

GRAY HORSE AT OAK LANE STABLE

by Kerri Lukasavitz

1. Storm Brewing

Stormy March winds whipped freezing rain against the windows of our 8th grade classroom, making tons of ticking noise as it ricocheted off the glass. An icy sheen glazed everything outside. It had snowed pretty heavy this morning, adding, like, 2 inches to what was already on the ground. I thought we'd have a snow day, but they didn't call off school. The snow had changed to sleet late morning, then to rain when it warmed up before lunch, and was now back to sleet after lunch. I stared toward the windows, chewing my left nails and wondering if I'd make it to the stable later to ride Snowdrops.

"Bet we get sent home early," Scott Hanson said as he got up from his desk, hiked up his too-big jeans, and went over to the windows to watch. He's been in my class since 5th grade. "Bet that's where Mrs. Thompson went...to talk to Mr. Edgeman to send us—"

"No they won't," said Tommy O'Connor, the new guy who had started 8th grade with us last fall. He wriggled his long legs out from under his metal desk to join Scott. "It's got to be worse than this before the principal sends us home. It's only raining."

"Bet they do," Scott said as David Schaeffer, James Strupp, Karen Klink, Harvey Strobel, Robert John Lewandowski The Third, and some of my other classmates joined him and Tommy to watch the icy rain bounce off the windows and freeze up the small Wisconsin schoolyard.

"Do you think we can still go to the barn?" I asked Allison and Ingrid, my two best horse friends since, like, forever and who sat next to my desk, which was in the row on the farthest side

of the classroom across from the windows. “Claire said she’d have time to give me a lesson today when I rode Snowdrops. I need to keep practicing if I’m going to qualify for the Children’s Hunter Seat Equitation Finals.”

“I was going to ride Diamond Jack, except my dad said the weatherman predicted freezing rain for this afternoon.” Allison snuck a piece of pink bubble gum into her mouth from a crumpled, opened pack she kept in her left jean’s pocket, even though she knew Mrs. Thomson forbade it during class. “We don’t live that far from the stable. I bet my mom can drive us over. It can’t be that bad outside.”

“Maybe it’ll stop later.” Ingrid leaned forward in her seat to maybe get a better look out the windows. “At least you guys have your own horses. My parents still won’t get me one. I always have to ride Bailey. Is Claire ever going to let me ride a different school horse?”

“You can always have my old school horse, George. He’s fun to ride.” I looked at her, then back toward the windows and tried not to burst out laughing.

“Get real, Cassie. He is NOT!” Ingrid sat up in her seat. “You always had a hard time riding him in lessons. The only time he wasn’t a doofus was when you went to a horse show with him, and that wasn’t always so great either.”

“He’s such a slouch.” Allison blew a small bubble in case Mrs. Thomson came back into the classroom and saw her doing it. Allison told me the last time she’d gotten caught, she’d only blow tiny bubbles and not the giant ones she usually did so she didn’t get into trouble again.

“I wish I’d get my own horse.” Ingrid looked toward the windows. She probably watched David too. They’d been going steady since last summer. I used to have a secret crush on him last year, but didn’t now.

“Maybe you’ll get one this year.” Allison leaned in closer to us. “Hey, Cassie, are you going to ask Tommy to the Sadie Hawkins dance in May? Girls ask the guys.”

I pulled my knees together and looked down. I picked at my notebook paper, ruffling the page edges. Heat crept across my face.

I wished Allison hadn’t asked me that. Why couldn’t Mrs. Thomson hurry up and come back to class right now? Maybe I should leave and hide out in the bathroom for a while so I wouldn’t have to answer her.

“He’s dreamy,” Ingrid said softly. She looked down at her feet and wagged her tennies back and forth. She blushed.

Great! I was off the hook.

“You’ve got a boyfriend, Ingrid, remember?” Allison teased her. She blew a pink bubble, popped it, and sucked the wad back into her mouth.

Yes, Ingrid, you DO have a boyfriend. Remember when I was mad at you last summer when David had asked you out and not me? He obviously liked you better. Now you think Tommy’s dreamy too?

“I think he’s kinda cute.” Ingrid pulled on a few strands of brown hair that curled near her face. “David is super-cute, though. I wouldn’t trade him for anyone.”

“Sure about that?” Allison stretched her legs out in front of her seat.

“Of course,” Ingrid said.

“Betcha would,” Allison teased her, “if the guy was cute enough.”

“Would not.” Ingrid looked toward David, who was still talking to Scott and Tommy by the windows.

“Would too.” Allison crossed her arms.

“Would not.” Ingrid’s face turned beet red.

“Would too.” Allison then blew a big bubble.

“Stop it!” Ingrid shouted at Allison as she leaned toward her.

Everyone by the windows turned their heads to look at us, including Lisa Schmidt—my classmate and riding rival since 5th grade. She thought she was better than any of us. She had a boyfriend who was a freshman in high school and had friends who were Junior-Level riders.

Lisa, Ingrid, Allison, and I were still in the Children’s Division. I couldn’t wait to turn 14 next year, then I’d be a Junior rider. I wanted to show in their hunter classes and ride the higher fences, maybe even start riding jumpers. I didn’t want to be a children’s anything anymore.

Ingrid gave Allison the death stare.

“Hey, guys, take a chill pill.” I turned to face our other classmates. “Nothing to look at over here. Everything’s cool.”

Everyone at the windows went back to talking to each other.

Allison blew a giant bubble just as Mrs. Thomson clomped back into the classroom, wearing her dark brown platform shoes that I loved and wished I had a pair like them. Her reddish-blond, roller-curved hair bobbed up and down as she walked in.

Allison suddenly twisted around in her seat, popped the bubble, and tried to suck it back into her mouth before she got caught.

“Class, I’ve spoken to Mr. Edgeman.” Mrs. Thomson scrutinized us through plastic tortoise shell, octagon-shaped eyeglasses and stood with her hands on her hips at the front of the room by the blackboard. She wore her beige bell-bottom pants suit, a matching belt tied around her waist, and a brown paisley blouse with a super-pointy collar. “They’ve cancelled school this afternoon because of...Miss Greene, throw out that gum...the weather. It’s only supposed to get

worse...I said now, Allison...as the day goes on. Get your things together. The school buses have been dispatched and will be here in 20 minutes.”

Allison put the wad of gum in her left hand and marched over to the dark green garbage can next to Mrs. Thomson’s steel-gray teacher’s desk. She tossed the gum in the garbage can.

“Allison, I’ve spoken to you before about chewing gum during class.” Mrs. Thomson looked like a mean statue, but was super-nice if you didn’t make her mad. “I will NOT permit this again. DO I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Mrs. Thomson.” Allison looked right at her, then rolled her eyes when she walked back to her seat.

We all watched her get yelled at.

“Good, now get your things together.” Mrs. Thomson sat down at her desk. She put our stack of English essays into her leather-looking school bag—the essays we turned in before she was called to the principal’s office.

I grabbed my homework from inside my desk and shoved it into a brown paper grocery bag I’d brought with me so my books and papers wouldn’t get wet going to and from the school bus. We’d probably have at least one day off from school if the weather got as bad as they said it would. I mostly wanted to go to Oak Lane Stable to see Snowdrops and practice riding for my upcoming horse shows.

We made a ton of noise as my classmates and I joined the other kids from the 1st through 7th grades in the school hallway to get ready to go home. The hallway had a single row of 4-foot-high shelves on both sides of the walls. Each long shelf had individual metal hooks under them to hang up our coats, a place to keep our hats and mittens on top, and where we sort of lined up our winter boots along the floor.

My things were by Ingrid's and Allison's stuff, just down from Scott's, David's, and Tommy's areas. Lisa and her only two friends in our class were across the hall opposite of us, giggling about something. Lisa looked at me and then back at her friends. I made a face at her she didn't see and bent over to pull on my boots.

"Hey, maybe we'll get a long weekend if they close school tomorrow," Scott said as he grabbed his coat. "It's already Thursday. Remember when we had that giant snowstorm and were off from school for about a week?"

"Wasn't that, like, three years ago...April, 1973?" Tommy asked as he took off his shoes to put on his boots. "We lived in Madison then before moving here to Richfield to help Grandpa with his dairy farm after his tractor accident. Madison got maybe 13 inches of snow and had, like, 50 mph winds blowing it everywhere. Made some huge snow forts, though."

"We got closer to 15 inches," David said. He smiled at Ingrid, who smiled back. "My dad bought tickets for us to go to the Brewer's Opening Game, but they had to postpone it because of the storm. Know what you mean about the snow forts—"

"Don't forget King of the Hill and the snow fights—they were mondo-cool!" Scott said as he zipped up his coat.

"So cool!" James put on his red ski mask over his big head and pulled the knit bottom end up and over his forehead, making a cap of sorts.

"They were NOT!" Ingrid stopped zipping up her coat mid-way. "You threw snowballs at us that were more like ice balls. It hurt!"

"Don't be such a baby," Scott said. "We were only having—"

"They did, too, hurt!" I pulled on my purple crocheted hat. It made the shorter hairs around my face all staticy. I lifted my long, dark hair out of my collar after I put on my fake-fur,

beigey-brown winter coat before buttoning it up. “You gave us face washings and shoved snow down our backs!”

“You wanted to play with us.” David shrugged as he put on his gloves.

“You guys were just being mean,” Allison said as she grabbed the last of her stuff.

“No, we weren’t.” Robert bent over and tucked the open ends of plastic bread bags in the tops of his boots after putting his stocking feet into them—they must have leaked. His boots looked way too big for his feet, probably handed down from his dad. He stood up and smiled at Allison. “You guys can’t take a—”

“The buses are here, everyone!” Mrs. Thomson announced as she charged into the hallway, clapping her hands three times. “Everyone into lines and WALK out in an orderly fashion. Be careful of the ice on the parking lot as you load into the buses.”

“...a little fun,” Robert said to Allison. He buttoned his coat that also looked like it might have been his dad’s.

Allison smiled back at him.

The 1st through 7th grade teachers, along with Mr. Edgeman, came out into the hallway to help Mrs. Thomson get everyone on the buses safely. There wasn’t a lot of pushing from the younger kids like there usually was. I think they just wanted to go home early. Ingrid and Allison walked outside with me.

Two long, yellow school buses were parked in the front driveway near the school’s entrance. Both buses had heavy-duty steel chain sets fastened around their back wheels. The drivers only did that when it meant one thing—dangerous road conditions. We all lived on hilly back roads that weren’t plowed for a few days or until the main roads had been cleared first. The bus drivers had put the chains on for extra traction. The ride home would be slow-going.

“Oh, it’s so windy!” Ingrid grabbed her hat and tucked her head down as she hurried to our bus—the second one farthest away from the school building. David waited by the bus door to help her get on.

“Be careful!” Allison slid and almost wiped out. “Oh, it’s slippery!”

Icy rain stung my cheeks. I lowered my head to protect my face, but it didn’t work. I was just about to the bus door when I slipped on the driveway and wiped out on the freezing pavement. My paper bag of books split and slid away from me, sending books and flying papers all over the place.

“Cassie, are you okay?” David was right there to help me up since he had already gotten Ingrid on the bus. He almost fell down as he grabbed my arm to pull me up.

“Here, let me help you.” Allison slipped around while retrieving my books and the soggy papers that hadn’t blown away.

“My knee hurts a bit, but I’m okay, just a little wet,” I told David. Despite the driving wind and ice, I glanced up at the bus windows behind him. Tommy watched us from his seat near the middle of the bus.

My heart raced inside my tightening chest. I swallowed hard.

Great, just super-great.

I looked away, tugged my hat down farther on my head, and bent down to round up the last two books by my feet. “Thanks, guys. Come on!”

We huddled around the bus door to get inside. The wind pelted us with sleet.

“You okay, young lady?” the bus driver asked me when I got in. “That was quite a spill.”

“I’m fine.” My right knee throbbed while I rearranged my armful of books and damp, crumpled papers. I looked for an empty seat by Ingrid and David and sat down. Allison slid into the seat with me. We talked about going to the barn to ride our horses.

I avoided looking at Tommy.

He probably thinks I’m a spaz now anyway. So much for asking him to the Sadie Hawkins dance like I’d secretly wanted to do.

Books by Kerri Lukasavitz (www.kerrilukasavitz.com):

Mystery Horse at Oak Lane Stable (Book 1)

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