

UNBRIDLED, by Kristin Kisska

Wet gravel crunched under my tires as I approached the Lowcountry Equestrian Center from the old oak-tree-lined entrance. Though still early, horses already trotted around the training rings and I even glimpsed a flash of a horse's tail as someone rode into the woods. Ah, I lived for Saturday mornings at the stables! It was the home of my pride and joy gelding—Baymont Blues, or as I affectionately called him, Bay.

Though the rain had finally tapered off, it didn't soften the edge of South Carolina's notorious spring humidity. I'd already swatted a couple mosquitos this morning. Outfitted in leather boots and breeches, I hauled my grooming bucket into the stable. Parker, the head trainer, had agreed to meet for a private session this morning to polish my dressage techniques.

The stable's residents greeted me with their chorus of neighs, meows, and a stray bird tweeting from the rafters. I inhaled the cocktail of leather, brass, and hay—the most intoxicating scent on the planet—then walked the length of the wide hallway.

"G'mornin, Mia. You're here early." I winked at Parker's daughter. The teen slid Bay's stall gate open and stroked his muzzle, keeping his nose out of the bag of carrots I'd brought. "Did you ride your bike?"

"Hey, Courtney. Nope. Dad dropped me off before running errands. I wanted to clean up this messy boy. Dad would kill me if he knew I'd ridden him through the mud." As Parker's daughter Mia brushed D'Artagnan, each swift stroke revealed more of his dappled coat. Though tethered only by a halter and rope, the eighteen-hand Irish draught horse behaved like a gentle giant in her expert care.

"Don't worry. I won't tell," I said.

The empty stall and a quick glance at my friend Gina's tack box showed her horse Spade's saddle, bridle and girth were gone. Hardly the usual weekend routine for Gina who'd relocated from Virginia last autumn. "Gina got here early. Did you see her?"

Mia shook her head. "Maybe she's nervous about Tryon and already practicing." Next weekend, many of our stable's horses and riders would caravan to Tryon International Equestrian Center for the opening of their Spring Series. Bay and Spade were entered in the dressage and jumper events—this was my first time ever competing against Gina.

"Maybe." I noticed the teen's smile didn't quite reach her soulful dark eyes. Poor thing looked haggard. "Did homework keep you up late?"

"Final exams are in a couple weeks. Calculus is the worst." Mia nodded, perking up a bit. "Only one more year till college."

Studying into the wee hours was not how I spent my Friday nights when I was in high school. "Where do you want to go?"

"South Carolina. Mama studied there."

Almost two years ago, her mother had departed for a weekend with her college girlfriends in Charleston, but had never returned. She'd died in a hit and run car accident.

Forcing a smile, I sad, "I didn't know that. Go, Gamecocks!" I leaned my weight against Bay's shoulder to move him to the far side of the stall so I could muck it. "Gina graduated from USC, too."

"She mentioned that two days ago."

"Really?"

"Gina recognized Mama from the photo I keep in my wallet. Turns out they were good friends in college. Gina hadn't realized Mamma and I were related."

Brave girl, on so many levels. “Does Gina know ...” Yikes, I didn’t mean to remind her of her mother’s death. It must be hard enough living with a new, moody stepmother who was a couple of weeks shy of giving birth to her half-brother. But I’d already ventured down this path, so I softened my voice and continued, “Hard to believe it’s been almost two years since your mom died.”

“Seventeen months. Three weeks. Two days.” Mia paused combing D’Artagnan’s mane and glanced away, exhaling before continuing. “Gina was there. In Charleston. When Mama died.”

We both turned at the sound of footsteps approaching.

“Hey, have y’all seen Gina?” Scott, Gina’s husband, asked. “Spade’s stall is still empty. I’d call but she left her cell phone in the car when I dropped her off an hour ago. Didn’t notice ‘til I got home. Figured she’d need it.”

“I can give it to her,” I said.

“Thanks,” Scott said.

I slipped it into the back pocket of my riding breeches as Scott strolled away.

Activity in the stable picked up as more horse owners arrived. Finally, I had Bay brushed, bridled, padded, and saddled. While I summoned every ounce of strength I could muster to tighten the buckle straps on Bay’s girth, a large, dark shadow entered the far side of the stable and trotted toward us.

Spade’s saddle was empty, his stirrups bounced drunkenly, and his broken rein scraped the brick floor. He slowed to a walk as he entered his stall, and then nipped at his hayrack, content to be home.

But no Gina.

Parker pulled up to the stables and parked as Mia and I raced outside.

“Hey, Parker! I think Spade threw Gina. Can you help me look for her around the grounds?”

“Sure.” Concern overshadowed his Hollywood good looks. “Mia, you ride with me.”

“Okay, Dad,” Mia said.

Parker drove his pickup truck east as I drove my SUV west. Separate directions ensured we’d cover the equestrian center’s collection of fields, paddocks, and riding rings faster. When I found no sign of Gina, I parked by the horse trailers near the arena near the lower grounds. I searched the trailers and then ran inside the covered arena. At every turn, I feared I would find her in a lump at the foot of some jump.

But there was no sign of Gina—injured or otherwise.

I got back in my truck and drove until I pulled up alongside Parker’s truck. I opened my window. Grasping for ideas, I ventured, “Someone rode into the trails as I arrived early this morning. It could have been Gina.”

“Worth a look,” Parker said.

“I’ll return to the stable in case Gina returns,” Mia said. “Dad, text me if you find her.”

Parker patted his pockets, and then shrugged. “Must’ve forgotten my phone.”

Mia shook her head. “Courtney, can you text me?”

“I sure can. Be careful,” I said.

Mia’s brow couldn’t have been more furrowed as she hopped out of her father’s truck and jogged back to the stable. Poor thing. This had to remind Mia of the last day she kissed her mother goodbye.

“Don’t worry, y’all,” I said. “I bet we’ll laugh over our search-and-rescue misadventures later.”

“Let’s hope,” Parker said.

When we reached the fork, I drove down Gina’s and my favorite trail—the one that leads to a large meadow with a creek. Parker searched the other. I made it about a mile into the trail before the trees became too close for my SUV to pass. I’d have to walk—or rather, slog through the mud—the rest of the way.

Lordy, what could’ve possessed Gina? We horse owners are quite a superstitious bunch. Even under good conditions, no one would ride a trail before competing in a show. This ground was so saturated; she risked Spade going lame with a sprained ankle.

After a few turns along the path, I spotted a purple helmet lying in the mud. And a body, sprawled nearby. Oh, no.

“Gina!” I called out, but no response. No hint of movement.

Adrenaline flooded my veins as I rushed to her, then felt for a pulse, careful not to move her. She was breathing. Her arm lay at an unnatural angle.

Grooves of mud from where Spade had skidded filled with standing water. Thank God she hadn’t landed face down in a puddle. And why on earth would someone leave loose nails lying on the ground? A horse could’ve injured his hooves. Or thrown his rider.

After calling 911, I texted Scott and Mia: *Found Gina unconscious. Meet us at hospital.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Scott paced the hospital’s lounge while the rest of us tried to remain optimistic and supportive. Gina had still not awakened by the time she was admitted to the emergency room. The piped-in instrumental music kept my nerves on edge.

Parker’s wife, Jane—with dark circles under her eyes and rumpled maternity clothes—navigated the tight cluster of chairs with a hand on her swollen belly and a bag of sandwiches in the other. She looked ready to check into the hospital herself.

“How’s Gina, bless her heart?” Jane hugged Scott.

“We’re still waiting,” Scott said.

Jane shoved the bag of sandwiches at Mia. “Pass these around.”

Mia took the sandwiches, but I was annoyed. Not so much as a please or thank you, which in my mind nullified any goodwill Jane just earned from bringing lunch. Ever the Southern gentleman, Parker helped his daughter unpack the sandwiches.

“No word from the surgeon yet. Still hangin’ on by a prayer.” Scott twisted his wedding ring. “She has to pull through. Gina’s my everything.”

For a hot minute, I was jealous that Gina had a spouse whose existence depended on her recovery. Who besides my parents would pace the floor for me had I been critically injured? Then again, every dollar and free minute I could muster went into boarding, riding, and keeping Bay in oats. But at thirty-something, I’d yet to meet anyone who could tempt me from my equestrian lifestyle.

“Parker-sugar, I’m going home for a nap. Please keep me posted.” Jane waddled toward the exit. But before she reached the door, she turned to glare at me. “Gotta take care of *all* of Parker’s girls, right Courtney?”

Holy hell! Heat radiated up my neck. What was Jane insinuating? That Parker was having an affair? Certainly, not with me or with Gina, either. I bit my cheek to keep from sassing her.

Parker and Jane had enjoyed a whirlwind romance and married less than a year later. As far as I could tell, their lives were perfect. Why would Jane be jealous?

Just then, Gina's surgeon, dressed in light blue scrubs and cap, arrived. Mia slipped over to her dad, clinging to his side.

Despite the doctor's tired smile, Scott's face drained to a clammy shade of pale. "Your wife's in the recovery room. She did well. We had to set her arm with pins, and she has two broken ribs, but no signs of spinal injury. Scans showed minimal brain swelling. We'll keep her for a few days to monitor her, but I'm optimistic."

"Oh, thank God." Scott pumped the doctor's hand like he'd won a blue ribbon at the state championships. "When can I see her?"

"The nurse will escort you back in a bit." He pulled Scott aside and lowered his voice for a measure of privacy. I pretended to collect my car keys to eavesdrop unnoticed. "Gina has severe contusions across her collarbone and left shoulder."

"She was horseback riding," Scott said. "Her horse returned with the reins broken. Spade must've spooked and thrown her. Could that have caused her injuries?"

"Doubt it. Probably something thin, like a wire or rope of some sort. Two inches higher and ... well, she was very lucky."

Since the rest of us wouldn't be allowed to see her with Scott, we all expressed our relief along with get-well-soon sentiments and departed. Knowing my friend would recover, I planned to spend the afternoon working with Bay. I offered to drop Mia at home before returning to the stables since Parker had lessons scheduled all afternoon.

As Mia and I walked to the parking lot, Gina's cell phone vibrated in my back pocket. In the excitement, I'd forgotten I still had it.

"Hang tight a minute, sweetie." I dashed back inside the hospital to return the phone to Scott.

While I rode the elevator, a new message flashed in from Gina's out-of-town sister. Planning to reply with an update on Gina's condition, I noticed several unread text messages. But her exchange with Parker yesterday caught my eye.

Gina: *I need to see you. Privately.*

Parker: *Meet me at the trail ride's meadow tomorrow at 7am.*

My gut twisted in the same way it had when I found Gina a crumpled mess this morning. I couldn't believe what I was reading. A secret tryst? Maybe Jane had been on to something.

Were Gina and Parker having an affair?

I hung onto the phone and returned to the car where Mia was waiting. Getting Mia to talk on the way home was like coaxing Bay to take his medications without the mint paste. Since she was staring out her window, I couldn't see her face, but she kept wringing her hands.

"You were at school yesterday, right?" I asked.

Mia nodded.

"What was your dad up to?"

"He bought a new horse trailer for this show season."

"And your stepmom?"

"Some work conference."

"When did Jane get home?"

"Eight or so last night."

“Is that normal for her?” I don’t know how much Parker made as the Lowcountry Equestrian Center’s head trainer, but I gathered that Jane, as a corporation lawyer, was the family breadwinner. Jane’s job also meant late hours and travel.

Mia shrugged.

“Was Jane in a sour mood?” Nothing like nine months of pregnancy hormones to fuel jealousy and maybe even plot a little revenge.

“I try to stay out of her way. I’m either in my bedroom studying or at the stables where I can hang out with Dad by himself.”

“Why?”

“Jane made it pretty clear I was a burden. She’d be happier if I weren’t around. Especially once the baby is born.”

“Oh, Mia-sweetie, Jane respects your relationship with your dad. He’s your only living parent.”

“I overheard Jane and Dad arguing the other night. As much she wants me to move out of the house tomorrow, she doesn’t want to pay my college tuition. The weird thing is, she already opened a college savings account for the baby.”

“Don’t give up. I’m sure your dad has been saving for your education. Plus, you can apply for scholarships. And student loans. You could work and save money—”

“I wish Mama were alive, then I wouldn’t have to deal with Jane.” The tear snaking down her cheek almost caused me to drive into the ditch.

Oh, the rotten hand of cards this sweet child had been dealt! This beautiful raven-haired girl, whose dark eyes were strikingly similar to her mother’s, who had lost her mother in a hit-and-run car accident only to be introduced to her replacement less than a year later. And now on track for demotion to second-class kid once her half-brother was born.

“Hang in there, sweetie. I’m always here if you need to talk.” I pulled into the driveway to drop her off. Rather than let her walk into Jane’s territory distraught, I leaned over to hug her. “Your dad is so proud of you, and your mom would’ve been too.”

“Thanks.” She wiped her cheeks before entering the house.

Instead of immediately returning to the stables, I stopped by the tack store to pick up a bag of feed for Bay. Besides, I craved the few extra minutes to sort through the tornado of thoughts swirling in my head.

Gina was an experienced, ribbon-winning rider. She’d never have willingly risked riding Spade through muddy conditions were it not important. Something made her override her caution.

The surgeon suspected her fall hadn’t been an accident, and that it could’ve killed her. Who would want to murder Gina? Was it so-pregnant-she-was-ready-to-pop Jane? Or maybe her alleged lover Parker lured her?

Gina had sent the first text. I had a hard time believing Gina would cheat on Scott, but the text proved she was determined to meet Parker privately. Then again, Scott had Gina’s cell phone this morning. Perhaps he intercepted their text exchange and tried to stop to their rendezvous. Maybe he thought Parker would be riding the trail. Jealousy could cause good people to do dark deeds.

Pushing a wheelbarrow with Bay’s oats up the stable’s central hall toward his stall, I craned to look for Parker, then remembered he was teaching lessons all afternoon.

D’Artagnan’s stall was empty except for a muddy bicycle leaning against the wall. Stuffed behind the water trough was a plastic shopping bag—hardly a safe item to keep near a

horse's stall. But when I grabbed the bag, a receipt for wire and flat head nails slipped out. Purchased yesterday afternoon. And I'd seen loose nails near Gina's fall.

Oh, sweet Jesus. Spade hadn't thrown her after all.

In all the chaos of searching for Gina earlier this morning and getting her to the hospital, I'd broken one of my strict personal rules—I'd left Bay in his stall fully tacked with his saddle and bridle on. But that would help me now. After calling 911, I gave instructions to the stable hand where to send the police. Within minutes I led Bay outside, mounted him, and cantered toward the woods.

But once we entered the trail, I tightened the reins to slow him to a controlled trot. I couldn't risk him going lame on some divot or root hidden by mud and water. When I approached the place where I'd abandoned my SUV this morning to search on foot, I decelerated Bay to a walk and leaned against his neck, protecting my own.

Bay followed the trail around a bend hidden by a hill. I spotted D'Artagnan standing in the distance while his rider Mia used a hammer to remove a nail from high up a tree. I halted Bay, snapped a photo, and then typed Parker's number in my cell phone. Then I hit *send* to place the call.

A ringtone sounded from Mia's back pocket. She stopped coiling a thin wire still attached to a tree on the opposite side of the trail and glanced back at me.

Busted.

"Mia-sweetie, what were you thinking? You could've killed Gina this morning." I nudged Bay forward with my knees.

Mia's forehead crinkled beneath her riding helmet. All color drained from her face. "Stop, Courtney. Don't come any closer!"

"Okay." Tightening Bay's reins, we halted a healthy distance away. I couldn't let Mia bolt. D'Artagnan could beat Bay in a race any day. "You've had your dad's cell phone the whole time, haven't you? Let me guess, you saw Gina's text and assumed they were having an affair, so you lured her to the riding trail."

"It wouldn't have been the first time he cheated, but no. Dad's devoted to Jane. I have no idea why Gina texted him." After coiling the wire, Mia used her hammer to pull a nail from the same tree where I'd found loose nails—carelessly dropped earlier, no doubt.

Coughing to mask my sigh of relief—I couldn't imagine Gina stooping to seduce a married man, or any man for that matter—I pressed on to keep Mia talking.

"Then what did Gina need to tell your Dad privately that would make you try to ki—hurt her?" I kept my voice soft so as not to spook her.

"I didn't mean to hurt her." Tears brewed in her eyes, then spilled down her cheeks. "It was an accident. A terrible mistake."

"No, Mia. Stringing wire up and then pretending to be your dad was intentional—"

"Not Gina. *Mama*." A cloud, as stormy as the ones hovering overhead, soured Mia's features. But then her groan launched a small flock of birds nearby. "I never meant to hurt her."

"I don't understand." My gut twisted. Her mother had been killed in a hit and run accident, but the police never found the driver. But then a new theory sent my mind whirling. "Wait. Were you the driver?"

She nodded, hiccupping between sobs. "About an hour after Mama left with her college friends for their girls' weekend, I found Dad and Jane together. Like, *together* together. I tried to call Mama, but she didn't answer her phone. I had to warn her. So, I took Dad's car and drove to

Charleston. Oh, why didn't she just answer her cell phone? None of this would've ever happened."

"But you weren't old enough to have a driver's license then."

"No. Just my learners permit. I knew where she and her friends were staying. Mama was furious when she saw me drive up alone, so she ran out into the street to stop me. But I was so upset. So nervous. I got confused and jammed on the gas pedal instead of the brakes and I..."

"You hit her." Oh, such a burden of guilt this girl carried. My heart broke for her, and yet, her reality had brutal, life-shattering implications. "Why did you leave the scene?"

"I was so scared I kept driving. I knew Mama's college friends would call an ambulance to help her. I thought she'd be okay. But she wasn't. I never told anyone. I didn't know what would happen if I did. Would I go to jail? Would Dad hate me?" Her eyes pleaded with me, but for what? Understanding? Forgiveness? "I couldn't lose him, too. After Mama died, Dad was all I had left."

"What did you do with your father's car?"

"I drove it into the garage door."

I'd forgotten about her car accident. She'd sworn she'd just been trying to back the car out of the driveway. "You kept a big secret all this time."

"After Mama's funeral, Dad and Jane got married. I wasn't even invited." Mia wiped her face on her forearm, still holding the hammer. "Since the police never linked my car accident to Mom's death, I figured it was all over. Case closed. My secret lay buried in Mama's grave, until..."

"Until two days ago, when Gina saw the photo of you and your mother." In my peripheral vision, police officers crept around the bend positioning themselves in the trees.

"She was there when Mama died."

"She realized you were the hit and run driver, didn't she?"

"That *stupid* picture in my wallet." Mia squeezed her eyes shut, her face twisted in agony. She loved that photo, as it was the last one ever taken of her mom with her. She always carried it. "Gina threatened to have the police reopen the case."

"So you tried to stop Gina before she could tell Parker."

"Please, Courtney. Don't tell him. Don't tell my daddy." Her raspy voice hitched on the one word that belied this young adult's youth. Her naiveté.

"I'm so sorry, sweetie, but the authorities need to know." Each word uttered ripped my heart to shreds, yet reinforced my resolve. Mia was in over her head. I'd promised to help her. To be there for her. And I would. Every step of her brutal journey. But first, this young woman needed to own up to the mistakes she'd made. "Parker will understand. Over time—Oh!"

"No!" Mia jammed her heels into D'Artagnan's side, sending him charging toward me at full gallop.

Before I could steer Bay out of the way, a cop lunged from a nearby tree as Mia passed under, landing on D'Artagnan's rump and taking control of both horse and rider.

Less than an hour later, a fleet of blue strobe lights pulsed through the woods in the waning dusk. Mia's wrists were handcuffed, and the police had cordoned off the trail with yellow tape. As I finished giving my statement to one of the officers, Scott and Parker hopped out of an arriving squad car.

"Mia?" With a stony face, Parker raced past us to his daughter and D'Artagnan. "What's going on?"

Scott took Bay's reins from me to escort us back to the stables. Once we were out of earshot, he asked, "Are you okay, Courtney? Did Mia hurt you?"

"Still in shock, but I'm fine." Bay nudged my shoulder with his muzzle. "How's Gina?"

"She woke up and spoke with me for a couple minutes. Hopefully, she'll be back in the saddle before autumn."

"Thank God." I hugged Scott.

"What the hell got into Mia? Dang, that girl came unglued."

I stopped and looked back in the distance at the precious-yet-broken girl, wrists tethered behind her, pleading with her dad. My gut sank to somewhere around my knees at the thought of the dark secret he was learning. Poor guy.

"Unglued? More like unbridled."