

**RIVALRY IN
RIDING BOOTS**

By Annie Le Voguer

CHAPTER ONE

Lilly hesitated, fiddling nervously with the car keys in her lap. Exhaled, tried to remain focused. This was it. This was the now or never moment she had been waiting for.

Another car crunched through the snow, made her jump out of her daze as it pulled up next to her. The driver looked at her through the window, grinned and gave her a wave. Karl Lister, the accountant.

With four other cars already parked up, it was a sign the team were all there. The pitch was on.

Her opportunity to create a fresh life, time to move on from the daily chaos of the livery yard. Currently her life was all about being the poker face of diplomacy when faced with an owner who asked the impossible for their horse. Or scouting for a freelance to cover when a groom texted her five minutes before duties to say they were sick. The horses, she loved. It was people that bothered her.

Glancing into the rear-view mirror, she tucked a stray auburn lock behind her ear, hoping the rest would remain in her scrunchy for the next couple of hours. It usually didn't.

"Karl, thanks for coming at short notice" Lilly called boldly as they both got out of their cars.

Hers, an ancient Fiesta she called Red Rocket. His, a black S Type Jaguar. Probably called curvylicious, in keeping with the sleek design. A bit like having a gleaming thoroughbred racehorse stood next to a shaggy Shetland pony.

She turned back to push the driver seat down, leant in to pull at the strap of the rucksack on the back seat. It had snagged on the saddle she'd slung in two days previous. She really needed to try it on Sage today, his owner was after a seventeen-inch black dressage fit, she could make fifty quid on the deal.

With one leg bent in, one stretched out behind her, she fiddled to free the buckle from the stirrup it was attached to.

Lilly could feel herself grow hot. Her face reddened up like an embarrassed school kid being called out by a teacher for forgetting her homework.

Of all days, today she wanted to look sleek and smooth. Like that Jag. Why had she left in such a rush? Why had she not just put the frickin' saddle in the tack room?

A firm tug of the rucksack whilst holding the saddle by the pommel, the neon pink and white bag finally gave way.

Lilly slammed the door shut in triumph, slung the bag over her shoulder, weighted down with A4 folders. One for each member of this coddled together Committee. She turned back to Karl, blew upwards to remove that stray wisp of hair now covering her left eye. The scrunchy was failing miserably in its job to keep the curls at bay.

Karl stood by his car with a lopsided grin on his face. A slim black leather briefcase with KL in gold neatly inscribed in the top corner held firmly in his right hand.

The pink flushed crimson on her face. Realisation dawned that he'd just had a view of her backside as she'd leaned in. In haste, she'd thrown on the red lacy knickers that she found on the floor. The same ones that she had been all too eager to allow Jay to remove the night

before. Bugger. Now, through her stretched cream jodhpurs, she'd given this guy a glimpse too.

"Lilly." He pushed back his oversized glasses with a long, suntanned middle finger. The tortoiseshell rings made him look like an owl. A brown owl dressed in a pinstripe grey suit with a blue tie, covered in little yellow horseshoes.

"Always a pleasure to, um, see you."

"Are you wearing that for my luck or yours?" Lilly pointed to his tie, trying to distract from the ungainly scuffling, the underwear reveal. She was certain she could melt the snow settling at her feet if she got any hotter.

"Ah, matching socks too," he grinned. He brought his right leg up to his left knee, pulled at his trouser bottom with a flourish.

"I love it!" she declared, her eyes widening in exaggerated amazement. Great, bring the conversation back in touch, she thought.

"More important, where have you been to get a tan like that? Not your garden in this weather," she asked.

"Bermuda. I got home last Friday. A glorious thirty-two degrees, sun, sea, no triangle though," he replied merrily.

"You just masquerade as a boring chief accountant, don't you? I bet you were on the beach drinking margaritas with the senioritas, shmoozing the good life," she teased. "Now I know where that slight smell of coconut is from."

He winked at her, an eyebrow shooting up, reminiscent of Dwayne Johnson.

“Good, shall we? If I stay out any longer, my tan might fade,” he joked.

Despite the pants on parade moment, he was a welcome reprieve. Ahead lay hard work to convince a formidable group to give her the green light. Right this minute, she wanted to throw up.

She sensed Karl was a genuine man, with his ready humour and open face. One you could depend on to do the right thing. Lilly hoped she could today.

Both pressed their key fobs. An ungainly clonk sounded heavy over the smooth higher pitched beep beep of the Jaguar. Just to add further humiliation. Well, her car may not be worth stealing, but that rogue saddle was valued at over a thousand pounds.

Brick pillars stood either side of the steps as they stepped up to the door.

Butterflies somersaulted in her stomach as she tried to fight back the nauseous feeling. Actually no. More a crescendo of bats flying into each other to escape the cave and go feed on the gnats that hung about the water troughs in May.

A flurry of snow had fallen that morning. Feeding all the horses on the yard, she'd had to break the ice on several water buckets as she went. A plastic bottle covered the lagging on the tap pipe, a trick to keep fresh water available. It was working. For now.

Lilly had thirty horses in her care. Alison, her head groom, had prepared feeds the previous day but it was always Lilly that distributed them. Stacked up in the big wheelbarrow, wobbling as if they'd tip over at any moment as she pushed it along the rows.

Despite the blackness and the cold, she loved that time of day. No one else about, just the sound of the horses waking, snorting, their breath like smokers in the cold. Whickers in anticipation of breakfast, the odd one kicking the door impatiently. This was her bliss.

She had slept little last night. Sleep was for nights when she was alone, not when sharing a bed, and his visit had been a very welcome one after two weeks apart. Country and status divided their lives. Great big chunky divisions that gave her doubts anything could come of it. Was he really telling the truth when he said he was a one-woman man and she was his one woman? Could she dare believe he wasn't in fact saying that to all the babes in his bed?

He promised that she was the only one, claimed any sexual frustration was taken out in the hour-long gym workouts each evening. He also promised to get over more, suggested she could visit him? Yeah, like that was so easy when you had responsibility of a yard full of horses and their daily care. Assurances aplenty that he wasn't a player, that he wanted a commitment. Words. Words she wanted to believe. Dare she open her heart and let him in?

Oh yeah, she remembered with relish. She had been very keen to open her body and let him in last night, that's why she was so late. An early morning quickie when the alarm had shrilled the five a.m. wake up. Her body reacted at the memory.

Jay looked like he was being truthful as he said goodbye, caressing her cheek, his hand curled into her hair as he drew her back in for one last delicious kiss.

His thick dark eyebrows shot downwards to his nose like two diagonals, piercingly sky-blue eyes bore into her soul. He had gazed at her with such urgent desire; it was tough to pull away from the smouldering smooch.

Lilly could almost taste him now as the enormous door swung open, breaking her thoughts. Mrs C, the housekeeper, welcomed them both into the manor.

“Come in, both of you. I’ve left out hot coffee and croissant, and your green tea, Lilly.” The little woman with a soft voice, severe blue grey bun and plump cheeks motioned them inside, closing the protective barrier of heavy wooden oak door behind them from the swirl of frozen air attempting to invade the inner warmth.

Lilly welcomed the heat of the hallway as she removed her coat and boots, slipping on the fleecy white slippers laid out underneath the coat rail. She knew Mrs C was a stickler in keeping the outdoors outside and away from her clean floor. It offered less housework, something Lilly approved of. She had enough to do cleaning up after horses.

With an involuntary shiver she folded her arms about her. Skin friction worked to warm up. Last night, skin friction..... oh snap out of it, she muttered under her breath.

“Everyone’s in the dining room, this way”. Mrs C walked them across the shiny black and white chequerboard floor to the far end of the hall, second door on the right.

This is the big lifetime goal moment. Stop with the flashbacks, it was only sex. Unbelievable sex, accepted, but this, this today, this is the future. Lilly crossed the hall, mind-punching herself to focus.

As she stepped, she smoothed sweaty palms down her thighs, her heart boomed in her chest. The bong of the grandfather clock made her jump as it struck the hour.

Nerves jingled, doubt picked away at the steely determination previously so strong on the drive up. A resolve that had gripped her as the flakes fell and the car slipped along the farm

track already covered in a fine white coat, the wipers furiously keeping her screen clear as she tore along.

Lilly now wondered if she'd done the right thing wearing her equestrian clothing. She'd argued the point with herself, smart suit versus horse gear. Admittedly, she didn't have a smart suit, or any suit come to that, but the swing-o-meter had been that she wanted to project what she represented. That she was in the business of horses, plain and simple.

She patted down the pocket insert across the front of her forest green jumper. The last thing she needed was for something to clonk out onto the table by mistake mid-flow, like a hoof pick or a curry comb. It was top of the range horse gear, made by Marengo, the number one fashion in equestrian wear. One of her full-time liveries owned the company and the top had been a Christmas present. She must make sure it was pulled down over her arse though, or they'd all have the flash of red lace.

“Do I look ok?” she asked Karl before they entered.

“It's not what you wear but how you wear it, my dear,” he clarified. That elongated finger pushed his glasses up his nose again, more than just reassurance on his face.

She cursed loudly in her head. Did she actually appear presentable or was he talking about her underwear?

Either way, it was too late to change. They were all in the room waiting.

At their entrance, Piers rose to his feet, strode over to shake Karl by the hand, kiss Lilly on each cheek.

Piers Wingfield Brown. Owner of this manor, the estate, her yard, and a multi-million-pound business. Albeit largely retired, he retained a token seat on the Board, along with a few Directorships of charities and trusts. His opinion was valuable, it would certainly sway the vote.

She was glad they had a good rapport. That she continued to encourage him to visit the yard when he felt low. Following the loss of his wife two years ago, he had spiralled into a state of despair. With gentle persuasion from the Board, he stepped down from running his empire.

On those visits, Lilly offered coffee and time. Often, they sat together in her lounge as he re-countered memories of his youth. The swashbuckling days, as he called them, a time when he mixed with Duran Duran in Rio, partied like Jagger in New York, drank cocktails in Juans Les Pins. Many a polo tournament too, often with Prince Charles, in Argentina. Golden years.

She would laugh with him at the stories. As his face became animated a twinkle would appear. This twinkle could develop into a mist of laughter or tears as his recollections spilt out over a cheese and pickle sandwich.

Janette had walked into his life at the international Hockmead show. His eyes lit up bright each time he recounted the story. How he'd been enchanted by her eyes, the blue of the brightest summer day. He had never left her side until the day she died.

It would be at this point he'd get his hankie out and dab at his eyes, melancholy etched on his still relatively handsome yet weary face.

Today, however, Lilly saw him animated, back in the game, eyes alert. His thinning white hair tumbled over his forehead with purpose as he pumped hands with everyone, joking and smiling. A Committee gathered to decide whether to give the go ahead for a project she first raised with him months back.

How many hours must she have spent? From a spark she built a bonfire, poured over google maps of the fields on the estate, pieced together a route, researched costs, sponsorship, even the tiniest of detail such as the design of the rosette.

The final folder was placed on each of the seven settings. She plugged the laptop into the overhead projector. As the lamp flickered into life, so did her plan. A background image of the manor grounds, thick black typeface over the middle:

‘WINGFIELD THREE DAY TRIALS – THE PROPOSAL.’

CHAPTER TWO

As everyone made their way to their seats, she scrutinised them. With a cup in one hand, a hot pastry or biscuit juggled on the edge of the saucer, she imagined how they felt. Hoped the joviality was positive and not reactionary to the snacks. A thoughtful touch. Note to self, send Mrs C flowers for the effort made on her behalf.

With a scrape of his chair, Piers stood. Drew himself up to his full six feet, clapped to announce silence. The room fell quiet.

Lilly noticed that Karl had opened the folder and was studying the contents, nibbling on a digestive.

Sat motionless, staring at the screen was Mark Larch, Director of Wingfield Aggregates. A figure trusted by Piers, not by Lilly. She wondered if he was silently willing that the projector's bulb would blow and along with it, her break.

Steel grey hair moulded to his head with a good dollop of gel. He had taken off his jacket, placed it over the back of the chair. His shirt appeared starched rigid, creases down each arm that might cut through wood. She wondered now if his pyjamas had creases on the sleeves too.

Pam Cook. PR guru for Wingfield Group plc. No doubt primed to pull apart her attempt at event marketing. Pam sat to Mark's left, her highlighted blonde hair a perfect bob, full face make-up with bright red lipstick. A navy-blue military style dress fitted like a glove. She must be about the same age as me, Lilly assumed, yet different world. Make up? She couldn't remember the last time she'd worn anything other than mascara, maybe a bit of lippy. Just

how long would she need to create a face as perfect? Too long, she suspected. Likely as not, she'd be able to get four stables mucked out, and a dozen haynets made up in the same time.

At the far end of the table sat Dean Mullins. He shot her a conspiratorial glance as he bit into his croissant, flakes spilling down his red pullover. Some landed in his hipster beard which he brushed away surreptitiously to the floor. Manager of the local Council events team, they'd been after opening the Estate to the public for years. Guaranteed to vote yes. Preliminary meetings with his team had helped with some crucial facts and figures.

Next was Joe. Farmer of the two-thousand-acre estate. He too had worked with her in terms of footprint, or hoofprint. Although, he had made it clear he would go with 'whatever Mr Wingfield decides'. At twenty-eight, he was the youngest in the room. Being the size and shape of a bear, she amazed how he blended into the background. No doubt due to his quiet demeanour and choice of seat at the far end by the projector. Not to be underestimated as only last year he introduced revolutionary technology to the estate and was being touted as an industry motivator. Lilly recalled the description in *Farmers World*, an economic and environmental saviour. Piers looked on him like a second son.

Lilly moved on around the table, analysing each one gathered to decide on her dream.

Karl. Could go either way.

The man himself, Piers. Well, who knew how he'd be persuaded? Aware his moods could swing dependent on his choice of breakfast, let alone a board discussion.

Last but no means least, on the far end of the table, someone one hundred percent team Lilly. Carole Beattie, from *Horse & Hound* magazine. She agreed to attend to help emphasise the importance of such an event. Both for the equine industry and the local economy. Scarf

wrapped around her neck as if she were about to walk the Matterhorn. She turned the pages of her folder with keen interest.

“Good morning and thank you all for being here,” Piers began.

“Quick introductions so everyone knows who you all are. I’ll start by asking you to say your name and why you’re here, Lilly, you go first.”

She stood up, a little shaky, smiling as boldly as she could.

“Hi, my name is Lilly Marshall. I run the Wingfield Equestrian Livery yard and I’m asking you all here today to approve the formation of the three-day horse trials set amongst these lovely grounds.”

“Thank you, Lilly, I’ll go next. Piers Wingfield Brown, and these are my lovely grounds the proposal is based upon.” He chuckled as he sat back down.

Once the room knew name and job title, Lilly clicked the clicker that started the power point presentation. The one she’d reworked a hundred times. Anxious it be slick and professional. No turning back.

All her life she’d been around horses. First as a child, then gaining an equine diploma at college. A further two years teaching children and adults the art of sitting on a horse and staying on. It always went ok until she summoned the dreaded words ‘trot on’. Then she’d watch the rider bounce helplessly, or fall, or be unable to even get the unhelpful steed to trot more than five paces before returning to a walk. She had enjoyed getting them over this and into a unified ‘up, down’ to the horse’s gait. The line goes that you need to fall off fifty times to be a good rider. In her eyes, to be a rider at all, you needed to pass the trotting stage.

A few other jobs in-between. Now this.

The livery yard had been home for the last two years. Whilst Lilly loved her business, it was hard work, physically and mentally, the days endless. Always an incident; fencing would break; someone would complain the wrong rug had been put on their horse; a shoe would be thrown on the morning of a show. Or, as she was prayed would not happen again, the pipes froze and there was no running water. She'd lost count of the times she'd been kicked, knocked over or squashed by horses vying to get in or out of their fields. Trapped between them, dangling by a lead rope, being ignored as she shouted 'whoa there'.

Not to mention money was tight. Just when she thought she had enough to invest in new equipment, something happened that took that spare cash. She hardly ever took a wage and the fourteen-hour days were taking their toll.

If this event proved a success, Lilly planned to hire more staff, take a backseat and spend her time developing the trials to make them better each year. Less of the daily chores, more time with Jay, remain involved with horses without the constant smell of wee soaked straw on her clothes. Not so much Amen to that, but Ammonia.

She'd approached Piers with the idea just before Christmas. He knew several people on whose estate such sporting events took place. His response was positive, the thought of so much activity took him back to the old days when the manor was party central. There was a but, he needed to make sure it was watertight. Every aspect checked. He didn't want his grounds ruined in a free for all. Or his reputation.

So here they were today. In summing up, Lilly knew Dean and Dawn were on side. Mark was the sticking point, which meant Pam, Karl, Piers and Joe might be too. Mark was not a fan of horses, viewing the proposal as a half-baked horse gymkhana filled with Thelwell

style children falling off and screaming, not a vision he felt matched the company profile. His position being that the potential failure would reflect on the reputation of Wingfield Aggregates. It would be a no from him.

Lilly pressed the clicker for the next slide, pinched herself for luck. Exhaled the air held tight within her that altered her voice several notches higher than usual. “I’ll run through my presentation with you. I’ll be happy to answer any questions you may have after that.”

She scanned the room to see that she had their attention. A quick sip of water and away.

“A little background.” She faced the screen which displayed a line of cavalymen, all ready for battle.

“Where did eventing start and why? Well, its roots go back to the days of comprehensive cavalry tests. Those required the rider and horse to master several disciplines. Steadiness in parade, being able to cross-country at speed in battle, plus the fitness and agility. These offered the rider a better chance of survival.”

Click. Next slide.

“Ever wondered where the word management comes from? Lord Cavendish, first Duke of Newcastle.” She used the laser on her clicker to beam a red light onto his face.

“Back in the 1600s, he established the manege. An indoor arena where he could practice his skills. Prowess in this art demonstrated an accomplished horseman.

“Today, when you manage your team well, you offer a stable environment. See how our language, even in business, involves horses.” She paused a moment to take in the acknowledgement about the table, in particular Mark, who remained stony faced.

“I’ve got the bit between my cheeks on this,” she added. A couple of chuckles.

Click. New slide. One in which a horse leapt a fallen tree against the backdrop of Burghley estate.

“Burghley. One of only six events in the world at five-star stage. The best of the best. Burghley started out in 1961 with just nineteen competitors and twelve thousand spectators. Today, four hundred and fifty horses take part, eighty are the best in the world. One hundred and seventy thousand spectators. Some six hundred exhibitors and food stalls.”

Give them facts and figures, Jay had said. Money. Makes the impact in a Boardroom. Deliver up the potential for making money.

She relaxed into her stride. Nerves faded; her passion fired up as she continued the presentation. She proposed three main classes and to follow guidelines, she had poured over the British Evening rules and regs right at the start of this journey. Checked and double checked every element of the course.

So far, so good.

“Now, the financial projections.” Lilly noted that even Mark was checking her spreadsheet as she spoke. Head bent, pencil running down the page. At least he was listening.

“Yes. This is not your everyday pony club event. This is high end, high spend, high quality sport,” she pitched.

“I’ve detailed every aspect of projected income and outgoing. You’ll find it all in your packs. Though, to avoid a protracted presentation, I’m happy to explain any of it later.

Lilly wanted to establish a first-class national equestrian event. Maybe take it to international level.

“To conclude. My vision is for The Wingfield Horse trials to become an established name on the circuit. Thank you for listening.”

Lilly sat down to a round of applause.

Mark was straight in. Chose not to clap, or even wait until the clapping stopped.

“All very slick, Lilly, but is the world ready for yet another horse event? I refer to page seventeen in your folder, a calendar from last year’s eventing activities. I count twenty-five. Accepted, I may have seen clips of Badminton on TV. But to be honest, I’d rather go to Silverstone for the cars, a premier league football match even. I suspect others will agree. It’s elite, old fashioned, just like your Lord Cavendish.” With a smirk, he looked about, searching for approval.

As the conversation battled between for and against, Lilly noticed the snow was falling heavier, a blur of white through the windows that made her think about the horses, that the water troughs would be iced over in the far pasture. Some didn’t mind the snow, but access to fresh water would be essential. She’d drive past on the way back and check.

Karl brought her back to the session. “I see this as potential revenue for the estate. We’ve looked at detaching running costs from the company for a while. With the right-wing roof in need of urgent repair, would this not be a prospect worth considering? Net profit figures along with year-in growth could offer a solution.”

“Where is our Vice President today?” asked Pam. “Do we have his opinion, maybe it would help everyone vote?”

“I had hoped my son would be here today too.” Piers replied. “He flew in overnight but had to drive up to Sheffield first thing on a call out from Wingfield quarry.” He looked across at Mark. “Didn’t Julian call you?”

“No. I tried first thing this morning, but his phone went to answer.”

“I caught him.” Joe spoke in his deep Hampshire burr. It suited him, an earthy quality that stood out amongst the well-spoken Londoners. “Last night, he’s been helping me with a funding proposal.”

A mop of black hair fell out around his cap, three-day-old stubble covered his chin. Lack of time, not designer. Lambing was in full swing.

“Said it would give his dad something to do. Something not business related.”

Mark spluttered loudly.

“Hardly the seal of approval,” he muttered.

“Maybe not, but he also said I were to add his yes to the vote.” Joe added, eyes full of mischief.

“He said yes?” Mark questioned, rolling his eyes with an audible sigh.

“Aye, he did. Sent me the text to confirm it too. Said I was to show you as you may question my word.”

Joe searched about in the large pocket of his baggy fleece for his iPhone. The room alive with drawn breath, whispers.

“Here you go.” He thrust the phone towards Mark, who sat three people down. Mark squinted, refocused his eyes on the screen. A scowl of disgust and inevitability appeared.

Lilly returned to the room with a jerk as Joe made his revelation. Her heart was in her mouth, surely this was going to persuade Piers to push for a yes?

“I’d like to record my strong objections; I refuse to be held account further down the line when it’s goes pear-shaped.” Mark stated, annoyance written over his face. He shifted on his chair, irritated by the fait accompli.

“Acknowledged. Thank you, Mark.” Piers glanced at his watch, clapped his hands together.

“Ok, shall we wrap this up? I expect you are keen to return to your jobs. A show of hands please, all in favour of the Wingfield Horse trials?”

He looked around the room. All hands up, except Mark.

“Splendid. Lilly, you have the go ahead.” He gave her a broad smile.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught Mark about to say something. Probably that his hand had not been raised. He shuffled the folder and papers into his briefcase, snapping it shut. His chair almost fell as he jumped up, grabbed his jacket then strode out of the room, radiating disapproval.

“Lunch?” Piers whispered to Lilly hopefully.

“What do you have to offer?” she whispered back, continuing to nod and thank people as they filed out.

“No meat, I assure you, I’ve been told by the doctor to cut down. Likelihood it’ll be something green, I seem to be turning into a rabbit these days.” His eyes turned down; mouth formed a fake pout. “No chance of being an old rebel, I’m afraid. Mrs C’s cleared the freezer of the hidden sausages behind the peas.” He let out a dramatic sigh.

“Go on, Piers, lunch it is,” she accepted. High on the adrenaline surging through her body, she owed him another hour of her time.

CHAPTER THREE

The ice had already been broken in every field as she checked on her way back. Lilly stopped for a moment to take some photos on her phone, the sky had cleared and a weak sun had appeared. The land lay in front of her a deep white, several horses kicking up the snow with their hooves as they cantered about. The boughs of the oak trees on the left bowed with the weight, droplets of water falling as the snow melted. She'd post the photos onto the yard facebook page, a fun moment of horse play.

Back at the yard, Lilly stopped in on Alison to see if there was anything urgent. Reassured, she agreed to be back in time for the afternoon shift. Part of the day when horses needed to be brought in, hooves picked out, mud hosed off legs. Once in the stable turnout rugs had to be taken off, stable rugs on, horses feeds, hay, top up water. The daily winter routine.

Ruby, her little brown Staffie, was waiting in the hallway. She flung herself at Lilly's legs as she bounced about with the joy of a dog.

"Miss me, did you, sweetie? Sorry, this time I couldn't take you. How's about a treat as you've been such a good girl?" She fussed over her companion, reached for a biscuit from the jar she kept by the front door.

Ruby gave a little woof in delight, scooped down her bone shaped delicacy in two crunches, wagged her tail, eyes eager for another.

Lilly's kitchen and lounge shouted horse. Walls adorned with various photos and paintings of horses she had known and loved. At one point she wondered if it she over-

cluttered. Then she reminded herself, you can never have enough pictures of horses. The collection continued to grow.

Rosettes, trophies and plaques decorated the pale blue walls. Most were from her moments of success in the ring. A turquoise and pink rosette, her first and most special, had pride of place, framed with a photo. A clear round, aged nine, on a pony borrowed from the riding school where she helped out. In exchange for the work, she'd received a weekly lesson. Even though the rosette was faded, it represented the beginning. From first small success to present day. A much larger win. She gave a little shudder of excitement at this reflection.

The lounge doubled as a meet for the team every Monday morning. Over coffee they would chat about upcoming events, both on site and the shows liveries wanted to attend that involved preparation. A relaxed and comfortable setting, the drawback being that the floor was usually covered in bits of shaving, hay and general muck from the yard. No matter how much she hoovered. In all honesty, hoovering was low down on the list of objectives after a full day outside. Occasionally, she just about managed to eat her dinner before falling asleep, never mind being Queen of clean indoors.

Upstairs lay her sanctuary, a haven in which to unwind. Only one other saw this inner sanctum. And Ruby. Her little pink bed and blanket set out at the foot of the bed.

Blood still pumping, she needed to remain active. With a glance around at the clutter she began to grab items to tidy. Leg bandages spilt over the coffee table she threw in the washing machine along with brushing boots, a couple of towels and a hoodie, ready to switch on later.

Next, she turned to the tack. Lilly kept a large bucket in the corner for body parts. Already half full with bits, cheek pieces, reins, the odd browband, a couple of stirrups and a riding boot. Who was walking around with just the one? The boot had been there for at least two weeks now. Some pieces needed a stitch, some a clean. Others were things that people brought with them and forgot as they left. Eventually, they would root them back out when they remembered.

Tidy complete, she picked up the mugs that lay about. Filled the kitchen sink with hot soapy water, placed them in to soak. The window above the basin looked out to the yard to the right. To the left, fields reached down as far as the main road, a drive split down the middle. Near the bottom of that drive, tucked away from view, was the DIY area. She could just see the start of the car park from here, but not the stables.

Lilly settled at the kitchen table, picked a numnah that had been left on the chair to wash, under which lay her laptop, the latest issue of Horse and Hound on top. Before she could dance about the floor doing her winner winner chicken dinner dance, she focused. Ever the professional.

She had to check emails, texts and look on Facebook, put the photos up. The account was used by all for posting information, several used it to ask her for last minute extra services. Being 'friends' with many of her clients on their personal sites also meant that she knew what they were up to. If they'd been out late, had an argument, upcoming holiday plans, and moods. Feeling 'meh' or an angry emoji could upset the atmosphere on the yard from pleasant to hysterical. 'In a relationship' might tip into anarchy.

She also wanted to update the spreadsheets with the services from yesterday. This information was all in the big diary she took earlier after seeing Alison. The yard Bible, the

most important document of all. Filled with the life of the yard, purporting to the daily schedule. From the neat inputted duties written up each Sunday to scrawled notes. ‘Tov had an extra haynet’. ‘On a course, please can you ride Noddy’. Or ‘Bo needs one sachet of bute in his night feed for the next week’. If she didn’t input these changes every day, she worried things might go astray, become mixed up, missed out, which may cause accounts going out wrong. Only last week, at the start of the month, she’d had one client complain about additional costs that she was able to show had, in fact, been requested. It all worked because she was such a stickler for detail.

Lilly usually covered this job after morning feeds. Time when she had a quiet hour to herself. Today, it was past two o’clock. If she didn’t get the book back out before bring-in time, the grooms may forget the add-ons. That or write them on a scrap of paper that they might then lose. With winter tasks such as washing down muddy legs, the one pound fifty might not appear much. But it added up with twenty odd horses seven days a week.

By sitting down and concentrating, Lilly hoped it would calm her down. Stop the shaking of excitement that gripped her. It made her jump about like a madwoman with little whoops of delight. Her mind was on full gallop. She needed to calm, prepare how to tell the team the good news.

Methodically, she worked through to find each owner, the additional fee input against the horse. Next, she scored out the diary note in green highlighter to acknowledge its entry.

How would she start?

“Guys, I’m going to be less hands on for a few months.” No, that was not a good opening bid. They’d immediately see extra stables lined up for them.

“Guys, I need your help.” Better. Get them on side, be sympathetic.

As she fumbled about for words her phone beeped. A message from Jay.

“Great news, my red-hot entrepreneur. Sorry for late reply, it’s been a long drive. Catch up later xx.”

She smiled. She’d sent him a text as the Committee said their goodbyes, desperate to call him but knowing it would go to answerphone. His six-figure salary didn’t offer time in the day for frivolities like personal calls, he’d stated from the outset. Often it didn’t offer time in the evening either. But she wouldn’t focus on that right now.

Lilly replied, with lots of kisses and a naughty gif. She hoped catch up meant he’d be able to make another overnight stop.

He seemed so different to the last man she’d fallen in love with. But that one had seemed so right to start with too. She shuddered. She *never* wanted to encounter one like him again. Ever.

A fleeting memory flashed in her mind. Wayne, the ranch hand. Or should that be randy hand? She’d worked with him on a ranch close to Carson City, Nevada, the ranch where she’d gone to train mustangs just weeks after her twenty-first birthday.

Fact. Her real-life cowboy turned out to be more Crystal meth than Rhinestone. His star-spangled rodeos were drug splatted romps, and he would NEVER get cards and letters from her.

Fuckaroo was, in fact, how she had described him to his face. It was the day she’d had enough and fled to Reno to pick up a flight home.

One lucky night at a casino and he'd spent the next month snorting the money up his nose whilst cavorting with prostitutes in the nearby brothels. Not her type of guy after all.

Jay was the first man Lilly had allowed back into her life since having her heart broken. The previous ten years she'd chosen to focus on horses.

They met at a summer ball for the local pony club. Her best friend, Rico, persuaded her to go along as his plus one. She expected to make polite conversation, watch as others drank too much, danced until they threw up, or stagger into bushes with a willing partner for a casual sexual encounter.

But as Rico led her to their table, there he sat. To the left of her place setting, sporting a tan that looked like he'd just walked off the beach in St Tropez. His dark eyebrows drawing her into intense blue eyes. Blue like a Greek coastline on a summer day. She knew that because it had been her one and only holiday destination.

He jumped up to pull out her chair as she stood dazzled by his Hollywood smile. When his fingers touched her, a shudder shot through her, one she'd thought dead and buried.

Handsome, charming, witty and extremely attentive. He could have his pick of women and there were plenty that flirted and flaunted before him that night, desperate to get his attention.

They had clicked instantly, talked the night away. Followed up by more nights whenever he was in the country. Six months in, Lilly stalled at making it public. She was determined to get this event up and running before making such a commitment, wanted to make sure she was actually ready for the next step.

“I promise, I will even change my Facebook page to ‘in a relationship’, please wait,” she’d pleaded just the night before.

Love had not been on her agenda. She reminded herself that career came first. If he really was the one, he’d give her that. If not, well, she didn’t want to consider it.

To halt further dissection of her love life, Lilly closed the laptop with a snap. She grabbed her coat, called to Ruby, and went back out to bring in the horses.

The process was never smooth. In the snow, mud and freezing cold conditions, horses tended to play up more, eager to get to their stables where a haynet would be waiting, a dry floor, a warm fleece instead of the wet rug. They jostled each other at the gate, paced up and down, threw their necks high, whinnying with expectation, adding to the already churned up mud.

You would think it be a simple enough task to hook a head-collar over the head. Not when they all wanted in at the same time. They pushed against the field gate, an ominous creak as the weight of several horses vied for prime position. With a high-pitched squeal, a pair of hooves would fly out with a splatter of mud flying in several directions.

A successful capture of one. But they took the horses in pairs.

Now the game would hot up. With her left hand gripped to the lead rope of one, she had to push several horses aside to step towards the other pair. Her boot may be sucked down into the mire, leave her rooted in position. Or worse, dangled at the end of the lead rope. One boot on, one boot firmly in the mud, one socked leg bent at the knee so as not to make contact with the ground.

The process was similar to making it through the legs of a rugby scrum whilst spinning plates.

This winter, Lilly had fenced off fields to reduce the herds into smaller groups in an attempt to avoid riots, it gave the grooms a fighting chance in the Gladiatorial battle. She didn't want an injury; a flying kick could be lethal.

In the summer months it was the total opposite. Horses weren't interested in leaving behind their lush grass. A walk through a field towards the horse you wanted to catch, its head down, casually grazing. Until you were within touching distance. Head would come up. A withering gaze. A turn to swish its tail in your face, to trot away to the furthest corner of the field.

Today, with minimal fuss, all horses and grooms made it back in one piece. Legs washed, hooves picked out, stable rugs in place. Finally left to merrily munch on their evening meal with contented noises, an occasional kick against feed bucket as the team completed their day.

Lilly elected to make her announcement at the team meet next morning. She figured it gave her time to gather up ideas, prepare a rota, include them in the organisation. She bid them goodnight, headed inside to make herself some food and begin her notes.

Half way through eating, there was a furious knocking at the door. Lilly glanced at the time on her phone. Seven fifteen. Panic spread over her. Had someone taken a fall in the sandschool? She knew several owners were outside. The staff may have finished at five, but people showed up after their own work to ride in her floodlit sandschool.

“Whoa with the banging, I'm on my way,” she shouted as she got up.

Taylor, the teenager from the DIY yard, stood on the doorstep looking pale and worried.

“Robin has got out of his stable again. Eaten all the feeds left out for the morning. I don’t know which horse has what, so I can’t make more up. They’re going mad, kicking their doors like they’re going to break them down. And I’m worried Robin now looks like he may have given himself colic,” she wailed.

“That little bugger, I suppose she forgot the kick bolt on the bottom of the door. For the hundredth time. I’ve warned her, if that bloody horse gets out one day, he’ll kill himself.” Lilly muttered more to herself than the girl before her.

Picking up a coat, she pulled on her boots, told Ruby to stay put. With a shiver as the icy night air hit her, she ran with Taylor as fast as she could down the track to view the damage.

No one else was at the DIY yard, they had all been up already. Ridden, well maybe, their horse put away for the night. She knew Taylor was always first up in the morning and last at night. Dedicated to her little grey showjumper, Mystic. Come spring, it would be a different matter, with warmer and lighter evenings. Then, all the owners would stay til late, drink coffee, even make dinner in the compact kitchen. It offered a chance to be social and talk horse.

But now, pitch black and with a light drizzle hitting the snow that remained from the morning’s fall, the car park was empty. Lilly felt sure the sludge would be compacted ice by the morning. She made a mental note to send out a text message to warn her team to take care tomorrow.

The routine with owners on this section would be to leave out their bucket of feed by the stable door for the morning, covered with a waterproof stretched fabric, often with the name

of their beloved horse machine-sewn across the top. Or with the obvious 'morning feed' stated in pre-prepared lettering. Whoever was up first would do the round, throw the bucket over the door. Some might even have left hay alongside a note, asking to check the water. They all knew that it would be Taylor. Although she didn't seem to complain. She needed to feed her horse before returning home to change and catch the school bus. Her view being, why leave the others go hungry whilst hers tucked into his breakfast?

This yard had been the original stable block close to the back exit of the estate. Built over fifty years ago, the increase in horses led to the larger yard being created further up, the main livery. These buildings remained empty until Lilly came along.

She had seen value on an initial outlay of her own money to have them tidied up. Wood replaced as needed, plus a good coat of paint to brighten the faded doors. She reasoned that not all horse lovers had the means to pay for livery. After all, she had never been able to afford to buy a horse. Over the years her journey had been to offer free labour in exchange for rides.

A lack of funds, or the owner preferred direct involvement in every aspect of their horses' life. Just two examples for being DIY. To enjoy every spare moment of their life to care for their horse. She got that. There was something very satisfying in the daily routine of horse ownership. Lilly wouldn't be in the industry otherwise.

However, was there an excuse for not getting up to feed your horse? Well, yes, she considered on reflection. If someone else says they will do it for you. Just tip a bucket over the door, then yes, a temptation anyone would bite at.

How many times had she wished she could pull the blankets up a bit higher, give herself another half hour? As a student at Pinnington, taking her two-year diploma in equine studies,

she'd had no choice but to get up before dawn. In order to get a course discount, the deal was to be a working pupil. To look after the college horses and those on livery.

Time and again she had been tempted to not look at the weather app. To avoid the realisation of another cold long day ahead. Though, when you rugged up horses ready for turnout, you had to have an idea of the weather to decide which rug. Or two.

The DIY stable block came with its own setup. A wash area, muck heap, tack room, toilet. It also had a kitchen big enough for a few chairs. They shared four acres among the ten horses. Fields that reached down to the road at the back entrance to the estate.

As a result of the limited grazing, there were strict rules on time out. The current one allowed only two hours. In the summer, it reached up to seven hours as the grass grew quicker. In the midst of winter, to avoid a mud hole, two hours was enough. A pocket of time to offer a bit of exercise for the horse, to enable them to at least stretch legs. Usually, the horse would wonder about for a few minutes before returning to the gate. Then it would hang its head over the metal bar for the remaining one hour fifty.

Lilly had asked Piers for the extra four acres that he owned across the road. The land led down into a beautiful valley with a small wood where hares would run from in the spring and bluebells could be found in abundance. There was even a stream that ran through in a snake like way into a little waterfall at the furthest end of the copse. It would save lugging water containers back and forth. An ideal problem solver, she could fence off into squares, even offer individual turnout. It had been a firm no. He claimed the whole area was allocated for a project, one yet to materialise.

She didn't push further, but determined to raise the subject again shortly. She had plans to provide better facilities for this section. It was important to have the whole yard running

smoothly before the summer. After that she'd have no spare time to manage the usual moans on the issue of grazing.

Piers had suggested the DIY horses be mixed into the livery fields. No way was that even a possibility. All too aware of the snobbery amongst the equine owners at the main yard. Several did not want to share with what they termed the riff raff of DIY.

To add to the case would be the problem of bites or kicks. Imagine the insurance claims. The pointed fingers. Cross words. All ugly scenarios to avoid. This was the main reason she kept the DIY down on the lower yard. She did not need the clash of personalities or the risk of argument. There was enough of it already without additional reasons for a gripe.

“So, where's Robin now?” Lilly looked over to Taylor as they jogged across the car park.

A clever ex polo pony, run into the ground by an unscrupulous owner. He struggled to keep weight on, always looked malnourished. Vicky bought him for two hundred pounds to save him from the container headed for the Parisian abattoir. Whilst fairly successful at local shows in her teens for a few years, that was before she fell pregnant. Now a single mother, living with her mum, she struggled to find time to do anything with him. Despite the lack of time, she refused to sell him.

“I put him back in his stable, but he looked a bit rough.” Taylor replied.

“And the others?”

“As mad as hell.”

On cue, they could hear the commotion of nine outraged animals.

“Any of them on meds?”

“Bess has half a sachet of bute for her leg. I think Terry said he was giving Austen supplements, not sure which. Otherwise, it’s mostly chaff, nuts and a few helpings of beet.”

“And the beet has been soaked?”

“Yes, as far as I’m aware. But at least five take it in their feed, so he’s eaten a large amount.”

“Did he eat all the feeds?” Lilly continued to quiz Taylor for information. It would help her assess Robin quickly. An overdose of medication could be serious. Too much beet, even well soaked, would still bloat his stomach and result in an impacted gut.

“As good as. He must have been out for a while. I came back from a lesson at Ivy’s. I took Mystic out of the horsebox, round to the stables to find Robin wondering about. He’s taken the covers of all the buckets. Five are clean, the rest are eaten to varying degree.”

They arrived at the block. Set in an open square with five stables on the left, five in the middle, the storage and kitchen area to the right. The night spotlight came on above the far end. It offered a yellow glow to the central yard, dark shadows stretched towards the stables like the setting of a whodunnit. But it was clear who the culprit was in this crime scene. He was back behind bars awaiting sentence.

Lilly paused at the entrance.

“Ok, Taylor. Is there a list anywhere in the feed room of who has what?”

“Some, not all.”

“Best we put the buckets away for now. I’ll work through that once we have the sick boy under control. Which one is he in?” She remembered the horse, but not which stable.

Taylor took her over. Looking over the bottom half of the door, it was clear Robin was feeling the effect of over-eating. He stood at the back of his stable, faced the wall, his head down, ears back.

“Thanks, Taylor, leave him to me, you carry on untacking Mystic. Where’s your mum?”

“She was driving the box back home, then coming back with the car to pick me up.”

“Good, so you’re under control at least!” Lilly teased.

The girl smiled with relief.

Taking the headcollar and lead rope from the hook by the door, Lilly entered. In a soft voice, she spoke soothingly to the horse, the headcollar at her side. Robin looked round at her. Fidgeted on his legs. Remained still.

“You stupid boy. You don’t learn do you, third or fourth time now isn’t it?” she soothed. She reached the horse, stroked his cheek as she murmured to him. With a fluid motion, slipped the headcollar over his head, hooked the clip at the side of his right cheek to secure it in place.

“Come on, let’s check you over.”

Lilly led him out with a tug on the rope to encourage him to move. His reluctance offered her further evidence that he was not well. Once outside, she tied him up on the ring with a treble release knot, to be on the safe side. With her fingers she pressed about his belly, felt how tight it was. If she had a pin, it would probably pop.

Half a bute wouldn't cause him any issue, but the beet had doubtless been too much. All that extra sugar that he wasn't used to. He managed a couple of farts as she pressed in, her head near his tail.

"Thanks mate," she muttered.

"Have you phoned Vicky?" Lilly called over to Taylor who headed towards the tack room. She hurried, saddle over her right arm, bridle slung over left shoulder. A bright green woolly hat sat firm on her head as the temperature continued to plummet. A drizzle of sleet fell, highlighted in the spotlight's yellow glow.

"Yes. Said she couldn't get up as she had no-one to look after Jessie. She's asked if I'd keep an eye on him till her mum gets home from work to give her a lift up." Tay called back.

"Absolutely not!" Lilly snapped. She saw Taylor's eyes open wide, startled, stopped in her tracks, unsure how to take the change in tone.

"Sorry, not aimed at you. What's her number?" Lilly asked, removing a glove with her teeth to search for her phone in the pocket of her coat. Knew it was on her contact list, but quicker to ask Tay and tap it out.

Vicky answered on the ninth ring, which didn't help Lilly's mood.

"Vicky, it's Lilly from Wingfield Equestrian. It would appear your horse has eaten himself into colic yet again. I think I've already mentioned the bloody kick bar, to check it before you leave at night. You need to call your vet and get yourself round here, now?" Lilly's voice rose at the last sentence, angry that the horse was suffering.

“Er, yeah, er, right. Well, thing is, I ain’t got nobody for Jessie as me mum is out,” Vicky spluttered.

“Well I suggest you ask your vet to pick you up on the way then. Wake up, Vicky, Robin is really sick. I’ll see you here shortly.” Lilly ended the call.

Why oh bloody why, did that girl still have Robin? Life as a single mum was hard enough. With Vicky out of work she had to rely on benefits. Money and time for a hobby were more than tight. Absolutely, the kid had to come first. Though this meant the horse came last. When did you draw a line, sell on?

Robin’s rescue had been a good deed. Vicky had been devoted to him. She took him from skin and bone to a fit, healthy show jumper. Time with him made Vicky feel positive, helped her cope better, boosted her mental health. But owning a horse was expensive, time-consuming, with all the responsibility an animal entailed.

Lilly had a pang of guilt for being sharp on the phone. A reaction to how sorry the horse looked. Who was she to take the moral high ground? She resigned herself to change the top bolt. One Robin could not open. Being a Houdini didn’t help the situation. If he would just stay in his box, he could avoid these repetitions.

The vet was up within half an hour, Vicky in the passenger seat. As Lilly approached the van, she noticed the little girl, dressed in pyjamas, tucked up in her mother’s arms. Wrapped in a blanket, her teddy bear in one hand. She appeared to be asleep.

They sedated Robin to allow for the vet to perform a rectal examination. This followed with an injection of buscopan to relax his gut, and finadyne for the pain. With instructions to

keep him monitored, he handed Vicky a few packets of bute should they be required. Absolutely right in Lilly's suspicions, it was colic.

"You know the drill, avoid him lying down, don't let him roll. Call me if he doesn't improve in the next couple of hours." he stated the obvious.

With Lilly's assurance she would drop Vicky back home, he headed for his car.

Vicky, visibly shaken, began to cry.

"It's ok, he'll be fine soon enough. Keep him up, keep him relaxed. I'll hang about a bit. You can't keep an eye on both horse and child." Lilly had been short tempered before. She put her arm around the girl's shoulders, drew her into her with a squeeze.

"It's not just Robin that I'm worried about. I now have an emergency call out to add to my overdue bill with the vets. I don't know how I'm going to manage." Vicky choked out. Her shoulders heaved in an attempt to stem the sobs. Her face screwed up as the tears ran down her cheeks. Cold and wet, her skin a shade of grey, despair was clear in her sad brown eyes.

Lilly walked with her as she led the horse around the yard. Vicky shivered in a reaction to the worry and the cold. Robin was hesitant, stopping every over stride to bite his tummy and kick out. Vicky kept him going with a tug on the rope. Encouraged him to step forward again.

"If I were you, I'd find him a new home," Lilly ventured. Immediately, Vicky tensed up, drew in a breath. Lilly continued quickly.

"I understand, believe me I do. Once you let a horse into your life, there is no way back. However, we do need to do what's right for both of you. Robin needs care and so do you. It's clear you're making yourself ill, struggling with it all."

Vicky looked at Lilly. Her pretty, freckled face, streaked with rivulets of tears, smudged with dirt and mascara, crumpled. It was hollow, empty, a reflection of her own perception of a failed life.

“First things, I’m going to give you a new lock that will be Robin proof. But what about a loaner? Someone that could take the strain off you financially and help ride him?”

A flicker of relief illuminated Vicky’s angular features as she blinked away tears and sleet. Then a wave of despair descended back over face.

“You could suggest, but who would want to loan him? He’s as stressed out as I am most of the time. Nor is he an easy ride. A neurotic buckner is not a quality most look to take on, is it?”

Lilly felt wretched. There she was, having just had the most amazing day. Reached a milestone in her ambitions. Only half an hour ago been ready to read the riot act on the bedraggled girl now standing, cold and frightened, in front of her.

“Let me think on it, we’ll sort something out. For now, it’s beginning to freeze big time. What about we get him back in the stable for a bit, then I’ll walk him around for fifteen minutes? We can alternate until he’s safe. You need to wrap a stable rug around Jessie before she catches a chill. You don’t want a doctor’s bill on top of the vets,” she winked, attempting to make Vicky laugh.

It was gone nine by the time Lilly considered Robin to be over the crisis. By now, Jessie was fast asleep in the straw and Vicky was blue with cold. Bolting the stable door firmly in place, Lilly drove them both home before a final check on all the horses. Finally, she could turn in herself.

On her own. A crisis up north had kept Jay from being able to drive back to her, and tomorrow he was on a plane to Europe.

Standing under a hot shower, letting her body thaw out and the sweat and dirt of the day wash away, she considered her current predicament.

Life in riding boots. Like a circus. Swings and roundabouts, with her yard being the carousel.

CHAPTER FOUR

Saturday, the last day of February. Show day! Preparation had taken much of Friday. Horses in the hot wash, shampoo and set, whiskers shaved. Manes pulled, hooves oiled and rugged up to the nines against the freezing air overnight.

Rico Ortiz arrived early Saturday morning to plait up Serendipity ready for the kids. The unruly mane now a neat row of plaited bumps as he gave him a final wipe down with a damp sponge. Despite the stable rug, lycra neck and hood, bandages up to his knees, Seren, predictably, had lain in his own poo overnight. On his right bum cheek, streaks of dark yellow ran down towards his hock.

Rico moved around steadily, taking his time, not wanting to mess up a plait or upset the other horses still sleepy in their nearby stables.

He'd assured Lilly he'd do the early shift. Living only ten minutes away by car, he was an early bird, always awake before five.

"It's what best friends do, Lilly, payback for all the times you saved my skin." He'd told her after the tenth time she'd objected.

He'd met Lilly when on the European show jumping circuit. She worked for Yves and Charles Moreau as a groom. Initially it was lust at first sight. He had been blown away as he took in the delicate alabaster skin and teardrop green eyes, a mane of dark chestnut hair, as rich and shiny as the body of a bay horse. It dropped around her head in tendrils of curls that escaped her riding hat. He watched her keenly as she walked La Tonnerre around the warm up arena.

Thunder proved a good name for the dark grey stallion. He sounded like the growling of Greek Gods when he was wound up. It would take all of Yves' strength and experience to get him around the ring. It impressed Rico that such a wisp of a girl was able to contain this hulk of warmblood x, high on testosterone as he pranced around, fighting for his head. What impressed him even more was her beauty.

Lilly resisted Rico's sexual advances no matter how hard he tried. And try he had. Every trick in his extensive book of tricks. Once he'd realised the chase was futile, they ended up best of friends. His fall guy, even.

He had a habit of getting into scrapes. Not for him exclusivity, often not even for one night, if the temptation was there. When Hilda was swapped for Harry or Olly became Ali in his hotel bedroom exploits, it was Lilly to the rescue. She hid him in her room. Calmed the injured parties. Allowed his manhood to remain attached to his body. Si importante.

He had fallen over himself at the opportunity to remain close to her. After the accident, she had been his salvation. He became her freelance instructor, a contract that suited them both. Available to her clients, he could also work elsewhere with a small list of private clients.

Today, frost was still thick and slippery under foot as he walked from the stable to the tack room to boil a kettle. He shuffled from one foot to the other, blowing warm air into his hands as he waited, breath appearing as if he'd dragged deeply on a cigarette. He emptied a packet of bright white into hot water to make a chalky thick paste to spread over the stains on the little pony's backside and legs. Once at the showground, he'd brush out the dried paste to reveal a clean backside and legs once more.

He was to ride Cam today in the one metre ten show jumping event. A warm-up for the season. A bonus first was Paul Greenwood's palomino, Viking.

Rowena, Camelot's owner, would be there, somewhere, most probably in the VIP section. Mingling with whoever looked worth a mingle with.

That woman is bonkers, he told Lilly, the first time they met her.

She had turned up in the yard about a year ago. Strode towards him with a determined air about her. Honey blonde hair teased into clouds held tight by sweet-smelling sandalwood and jasmine hairspray. Scents he recognised from childhood in Southern Spain. It made several horses snort as she wafted past. Tottered unsteady in pink boots with six-inch heels, tight white pants covered slim legs. She completed the ensemble with a powder pink bomber jacket. Dressed like that, he wondered if she should audition for a part in Grease. Not quite the usual yard attire.

"Hello. I'm Rowena. Rowena White. I am here about your facilities. I'd like to house my horse here?" she inquired, hand thrust outwards towards him. Perfectly manicured, vivid pink nails that looked dangerously shovel like. A large blue stone sat on her middle finger surrounded by diamonds. It caught the sun at every step she took.

Lilly took her to the house for a chat. To discuss the details and no doubt have her sign a contract. He smiled as he thought about it. Lilly was so organised. Nothing was left to chance with her liveries, even he, her best mate, signed an agreement.

The following day Lilly confided to him that Rowena was a Euro millions winner. The lucky bitch. He did a row every Tuesday without fail. Hardly ever did he match two numbers, let alone the jackpot. With this bounty she purchased a five bedroomed country home. Decided to try horse riding to become part of the country life. She wanted her new life to be the very essence of her dreams.

“Why this horse?” he first asked when Camelot arrived on the yard a week later. A sixteen one dapple grey he’d seen on the circuit the year before, under a different name. The horse was a prolific showjumper, though by no means an easy ride. He’d thrown the rider, then proceeded to career about, fizzing like a shaken can of soda, as he descended into a frenzy of bucks between fences.

“I just fell in love with him. Isn’t he a pretty colour?” she whispered breathlessly. A voice he since noticed she used for any man under the age of forty. Channelling her inner Marilyn.

Initially she tried to ride. She even had lessons. It became all too apparent that she liked to look, rather than sit, on a horse. As a result, Rico was offered the ride on this amazing gelding. He had accepted on the spot, an opportunity to increase his reputation. And his riding prowess. He’d learnt to sit into the bucks and squeeze hard. There was no way he was going to be eating sand in front of a crowd.

Viking was added to today’s list as a last-minute addition. Paul, his owner, was abroad on his journalistic world travels. Rico rode the horse a few times during the week, worked on his approach to fences, kept him on a shorter rein, reduced the stride. Viking had a habit of dropping a pole just when you thought you were home and clear.

Moving back to the stable, he pasted the chalk onto Seren’s bum. Rubbed it in thickly to make sure it took hold. It would draw out any dirt. His mind drifted back to its wonderings. To the current woman in his life.

To the affair with Sam, married mother to the two children that rode this pony. It had been going on since last November.

Charlie and Sophie, how old were they? He couldn't remember. Around ten or twelve perhaps, Charlie being the elder. Both pony mad. She had approached him about giving the kids lessons when they moved to the yard months before. From the outset she watched from the sidelines, sat on the bench to the side of school's entrance, huddled up, phone clasped in her hand, staring at it distractedly. An air of misery hung about her. Once the lesson finished, she would walk off to wait in the car, a silver Mercedes Benz. In truth, he barely gave her a second glance. Her jet-black hair hung limp over her face, like a curtain, body clothed in an assault of mixed colours and layers, hiding flesh and personality. He had more interest in the car than the mum.

As the lessons continued, she admitted later that the glance over to him turned to a full-on ogle, mesmerised by his tight cream breeches, stretched over a sexy pert backside. How he'd turn the lapel of his bomber jacket up against the wind. Or, in the sun, a tight plain tee stretched over his pecs. Rain or shine, a trademark baseball cap firmly in place, shoulder length hair, tied up in a ponytail, stuck out the back. Sam would listen as he spoke into his microphone that linked to the earpiece her child wore. From her vantage point she caught his deep sensual voice. The lilt of his Spanish accent. Strained to hear his every word as he explained the required action to his student.

When he looked her way, his intense brown eyes had caused her heart to flutter. He was all too aware of their potency. He had used them on many an occasion. A highlight on his repertoire of charm offensive. Surrounded by thick long lashes he could bat as good as a girl.

Each time he glanced over; he made her feel as if she were the most desirable woman in the world. It made her feel good. No, more than good. Sexy, desirable, *wanted*. It had been a long time since she had felt wanted.

Unaware his eyes had offered so much information, of her increasing pulse rate, he stuck to his instruction. Sure, he checked out everyone he met as habit. But initial introductions had revealed nothing more than a mother asking him to teach her children. To give them confidence in their riding ability, push them further. The little pony had more going for it. Nice deep chest, powerful hindquarters, intelligent head. Plenty of potential. He would be pleased to work with them. But no, she had lit no flame for him.

Sam had slowly transformed over the weeks. As the summer warmed up, she shed the brown oversized coat, the layers of knitwear, the bright assortment of colours. Realisation that under her coat, just like a woolly horse losing its winter fur, was a sleek body. Now she piqued his interest. His eyes were glued to her body as she strode along. A pair of tight jeans, a fitted single colour jumper, a black gilet, a pair of Lariat boots.

Her hair, previously pulled back in a bun like an old housewife, now hung loose, flowing down her back almost to her waist. He noticed how thick it was, how the light caught it, turning the black a shiny blue. He mostly noticed her boobs. With mounting interest, he imagined his hands on them, soft and warm between his fingers. Now she gazed at him boldly, almost daring him into action.

Opportunity took over for him one morning. The yard was quiet as she returned from taking Seren to the field. As she walked down the slope, head collar slung over her shoulder, she hummed to herself. Denim jeans, a loose blouse, a dark green gilet to keep out the chill from the November air, hair swinging about her body, she was a vision he could not resist.

On impulse he darted out around the back of The Colonel, tied up by his stable door as he untacked from a hack. He took her by surprise, grabbed her hand, led her into the adjacent feed room. With his free hand he pushed the door closed. Moved in to kiss her

passionately. She'd melted into his arms, her body going limp as she gave herself to him without a murmur.

He smiled to himself as he remembered that first encounter. He'd used one of his standard chat up lines, smouldered his eyes and pouted his lips.

"Oh babe, I want to see you naked." Corny but effective. His hands snaked up her top as they kissed. Too soon, he'd heard someone approach. Dropped her instantly. Spoke in a loud voice about the right diet for Seren, how important for the pony to maintain his physical peak. He whispered 'like you' as he brushed his hand over her blouse. A broad smile shone across her face.

It inevitably happened one lunch time, when the grooms were on their break and Lilly was out meeting a potential client. For once the yard was super quiet. No one was about. He had wasted no time, sought her out in Seren's stable, shavings fork in her hand, mucking out.

Without a word, he laid her on the clean shavings of the pony's bed. Master of seduction, Rico showed her what she'd been missing for so long. Without hesitation she melted to his touch, her hands fumbled at his clothes as fast as he shed hers. She told him that as she came a dozen champagne corks popped in her head. A few party poppers too.

He wondered how rich he would be if he had a pound for every time a woman had said that to him. He gave a good masterclass in lovemaking as well as horse instruction.

Partly because he found pleasure in unleashing her sexual awareness, partly because she was such a willing conquest, he continued to take her at every available opportunity. In the stable. The hay barn. A corner of the field behind the giant oak. In his car. He'd even been to her house under the pretext of discussing Seren's show season.

Sexy Sam, the lonely housewife. Her dick of a husband had quit the commute down from London, bought a flat up there where he stayed put. Made an appearance over the weekends, or not as the case may be. He'd lost interest in her. Usual excuses, too stressed from work, too tired.

Rico was not so easily fooled. Tom must be in his early thirties. He suspected a mistress in London. Rico couldn't imagine not having sex for a week, let alone months. Sam said she'd given up trying, accepted that he had fallen out of love with her. Refused to discuss the alternative.

Who was he to interfere? All he wanted was a regular lay with a beautiful body. Which is what bothered him now as he worked on the little grey.

He could tell she was becoming too involved with him. The questions sneaked in. Subtly asking if she was the only one? Wondering out loud if she left Tom, what would happen? He had changed the subject each time. The answers, had he voiced them, were a firm no to the first. He had only ever been faithful once, and that had not worked out well. To the second, that she would be a single mother. Alarm bells echoed in his ears, walk away you fool.

He loved women, all shapes and sizes. He also loved men. No particular sway, whichever turned him on the most at a particular time. He was not about to become limited edition.

Rico switched back to the present as he heard Lilly call out to him. It stopped all thought on his sexual preoccupation as she appeared.

"Hola!" He smiled in delight as he opened the stable door. Rubbed the head of the little dog as Ruby bounced up at him.

“Hola Rico. You ready for the first outing of the year?” Lilly asked as she kissed him on each cheek. She ruffled his hair, hung loose about his shoulders in shaggy dog fashion. He’d tie it up before they left.

“You look like you’ve dragged yourself from someone’s bed?” She scrutinised him, her eyes searched his face.

“Lilly, what can I say, you know me too well.” He shrugged, a wry smile parted his lips as he ducked his head sideways from her. No point lying. She read him like a book.

“Rico?” she grabbed his left arm to stop him walking away.

“No, not her, a guy I met at a bar on Wednesday, ok?”

“Rogue bastard,” she replied, giving him a small punch.

“What about Jay, has he been over to service you recently?”

Rico was the only one who knew the truth about her love affair. After all, as he liked to remind her, it was thanks to him that they even met.

“No. Not for a couple of weeks.” Lilly bristled.

“I’m doing feeds then we’re good to go. Would you mind starting the lorry so it’s warmed up a bit, I’m freezing.” she asked, pointedly ignoring his question, instead wrapping her arms about her coat as if to confirm her statement.

“Muy bien, of course,” he agreed. Happy to alter the conversation before she dug too deep. He knew better than to push her when talking about her own sex life. The hackles would rise and she’d be more likely to bite him than Ruby would. But it worried him. That gorgeous

man could not be a saint. If they didn't meet up between now and September, he was definitely getting it elsewhere. And that would knock the delicate trust that teetered on the edge into the burning abyss. Leave her a spinster for life. He gave a shudder. For his friend and for his own view of a sexless world.

CHAPTER FIVE

Lilly walked off with mixed emotions.

She adored Rico, but couldn't help feeling a teeny-weeny bit jealous. Ok, quite a lot jealous in fact. That man would sleep with anything on two legs with a pulse. Yet there she was, in love with just one man, going without sight or sex for weeks at a time. She wasn't into casual flings, but she did miss Jay's touch. The sensations that pinged through her as his hands caressed her naked body. Just thinking about him made her flush, a warm feeling flood her groin.

Soon. She scolded herself for being lovesick. Remember, time for love once the trials were established. She'd take a bit of time out, ask if Rico or Alison would cover whilst she had her own marathon. She must check out where would still be warm in October.

Lilly knew about Sam, had already asked Rico to end it. She had literally stumbled on them, going at it in the barn as she'd gone to pick up fresh straw for a new horse arriving that afternoon.

"Whoa. Rico, not the place please." Her face flushed then, and now, at the image.

They'd tucked themselves around the corner behind the bags of shavings. Though she couldn't see them, she could hear the sighs and the grunts. Lilly almost turned around and walked out. She had no choice. She needed to see who it was.

There, bent over, breeches around his knees, riding boots still on, shirt undone. Rhythmically pushing himself into a woman underneath him, her naked legs wrapped around his back. Lilly knew that arse too well, but not the legs of the willing partner.

It wasn't the first time she'd caught the lothario out on her premises. For real, he must have bedded a good half dozen people on her yard. Along with her groom, Kerry. And Matt, the farrier.

Who was it this time?

Bugger! As she walked closer, she realised it was Sam. The woman was attempting to cover herself up, without success. Her breasts fell out of the blouse he'd unbuttoned.

In the past, she possibly may have smacked his butt cheeks. Even thrown a wad of straw between his legs. Whereas, today, this was her business. She had to be professional.

"Hey, Lilly, you know how it is, no harm is being done." He assured her with a lopsided grin.

"Maybe not, Rico, but you're here to ride horses, not, well not to..."

"Ride their owners?" he laughed, glanced at Sam as he spoke. The woman struggled not to laugh, overwhelmed with nervous giggles and total embarrassment. She lay half naked on her back on a bale of straw. Rico inside her. The woman she paid to care for her children's pony stood over them. Mortified, she continued to tug at her top, using a sleeve to at least cover her nipples.

"Exactly. You want to carry on, do it in the comfort of your own beds, please. I don't need to see it here. Sam, you have straw in your hair. I've a brush in the kitchen, you're welcome to go in and tidy up. Save the entire world knowing about your roll in the barn." And with that, Lilly had walked back out, forgetting the straw.

She'd waited fifteen minutes before venturing back for the straw. Wanted to make sure they had dressed and gone. Glimpsed Rico headed towards the tack room ready for his next 'ride'. This time, a horse he was working in for a show. He waved. She shook her head at him, tried hard not to smile at the same time.

She wanted to laugh at the crazy life of the yard. She'd seen enough during the years on tour around Europe. Knew that people had sex when and where they felt the urge, lorry parties were notorious. Half the children that accompanied the riders were likely as not consummated in a stable or a lorry toilet. However, she needed to calm him down. What if it had been Charlie or Sophie that discovered the tryst? They'd be gutted, both being crazy about Rico and his equestrian abilities. The last thing they needed to see was Rico humping their mum in the hay.

Despite his wandering willy, she would be lost without him. Not only someone she classed as fam, but when it came to horses, so reliable, ever happy to go the extra mile. Like turn up at stupid o'clock on a chilly February morning in the pitch black just to help her.

Sure, Rowena and Paul would pay him for the ride on their horses. Whereas, the rest he did because he loved her. She knew she would always love him. No matter how many times she found him in bed with the wrong person. We'll stick together through sick and sin they'd once declared one drunken night, celebrating a major victory for La Tonnerre. Sin being an appropriate word in his case.

As the dawn flickered awake another day, streaks of pink soaked through the grey fuzz of the early morning mist. Rico drove Lilly, Ruby on her lap. Alison sat on the far side having arrived in time to help put on travel boots and walk the horses into the lorry. It was a short journey, a mere thirty miles up the motorway to the showground, ready to kick the season off.

Rico barely spoke to Sam all day. He had two rides, Camelot in the one metre ten affiliated and Viking in the one metre. The Spaniard had fences, not females on his mind.

Paul Greenwood normally took Viking himself. He'd been sent on assignment to Kentucky, to cover a race meet.

Everyone loved Paul. A freelance equine journalist, with a keen eye for a story. Late twenties, he'd rock up to the yard, often unshaven, a little rumped, but always down to earth, with more energy than the national grid. He bounced around like a Tigger on speed, greeting everyone with a bear hug or a kiss, happy to help anyone out. His presence at the stables could lighten the darkest of moods.

To Lilly's alarm, Tom turned up with Sam, though both seemed distant with each other. Distracted. Walked together but minds miles apart, as if neither saw the other as a partner any longer.

He was wrapped up in a pair of blue cords, a Burberry coat and matching scarf. The ensemble finished off with a peaked green hat. His wellies, Hunter she noticed, looked like the only mud they'd seen was from this morning.

Sam was in an old pair of jeans, rainproof anorak, wearing a pair of well-worn riding boots. The type perfect for long country walks, covered with a well engrained layer of dirt. She topped her outfit off with a beanie hat, long dark locks cascaded down her back like the mane of a Friesian mare. Cherry red lipstick highlighted her full lips against the pale winter skin.

One in perceived country gear. The other in country gear people wore. Two different worlds. Lilly gasped inwardly as a sudden image crossed her mind. What if that was how she would be seen in relation to her own man?

With a lurch, she pictured the horror. Both at a dinner party, amongst his friends. He dressed in an exquisitely tailored dinner suit, polished shoes, an antique tie pin clasped over his silk tie. The pin no doubt re-worked from what had once been part of an earring from a Maharajah in the early 1400s.

Whereas she would be clad in something she found in a charity shop. A dress, long and floaty, slightly tatty around the edges. A pair of old strappy sandals and dangly earrings that had once been on the rack at Primark. She made a mental note. Never to look so out of sync with him as these two now did.

What everyone was in agreement on was ensuring the children enjoy their day. To kick off their first show of the season with a bang. In that, it was a success, despite the ominous black clouds that offered the odd downpour.

Charlie, to his great annoyance, fell in the jump off. Seren tripped, turned too fast to the last fence, stumbled to his knees as the adults gasped. Whilst the pony righted itself, the boy was thrown sideways, landing with a thud, face down in the sand. For several moments he lay still, winded from the fall. Lilly and Rico both leapt into the ring just as he rolled into a sitting position. With a nod to the announcer that yes, he was OK, he stood back up, walked out, leading the pony behind him. Rico walked him to the lorry as Lilly was left to reassure both parents that no harm was done. Just knocked pride.

With five others all also in the jump-off, he missed being placed, no rosette. He blamed himself for the disqualification. For being an idiot rider.

To add to the boy's frustration, Sophie won her show class. With a whoop, her father came alive. The stern expression on his face, creased with years of city life, melted away. It revealed the Tom who may have once been. Eyes shone with pride; he whirled his daughter around in his arms with delight. Lilly took Seren's reins to lead him back to the lorry and a welcome haynet.

"Lilly, thank you for all the trouble you took in helping to achieve this success today." Tom shook her hand, pumped it enthusiastically. With his left arm, he held Sophie close to his chest. Her arms wrapped around her dad's neck, she grinned wildly. Part in flush of success. Part in being daddy's girl for this fleeting of moments.

"Oh, it was a pleasure," Lilly replied. Her body felt like it may spasm into a Mexican wave if he didn't let go of her hand soon.

"Rico has been doing all the hard graft teaching Charlie and Sophie. He was up early this morning to prep Seren for me, too," she added, without thinking.

The triumphant look flickered. His eyes narrowed, a dark glaze hastened across his face, before the smile returned.

"Well, I'll be sure to ask my wife to thank him for me next time she sees him. I understand she values him as an excellent instructor," he replied. A comment laced with a bucket of sarcasm.

In that moment Lilly knew that he knew. She glanced hesitantly at Sam. Sam looked away into the distance, a fixed smile that spoke louder than words. It said there had been an argument. Lilly just nodded and smiled weakly.

Tom put Sophie back on the ground, stood up with a stretch of his arms. Turned to both his children.

“A victory lunch for you guys?” he suggested.

“Cheesy chips at the café!” Sophie jumped up and down with excitement, clapping.

“Not what I had in mind, but if that’s what my Princess wants, she gets,” he said.

The quartet walked away. Tom clasped both children to him, talking loudly. His wife two steps behind, dragging herself along as if her legs were made of stone.

Lilly would have to tread delicately around Rico on the subject, but tread she needed to do. If this blew up, it could create an unpleasant situation for her. Even force her to make choices she was unwilling to make.

Back at the lorry, she tied Seren up then untacked him, sponged him down where his saddle and girth had been, his neck and his rear, taking off the sweat. Finally, a firm rub down with a towel, she threw a fleece over his back, then walked him up the ramp, threading a lead rope through the ring where a haynet was hung ready for him to feast on. Alison had already taken Viking out to saddle him up. Rico was getting changed into his show breeches and shirt inside the living quarters.

Viking was up first. Lilly walked the course with Rico whilst Alison warmed the horse up in the practice ring. Once she’d covered a few rounds of the ring at walk, trot, canter she took turns with the other competitors to jump the two fences in the middle of the sandschool. First one way, then in the opposite direction. After a few leaps she walked him around to keep him supple and his muscles warm.

It was a simple figure of eight course with one double and a small water fence. Held indoors, the water jump was in a blue tray which could spook a horse into a refusal. Rico felt the biggest problem wouldn't be the water, it would be the gate two fences before the end. White and narrow, a classic trick by the course builder to avoid too many clear first rounds.

Lilly felt confident Viking would fly it without skipping a beat. As easy-going as his owner, they jumped for fun, not prestige. The aim of the day being to have him ready for the season which Paul fully embraced. She knew how he loved the whole buzz of show days. The clamour of horses whinnying. The loudspeaker announcing classes. The dull thud as a pole would fall, the crowd all ooh'ing at the same time. The smell of horses, saddle soap, leather, hoof oil. And the atmosphere of people enjoying the day. All this and more appeared in the many articles he'd written over his ten-year career. She agreed with every sentiment of his words. There was nothing quite so exciting or unpredictable than a horse show.

Viking, true to Lilly's belief, jumped clear in the first round without hesitation. Sadly, despite Rico's work that week, he knocked a pole in the jump off. Rico was gutted. Blamed it on a stupid error of his own doing. He'd given the horse a squeeze to take off a stride too late. Caught too close to the fence, Viking had tapped the top red and white pole with his front hoof.

The one metre ten class wasn't scheduled to begin until two thirty that afternoon. So far, no one had yet seen Rowena. Lilly, nevertheless, had heard her, knew exactly where she was. In the VIP room talking to judges gathered for a sandwich and a drink. Rowena didn't drink herself, it was a pretence to walk around with a gin in her hand when it was in fact just water.

“How on earth would I be able to drive my Disco if I’d been on the gin, darling?” She’d informed Lilly the first time she had tracked Rowena to the VIP tent. She’d seen the tumbler and pointed at it with a quizzical eye.

Rowena admitted that winning the lottery had been a total game changer for her. A makeover of monumental gain. All her dreams came true with a little over sixteen million pounds landing in her bank. She’d had her body upholstered and sculpted, her mouse brown hair highlighted; extensions topped up by the London hairdresser to the celebrities. A spray tan every six weeks kept the bronzed St Tropez just-off-the-beach look. And the shopping. So juicy walking into a shop in Chelsea or Kensington High street, picking out one in every colour from the latest designers, she’d regaled Lilly.

“It’s a long way from the small Yorkshire town I used to live, working as a shop assistant in Boots. Though don’t you dare spill the tea on me,” she’d laughed, her twenty-thousand-pound dental makeover dazzling whiter than white.

Lilly had tried to help her with her riding ability. She even agreed to teach mid-morning when there was less likelihood of lots of eyes watching. She’d borrowed Jeremy’s little grey Connie, Timmy, who was perfectly schooled and would offer every confidence to a nervous newcomer.

“Trot on.” Yet again those two short words the kiss of death to Rowena’s fate. No matter how she tried. Because Lilly wondered if try was all she had done. The woman just bounced about, holding on to the safety strap. Even running next to her, holding her right leg to encourage her to push down in the stirrup, raise herself up off the saddle. That had only ended up with Rowena standing for the entire length of the school. No attempt to come back down again.

“I give up, I really don’t get it,” Rowena had wailed the last time she’d fallen. This time over the mane, head first. A nail snapped as the strap caught up in her hand.

“You know, Lilly, to be honest, I can’t take the smell or the fur on my clothes. I have to go back to the hairdresser the next day to fix my waves as the hat crushes it all,” she had declared. She had looked as if her finger had fallen off rather than the shellac falsie.

“Thank you for your help, but I’m happier, and safer, watching.”

Inside, Lilly agreed. Despite all efforts, if the surefooted Timmy couldn’t keep her on board, nothing would.

Rowena focused on the social side of the horse world. Her horse offered up an ice breaker. Something to start the conversation as she tottered up to men in show jackets. Those whom she felt were influential in this equine society.

Lilly found her in animated flow with Robert Chapman, today’s showing judge. How she would love him come to dinner sometime soon. Maybe with Mrs Chapman? Lilly couldn’t help but chuckle. Robert was a confirmed bachelor, a significant partner would not be a she. Poor Rowena was barking up the wrong tree by flirting with this one.

“Ah yes, love to, must arrange it soon. Oh, hello Lilly, good to see you, must be off deary, think I’m judging shortly.” He muttered as he excused himself with a sigh of relief. He extracted the pink talons clutched to his left hand. With a polite nod, he disappeared.

Lilly led Rowena to the fixed seating at the edge of the ring. She tried to explain to her what Rico would do throughout the course.

“We’ve already walked it, you know, checked the strides to each fence. The double is a bounce and go. Some might try to fit one stride in, but we think it’s too tight for Cam. Next, it’s the water tray, four strides to the gate which is fence number seven.”

“Whoa, I’m lost already, which number is the water did you say?”

“Ok, let me point them out in order.” Lilly detailed the name of the fence along with the colour as she pointed towards each, checked at each one to confirm that Rowena understood.

“Many are finding the run to clear the water, followed by so few strides to the straight white gate, too much. They have no time to pull the horse back into check. As Rico predicted, it’s been falling.”

Rowena nodded.

“One day I may understand all this. But horses’ paces, the number of strides they need, the fence names, just confuses me,” she admitted. Gazed at Lilly with pure emotion.

“I just love watching my Cammie, I get all the feels with him. That tail of his is almost black, whereas, his white stockings go up past his knees. See? I remember what you call those.” She gave a triumphant grin.

“Rowena, if you get enjoyment from him this way, then that’s all that matters. You picked a superstar, he’s an ace jumper, Rico will get the best out of him.” Lilly touched Rowena’s hand in a gesture of understanding.

The woman was one of her favourite liveries, despite her dizziness. Perhaps because of it. Certainly, there was nothing fake about her heart. That was firmly in the right place. Neither

did she quibble over any extras added to her bill to keep Camelot in top condition. The monthly invoice was paid the same day Lilly sent it. Rowena may be ditzy, but she was a good client.

Camelot didn't consider the pace to the gate a problem as he cleared it at speed, giving him first place. Rowena whooped with delight, trotted into the ring. Tugged to the nines in her white jodhpurs with diamante pockets, Omina label tan brown jumper and matching jacket. The ensemble finished with boots hand made by Sirelec, chocolate brown faux leather with a pink sparkly trim. Total worth of her outfit? Close to an all-inclusive week in Majorca for a family of four.

She reached the centre of the ring where the horses stood lined up in order of placing. As she gripped the left rein she smiled up at Rico.

“Well done, you were brilliant! This is so exciting, our first win of the season, Rico, so very exciting,” she gushed.

He smiled down at her. Wondered what it would be like to..... no, seriously, what was he thinking? She was as mad as a box of frogs with fake boobies. Fake body parts turned him a definite off.

He was pleased to have continued the winning streak of Camelot, aware that Rowena wanted bigger stuff now. Especially after his Hockmead success at the end of last season. It would serve him well to keep her sweet, but never in that way, was he nuts? That would be too complicated, even for him.

“He truly is one in a million,” Rico agreed, as he leant forward to give the horse a tweak on its ear.

His mind buzzed with the thrill of jumping this exceptional horse. Along with the attention he received. He sat proudly on its back, shook hands with the various officials as they presented rosettes and trophies. His thoughts were twisted in the dilemma of how to cool it down with Sam. Now more than ever, after earlier today. An incident that had taken him by surprise and unhinged him.

He had been minding his own business, walking around the show grounds, when Tom had found him. The man had pulled him with a jerk to his shoulder from behind. Pushed him round the back of the vans that were serving a line of people hotdogs and hot drinks.

“I saw how my wife looked at you earlier. It confirmed my suspicions. I’ve asked myself time and again these past months, what has changed? Why does she seem so upbeat, happy even? I should punch your fricking lights out, but to be honest, you do me a favour. Keeps her from nagging me do the biz for her,” Tom had whispered coarsely.

Rico could smell the pancakes as they cooked on the hot pads. Distracting him as the man ranted about his wife. As if he cared a jot what the guy thought, he was nothing but a jerk.

He was about to deny it all, but remained quiet, his mouth firm shut. Probably best not to add to the outrage, the guy had lost the plot.

Tom’s eyes widened, wild, his lips puckered in a sneer as he spat out the words.

“Take this as a warning. I will not, under any circumstance, allow anything to damage my reputation. Or to embarrass my children. I warn you. If she makes any attempt to divorce me, I will have your name smeared so badly you’ll be on a boat to Spain before you can say adios. Do I make myself clear?” Tom’s expression twisted in a menace as he delivered his threat.

Rico felt anger rise like bile in his throat at the nerve of this cold and calculating man, but choked it down. Instead, he took a step back and returned the hard stare, his eyes black with rage. He sensed his hands curling into fists and thrust them in his coat pockets.

With a voice as steady as he could control, Rico replied.

“Tom, can I call you that? Are we on first-name terms? I see it like this. You’re taking the piss mate. With you up in London all the time, it is you that embarrasses your kids by not being a real father to them. Imagine the excuses they make as to why daddy hasn’t turned up to watch their sports day? Watch their mates hug their dads at school pick up? Each missed weekend makes it worse for you. You don’t call the shots, your wife does.”

With that, he patted Tom on the shoulder, shook his head and walked off before the man could close his mouth enough to speak.

La mierda! El nervio! To threaten him. Wives don’t stray if they’re happy at home.

Rico enjoyed Sam’s body, the thrill of the affair, but he was not about to risk a commitment. The words if she divorces me for you rung like a nuclear invasion in his head. Had she said something to Tom for him to speak of this? The last thing he needed was a married woman turning up on his doorstep, bags packed. Cramp his lifestyle? No way! He would not be a replacement. Neither did he want surrogate fatherhood.

He had kept himself busy throughout the day. By the close of show, he was ready to get back to the yard, settle the horses, then go home and get drunk.

As they led the horses up into the lorry, secured them in place for the journey, Lilly noticed that Rico seemed decidedly wonky. She caught his face off guard, the narrow mouth, distracted eyes, disturbed and smouldering. He brushed off her attempt to draw out of him the

problem. He merely gave her an overzealous smile; told her all was well. Why should anything be wrong? He'd had an amazing day, though admitted he was dog tired from the early start. She must be too? She agreed, not convinced he was telling her the truth, but knew he wasn't ready. Yes, she loved the excitement of show days, but as they packed up and made their way back, she yearned for bed and a solid night's sleep.

Alison drove the six-horse lorry back to the yard. Rico insisted on helping settle the animals back into their stables with a good feed, warm rugs and a dose of electrolyte in their water buckets. It gave Lilly a few minutes to run down and check the DIY's. She had been making it a thing to do at night now since Robin's last escape, unconvinced her talk had made any difference. It hadn't. Robin's kick bar was up, along with two others. She flipped them over with a sigh. Thank goodness she'd lost no time in fixing the new top bolt that kept the keen Houdini firmly inside.

Ruby padded along with her, despite her own exhaustive day of running about. The little dog had greeted dozens of dogs that attended the horse show with their owners. She was glad when Lilly finally opened the front door. She was up the stairs and in her little bed before Lilly had locked up.

CHAPTER SIX

Lilly woke early on the Sunday, her mind full of tasks to do, on and off the yard. The long day at the show had taken a big chunk of precious time. Well aware that she had more reason than one to keep on top of her schedule. If she got behind at all, a swift swish from Mark Larch the Starch and his crisply ironed cuff, sharp as a blade.

Why was he being a constant thorn in the hoof with terse emails in response to her updates, full of negativity? She didn't seek a pat on the back from him, but she could do with him backing off. She sighed, stretched out as she uncurled herself, ready to shower. After the morning feeds, she would need to tackle his latest note. Even though the project remained on track, he found reason to challenge her. Part of the joy of success will be to have the smile wiped off his face, she reminded herself. It gave her more confidence, put the fire back in her belly despite the exhaustion.

Many of her liveries were five-day assist. Although their owners came up at weekends to do their own mucking out, she did still have eight full-time livery. Not to mention several requests from people who were on holiday, skiing or Caribbean. With just Rahima in all day and Mike for the morning, she had fifteen horses to split between the three of them. Again, she questioned her sanity. Did she really roster just the two youngsters to work with her, the day after a show? She had buttons for brains.

With no option to stay in bed, to snuggle into her pillow, she threw back the duvet and jumped out. As she stood in the shower, she tried to focus on the day ahead as the warm water hit her body, waking her up.

Lilly thanked her good fortune for the horse walker. She could have four horses in it at a time, reducing the exercise later in the sandschool, which would free up an hour at least. Next,

offer Rahima the ride on Bluey. Would Mike take Kabishka? Brent was in St Moritz for the week and the mare needed the ride or she'd be nappy next time out.

A quick towel dry, Lilly pulled on a pair of long warm socks over her jods, double fleeced, then ran downstairs for her jacket and boots. Braced to start the feeding frenzy.

Lilly rubbed a velvet muzzle, tweaked an ear, spoke softly to each as she dropped a bucket over the door. Overnight the wind had picked up. She felt the sting of the cold on her face as it bit at her eyes, her lips, made her nose run. With a shiver, she tugged her beanie hat down further over her head. Shook and wiggled her hands between doors, in an effort to keep the sensation in them. With a final glance before the task was complete, she headed back inside to switch the kettle on.

Settled with a hot mug of tea and a bowl of porridge, Lilly wrapped a blanket around her shoulders and powered up the laptop.

At this time of year, updates to her yard spreadsheet seemed to take twice as long each morning. A wet and muddy winter day guaranteed extra requests for services, and extra time taken to do them. Once finished she turned to her event schedule.

Joe had agreed to let her use a couple of his fallow fields for the public zone. This allowed her to offer a hundred stalls, either for trade, exhibitor or catering. Also agreed was parking for two thousand cars.

Several emails were in. Mobile Munchies and Pizza Paradise confirmed attendance. Two more to cater alongside the noodle bar and chippy already booked. Five food vans in total as she had rung The Hungry Man to ask if they could come only yesterday, on the way back

from the show. They did a great veggie range, Lilly being a frequent visitor to the local cafe. The variety of fare would provide an added element to the day.

St John's ambulance had been secured from the outset. A mobile crew of three and a stand by ambulance. She noted their response along with the cost and wrote out a cheque for two hundred pounds as a deposit. Lilly had set up a bank account to use for the trials, it provided validation of separation from her own business and allowed her to send the Committee the bank statements beside her own financial forecasts.

Also in her inbox was a draft website link from Dean at the Council, for her opinion. It reminded her she needed to send them some photos. She scribbled on a notepad next to her. They were keen to get onto social media as soon as possible, to advertise the event in advance and encourage interest. With the additional caterers and several stall holders confirmed, she replied. Go for it. Lilly felt a thrill go through her as she pressed send. She couldn't wait to see the site live, to read the feedback from people. Maybe it would attract more sponsorship or bring more exhibitors in? She hoped there would be a buzz of chatter on Facebook and twitter, a powerful marketing opportunity. To be able to show that she had an interesting shopping centre, something to watch and a pleasurable food experience was vital. Every show had them.

Carole from Horse and Hound wanted to bring a photographer up on Wednesday, to interview two of her liveries due to compete. Did she have any names yet?

She checked if Jojo had sent her a reply. No. She texted her, hoped she'd pick it up this time. Jojo was due over and would be a perfect candidate. Katie was lined up as the second one. A vet and an eventer, she was sure to give professional answers that would read well.

Lilly gathered up the printed documents into a folder, ready to take up to Piers later. Piers preferred the old-fashioned paper and person procedure. For the rest of the Committee, she pinged them over an email with attachments.

A quick glance at her kitchen clock, with a groan saw she had run over. She needed to get her yard boots back on.

Rahima and Mike had already taken the horses to their fields and were at work on their designated stables.

Despite the desire to yawn much of the morning, Lilly kept on the move. The work warmed her enough to shed a couple of layers of clothing. It also kept her from having time to think about the desire to sleep. Being tired was all in the mind, she told herself as she turbo charged her way through the pile of wet straw and manure.

One thing guaranteed in life. Horses trashed the nice clean beds offered each day. Although some more clean than others, every day, the team went through the same process. Take the poo out, separate the shavings or straw wee'd on. Once clean, fluff it all up, neaten up the banks that bordered the walls. A fresh bed provided for the horse to re-enter at night. And how did said horse thank them for this chore? They would circle about the stable, two or three circuits. Paw the ground with a front hoof, snatch a mouthful of hay. Finally, with a tail lifted up, a sound like a deep grumble from the pit of their stomach, out came the waterfall. As if they had held onto their wee all day for this very moment. The process would begin again the next day. And the day after. Thankless task? Yes. Essential for the horses' welfare? Yes. Eat as much chocolate as you want, you'll burn the calories doing the job? Oh yes. Well, there had to be *some* benefit.

Lilly felt lucky with all her current team, though not everyone had made the grade. She had seen potential grooms turn up to interview dressed in a tiny vest that ended just above the navel, hot pants and ballet pumps. One whose dyed hair had been teased to perfection, a face covered in heavy makeup. Then, there were ones that turned up in correct dress, yet appeared to have never used a fork in their lives. Those who certainly had no idea how to muck out. Even one girl who screamed like a banshee when a horse tried to rub his head on her arm. It had been a steep learning curve in how to ask the right question in a phone interview prior to the offer of a trial.

Having shovelled shit for over fifteen years, she had the floors clean and ready in an hour. It even gave her time to shovel up the muck heap. Lilly took the hit on this, being, she admitted, a little OCD on keeping the pile tidy. Others had tried, and she'd been polite in her thanks. The minute they had left for the day, she was over to re-do it all. No, she was not a control freak, she insisted when her team took the piss. Except that she secretly knew she was. She liked the job done a certain way.

Mike was a lanky lad with a mop of long brown hair that hung like a curtain about his head. He would tie it back with a plaiting band until it snapped under the volume. At seventeen and in his last year of school, Mike worked most weekend mornings. Lilly liked his attitude, gentle in movement, gentle around horses, always polite.

But he would tip his wheelbarrow up and walk off, straw and poo strewn where it dropped. Rahima a little better. Though she didn't like to wheel the barrow up a plank of rotten wood lined up as a route when the pile had grown high. She'd once lost her balance and fallen sideways into a vast pile of fermenting manure.

Lilly paid for it all to be removed every couple of months to contain it. However, it didn't take long, with daily wheelbarrow loads, for it to spill out towards the field walkway. On the plus side, it was a great upper body workout. Lilly had biceps as hard as rock.

A quick sit down with both youngsters. Fifteen minutes to ask if all was good, any problems to overcome or anything they might need. Next, a run through of jobs that she required of them for the rest of their shift. Afterwards, Lilly checked in on the DIY yard. Taylor had warned her of unrest amongst some owners.

Lilly debated on whether to keep it as a DIY or to change it to assisted livery. She understood not everyone could afford to pay for their horse to be managed. Buying a horse was one thing. But the maintenance could be a major slice of the monthly expenditure. To others with the means, just a way of life they enjoyed. Spending spare time being sole carer for their horse was part of the fun. No, the problem with this part of her business was the increase of disagreements she seemed to hear. In addition, too many loaners had begun to appear out of the blue she didn't know about. Though the biggest and most serious issue to cause her to think of change was poor animal hygiene.

On her early evening rounds she noticed near empty water buckets on more than one occasion for it to be a simple error. Clocked up over a dozen times having to replenish them to ensure the horse did not dehydrate overnight. Seen mud caked over a face left to dry in a hard lump. A forelock tangled in whorls and bits of twig that twisted like dreadlocks. And she didn't even want to think about the fields full of horse shit no one had bothered to poo pick for over a week.

If she made these changes, she would employ someone to muck out, manage the feeds, ensure water was always available to the horse. She viewed the idea as a solid solution, one

that would offer greater peace of mind. Both for her and those on site genuinely concerned that the horses were cared for.

Of course, Vicky was high on the concern list. The new bolt served its purpose, and Robin remained in place, but she struggled with time. Lilly had a compromise for her. She knew of someone keen to help out, to ride a few times a week, an ideal loaner. Someone capable of dealing with the neurosis of both horse and owner. If Vicky said yes, she'd leave her on DIY rate. The loaner to split the cost with Vicky. That would give Vicky money in her pocket to help pay bills and days when she didn't have to be at the yard. The horse would benefit most, and that was the ultimate goal.

Next on her hit list, Jane and mad Mel, Jane's daughter. She shuddered at the thought, a pair of know it all's. Jane had owned horses for thirty odd years. Her dark bay gelding Larry was always lame, but no one could find the reason. Mad Mel. A small round woman with ears that stuck out like Dobby the house elf. She strutted about with an air of snobbery; her long nose turned up at those she did not deem her equal. That would be the entire human population then. She turned puce if anyone made a suggestion to her on equine management. With a loud harrumph she would turn her back and march off.

Her horse, Belle, was a beautiful chestnut mare. Long white stockings half way up her fine boned legs. A very thick white blaze down her face that covered most of it. As mad as her owner. When on form, she won every show she entered. But most of the time she'd buck at the mere sight of a blade of grass that waved the wrong way at her.

Lilly could put up with their idiosyncrasies. Just. But how would they take to the changes? To insist that someone else muck out their stable, turn their horse out? She didn't think they'd be too keen.

Will, early twenties, wide grey eyes that danced with mischief filled his face. He was a yard favourite, in part because he was always happy, but also because he'd bring leftovers from the bakery he worked at. Usually cake. With irregular shift hours, to enable him to keep his chestnut mare Pippen, he had taken on a loaner. A moaner would be an understatement. One of life's glass half empty stories. If she spotted Lilly, she'd be over with a bag full of woe. Would he stay? Probably not. But this is business, she reminded herself as she walked. One exception she could justify. Two tipped over the whole point of the reshuffle,

Lilly knew she was going in at the deep end by making changes at the same time as the trials. Though, no time like the present. What did her mum always say? In for a penny? She needed all the pennies she could make. In contrast to the main livery section, this yard did not bring value to her enterprise. Every month saw additional expenses she had not factored in, these brought her profit margin down. Once wages and feed had been paid, bills, rates, rent, her take-home wage barely matched that of her head groom.

To make it all work required difficult decisions. No one got rich by being the nice guy, did they?

How to keep Taylor on site had been one she'd tussled with when going through the list. Assisted livery would add at least a couple of hundred pounds to the girl's invoice. Chances were her mum would want to move to a different yard. Lilly had decided to offer Taylor the option to make up the difference with weekend work for her, similar to Mike. She enjoyed watching the teenager ride the little grey Welsh section A of an evening. On occasion, even offered a free lesson just for the pleasure of seeing the progress.

Now, as she neared the corner, voices could be heard, one louder, more agitated. Lilly stiffened, resolve sharpened. Stopped for a moment to listen to who it was that shouted the

loudest. With a sinking feeling she realised who. A mean-spirited little man who found fault in everyone else's riding and liked to point it out without embarrassment.

Sure enough, as she stepped into the yard, there he ranted. Terry Fletcher, fists tightly clenched as he squared up to Will. His grey hair spiked up like a hedgehog under a purple screwed-up face, not unlike an angry gargoyle.

"You calling me a fucking liar?" he screamed, inches from Will's face, spit flying like darts. Will flushed scarlet as he tried to step away from the snarling smaller man.

"I just pointed out that you have had more than your share of our hay. That's all, mate, and you know it. I've been gone two weeks and in that time we've doubled my normal usage. It's left me thirty quid out of pocket."

"Bullshit Will. I've used no more than usual. It's your horse that eats like a gannet, you know your horse is overweight." Terry continued to shout, took a step forward just as the taller, younger man stepped back.

"Terry, I've already spoken to Tay. She says she gave Pip the same amount as always, so I know it's not me." Will continued to hold his ground. His hands flew up to defend his face against the tirade, his voice tight and nervous.

"Well, that fucking haynet is packed solid." Terry was not going to give an inch. Determined to scream and dominate the other into submission.

"Whoa there, stop, both of you, please!" Lilly waded in. She put a hand on Terry's shoulder, who flinched it off as if it were a fly. She stepped around more, desperate to distract Terry from Will, who looked ready to wilt under the torrent of Terry's anger.

“Mind explaining what in hell is going on here?” she asked. “I’ll ask Will first. Terry, I think you need to calm down for a moment.” She gave a cool stare at Terry to emphasise her authority. She hated raised voices in the yard. Horses were sensitive, they didn’t react well to human high emotion.

Will looked at Lilly, hesitant in whether to speak. She kept her focus on him, nodded that he set out his story.

“Well ok, so we’ve been sharing bales of hay. First it was me and Sue. But Dawn asked if I’d go in with them.” he began. A snort came from across where the smaller man stood. His neck looked like it was fit to explode, the veins twisted and swollen.

“I didn’t really want to, but I went along with it to keep everyone happy. From the start, it appeared I was going through the bale quicker than usual. It just didn’t add up.”

Lilly put a hand up to Terry’s face as she saw from the corner of her eye his eyes bulge. She could almost feel the hot steam from his nose as he breathed like a raging bull.

“Go on” she nodded to Will.

“I’ve been on holiday. Tay has been looking after Pip for me on the days my loaner wasn’t up. I got a text from Terry to say he’d got another big bale and I owed him for half. I couldn’t understand why at first. But now I’ve been back three days and each morning I’ve clocked him taking a massive hay net into Honey’s stable. Like, way more than that horse should eat. It’s obvious he’s been taking more than his share.” Will finished, relieved to get his side of the story out to Lilly. He even threw in a bold look at Terry.

“Fucking liar! I’ve done nothing of the sort, you fucking trying to get me in trouble, you fucking idiot.” Terry screamed with ferocity.

Lilly's hand flew up again. It almost smacked Terry in the face as he'd lunged, his arm up as if to swing a punch at Will.

"Back off, Terry!" she warned. He glared at her, his mouth opened like a goldfish, gulping for air. Lilly repeated herself with as much steel as she could muster. "You need to calm down right now."

"If it's not either of you, then we have a thief on the yard," Lilly stated. "Which is a potential risk to my property." She looked from one to the other as she thought how best to action a serious situation.

"Good news for me, I have CCTV in place. We can't be too safe, not just the horses, but you all have tack. I will take a look through it in case we need to call the police. Meantime, easiest solution all round is to change back to the original rule. From now on, you can buy the smaller bales direct from me. Individually. I'll confirm the change in your monthly newsletter, effective from April first. It sorts out any future argument over who has what.

Terry went to mutter something but choked on his words instead.

"Good. That suits me," Will said. "At least I won't have to worry about paying for someone else's consumption."

Both Will and Terry strode off in separate directions. Lilly remained to check on the others. Jane was in her stable, keeping out the way. Taylor was up in the sandschool. Whilst Sean and Lee were both at a show with their coloured pair. The rest had turned out already and gone home.

She stayed long enough for her to be satisfied tempers had calmed, said goodbye and walked back up the track. As she passed a white Suzuki jeep in the car park, she noticed the

back was stuffed full of haynets. Several very large and very full haynets. With a surge of irritation, she marched back down.

“Who does that white jeep belong to?” she demanded. Though she had an idea, she knew the answer.

“Ours, why?” Dawn, Terry’s wife, emerged from the kitchen with mugs of coffee in both hands.

“Want to explain the haynets in the back?”

On hearing Lilly, Will shot off to the car park area. He returned livid, but victorious.

Terry was left to splutter, grasping for excuses as he continued to deny it. The culprit was all too obvious.

“You might want to arrange a refund for Will?” Lilly suggested politely. Professionalism stopped the urge to shout ‘fucking liar’ at Terry.

The man kicked his boot into the ground, his face stone cold. He turned and stomped off loudly, threatening Will, threatening Lilly. He shouted for all to hear how he’d had his fill of this yard; he could find better.

Will grinned sheepishly, grateful and wildly triumphant at the same time.

Lilly walked back to the main livery yard with a deliberate slow pace. She was more than a little stunned at just what had happened.

Later that evening, she recounted to Jay via Skype the saga of haygate as she coined it.

“You know, I don’t think a week goes by when it’s not DIY SOS. Honestly, it’s easier to deal with the biggest diva on the livery yard than walk down there,” she laughed.

“Tell me, love, who is the biggest diva on the livery yard?” he enquired with a tilt of his head, his eyes wide with expectation.

“That depends on the day.” Lilly smiled with a wicked grin. “Some days it might even be me!”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Early March saw a thaw in the weather. A time for horse riders to start in earnest ready for the show season. Bring their horse back into full time work with determination.

Lilly was in the top arena schooling Spartan. She had received an exciting call from his owner, Andrew, to discuss the forthcoming season with an announcement of wonderful news, a European tour.

“I’ve got entries for the top ones, Lilly. I just know that this will help me hit the big time, he’s got it in him to go international.” Andrew sounded so excited.

She understood exactly how he felt, been over the moon for him. Spartan was a one off, a lucky find. A tip off from a friend about a horse bought to pull a carriage that refused point blank to back into the shaft. On the first attempt he bolted out of the yard to jump the six-foot gate back into his field. Andrew paid a few hundred pounds to secure him. The owner, in his fury, threatened to send him to slaughter. Declared, that was all he was good for. Since then the horse had won every time out. Now, with a sponsor to offer financial backing, it was time to step into the top league.

The deal covered payment for transportation in a live-aboard lorry, plus stabling at each event, entry fees and costs associated. The only thing Andrew needed to find would be accommodation and food. He told Lilly he would bed down in the lorry habitation. A microwave, kettle and running water would see him through. He’d sleep in Spartan’s stable if that’s what it took. Last season in the UK had been so successful, his horse a jumping machine, he felt sure they could make it as professionals.

Mr and Mrs Longford, his sponsors, owned a multi-million-pound luxury travel company built from scratch twenty-odd years previous. Now in their seventies, they took pleasure in giving others a chance to shine. With horses as their hobby, they backed several riders already. They knew the moment they saw Spartan win his class at the Lincolnshire County show that they had found their next project.

Lilly and Andrew chatted on the phone about the shows pre-booked. Many of them she had been to during her time with Charles and Yves. She congratulated him for such an opportunity and suggested she would speak to them, arrange an introduction. It didn't hurt to have a friend or two in a foreign county.

Andrew wished to pay to keep the stable until he returned at the end of September. Eager to avoid an alternative yard. If she wanted to use it as a stopgap, he reassured her she would be welcome. He hoped his return would be a victorious one when he would rest the horse over the winter.

Before departure he was paying her to her to help prepare this magnificent horse for the journey. Spartan was big, a seventeen two hand animal, with power in his back end that gave him the edge. It's what helped propel him over everything. Whilst a good-natured horse, he was strong, wilful even. Having agreed on a programme of daily exercise to establish maximum fitness, she was in the zone. He'd need to jump fences higher than her. Spreads as wide as they were high. Water, brush, bricks, gates, coloured, whatever the course contained, he must be trained enough not to refuse. Not that there was much chance of that happening. Nothing stopped him so far, but she wanted to make sure Andrew felt he'd spent his money well. To allow them every chance of success.

Lilly delighted in this opportunity to be part of the journey to success. Despite her increased workload, she accepted the addition of a daily one hour of schooling and light jumping, followed by an hour hack. A chance to gallop amongst the beautiful countryside around them, up hills to increase his stamina, muscle up his rear 'spring'. What was not to like about the deal?

Today she was in full concentration as the ride wasn't straightforward. A reminder that no horse had such power, the ability to jump at great height, without being a little crazy. She required a firm rein as he pulled her towards fences like a steam roller. With front feet crabbing and bunny hopping, his back end throwing small bucks, his head attempted to snake free to rush the next hurdle. Every muscle in her body stretched taut in order to keep him in check, her attention keen, focused. All the while, keeping him going forward and in a straight line.

If she could bring his mind back to the job, she would have an easier hack later. On days like today, galloping was both a thrill and a dice with danger. His speed could make her face sting as he whipped up the wind. Added to that, a random buck. More than once she'd almost tipped over his neck on an off-guard moment. She had taken her fair share of trips to Accident and Emergency over the years and could do without anymore.

He had him settled into a nice even trot when from nowhere he spooked, bolting across the arena. Lilly pulled hard on the reins, sat in, leant backwards. Her fear being that he would clear the five-foot fencing around the ring without batting a hoof and be away. The reason for his flight, Lilly could now hear, was a whirring in the sky. At first it sounded like a large hornet. Spartan reacted to her request to slow down. Thank you Epona, she muttered to the Horse God. She gave him a pat on the neck in appreciation and reassurance as the noise became louder and vibrated.

Squinting up at the bright sky, she saw the helicopter and almost sighed with relief. Jojo was on her way.

She pictured the woman in her mind's eye. Imagined her seated in the back, blue eyes perfectly spaced above her slender nose, no doubt Vogue magazine in her hands. A tremendously high voltage person, her creativity would be splashed across the pages. Be it clothes, boots or jewellery, her latest collection would be on display. Jojo invariably gave Lilly the used magazine before she went, like a discarded gem. Lilly never quite knew how to take the gesture. Either Jojo offered it to her for genuine interest, or it was a hint Lilly needed the guidance. More likely the latter, she reckoned. The French designer would not be far wrong though. Lilly had not the slightest idea about fashion, unless you were talking saddles.

Josephine de Causans characterised the epitome of French aristocratic chic. Almost six feet, fine limbed, well spoken. Her expensively styled chocolate coloured hair skimmed the top of her shoulders. A face that looked like it should be on the cover of the magazine.

Piers made the original introductions. Lilly remembered how she had felt, a little dumbstruck. How did one manage to be born so perfect? All the while he recounted the story that connected them. Whereas now she had heard it over a dozen times as he reminisced. Thierry de Causans and Piers had been in the same polo team for years. Their wives became firm friends. As children, Jojo and his son would play together, waiting for their fathers to be victorious. Of course, they invariably were, he would add with a swell of his chest. Pride in his exploits of days gone by.

Now Jojo was a grown woman with several successful businesses of her own that took her all over the world to retail and advertise.

Poppy, she explained at their initial meeting, was the horse she wished to take to Badminton. Cross-country being her thrill, she had declared. A danger that made her feel alive. Whilst papa and Piers had been happiest on the polo pitch, knocking a puck around the field did nothing for her. Her adrenaline only kicked in as she jumped hedges into ditches, or raced down dunes towards a six-foot log. She'd competed throughout Europe at smaller events, but Badminton was the ultimate challenge.

Jojo's horse, Poppy was a bay seventeen hand warmblood that floated like a dancer in dressage, yet jumped fences with the punch of a boxer. But with Jojo's business commitments and home life in Paris, visits were sporadic. This meant Poppy was on full livery, ridden daily by either Lilly or Rico. Sometimes even Alison, if time was short. Every other week Lilly scheduled in a trip to Eastbank. A cross-country course you could hire out that provided the conditions necessary to keep Poppy engaged.

There was no doubting the mare's talent. Last year she placed on most outings. Dressage stopped her from the red ribbon. Bred to leap banks and bushes, Poppy behaved as if the discipline of fine movement was a chore. The dance of a butterfly she produced was due purely to the dozens of hours worked in making her listen. It didn't guarantee she'd remember when in a ring. Sometimes she preferred the wooden leg look.

Lilly reined in Spartan, gave herself a further five minutes to cool him down. She walked him with a long rein for several circuits of the school, to stretch his neck and for his heartbeat to return to normal.

She had learnt the procedure that followed the sighting. The helicopter would land on Piers' immaculate lawn. He would race out to greet her. To offer a cup of tea, a freshen up, a

few snatched minutes to chat with his favourite Goddaughter. Lilly had at least half an hour before they appeared once he had stopped fussing over her.

She walked Spartan back to the yard in-hand. Untacked then led him over to the hot shower cubicle to remove all the sweat from his body. Left him to stand under the solarium, the heated strips overhead warming him through. This horse was too valuable to sponge down and throw in a field still wet. And heaven forbid he might then roll and cover that perfect coat of black fur with a layer of dirt.

Despite the temperature finally going up, rain showers kept the ground soggy. The heavy-duty rugs that kept horses warm and dry were now being replaced with rain sheets. In Spartan's case he also had knee high neoprene padded leg wraps and a lycra neck hood, finished with a tail bandage. Many of the horses came in from the fields, mud up to the top of their legs, tails caked with lumps of soil, manes matted with various field plantation. Spartan needed to remain spotless.

Checking the time, she dug out the saddle and bridle from the tack room. Laid the saddle over Poppy's stable door, gave the mare a quick brush whilst she was in there, to remove any stray shavings, talking gently to her as she did. Lilly enjoyed interaction with the horses, rare as it was nowadays. Other people might own them, pay for them to live with her, but she fed them. It gave her star status in their eyes.

A final flick of body brush, a spray of coat shine, she was ready. Timed to perfection. Moments later she heard the golf buggy pattering into the yard that announced their arrival. Piers had purchased it from his club to enable him to drive around the estate more easily.

Lilly greeted JoJo warmly, kisses on each cheek and a genuine smile. The scent of a rose garden mixed with marzipan overwhelmed her senses for a moment. Wow that woman smelt good she thought.

“Piers, Jojo, I have coffee and biscuits if you’d like to come in?” she suggested. Lilly knew Piers hankered to remain with Jojo a while longer, happy to provide him with a reason.

As they accepted, she inwardly gave a little cheer having remembered to Hoover that morning in anticipation of a visit. Piers might overlook the mess, but this was a woman who was used to the most spotless of conditions. The very thought she would appear to live in some manky mess of a pit had urged her to set a reminder on her phone. After all, nothing inspires cleanliness more than an expected guest. Clean the bloody house! The reminder had screamed at her first thing.

Now the lounge floor no longer looked like a carbon copy of Poppy’s stable. For once. It appeared tidy, no visible shavings or hay, no muddy leg bandage spilling across the coffee table, nor a bit or a stirrup iron down the side of the chair. Sure, it was by no means up for a spread in Country Homes, but today a passable eight out of ten for a quick stopover.

Ruby threw herself at the French beauty’s legs like a jack in the box as she bounced her paws against the female knees. Expectant of affection. Her tail wagged with similar speed to that of the helicopter’s rotor blades. Her speciality was a quick lick of a hand or exposed ankle when they weren’t looking. Both humans appeared to like it as she received a good tummy rub from both.

JoJo declined the refreshments with a polite ‘non merci’. However, she seemed eager to discuss the September trials, offering to help in some aspect. She assured Lilly that she would be very ‘appy to ask friends to sponsor classes.

Music to my ears, mon amie, Lilly thought. This meant some big names and big money would come her way. That would benefit the show, offer the high-end style she had boasted to the Committee she would attain.

Lilly opened her laptop and worked through the spreadsheet that listed items still needed.

Bob, the drinks merchant who owned Cav, had already claimed the booze marquee. He would also supply bar staff to serve up the drinks on a sale or return basis. However, she still needed money to cover the hire of the VIP tent. It came with a raised wooden floor, crystal ceiling lights, tables and silver service. Ideally, she'd like floral displays on each table too.

In addition, she had several fences that required a sponsor. The money enabled the purchase or build, dependent on the style. A selection of fences were bespoke designs. A sponsorship of the under eighteen event and finally going begging was accommodation for the judges.

As she spoke the words Lilly saw Piers break into a broad smile. A little cough interrupted her flow.

"I have seven empty bedrooms. Well, maybe six if my elusive son actually turns up for once. He seems to prefer the gatekeeper's cottage in the wood to his old dad's company, claims he likes the chance to be alone like he was Marlene bloody Deitrich," Piers sniffed sadly. "I'd be happy to offer up rooms for the judges, I expect I will know them from somewhere. Go on, put my name down, my dear."

"And me, I should like to 'ave my name on the under eighteen class. Do you 'ave trophies for them?" Jojo inquired.

Lilly showed them images of the silver she'd sourced from a London company. A firm who had been designing trophies for various sporting events for nigh on a century. For the second and third prizes she offered a trophy with horseshoes for handles that came in various sizes. Whereas, the first-place trophy of preference bore a horse leaping a wooden gate, behind which a narrow tubular shaped cup rose up behind diagonally.

“Fantastique! These are perfect, non?” Jojo exclaimed.

Delighted that Jojo approved, Lilly smiled with relief. When Jojo agreed to the purchase, she wanted to throw her arms around her. With the trophies now sponsored along with the class, and the offer to speak to well-connected and wealthy friends, Lilly had good reason to celebrate. Key elements to the success of her show.

Lilly had secretly hoped for the support of this warm French woman. She felt a click on first introduction. Visits became more like a friend showing up rather than a client. Jojo also knew Charles Moreau. Lilly discovered it was his men's fashion line that had first bought Jojo's designs for equestrian wear. Now, less than ten years on, she ran a flourishing top brand in its own right, Marengo. The name of Napoleon's favourite horse offered the association of ancestry, even though it was not a dubious link, he did feature as a distant cousin in her family's genealogy. Why not? Lilly agreed. If you have it, may as well use it. The connection stirred up further publicity and ensured rapid sales.

“Bon, now, I must see my darling Poppy. I am anxious to ride her, more than ever now that I 'ave a focus date for my big moment.” Jojo smiled with satisfaction after signing a contract of agreement. Lilly was not going to let an opportunity slip by to confirm every offer whilst on the table. Never allow someone time to change their mind was her motto.

Piers kissed them both again on each cheek, an enthusiastic smack. But then, he was always ready for a bit of skin contact, she remembered. She made sure to move her face enough, so he only caught her cheek, not her lips, as he honed in. He too wafted, too strong, of spicy overtones. Lilly caught a hint of alcohol. That explained it. He was often a little leery when he had started on the pop before noon.

With a wave of his hand, he assured them he'd be at the sandschool to watch. To go on without him as he needed to use the toilet. She wondered if he was carrying the hip flask she'd previously seen him take a swig from.

Lilly had spent a good hour the night before scrubbing it clean. Being a Domestic Goddess was not top of her list of daily jobs. An impossibility on a large yard full of horses. Situated on the steps to the entrance of her house, the downstairs loo served as the yard toilet. She often wondered what people's own bathrooms must look like. No matter the sign above the toilet 'Please flush before you leave', or the bleach and cloth left on the shelf. It was like sanitising a cess pit.

As the women walked together to the yard, they chatted amicably. Jojo keen to learn the gossip. She could draw water from the Sahara dunes with her persuasive nature and loved to know what was going on.

Yard drama was part of life. Who had fallen out with whom, and why? With no names, Lilly recounted the hay tale, knowing it would amuse her friend.

"Mon dieu, it really is a bed of hotness" Jojo laughed gaily.

“Oh, I almost forgot, I ‘ave a small gift for you. A merci for the ‘ard work you do for my horse. It is part of my new collection.” Jojo fished out a small box from the pocket of her riding coat.

Lilly gasped as she opened the light blue velvet lid to find two beautiful drop earrings. The stones were an off white, a fine brown vein running through in haphazard fashion.

“You are too generous, they are beautiful,” Lilly gleamed, picked one up to turn it around between her fingers. “What is the stone?”

“Dry Creek white turquoise. I ‘ope you like. The stone can only be found in one mine in the world, chouette non?”

Lilly carefully returned the jewellery and closed the lid, clutched now to her chest with a wide smile.

“C’est si gentille de toi, merci beacoup” she replied.

“I ‘ave left you the magazin, you will be able to see the rest of my collection for this season in there.”

Jojo mounted her horse that was being held by Alison. She threw her leg over Poppy’s neck, lifted the saddle flap to check the girth. With a tug at the buckle she racked it up two notches with a practised hand. Leg back in place, with a squeeze the horse moved forward. Jojo gave a small wave as she gathered up the reins, her feet reaching for the stirrups.

Rico was in the sandschool, having just finished a lesson with another livery. He had plans to work Jojo hard on Poppy to get her flying changes in canter perfect, something the horse had struggled with last time. Following, he would discuss the next couple of weeks work.

Agree targets and review videos he'd previously sent her of Poppy jumping or lungeing. Jojo liked to be involved in all aspects of training even if she couldn't be around.

Once they were finished, Jojo would say goodbye, return to Piers, have a sandwich and head back out. The helicopter overhead would signal her departure, as usual about three o'clock. Lilly knew it would take her to the Alberough airport, where all the rich seemed to use as their UK travel base. Her family jet would be there, to take her back to Paris.

Lilly was glad it was not later. Attempting to extract horses from a field whilst a loud hornet buzzed overhead was sure to provoke a stampede. They would be wired from the commotion, all a jig at the gate, hooves and teeth thrown about with indifference.

Once bring-in and feed was complete and having escaped Hugo, an awkward livery that asked irrelevant questions or complained, she perched at the kitchen table. With a quick count, there were thirty unread texts on her phone and sixteen emails. A scroll through allowed a scan of the first line. She knew straight away those that could wait. A handful she would ignore, sales reps or spam.

Lilly spotted the magazine left for her on the kitchen table. Reached across to open it up with a degree of intrigue. She had been knocked out by the unusual earrings given to her as a gift. Even more by the story behind them. A chance discovery in a remote mine deep in the wilderness of Nevada not far from where she once worked. A single ridge of turquoise void of the sulphate which gave the colour, it made this semi-precious gemstone unique. Jojo explained the background before she left. If Lilly thought her gift amazing, what did the rest of the collection look like?

She smiled as she spotted that Jojo had inserted small pink sticky notes on the pages to read. It was something she had a habit of doing too. Opening the first, in finest gloss paper a

top end magazine produced, sat the jewellery collection. Spread over several pages and draped over the bodies and faces of the most fashionable and beautiful models in the world.

Wow, this was pretty spectacular. What an eye the woman had for beauty. All notion of her text messages went out of the window. Caught up in the translation of the French words that described the images she poured over.

She read how Josephine, as Vogue called her, had spent months working with her team to develop this season's pieces, sketching out her ideas and sourcing the stones.

Josephine was described as a designer with an eye on trend. Her vision lay in finding unique, individual gems. Ones ethically mined that offered employment to local tribes. A product that many had never seen before.

The entire series was turquoise and silver. As the article continued, it claimed Josephine was thrilled to discover so many varieties of this beautiful stone on several trips to the US.

From the standard blue turquoise, she added White buffalo, white with thick black splashes. For this, Josephine partnered up with the Navajo to create a natural, indigenous design. Feathers were detailed into the silver.

Lime green turquoise from the Tonopah Mine, that epitomised freshness and tranquility, which worked well in the spring theme of the collection.

A sky-blue stone with no markings named Sleeping Beauty offered the obvious, the Princess range. A model was dramatically strewn on a bed under a glass dome with ivy surrounding her in a cliché that only worked due to the pose and the mood lighting.

The article finished on a description of the final item in the collection. The Hubei turquoise of the Cloudy Mountain in the Zhuxi mine of China. Described as being so intricately woven that only a spider could have designed better, the campaign noted it being an item to encourage spiritual grounding and wisdom.

As she looked over the images with admiration, Lilly noticed that one necklace was selling for over five thousand euros alone. Her friend really did have the gift of making money. To boot, the collection was all but sold out.

It made her stomach tighten. Overcome with determination that she too would find the art of making money in her own sphere. She didn't aim to be stratospheric like Jojo. But the trials could offer up a better way of life for her that didn't leave her exhausted and penniless.

Originally, she'd believed that this livery yard offered up the answer. But only today two liveries had given notice, the washing machine was on the blink and in the post, a larger than usual water bill.

The liveries she wasn't worried about, she'd fill the spaces in no time. She had a waiting list of people with horses, eager for the facilities she offered. As for the washing, she would order a new machine at the end of the month. But the water bill was something she would have to investigate. Almost double the average consumption and they weren't even into summer excess.

Lilly put the magazine down with a yawn. A check on the time made her start. Nearly ten at night and she still had to catch up with the trial work. With the extra rides she'd been asked to do along with Jojo's visit, she was in danger of falling behind in her schedule. Stretching out on the chair, she picked at the stir fry she'd cooked up half an hour ago. Ate it cold with half-hearted enthusiasm, too tired to feel hungry but knowing she needed food.

A quick look on Facebook made her wide awake and bolt upright. Jay had posted a picture from a dinner with business clients. She dropped the fork with a clatter at the image of a very glamorous and scantily clad blonde sat next to him. Her hand lay on his arm, a diamond bracelet dangled over her wrist. She smiled up at him with adoration as he talked to the group. What the fuck? She zoomed in on the image, read the comment.

“A great evening with new clients, glad to have you all on board.”

Choking back the green finger that was stuck in her throat, she reminded herself of his last conversation. Three nights ago, on Skype.

The comment continued, “Welcome to our team! A wonderful family from the US, looking to relocate their business to Europe. A meal out to offer them our appreciation. Well, someone’s got to do it!”

Lilly breathed out through her mouth. Sure, she knew what job he had. Always surrounded by rich people investing their cash through the company. In fact, he himself wasn’t short of a bob or two. They discussed this. He didn’t care she wasn’t one of the jet set, that she hadn’t seen a hairdresser in at least a year, or that she’d purchased her one and only designer gown from a charity shop. She’d bought it the week before she attended a ball in La Rochelle with Charles when Yves had been unable to go, delegated as his plus one.

Jay had even spoken the L word. Both declared their feelings for the other, she had no reason to be jealous. So why was her heart in her mouth? Her hand shaky? Maybe because she’d just turned the pages of Vogue, seen such beautiful models? Now this. A young woman dripping in diamonds, her boobs squashed against his arm. They were the sort of woman on the circuit. Women in his daily world. Temptation abounded. Was he leading a double life?

She shook herself. How many times had he told her, never read into anything. He'd put it on Facebook after all, how obvious was that? He knew she'd see it. If he was a player, he'd have kept that photo well away from social media.

Lilly retrieved the fork that had fallen on the floor as she'd gasped. Rubbed it on her jods before taking another mouthful of cold vegetables. With a slam, she closed the laptop, turned to her list of things to do.

With a degree of forced concentration, she spent another hour staring at course plans. The email from Dean, noting the Wingfield Trials website had four hundred 'going', a further a hundred and fifty 'interested'. This was positive. A few scribbles on the to-do pad for morning. Check Joe's car park field. She may have to beg an overflow field. She'd also need to find more parking marshals, though if desperate she could beg volunteers from the yard.

It was near midnight when Lilly turned her bedside lamp off, settled down to attempt five hours sleep. Just as she shut her eyes, she felt a vibration from her phone, a message.

“Don't read anything into that photo. It's been a long night, speak tomorrow. Love you xxx.”

She replied with a love heart and four kisses, her heart leapt with relief. She really needed to find time in her crazy schedule to meet up. If she felt like a nun, he had probably ordered a monk's outfit.