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Opening extract from

Puzzle – The Runaway Pony

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Published by

Templar

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THE PONY DETECTIVES

Book Three

Puzzle
the Runaway Pony

by Belinda Rapley



templar

Chapter One

THE ponies kept their heads down to avoid the buffeting wind as they clopped along the lane. Rosie felt a large raindrop hit the back of her neck and trickle down beneath her jacket. With a shudder she looked up at the inky-grey clouds hanging in the early October skies. There wasn't a break in sight. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

"Hands up if you think we should abandon this mission and go home," Rosie said grumpily, as she felt another fat wet drop, then another. Her strawberry roan mare, Dancer, was already growing her winter coat, turning her body whiter while her head, lower legs, mane and tail stayed chestnut. But even with her thicker coat, Dancer still looked as miserable and cold as Rosie felt,

her ears back, her forelock stuck to the white blaze on her face from an earlier downpour. "I said this was a bad idea from the start. We're about to get seriously drenched again. I can *smell* the rain coming..."

It had rained almost non-stop for a week, scuppering any plans for a long ride at the start of the weekend. Instead, they'd had to spend all day Saturday grooming their ponies and hanging around in the hay barn reading *Pony Mad*. It was still raining on Sunday morning when they arrived at Blackberry Farm, but Charlie insisted that they'd have to hack out, no matter what, after the ponies had been fed.

"Charlie's right," Mia had agreed. "If we wait for the rain to stop completely we might end up not riding all weekend."

"And we're not exactly going to uncover any new mysteries hanging about at the yard all day," Charlie added. "We need to go for lots of hacks to find them!"

At the start of the summer, Charlie, Mia, Rosie and Alice had decided to call themselves the Pony Detectives, after tracking down Moonlight, a top local show jumper who'd been stolen just before the Fratton show. They'd taken on their second case at the end of the summer holidays, when Alice's pony Scout was unexpectedly put up for sale by his shady owner. With help from the RSPCA, they'd worked quickly to unravel the mystery surrounding Scout's past to save him from being sold. But that felt like ages ago now, and they hadn't had a single mystery to solve since.

Rosie was as desperate as the others to discover a new case, but she was still less than impressed with the prospect of riding out that day. She'd already argued that they should postpone it until the rain stopped because she had 'unreliable, leaky clothing', but the others were having none of it.

"Let's take a vote, then," Rosie had suggested, her pale blue eyes and English rose complexion framed by her long, straw-coloured flyaway hair.

"Who thinks we should go and get soaked – which, I might say, Dancer detests – and who thinks we should stay here in the barn where there is cake and hot chocolate available? Oh, that and the opportunity to *stay dry*!"

"Erm, I don't really mind either way..." Alice said, being indecisive. Her shoulder-length mousy-brown hair fell forward as she buried her face in Beanie, Rosie's Jack Russell dog, to avoid the dark stare Rosie was giving her from across the tack room.

On the one hand, Alice knew that Scout, the dappled grey pony she now had on permanent loan from the RSPCA, was a hardy Connemara cross and didn't mind the wet weather. On the other hand, her ancient jacket and baggy jods weren't exactly warm. But then she knew Scout was much happier getting out and being ridden than being cooped up all day.

"Well, I definitely want to go for a ride, whatever the weather," Charlie added, shoving

her hat over her dark elfin-style hair, her green eyes cheerful as she grabbed her tack. "And so will Pirate."

"Rain won't stop me riding either, so you're outvoted, Rosie." Mia smiled. Her part-bred arab, Wish Me Luck, had such thin skin beneath her silky palomino-coloured coat that Mia's parents had splashed out on every possible bit of warm, waterproof gear for her. And for Mia herself. "Come on, let's go!"

Once they were out riding the rain had stopped for a bit, but now the sky was darkening rapidly again and raindrops were starting to fall.

"We're almost there, Rosie," Charlie reassured her as she led the way on her small native pony, Pirate. He was at the front of the line of four, his small stubby ears pricked, bright and eager to keep going, and not even noticing any rain. His bushy black mane and forelock kept most of his chunky neck and mischievous face dry as they followed the route Charlie had mapped out in the hay barn

the day before. "Anyway, this is an adventure – we've never ridden out here. It's exciting!"

Rosie scowled as a gust of wind whipped off her riding silk and she almost fell out of the saddle leaning to pull it from a nearby branch. She tugged it wonkily back over her skull cap, grumbling to herself.

As Alice giggled at her friend, the faint beat of fast, rhythmic trotting hooves sounded on the lane behind them, quickly growing louder. The girls' ponies pricked their ears, turning their heads as three smartly turned-out ponies approached from behind. Their riders pulled the ponies out wide to overtake. Rosie, Alice and Charlie all looked across and gave friendly smiles.

"Hi there," Mia called out.

The two girls trotting together in front ignored Mia's greeting completely, but one of them, riding a chestnut, then nodded towards Charlie and smirked.

"How ridiculous – look! That girl must have

got on the wrong pony when she left the yard this morning," she said, purposely loud. "Or maybe her pony just shrank in the rain!"

The girl on a fine dun next to her looked at Pirate then burst out laughing.

"You're so right, Sasha," she snorted. "She's way too tall for that poor pony. I'm surprised he can move!"

Charlie went pink as she realised that they were talking about her, her smile fading quickly. She'd grown a lot taller recently and her stirrups had started to dangle well below her pony's elbows. She was light, though, and she knew that Pirate was strong and stocky enough to carry her.

A red-headed girl, who was trotting behind on a pretty skewbald pony, half-smiled at the Pony Detectives apologetically. The girl called Sasha spotted this, and tutted.

"If you don't find me funny, Bex," she said, scowling, "you could always leave the CM club, you know."

Bex looked as if she was going to reply, then thought better of it. She dropped her head as the other two smirked again before all three disappeared around a bend in the lane ahead.

"Great!" Rosie said indignantly. "Now we're being attacked by random riders as well as the rain!"

"Ignore them, Charlie," Alice said, jogging Scout up to walk alongside Pirate. "They're just being mean."

Charlie nodded, smiling a bit too brightly as she patted Pirate's thick neck. She'd had her pony for years, and they knew each other so well that she could anticipate his every move, sitting effortlessly to his excited bucks and his impatient spins as they charged about the countryside. She just had to think something and he'd do it. And Pirate was a daredevil: he'd tackle absolutely anything with gusto. No jump was too high, and that suited her completely.

When she'd first got him he'd been too big, and she'd had to loop her stirrup leathers to get

them short enough. He'd been pretty wild and she'd fallen off a lot, but as they'd grown up together Charlie had become more confident and now they were inseparable, best friends. She'd always thought that outgrowing Pirate would be something to worry about in the future. Only, that girl's comments had made her realise with a sudden jolt like being hit by lightning, leaving her insides fizzing, that the future was already here. Everything was suddenly, horribly real and she knew, deep down, that she couldn't pretend it wasn't happening, not even for just a little bit longer.

"Alice is right, Charlie," Mia added, noticing her thoughtful, unusual silence. "Their manners are clearly nowhere near as lovely as their ponies."

Charlie shrugged breezily, as if she wasn't bothered.

"I guess. Anyway, looks like we're here," she said, quickly changing the subject and firmly pushing all thoughts about Pirate and their future

together from her mind. "I reckon that must be Compton Manor!"

"Ooh, yes!" Mia squinted through the drizzle to a smart, open gate further along the tree-lined lane. "There it is!"

"Finally!" Rosie said melodramatically.

They rode to the open gate and pulled the ponies up. There, set back from the grand, sweeping drive, sat the Manor House. In front of it was the brand new competition and livery yard which had opened six months ago. It cost a fortune to stable a horse there, but according to its website it had first-class facilities, with one outdoor and two indoor schools, a jumping paddock, a cross-country course and vast American barns big enough to stable forty horses.

"Apparently one barn's kept *exclusively* for junior riders of sixteen years and under," Mia pointed out as they looked at the imposing grounds ahead of them. "They run the barn themselves too. I bet it's amazing!"

"It sounds just like Blackberry Farm, if you ask me," Rosie replied, looking slightly disgruntled. The four girls kept their ponies at the Farm, which Rosie's parents had inherited from an ancient aunt. It had a cottage, where Rosie lived with her artist mum and her farmer dad and older brother, Will. As well as the cottage there were acres of turnout and a small, eight-box yard. The girls were in charge, after Mrs Honeycott, Rosie's mum, said that they could all keep their ponies there, but only on the condition that they were responsible for looking after everything themselves. "After all, we're all under sixteen and we run our yard, too; I don't see the difference."

Mia raised her eyebrows as she looked over at Rosie, thinking that the ramshackle yard could hardly be compared to the Manor. They'd been waiting for a show to be held there so they could get a proper look round. That moment had almost arrived: in a fortnight's time Compton Manor was holding its first indoor jumping competition.

"Okay, well, we've seen it now and we know how to get here for the show," Rosie said, trying to bury her head in the neck of her jacket. She was the least excited of the four about getting to peek inside the exclusive yard, given that Dancer wasn't much of a jumper and she was the least competitive of her friends. "So can we please go home? I'm seriously about to pass out from hypothermia."

Alice shivered. "Rosie's got a point," she said. "I'd so *love* to be tucked up in the barn right now with a delicious hot chocolate to warm my hands on. My fingers are almost numb!"

At that moment Dancer spun her bottom round neatly so that her tail faced the sharp wind. As another gust billowed up, she tucked her tail in pointedly.

"See, even Dancer's turned for home," Rosie added with an exaggerated shiver. "She's normally *so* enthusiastic when I ride her that this *must* be a sign that we should head back."



Charlie and Alice giggled at Rosie, who smiled sheepishly. They all knew how lazy and sluggish Dancer was, even on her 'energetic' days.

"Come on – now we're here, lets pick up some entry forms for the show," Mia said, tucked up snugly in her fleece-lined waterproof jacket and matching trousers. "That way we can have a quick nose around at the same time..."

They followed Mia, nudging each other as they rode up a wide driveway between immaculately manicured lawns. They dismounted and walked into the yard, suddenly feeling scruffy and mud-splattered among all the neat perfection that surrounded them. Mia couldn't help but be impressed by the smart barns, with their rows of brand-new stables.

To the left stood an outdoor school, which had lots of brightly coloured jumps set up inside it. They watched for a moment as a young rider schooled his cobby cremello pony quietly between them. Then the three girls who'd trotted

past them earlier emerged from the smallest barn. Sasha, the girl who'd made the mean comment about Charlie, was still riding her chestnut pony, but the other two were following on foot as they headed towards the outdoor school. When Sasha caught sight of the boy already in there, she smirked.

"Tom, are you stupid?" she called out. The girl next to her giggled. Bex stood a step back from them, looking slightly awkward. "This is the *jumping* school, and you're not jumping."

"I'm just warming Casper up," Tom explained as he cantered past. "I'll be jumping him in a bit."

"Well 'in a bit' isn't now," Sasha pointed out, "and I'm ready to jump The Colonel, so you'll just have to find somewhere else to school Casper."

"Can't," Tom said, circling. "The indoor schools are being used by the seniors – I've already checked. Anyway, why can't we both ride in here? It's big enough."

"Because, Tom," Sasha called, glancing over to

the Pony Detectives, "I have a special project on and I need the whole space. And you shouldn't be arguing with me anyway. *I* run the Junior yard so what I say goes. Got it?"

Tom hesitated for a second, then with a sigh, brought Casper to a walk.

"Whatever," he said, opening the gate.

"Good," Sasha said, smiling sweetly for a second before adding, "although for taking ages, I'm putting you on muck-heap duty next week."

Tom fumed as he walked his pony out. As he passed by, Casper left a trail of sand from the school behind him.

"You'd better make sure you come back and sweep that up," Sasha said, "or I'll report you to Mum."

Sasha had already clocked Mia, Alice, Rosie and Charlie, and now she kicked her chestnut into a walk and headed over to them.

"Sorry about that," she smiled, although Charlie couldn't help wondering if the whole

episode had been for their benefit, "but you know what it's like. When you're in charge you have to remind everyone who's boss every now and again."

Mia was convinced that Sasha's 'every now and again' really meant 'all the time'. To get that good at being mean took practice.

"Anyway, you're the ones from the ride just now, aren't you?" Sasha said. "So, how can I help? The Junior yard's full and the waiting list is huge. And I'm really picky about who I let join it, too."

Sasha looked them all up and down, pointedly.

"Oh, we only came for some entry forms for the show," Mia said, trying to keep the irritation out of her voice.

"Which classes are you entering?" Sasha asked, gathering up her chestnut's reins. Alice felt sorry for him – judging by the sweat on his flanks he'd already done more than enough without being jumped too. "*I've* designed the course for the Junior Trophy myself."

"With your mum's help," Bex pointed out. Sasha scowled at her.

"She approved my design," Sasha said coolly, "but *I* was the genius behind it."

"Whatever, there's no point in any of you entering the Trophy," the other girl, who had short blonde hair, said quickly. "Sasha and The Colonel are unbeatable."

"The forms are in the office if you *do* want to bother," Sasha said. "But Jade's right. The Colonel's a jumping machine. Anyway, I can't sit around here all day – I've got to get some practice in."

"Not that you need any," Bex said, forcing a smile.

"Don't be a creep, Bex," Jade tutted.

"If you're not careful, Bex," Sasha sighed as they turned back to the school, "I *will* throw you out of the CM club, just because you're annoying me. Now, change those fences round. You know where."

"That's the second time Sasha's mentioned the

CM club," Alice said, looking over to the school. "I wonder what it is?"

"I don't know, but if Sasha's in it," Rosie muttered, "I doubt it's very nice."

The Pony Detectives watched Bex and Jade altering the poles while Sasha pointed and barked orders. Then she cantered round on her pony before starting to jump the huge fences. The Colonel was slick over them, but as he jumped he swished his tail round and round, his ears back.

"He doesn't exactly look happy, does he?" Rosie commented quietly as they stood and watched for a moment.

"A bit like everyone else around here," Charlie said, frowning.

She took Wish's reins as Mia ducked into the office to find the entry forms. Tom had quickly put Casper away and followed Mia in there, looking red and flustered.

"Mrs Compton," he said as the woman behind the desk pointed out the forms to Mia. Mia

lingered, slowly counting out her handful of forms so that she could eavesdrop. "I want to report a problem..."

"Yes, well, Tom, you're from the Under 16s yard, aren't you?" Mrs Compton said, glancing up at him then back down to her paperwork. "So you know how this all works. You have to talk to my daughter Sasha if you have any problems. She's in charge of your yard."

"But it's *about* Sasha…" Tom started, sounding frustrated.

"Like I said, all complaints go through Sasha," Mrs Compton cut in, peering over her half-moon glasses. "If she can't deal with it, then she'll talk to me. Now, I'm very busy."

Mrs Compton waved her hand, dismissing Tom in an instant. He rolled his eyes as he turned and stomped out. Mia followed him, thinking that however nice Compton Manor looked from the outside, it was the least friendly yard she'd ever set foot on.