled up beside them. Bad Boy leered at them from Elisha's bike basket, baring his tiny teeth.

'See ya later, loser!' Elisha said.

'Oh Pen,' Lucy said, 'we've just got to win!'



Lucy was teaching Flash to dance. 'One, two, three, cha, cha, cha,' she chanted and then screamed in delight.

Penny was lying on Lucy's bed, flicking through a horse magazine. She looked up.

'Did he do it?'

'Yes,' said Lucy. 'I'll see if I can get him to do it again.'

Flash was sitting at her feet nibbling a piece of raw chicken she'd given him as a reward. When he'd finished, Lucy wiggled her fingers at hip height and repeated the chant.

