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Opening extract from

The Pony Detectives: Moonlight, Star of the Show

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Published by

Templar Publishing

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THE PONY DETECTIVES

by Belinda Rapley



Moonlight

Star of the Show



THE PONY DETECTIVES

Book One

Moonlight: Star of the Show

by Belinda Rapley



Chapter One

THE four girls rode in single file down a narrow, rocky path in the woods. Charlie and her dark bay native pony, Pirate, were in front, leading the others. Pirate, whose bushy black forelock almost covered his white star and mischievous eyes, bounced sideways excitedly as Charlie sat lightly in the saddle.

"Can you believe it? The day we've been dreaming about for ages is finally here!" She smiled, closing her eyes for a second. She kept her reins loose, knowing that if she shortened them Pirate would use that as a signal to charge off. Charlie twisted in the saddle to look back at the other three riding behind her. "We've got six whole weeks of summer holidays ahead of us.

I reckon we should make some plans – any ideas?"

"My plan is to do nothing apart from lots of hacking," Rosie piped up from the back of the ride. Suddenly she was pulled out of the saddle as her strawberry roan cob, Dancer, dived for some grass at the edge of the path. They were riding downhill and Rosie squeaked as she started to slide down her pony's neck before scrambling back into the saddle. "I thought that's what holidays were for."

"I really need to practise my showjumping," Alice said, going cold. Part of her was over the moon that it was the start of the school holidays. The other part felt like she'd swallowed a lead weight. "The Fratton Show's only one week away. I've entered Scout into the Cup but I've hardly schooled him since Easter."

The Fratton Show was the first big event of the summer holidays. It had lots of different classes all day, from gymkhana games to 'pony with the biggest ears', but the highlight was

definitely the Fratton Cup. It was a huge show-jumping class which was held last on the day, and it always drew the biggest crowds. Scout, the sturdy dappled grey gelding Alice had on loan, loved jumping. So did Alice. But the crowds and the atmosphere at competitions never failed to reduce her to a bag of nerves.

"Well, I know what *I'm* doing," Mia announced as she held her palomino part-bred Arab, Wish Me Luck, with a light contact on her reins. Wish picked her way down the slope carefully. "Getting Wish prepared to win, again, in the Ridden Show Pony class next week."

Showing was Mia's speciality. Unlike the Fratton Cup, no jumps were involved in a showing class. Instead of having to clear a twisting course of brightly coloured fences, Mia had to impress the judge with her and Wish's smartness, style and correctness as they were inspected both standing still and during an individual ridden display. The pair of them ruled the local show ring, and it

seemed as if Wish, with her silky palomino coat and delicately dished face, just had to place one expensive, well-oiled hoof inside it to be handed the red winner's rosette.

The four girls and their ponies reached the bottom of the rocky path and splashed across a shallow stream that gushed under the arch of a little stone bridge. Pirate charged through the water. He let out a squeal of excitement as soon as his boxy black hooves touched the soft, wooded path on the other side, and he shot off in a scurry of short legs. Alice kept her reins tight until Mia and Rosie had reached the bank too, with Scout bouncing beneath her, straining to race after Pirate. As soon as Rosie shouted that she was clear of the stream Alice softened her hold on the reins. Scout sat back on his haunches, motionless for a second, then flew forward.

Alice watched Scout's dappled neck stretch out in front of her. She listened to his fast, rhythmical hoof beats on the mossy earth as they galloped

through patches of warm sunlight. His ears were pricked forward and Alice knew her pony was enjoying himself as much as she was.

Charlie, Alice then Mia breathlessly brought their ponies to a walk one after the other at the top of the hill, beaming as they trotted out of the shaded woods into the sun. Pirate backed up excitedly, hardly able to stand still for a second as Wish and Scout shook their heads, nodding them up and down and jinking their bits as they waited for Rosie. Dancer's chestnut head with its white blaze emerged slowly at the top of the sloping track. Dancer had a chestnut mane, tail and legs, but her barrel-like body was a mixture of white and chestnut hairs, making her look pink. Her saucer-like hooves thudded the ground, and she looked highly offended at being expected to canter uphill. She was determined to snatch mouthfuls of tree or shrub as she trundled her way towards them, grinding to a halt despite Rosie flapping her legs to encourage her on.

"I don't know about the rest of the holidays, but the first thing I'm going to do when I get back to the stables", Rosie said, her cheeks glowing, "is eat lunch. I'm *starving*."

Mia rolled her big, dark eyes. "Honestly, Rosie, you're as bad as Dancer. Always thinking about food."

Rosie muttered that she'd rather be eating it than thinking about it as the four girls set off to ride home at a relaxed, tail-swinging walk. They let their reins slip through their fingers so their ponies could stretch their necks, and dangled their feet out of their stirrups. By the time the ponies had wandered up the long, dusty farm track and reached the gates of Blackberry Farm, they'd cooled down.

Rosie's parents had inherited Blackberry Farm from an ancient aunt over a year ago. The farm consisted of a yellow-painted cottage, a small, rundown yard, a few big barns and acres of paddocks. As soon as they'd moved in, Rosie's

parents agreed to Mia and Charlie stabling their ponies in the yard. The farm was nearer to where they both lived than their last yard, so it was perfect. They'd finally agreed to Rosie having her own pony, too, and soon afterwards Dancer had arrived, goggle-eyed and whinnying. Just a week later Alice had taken Scout on loan and she'd led him straight to the farm. Suddenly, the yard was transformed into life. Rosie's mum, an artist, had only made one condition: that the girls all took full responsibility for their ponies and the yard. The girls had agreed excitedly at once.

The yard had eight wooden stables, four of which were being used by the ponies. One of the others had been converted into a feed room, one a tack room and one had all the mucking-out tools in it. The last stable was spare. Only the four of them kept their ponies there, and they all agreed that it was pony heaven.

Charlie opened the squeaky wooden gate with its crooked hand-painted sign and clattered onto

the small sunny square yard with its flowering weeds sprouting up from the cracks in the concrete. The girls were greeted by the squawking of chickens and the welcoming yaps of Beanie, Rosie's Jack Russell, who trotted importantly beside them.

They led their ponies across the yard to their stables. Scout dozed quietly outside his stable in the warm sunshine, resting one back leg as Alice undid his girth and lifted his saddle off. She put it over the stable door then reached up and slid his bridle over his ears, making sure the metal bit didn't clonk against his teeth. She slung the bridle over the saddle then slipped Scout's headcollar on and tied the lead rope to a bit of baler twine outside the stable. She dug out some mints from her pocket. Scout picked them off her hand softly, his whiskers tickling her. He shook his head up and down, crunching the mints, while Alice got a bucket and sponged his warm neck and back with some cool water.

Next she ran her hands down each of Scout's legs. Scout picked up each hoof in turn and Alice used her hoof pick to scrape them out. She turned the hoof pick over and used the brush on the other side to swish away the last of the mud.

"Come on, slow coach," Charlie called over. Alice looked up. The other three were all waiting for her, their ponies untied and ready to be turned out.

"I'm coming, hang on," Alice puffed, throwing her hoof pick into her grooming kit and hastily pulling the rope loose. She was always the last of the four to be ready although she could never work out why. She jogged over to the others waiting at the gate. Scout walked fast behind her, sticking his neck out, and they led the ponies together along the grassy path to the paddock at the back of the yard.

Pirate galloped off as soon as his headcollar was unbuckled and slipped off his nose. He bucked and wheeled, squealing and tucking his chunky

neck into his chest. Wish stood looking out to the horizon, her long lashes framing her huge dark eyes as if she were posing for a photograph, ignoring Pirate's antics. Scout circled a patch of grass, his legs buckling. He chose a spot then dropped to the ground and rolled vigorously, grunting. He stood back up and shook himself before settling down to graze. Dancer twisted her head through the bottom rung of the fencing, tugging at the longer, lusher grass just outside the paddock.

As soon as the gate was clicked shut the four girls wandered over to the hay barn, where the sunlight shot through the wooden slatted walls in shafts, picking up all the dust hanging in the still air. The sweet-smelling hay made it the best place on the yard to hang out. They'd turned it into their den, with faded posters pulled from *Pony Mad*, their favourite magazine, stuck all over the walls. It was snug in the winter and cool in the summer and provided the perfect place for them

to relax and keep an eye on their ponies at the same time, because the huge barn doors looked directly onto the paddock. They'd pulled bales into a circle near the barn doors among all the spilt hay and straw that made the floor spongy to walk on.

Beanie suddenly appeared in the barn, snuffling among the hay, pretending to chase rats.

"Okay, so apart from getting ready for the show next week," Charlie said, "does anyone have any other ideas for the holidays?" Neither she nor Pirate were keen on schooling. Her lightning-quick, intelligent bay pony only had two speeds, jog and flat out, and going round in circles didn't seem to improve the situation much, so the thought of schooling all week wasn't exactly filling her with joy. Charlie flopped down onto one of the straw bales, tucking her long, gangly legs up beside her. She scruffily pushed her elfin-cut dark brown hair out of her tanned face and green eyes.

Mia frowned. Any kind of untidiness in the

others bugged her. She was tall and striking, with slim legs that were always wrapped in a selection of pink or purple jodhpurs. Even after the two-hour ride that morning, Mia didn't have a single long straight black hair out of place, her olive skin was dirt free, and the tiny bit of make-up on her dark, almond-shaped eyes was still intact. Even her jodhpurs were as clean as when she'd arrived that morning. She always looked immaculate. While the others couldn't figure out her secret for staying so clean, she could never work out how they attracted so much dirt and messiness without even trying. She looked around the others as they got comfy in the barn, and sighed.

Alice was suffering from a bad case of hat hair. Her shoulder-length mousy brown hair was stuck to her head and Scout had rubbed against her pale blue T-shirt, covering it with white hair and dirty smudges. Alice was the smallest of the four girls, and her jods were always too baggy and worn because she preferred to spend any spare money

she managed to save on Scout, rather than on herself. Rosie, on the other hand, was plump and somehow always managed to wear clothes that were a size too small for her. Rosie's thick, long straw-blonde hair was flyaway; she never tied it back and it floated all over the place. She was a total English rose, with pale skin, pink cheeks and blue eyes. Mia used to threaten her with a makeover, seeing how pretty she was beneath all the scatty hair and odd-shaped clothes. But Rosie was more interested in grooming Dancer than in grooming herself, and Mia had declared her a lost cause.

Looking from Charlie's spiked-up fringe, to Rosie biting her sandwich and taking a mouthful of hair with it, to Alice trying to piece together a hole in the knee of her ancient jodhpurs, Mia said that it was no wonder she was the only one of the four who went in for showing.

"None of you would ever be smart enough," she sighed.

"Or care enough about being smart," Rosie pointed out as she slumped on one of the bales. Beanie circled a couple of times before settling at her feet, rolling over to have his tummy tickled. Rosie took another big bite of her sandwich, flicking through her brand-new copy of *Pony Mad* magazine.

"Well, if anyone else fancies doing some jump schooling, we could always build a course in the paddock," Alice said half-heartedly. In the corner of the schooling paddock there was a pile of old flaking poles, some barrels and jump wings. But just the thought of putting up the jumps reminded her again of the show. Her stomach churned and she put down her apple, unable to take another bite.

"Count me out," Rosie replied, not taking her eyes off the magazine. "Sounds too much like hard work. Anyway, there's no point. I know me and Dancer will be totally useless in the Cup, however much jumping practice we have.

Last year we had two refusals and got eliminated at the first fence."

She looked up for a second, starting to giggle with Alice and Charlie as they remembered Dancer deciding to stop and eat the decorative shrubs beside the first fence, rather than jump it. After Rosie's third failed attempt to get her over, Dancer had left the ring with one of the shrubs hanging from her clenched teeth.

"There's really no need to remind us of that painful experience," Mia sighed. "Don't you even want to try to get a rosette this year?"

"Er, no. I'm not ultra competitive like you, Mia," Rosie replied, opening a packet of crisps with a pop. "I'll go in for the class again because Dancer enjoys a day out, but I'm not bothered about winning anything. I'm just as happy hacking about. Anyway, I'd rather be realistic about my riding than be like Alice."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Alice asked indignantly as she stopped reading over Rosie's

shoulder the *Pony Mad* article about how to ride the perfect circle.

"She means that at least she doesn't almost die of nerves before each show," Charlie explained. "Face it, Alice, you're already as jumpy as a flea and there's still a week to go before the Fratton Cup."

Charlie was right. Even hearing the words 'Fratton Cup' said out loud made Alice's knees turn to jelly.

"I don't get it," Alice replied. "How come you never worry about competing?"

"Because there's no need to, that's why," Charlie said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "We go to the show, Pirate either clears every fence or knocks them all down depending on what mood he's in, then we go home. Simple."

Alice sighed, wondering if she'd ever be as brave as Charlie. Charlie had been riding for ever, and she'd owned Pirate for years. They knew each

other inside out, and although none of the other three dared sit on him, Alice knew that, for Charlie, Pirate was the best pony ever. He was a daredevil who'd tackle anything, just like her. The only worry Charlie ever talked about was outgrowing Pirate. He was 13.2 hands high, and she had suddenly started to shoot up.

Alice, on the other hand, worried about everything. Because Pirate was shorter than Scout and Dancer, he'd be competing in a different class, with smaller fences. Alice wished for a second that she could shrink Scout, just for the day. She knew the fences for the Cup would be huge, with tall uprights and vast spreads. Last year she'd been eliminated when her mind went blank halfway round and she'd taken the wrong course. Despite this, Alice still couldn't stop herself dreaming of winning the Cup one day.

"Well, I think it's pretty clear who'll take first place," Mia remarked matter-of-factly, crunching on a carrot stick. "Poppy Brookes. She's bound to

win again. Moonlight's totally amazing. They've won for the last two years in a row and I can't see anyone beating them."

"Not even Tallulah Starr?" Rosie asked. "She's got a whole string of good jumping ponies. She *must* be one of Poppy's biggest rivals."

"The Starr ponies are good," Mia said, thinking about Tallulah's team of grey ponies and the entourage of grooms she had to help keep them sparkling. "But they can't quite match Moonlight over a fence. And Tallulah isn't anywhere near as skilful as Poppy in the saddle."

"What about Mark Tickle, then?" Charlie suggested. "He was runner-up to Poppy both times so he'll be desperate to win this year. You know what he's like – he's so competitive, it's almost unsportsmanlike. I bet he's sitting in his yard right now trying to come up with a plan to topple her."

"No," Mia replied sitting up. "Poppy and Moonlight are in a league of their own. I bet

you my favourite pink jodhpurs that Poppy wins again this year, no matter what Mark or Tallulah do."

"Oh no, she won't!" Rosie gasped, inhaling a crisp the wrong way by mistake. She started to choke, and in between big gulps of air spluttered, "She can't!"

"What are you on about?" Charlie asked as she thumped her on the back.

"Look!" she whispered hoarsely, jabbing a greasy finger at a photo in the classifieds at the back of her magazine. "It's Moonlight! There, in the 'Missing' section!"

They all stared in silence, unable to take it in. Up until now it had been as if the ponies in the 'Missing' photos were somehow not real. But they knew Moonlight. He was stabled not that far from Blackberry Farm and was a celebrity on the local showjumping circuit.

"Read out the ad," Mia said as they all leaned in.

Rosie cleared her throat and put on her serious voice: "Piebald showjumping pony stolen from paddock. 14.2 hands high, twelve years, answers to name of Moonlight. Please call Poppy if you have any information."

They tried to imagine coming into the yard one day and finding that overnight their ponies had mysteriously disappeared, the awfulness of seeing a stable door open and no pony inside. The worst would be not knowing what had happened, or how their ponies were being treated and wondering if they'd ever get to see them again. It was terrifying and impossible. And with the Fratton Show coming up, the timing couldn't have been worse – Poppy must be shattered.

Rosie suddenly perked up.

"Ooh, I wonder if they're offering a reward?"

The others all glared at her.

"I was just saying!" she added huffily, turning back to her magazine and flicking the page.

"Well, that's it then," Charlie sighed. "Mark will

finally get the first place he's so desperate for in the Cup."

"Ooh, ooh, ooh!" Rosie said, her blue eyes wide. "Maybe *he* stole Moonlight so that he could win. I wonder if I should call Poppy and suggest that. Then I could ask her if there's a reward going at the same time."

"Maybe Rosie's got a point," Alice said suddenly.

Mia and Charlie looked at her as if she were mad.

"I don't mean about the reward, or calling Poppy – but her yard isn't far away," she explained. "Moonlight might've been stolen by someone near here. I know! Why don't we try to find him? I mean, imagine if it was one of our ponies – I know I'd feel terrible, and I'd want everyone around to be searching for Scout if he went missing."

Charlie frowned for a second; it sounded like a crazy idea. Then suddenly her eyes lit up as she

realised what looking for Moonlight might involve. "Yes! We'll get to gallop all over the place, checking every paddock and every stable for possible clues!"

"Think how much chocolate we could buy if there is a reward!" Rosie said, getting excited too. The pair of them started to jump up and down around the barn, holding onto each other's arms. Beanie joined in too, leaping up and bouncing between them as if he were on springs, yapping and adding to the general noise.

"I might get my picture in this magazine! They might do a whole feature on me... I mean us!" Mia gasped, looking at the pages of *Pony Mad* reverently.

"We'll be famous super sleuths!" Rosie shouted.

"Right, come on then, we need a plan," Mia said, clapping her hands and bringing the others to order as her mind raced with the possibilities of photos and fame.



"First we'll have to visit Poppy's yard, Hawthorn Farm. It's about four miles away, I think," Alice said loudly, hardly able to control her voice she was so delighted with her idea. "The ponies can't go out again today, so we'll have to wait till tomorrow to start the investigation. That'll give me time to find a map."

The others nodded in agreement.

"I'll get a notebook and pen," Mia said seriously, "to write down all the clues in."

"I'll organise snacks – if the yard's that far away we'll need them," Rosie added even more seriously. "And we'd better take sandwiches, too."

"OK, so tomorrow we ride out to Hawthorn Farm and search for clues," Mia said, before starting to smile. "Imagine how happy Poppy will be if we manage to find Moonlight before the Fratton Show!"

"That doesn't give us long, though." Charlie frowned.

"Exactly. The next week will have to be

crammed with frantic evidence-gathering," Alice said enthusiastically.

"And lots of galloping between one bit of evidence-gathering and the next," Charlie reminded her, thinking how much Pirate would absolutely love that. Not a schooling circle in sight!

"I say we get going at ten o'clock tomorrow morning," Mia said.

"Right, that's sorted, then," Rosie nodded.

"Settled," Charlie agreed, and they all stood up, gathered the rubbish from their packed lunches and marched out of the den, fired with a new purpose.

Alice hastily picked up the apple she was saving for Scout and rushed after them. A thought suddenly struck her. In all the excitement she'd completely forgotten about her own plans for the next week. Her stomach lurched again as she thought about how little time there was both to school Scout and to find Moonlight. The show was looming closer by the hour. Alice called Scout

and he came trotting over, his ears pricked as he scuffed to a messy halt by the paddock fence, snorting. As she held the apple out on her hand Alice noticed that it was already starting to shake.