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Opening extract from

Phantom – Once Last Chance

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THE PONY DETECTIVES

Book Four

Phantom:
One Last Chance

by Belinda Rapley



templar

Chapter One

"I'VE found *more* black hairs in Wish's body brush," Mia said, her breath white in the frosty air of the tack room. She pointedly plucked them out and dropped the pink brush back into her grooming kit.

"That's hardly surprising", Rosie said, rubbing her gloved hands and blowing into them to warm them up, "when you think how many people have come to the farm to try out Pirate. Some of them must have accidentally used your brushes to groom him instead of Charlie's."

Charlie had been rapidly outgrowing Pirate, her mischievous little bay pony, since the end of the summer and, after one final success in the showjumping ring at the beginning of October,

she'd finally stopped riding him. Her parents had let her have a new horse on full loan but they couldn't afford to keep two ponies. So Charlie had reluctantly agreed to find a new rider for Pirate.

"Has everyone ridden him now?" Alice asked Charlie.

Charlie nodded, poking her dark brown elfin-cut hair back under her woolly hat. Mia, Rosie and Alice were Charlie's best friends and she trusted their opinion completely. So, the four of them had spent yesterday meeting people, interviewing them and seeing them ride. Charlie had wanted the evening to think about which rider would be best for Pirate, but as she sat in the tack room the next morning, she still wasn't convinced that any of them were right.

"So, all you've got to do now is make a decision," Mia said, opening her notebook. "Who, from this list, do you think most suits Pirate? Who would you want to take him on loan?"

"I don't know." Charlie sighed, reading and

re-reading the neatly written list that Mia was holding out to her. "How about none of them?"

Charlie had wanted to find someone local, so that Pirate wouldn't be moved far. The girls had helped her, writing out adverts and putting them up in the post office and at school. Lots of people had come to try him, but he was quick and tricky to ride and most had been frightened off, or Charlie had put them off on purpose, knowing they weren't right. But with Christmas two weeks away, her parents were starting to pile on the pressure for her to find someone who'd take on not just the riding, but the costs of his stabling, bedding, feed and shoeing too. And not only that, Charlie was finding it difficult fitting in the time to look after two ponies before and after school, alongside all her homework. None of it was making the decision any easier. Charlie scratched her head. "This really is impossible," she muttered grumpily.

"Look, we *can* work this out," Mia said,

sounding determined as she scanned down the list of names in her notebook, "after all, we've solved bigger problems than this before."

The girls grinned at each other and even Charlie forgot her worries for a second. At the beginning of the summer, the four of them had decided to call themselves The Pony Detectives, after they solved the mystery of a stolen showjumping pony called Moonlight. Since then, they'd had three more cases to investigate, but they desperately wanted a new one to get stuck into, however small.

"Mia's right," Alice agreed. "And seeing as mysteries are a bit thin on the ground at the moment, this is what we should be putting all our efforts into – finding Pirate's perfect partner."

"And with our track record," Rosie said, "once the Pony Detectives get on the case, Pirate will be sorted out in no time."

Charlie looked less convinced.

"Actually, it might be sorted out already,"

Mia said, tapping her notebook. "Look – there's only one person who's really keen *and* an okay rider: Megan Green."

The others groaned. Megan lived in the cottage across the field from Blackberry Farm and she desperately wanted to take Pirate on full loan.

"I'm sure she waits at her bedroom window, watching the yard for when we come back from a ride," Rosie said, "because she seems to know *exactly* when to come over."

"Normally just as we're about to sit down with a hot chocolate," Alice grinned.

Since Megan had first ridden Pirate a few days ago, after seeing the ad in the post office, she'd been popping over every five seconds to show Charlie a new exercise for Pirate that she'd thought of, or a new feed supplement she wanted to try to make his coat shine. She used any excuse to come to the yard so she could groom Pirate or trim his feathery legs, trying to prove to Charlie that she was his ideal partner.

"To be fair," Mia said, tossing her long, silky black hair over her shoulder as she put down the notebook and started flicking through the bumper Christmas issue of *Pony Mad*, "she is a pretty good rider."

"I know, but it's not her riding ability that's the problem," Charlie grumbled. "More her ridiculous plans to turn Pirate, the hairiest showjumper around, into a super-smart dressage pony. She hates jumping, which he loves, and Pirate *hates* flatwork, which is all she wants to do. It took everything just to persuade Megan to join us later this afternoon for a hack as part of the trial. She'd be happy just schooling him all the time. He'd die of boredom!"

"Well, if it's a dressage pony Megan wants," Mia said, flicking through *Pony Mad* to the ads at the back and circling one with a pink highlighter, "there's one in here for loan at Rockland Riding School, which isn't far away – 13.3 hands high, fourteen years old, experienced

competition pony. Sounds ideal."

Suddenly, from outside, they heard a loud bleat, a cry and the clang of a metal gate being slammed shut.

"Well, here's your chance to tell her," Alice said as Mia put the magazine down. The next second the tack room door opened, letting in a blast of icy cold air. A small girl rushed in, her blonde pony tail bobbing from side to side. She was dressed head to toe in the neatest, most correct riding gear, holding a shiny red folder, and looking apologetic.

"Sorry, Hettie got past me again." Megan smiled as a black-faced sheep trotted past the tack room door, making a beeline for the feed room.

"I've told you a million times – *if* you insist on coming through the sheep field, *don't* open the gate," Rosie said, clambering to her feet. "Hettie's always lurking about, waiting for an opportunity to barge her way onto the yard so she can rummage around in the feed room."

"Why don't you just climb over the gate?" Alice asked, getting up with Rosie to help her catch Hettie and return the sheep to her field.

"I keep forgetting," Megan said lightly, holding up her folder. "I was too busy looking through this. I've found some really good schooling exercises I can't wait to try on Pirate and I've put them all onto a chart – look!"

Megan opened her folder and unclipped the ring binders. She carefully laid out three A4 pieces of paper which she'd sellotaped together to reveal an intricate plan of her exercise regime for Pirate. Big red, green and yellow arrows interweaved until they reached the final box which had gold stars all around it.

"All this work will take us to our first dressage test!" Megan breathed excitedly, pointing to the box. "I just wanted to prove to you how serious I am about taking on Pirate, Charlie. I thought this might help you make up your mind about letting me have him on loan – you said you'd let

me know today, after our first hack. I know loads of people have tried him, but I watched everyone riding him from my window and I didn't think any of them got on with him like I did. Anyway, I'll just pin this up here..."

Beanie, Rosie's Jack Russell dog, eyed Megan suspiciously as she leaned over him to a spare bit of wall opposite the saddle racks. She never quite seemed to see poor Beanie and was always treading on him, squashing him or edging him off seats. She took some Blu-Tack from her pocket, then stuck the huge poster up, kneeling on the blanket box in front of her and nudging Beanie off of it in the process. As Alice and Rosie walked back into the tack room, Beanie shuffled crossly into the corner. Charlie looked at the chart, her face dropping as she realised how unimpressed Pirate would be by all the schooling Megan had planned for him, especially as there wasn't a single mention of hacking or jumping.

"Listen, Megan," Charlie began, "dressage

really isn't Pirate's thing. I mean, he's only got three speeds – jog, jog faster and flat out. That doesn't generally go down well with dressage judges, and you'll probably get fed up with him after a bit."

Megan shook her head vigorously and was about to interrupt, but Charlie continued.

"Look, there's a dressage pony being advertised in the latest *Pony Mad* – maybe that one would be better suited to all this?"

Charlie grabbed Mia's copy of *Pony Mad* and pointed to the highlighted ad. Megan glanced across, then shook her head again. "Don't worry, Charlie, I wouldn't get fed up with Pirate," she said, sounding determined. "And if you *do* let me take him on loan, I won't let you down, I promise!"

With that, Megan picked up Pirate's tack and stepped out onto the yard. Charlie sighed. Convincing Megan that Pirate wasn't her perfect pony was going to be harder than she'd thought.