Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

# The Pony Detectives: Scout and the Mystery of the Marsh Ponies

Written by

## Belinda Rapley

Published by

## Templar Publishing

**All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator**

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk



# THE PONY DETECTIVES

by Belinda Rapley



## Scout

and the Mystery of the Marsh Ponies



# THE PONY DETECTIVES

Book Two

# Scout
## and the Mystery of the Marsh Ponies

by Belinda Rapley

# Chapter One

ALICE cantered into the show ring to a ripple of applause. Her nerves tingled, making her fingers tighten their grip on the reins. Scout, her sturdy Connemara pony, dropped back to trot abruptly. Alice was so rigid that she almost toppled out of the saddle. She tried to relax. She told herself that even though she always got nervous at shows it hadn't stopped her and her dappled grey pony having an amazing summer so far. Doing well in the Fratton Show at the start of the school holidays had set off a winning streak. Since then they'd managed to come first in a class at every show they'd entered; one bedroom wall was starting to disappear behind all the rosettes.

But they'd all been won in straightforward show-jumping classes. Alice knew this was a completely different challenge.

The Eventers Grand Prix was a class she'd never ridden in before, mixing brightly coloured show jumps and natural, more solid cross-country-style fences. The sun was beaming down and she was feeling hot and sticky in a long-sleeved green jumper, rather than her familiar black jacket and tie. The course was against the clock, with penalty seconds added for every knock-down and refusal. That meant Alice couldn't afford to get lost and dither about halfway round. But even though she'd walked the twisting course five times, she was still convinced that she'd forget which way to weave around the tightly packed fences.

"Come on, Alice! You can do this!"

Alice looked up and saw her three best friends – Charlie, Mia and Rosie – waiting by the ropes at the edge of the ring to watch her round. It was Charlie who'd called out, pulling off her riding

hat and pushing her elfin-cut dark brown hair out of her large green eyes. She gave Alice the thumbs up. The class was open to horses and ponies of all heights, which meant that the two best friends were competing against each other for once. Charlie had just flown round effortlessly on her 13.2hh speedy bay pony, Pirate. He'd been totally nutty all the way, charging about like a firecracker. But Charlie had just sat quietly, her long legs wrapped around Pirate's sides as she looked for each fence and steered him towards it. She never got nervous in classes and had made it look easy. Pirate had clonked a couple of fences and the poles had come down, but they'd still made a really fast time, putting her in first place.

"Number 224, your bell has rung," a voice suddenly crackled over the tannoy.

Alice shortened her reins. Taking a deep breath, she clicked Scout into a fast canter and circled to the start gates; together they flashed through them. As Scout sailed over the first green-and-red upright,

Alice leaned forward over his withers. His mane brushed her face and she smiled, forgetting all her nerves and the blurred crowd in an instant.

Scout easily cleared fence after fence in the first section of the course – the show jumps – his ears flickering backwards and forwards as Alice slowed him before the uprights and the trickier fences.

Then Alice let Scout open up on the run to the cross-country jumps. He flew over them, ears pricked and stretching out his neck as he galloped across the width of the ring and back again with Alice crouched low over the saddle. For the remaining show jumps she sat upright and steadied Scout again. If she wanted to win, Alice knew she'd have to pull off something special, so as she landed over an upright she turned Scout on the spot inside another fence on her way to the spread. But the grass was slippery, and the dappled grey's near hind skidded from under him, tipping Alice up his neck.

Scout bobbed back up as the crowd 'oohed'

loudly, but he was at a standstill three strides from the fence. Alice instinctively pressed her legs to Scout's side. Her grey picked up and stretched for the back pole to a cheer.

"Good boy!" Alice shouted as they flew over the last jump, and Scout galloped through the finish like a racehorse. Alice stood up in her stirrups and patted Scout's dappled neck, over the moon at completing the tricky course. Scout snorted, shaking his head excitedly as Alice squeezed on the reins to bring him back to a fast trot.

"And that's a clear for number 224," the judge's voice announced. "Scout ridden by Alice Hathaway in a time of one minute thirty-four seconds, which puts her in the lead with three riders to go."

Alice beamed, leaning down to hug Scout as she rode out of the ring. A tall, thin woman with a wide-brimmed hat adjusted a large pair of dark sunglasses as Alice rode past to her friends in the collecting ring.

"That's the last time I give you a pep talk,"

Charlie joked as she slung her arm over Pirate's neck. "You've just beaten my time!"

Alice laughed, sliding out of the saddle and loosening Scout's girth.

"Appreciate your position in first place while it lasts, Alice," Rosie joked with a cheeky smile. She looked like an English rose, with her long flowing yellow hair trailing out from under her hat, her pale skin, round pink cheeks and pale blue eyes. She tucked a stray bit of hair under her hat. "You won't be in the lead for long. I have a feeling that today is Dancer's day."

Rosie flapped her legs against her pony's side. Dancer, her 14.1hh cobby strawberry roan mare, grunted. She was busy stuffing as much grass into her mouth as possible and was not happy about being interrupted. She swished her chestnut-coloured tail and started to slowly make her way down the roped tunnel.

"Good luck!" Alice giggled, as she rubbed Scout's hot neck under his mane and kissed

his velveteen muzzle, breathing in his warm pony smell.

"Luck has nothing to do with it," Rosie called over her shoulder as she trotted away in a wonky line. "It's all down to talent. Fortunately, Dancer and I have it in bucketloads. That, and a cunning plan that will get us the fastest time of the day..."

"Honestly, Rosie never takes anything seriously!" Mia tutted as she craned her neck to watch. Wish Me Luck, her beautiful palomino pony, stood next to her, behaving herself impeccably as always. Together they had already competed in their Ridden Show Pony class, which involved Mia and Wish both looking immaculate, Mia in her pink tie with silver dots and Wish in her matching bright pink velvet browband. Wish had walked, trotted and cantered around the ring elegantly, without putting a single well-oiled hoof out of place. As a result, the pretty part-bred arab had a huge red rosette fluttering from her bridle.

The bell rang, and in the ring Rosie pushed

Dancer into a slow, reluctant canter. The mare stepped clumsily over the first fence, then trundled on to the second, dropping back to a trot as she landed. Rosie cantered Dancer steadily past the third fence, a tricky oxer, and made straight for the fourth.

"Rosie!" Charlie and Alice both cried out, waving their arms. "Fence three! You've missed it out!"

Rosie went pink but looked pointedly ahead, not changing course. Dancer cat-leaped the fourth jump before the tannoy suddenly crackled into life.

"Competitor 239, you've missed fence three, which means elimination," the judge called out. Rosie kept up her slow canter all the way out of the ring, looking pinker than ever.

"I had hoped they wouldn't notice," she explained as she pulled up, puffing. "Dancer would never have got over that fence, so I thought I'd just nip round it. I planned to do the same with all the cross-country fences – that way I might

have beaten Alice's time. I reckon I'd have got away with it, too, if you lot hadn't made such a fuss!"

As Alice and Charlie looked at each other and laughed at Rosie's crazy plan, Dancer dropped her head to pull at the grass just outside the ring, acting as if she hadn't been fed for weeks. In her summer coat, only her large rump still had the mixture of white and chestnut hairs in it; the rest of her had turned chestnut. Rosie tried to walk Dancer on, but Dancer refused to budge. She stood stuffing as much of the luscious grass down as possible, her large rump totally blocking the narrow entrance into the jumping ring.

A shrill voice called out.

"Could you *please* move that pony out of the way!"

As Rosie attempted to pull up Dancer's head, Charlie, Mia and Alice all let out silent groans. They knew without looking that the high-pitched voice belonged to Tallulah Starr – all glittery eyeshadow, sparkly nail varnish and masses of

curly light brown hair. Her dad owned a successful second-hand car sales business and he bought Tallulah anything she asked for. She'd made it well known that she wanted to be a top showjumper, so her dad bought her an ever-changing string of grey ponies (they all had to be colour coordinated) to help fulfil her dream. She also had an ever-changing round of grooms and instructors, the best her dad's money could buy.

The ring steward called out Tallulah's number and she kicked her pretty Connemara cross, Diamond Starr, into a fast canter. As she rode past, the others saw the white writing on the back of her striped green, pink and yellow cross-country colours:

*Tallulah Starr & Diamond Starr,*
*sponsored by Starr Cars,*
*the classiest motors in town*



Tallulah rode up to the start gates. A man dressed in jeans and a flashy, open-necked shirt stood by the edge of the ring cheering loudly: Tallulah's dad. He pointed an expensive-looking video camera at her.

"Come on, Lulu – show 'em who's got Starr quality!" he shouted in a strong cockney accent.

Tallulah posed for the camera, then leaned forward, setting her face and flinging the reins at Diamond Starr as she flapped her legs urgently. The grey pony shot forward in surprise, then settled and jumped each fence cleanly and steadily while Tallulah flung herself about on top, leaning left and right dramatically and squealing "Hup" at the top of her voice in front of each fence. For all his money, the one thing Tallulah's dad couldn't buy his daughter was ability.

Diamond Starr neatly cleared the last fence and flew through the finish line with Tallulah clinging on tightly. She rode back to the exit, looking smug as her dad roared his approval

from the edge of the ring. The tannoy crackled, then there was a pause before the judge cleared her throat.

"Well, although that was a clear round for number 265, Tallulah Starr riding Diamond Starr," the judge announced after a pause, "I've just been informed that unfortunately it won't count because you started before the bell went, so that's elimination, I'm afraid."

Tallulah turned crimson and leaped out of the saddle, abandoning Diamond Starr as she ran towards the judge's box at the far side of the ring. Her dad was already on his way. Alice caught hold of Diamond Starr's reins while Charlie loosened her girth and ran up the stirrups. The pony turned her large grey head and blinked her dark, long-lashed eyes sweetly at them.

"Glad of a bit of a fuss, probably," Rosie commented as she patted the mare. "She doesn't get any from Tallulah."

"Her grooms are always running round like

mad so they never have time either," Mia added, rubbing the grey's forehead. Diamond Starr lowered her face and leaned in towards Mia as the last competitor, a young boy, rode past them into the ring. He cantered his flighty chestnut pony in circles while Tallulah held up the proceedings, arguing with the judges before stomping back to them.

"They won't listen," she stormed, snatching her pony's reins as the bell went behind her and the boy finally started his round. "Not that I care. I mean, this class doesn't count anyway. It's not even proper showjumping, is it?"

Behind them in the ring, the young boy and his chestnut pony had refusal after refusal at the third fence, the oxer that Rosie had avoided. The bell sounded again for his elimination.

"That's the end of the class and we have a winner – Scout and Alice Hathaway take first place," the judge boomed over the loudspeaker as the boy walked out looking glum, "with Pirate

and Charlotte Hall in second and Blue Bandit in third with Hannah Edge. Would the riders and their ponies make their way back to the ring for the prize-giving."

Tallulah was about to drag Diamond Starr away during the lap of honour when Poppy Brookes appeared through the crowds, making a beeline for Mia and Rosie. Poppy was like a local celebrity on the circuit because she was the best showjumper in the area with her piebald ace, Moonlight. The Pony Detectives all looked up to her and were delighted that she'd started to say hello to them ever since Moonlight had been stolen earlier in the summer and they'd helped to track him down. After the four friends had successfully solved the mystery, they had decided to call themselves the Pony Detectives, and each of them was hoping for a new case to investigate soon. Mia waved at Poppy excitedly. Tallulah caught the look on Mia's face and tutted.

"I don't get the big deal about Poppy Brookes.

I mean, I'd be way better than her if I could *just* get my hands on the right pony," Tallulah boasted dismissively.

"Really?" Rosie exclaimed, thinking that Tallulah couldn't actually believe what she'd just said. After all, it was clear to everyone that Poppy and Moonlight were in a class of their own. Since winning the Fratton Cup they'd taken on bigger horses in huge jumping classes; the pair had won most of them, too. That was more than could be said for Tallulah, who pushed and pulled her honest, talented mounts around courses that were too big for her, if not for the ponies she rode.

"Oh, yes," Tallulah sniffed importantly, fluttering her glittery lashes for a moment. "I keep trying to get hold of top-class jumpers so that I can finally beat her, but I haven't had any luck yet. Dad's made loads of huge offers at shows whenever a pony does really well, but no one's agreed to sell their ponies to me yet – I can't think why."

"I can," Rosie whispered to Mia. "*Everyone* knows that Tallulah's got a habit of ruining good ponies by jumping them over fences that are too big."

"And once she's spoilt them," Mia whispered back, "she thinks they're useless and sells them like they're one of her dad's second-hand cars."

"What was that?" Tallulah asked as the girls exchanged looks.

"Oh, nothing," Rosie said quickly.

"It's odd, isn't it?" Tallulah sighed, carrying on. "Dad even offered to buy Moonlight once. To be honest, he wouldn't really go with my colour scheme of all greys. But Poppy Brookes said she wouldn't ever sell him at any price, anyway. So I'm still searching for a pony who can take him on. And I *will* find one, especially with the money Dad can afford to pay. Then it'll be me that everyone gets excited about talking to at shows, not Poppy."

Tallulah fell silent as Poppy reached the group,

which was soon joined by Alice and Charlie who rode out of the ring with their red and blue rosettes fixed to their bridles.

"Congratulations, you two," Poppy beamed up at them. Alice went slightly pink, still a little bit in awe of Poppy. Charlie flung herself out of the saddle. Tallulah loitered nearby, eavesdropping as she bent down pretending to fuss over the tendon boots wrapped around Diamond Starr's front legs.

"Scout picking up first prize is starting to get a bit of a habit these days. Moonlight, you'll have some serious competition if he carries on like this!" Poppy smiled, stroking her pony's black and white neck. "If I didn't have you, I'd love to ride Scout. He's a real star, isn't he? Alice, please tell me you're not thinking of entering the Sweetbriar Stud Cup next weekend? That's one I wanted to win..."

"You never know," Alice laughed, well aware that Poppy was joking. She'd watched the

Sweetbriar Stud Cup the year before. It was held at the last show of the summer holidays and the fences were massive; there was no way she'd even get over the first! The Fratton Cup was pretty much as big as she wanted to jump on Scout without denting his confidence, or hers. For Moonlight and Poppy, though, the Fratton Cup had just been a warm-up on the way to much bigger classes. Since that show, Poppy and Alice had hardly competed against each other.

Poppy smiled, then looked over to the ring. "Right, my class is on next, so I'd better get going. Lovely to see you all!"

She jumped lightly into the saddle and trotted Moonlight off to the warm-up area, waving over her shoulder.

As Poppy disappeared Alice noticed Tallulah standing on tiptoes, peering over the top of Diamond Starr's saddle to get a better look at Scout. A second later her dad walked over, looking ruddy-faced after continuing his row with

the judges. Tallulah whispered something to him. The next second, he pulled out a cheque book and marched towards Rosie.

"Right, how much do you want for this nag?" he boomed, nodding towards the sleepy roan mare in front of him.

"Not that one, Dad!" Tallulah shouted rudely, pointing wildly towards Scout. "It's the *grey* pony Poppy said could beat her in the Stud Cup!"

Mr Starr turned to Alice and repeated his question to her, sizing up Scout like he was a shiny new sports car. Alice felt half as if she was about to laugh out loud at Mr Starr and half furious that Tallulah had even got him to ask the question.

"He's not for sale," she told him, shaking her head in amazement. "He belongs to Mrs Valentine, but there's no way she'd ever sell him. She put him on permanent loan to me a year ago."

"What? He's not even yours?" Tallulah butted in, dragging Diamond Starr towards Alice irritably.

"It doesn't matter, princess," Mr Starr said, ignoring Alice and waving his cheque book about. "We'll just have to find this Mrs Valentine, then persuade her to change her mind."

Tallulah squealed, hugging her dad before they rushed back to their box, where one of her grooms already had a different pony waiting for her to ride in the next class against Poppy.

