

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 señoritas, 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.’

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