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Fine Spanish Riding, packed into a
thrilling novel.”***

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1.

South Africa, May 5

“My decision is final.” Catherine drummed her fingers on the desk top while she waited for Alexander’s reaction. On the desk lay the dismissal letter that she’d just slammed down in front of him.

Alexander weighed up his next move: Denial? No chance! This little fiasco had gone way beyond that. There was no plausible explanation. The only thing to do now was to show remorse. “Okay, I messed up. Once! Do you have to fire me for that? I’ve always done a good job, come on!”

“I’m sorry. I can’t work with you anymore.”

“Look, I understand what you must be thinking right now, Catherine, but you know my background. I need my job. Make an exception. It won’t happen again.” Alexander forced a smile onto his face.

“You abused our trust and used your privileges to access my personal database, Alexander. You had no right to snoop around in there and,” she swallowed, “yesterday you lied to me without batting an eyelid. Had you really regretted this, you would have come clean then.”

“I never harmed the company!”

“Because I stopped you just in time!”

Catherine showed no sympathy.

Alexander didn’t know her like this. She had a temper, yes, over small stuff, but one could always reason with her. The bigger the problem, the more level headed her typical response. Her rigor surprised him, although he never did trust her entirely. Don’t mess with her; a colleague had warned him right from the start, describing her as an unpredictable spoiled brat, who’d accomplished nothing on her own. The highlight of her career,

he'd claimed, was to take over the headhunting business from her late father.

Other employees, especially those who worked closely with her, loved their charismatic boss. Catherine was undeniably unconventional. This trait worked for some, others hated it. She had a strange enigmatic flair about her – which was why he'd snooped around in that mysterious database in the first place.

Alexander resolved to regain her trust and then prove to her that she'd made the right decision. "Catherine, I'll fix this! Give me another chance." He would not let those dubious foreigners get to him again. From now on he would be the best IT guy that Firm Commitments ever had.

"Fetch your papers from HR on Monday. If you need a reference, give them my number. I'll keep it to your work and won't mention this little debacle. More than this - I can't do for you, Alex." Catherine stood up.

He didn't move from his chair. Her final verdict invoked a look of shame and his eyes drilled an imaginary hole into the table top. He wanted to follow her example and get up. The meeting was over. He understood this but his body was doing its own thing. Short of breath, his mouth dried up and while he was gasping for air, a spongy powerlessness flooded through his veins. It was unbelievable: no second chance. No reconciliation. No warning. Not even a disciplinary hearing which he was after all entitled to, or at the very least an offer to part on mutual terms. This isn't how it's going to end, you witch from hell! Internally he hissed obscenities about the female anatomy. Rational thinking was out the window – he felt like he was on a medieval battlefield facing the enemy. As his consternation ebbed off, his anger welled up. The adrenalin rush caused his muscular body to become rock-hard, now steering his energy towards self-justification in order to restore his cracked self-image. Gradually, the blame for his mess-up shifted to her "injustice".

Catherine began to sense the silent anger and started to feel unsafe. Slowly she slid along the edge of the table back into her chair. Alex now stared straight at her and it was Catherine who looked down. It was Friday, shortly after 6 pm, the offices were

nearly deserted. “All right then,” she gave in, “we’ll talk about it on Monday.”

“I want an answer now!”

“Give me some time to think, okay, Alexander? I’ll try to solve our problem and we’ll talk again on Monday. Let’s say at 9 am?”

Her voice sounded too soft, her tone too sweet – surely she was feeling intimidated and only pretending to be ready for a compromise, he surmised, silently celebrating his upper hand. “Our problem? A few minutes ago I was the cheat and you the judge. And you can keep your stupid reference!” Catherine, usually quick-witted, didn’t utter a syllable. He’d never seen her unsure of herself, and now she was scared. Of him! Gripped by a sudden attack of bad conscience, he reminded himself that after his release from Waterberg Correctional Services after two years of incarceration, Catherine had financed a Network Administrator course for him and given him a job. With a sweeping motion over his forehead he wiped away the guilt and re-organized his mind: one mistake and gone was her grace and goodness. Typical capitalist employer! No sense of community and solidarity.

“Alexander, we must finish off now. I’ll see you on Monday.”

Her attempt to regain control infuriated him. His anger compelled him “to teach the bitch a lesson”. At lightning speed he shot up, bent over the table, grabbed her right arm with his left hand to hold her down, and with his right hand he gripped her neck. He knocked her head into the table top, held down her face for a New-York-second, lifted it up and slammed it on the surface again. Then he jumped around the table, pulled her from her chair and dragged her singlehandedly to the corner where he pressed her against the wall.

“Alex, Alex,” she pleaded, flailing about and fighting for air.

The power was thrilling. Reveling in his superiority, he held her against the wall by her neck. “Alex, please,” she croaked again and dug her nails into his hand around her throat, which resulted in him using even more force and pushing her higher up the wall. Her feet were no longer touching the ground and this gave her space to move. She managed to hit his shin with the sharp tip of

her stiletto shoe. In his adrenaline rush he felt no pain but in reflex, Alexander let go of her neck and Catherine fell to the floor. Bending over her, he now pummeled her body with his fists. She threw her hands over her head and twirled around, but was now trapped between the corner and the desk. His blows pounded into her back. Every one of her defensive moves was surpassed by masculine strength, but her throat was free. Her lungs filled with air again. With all her remaining strength she screamed for help as loudly as demon, which frightened the living daylight out of Alexander.

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry.”

He let her go.

The door flew open. Tom, Catherine’s 2 IC burst into the room. “Hey, what’s going on here?” He pounced on her attacker and pulled him off her. “Are you nuts?” thundered Tom and shoved him aside. He took Catherine’s face in his hands. “Are you alright?” Catherine nodded weakly. “Hey, where do you think you’re going?” Tom jumped up to chase after Alexander who was bolting out the door but Catherine held Tom back.

“Let him go.”

“Let him go? We have to call the police! What’s going on here, dammit?”

“It’s okay Tom. I just fired him. He’ll fetch his papers on Monday and we’ll never see him again.” She buried her head in her shaking hands and wondered about how strenuous it was to think and talk. Tom tried to help her up and muttered words such as “unstable”, “jail” and “you never listen to me”, but she brushed him off. She also declined Tom’s offer to drive her home. Still lying on the floor, she curled up and started to cry.

Two hours later, she was home. Her phone rang.

Tom: “How are you feeling now?”

She: “Fine.”

He: “Should I come over?”

She: “No.”

Shortly afterwards she called him back. “Sorry I was so cranky earlier. It’s just that nothing like this has ever happened to

me. When I couldn't breathe anymore, you know, I thought I was going to die. It was awful. But I'm okay now, really. Thanks for everything. It's over now."

At the same time in Spain - a man, whom Alexander knew as Javier answered his call from South Africa. After hanging up, Javier dialed a number in Buenos Aires. There, a housekeeper answered and put through the call. As Sophia eavesdropped for a moment, she heard that "the man from South Africa was off the job and no longer had access". Before she put the receiver down, she heard the words "Miami" and "May 13".

One month later...

10.

Peru, June 7

Catherine followed the man across the courtyard to the stable. The sight of the contented horses soothed her anxiety. Horse lovers are good people, she reassured herself.

The stable was cool and the fragrance of straw, hay and livestock was an unbeatable combination as far as Catherine was concerned. For her, the symphony of snorting and grinding noises emanating from the stalls eclipsed even a symphony at Carnegie Hall. The stable was a converted barn with a center passage. On both sides of the passage, large stalls accommodated no less than sixteen horses. Wooden side poles separated them from each other and an iron chain kept them from getting out the front.

The man motioned her to wait and disappeared out the stable door. She gestured into the air after him and went to stand at the first stall, in which that magnificent Andalusian was being groomed by a stable hand. The horse clearly enjoyed the vigorous strokes and occupied himself by pulling big tufts of grass from his hay net. The groom disappeared briefly and returned with bridle and saddle, paying no attention to Catherine, not even answering her tentative "hello".

“Morrnen Rrivass,” the man suddenly called towards the entrance of the stable. He spoke English, with a Scottish accent! Catherine turned towards Rivas and the sight of him sparked an involuntary admiration that was so intense that she felt the blood rush to her face.

Please don't blush. Don't blush!

The grown woman inside her pointed out that she was standing face to face with an unscrupulous criminal. The girl inside her adored him like a groupie worshipping her pop idol.

Not only does the stallion belong to him, he also rides him.

He was dressed for riding, and how! The Spanish riding outfit hugged his impeccable body and an absurd, infantile wish overcame Catherine:

Oh to be his shirt!

“Good morning, Sam.” He returned the groom’s greeting and turned to Catherine with a subtle smile.

The faint gesture spoke louder than words. A shimmer of hope warmed her heart. *Ekuseni!* A new morning. New strength. New plans. She sensed that she was on the point of falling in love. Her head reminded her quickly of his malicious slap the other day. She recalled how hard he’d hit her and how undeserved it had been. Immediately her heart rushed in to defend him: “How could he not set boundaries after you insulted him the way you did? Why do you always have to be so cocky?”

Catherine clasped her hands behind her neck and exhaled audibly.

Please not him. Please Catherine, don't fall in love with this bad guy. Not with him!

But how could she stop it? Her stomach was fluttering and her temperature had gone up by two degrees. She’d barely exchanged a dozen sentences with him, she hardly knew him, but what he’d predicted had now been set in motion. With just one smile!

She was still engaged in this futile inner dialogue when Rivas turned to his stallion and embraced his neck. She’d never seen a man unleash such unbridled passion on a horse before. The black beauty shamelessly exploited his owner’s affection and subjected him to a body search in an effort to sniff out a treat in

one of his pockets. Rivas excused himself and returned with a handful of molasses, which the horse licked from his hand with much gusto. “He prefers butter cookies,” explained Rivas, “but we’re all out.”

“Cookies?” Catherine laughed self-consciously and gave the horse a bashful pat. He clearly basked in his status as an object of human veneration.

“And coconuts and jam sandwiches.”

“You’re kidding! That’s not at all good for him!”

“You tell him! I tried, but he won’t listen. He knows everything better!”

“Shall I tack up Metodista?” the Scotsman asked and handed Rivas a supersize Peruvian banana.

“Thanks.” He peeled it and seconds later the Andalusian sucked it into his mouth in one go. “No, get Pichon ready, Sam.” The smell of crushed banana spread across the barn, tantalizing the other horses. They nickered enviously and a big grey pawed the ground to assert its presence. The banana peel landed in the dustbin by the barn door, and Rivas asked the fateful question: “Want to come for a ride?”

It was a fine morning for an outride but Catherine couldn’t believe her ears. Had he really just invited her to accompany him? “You know that I ride?”

“He needs to be exercised otherwise he’ll sulk. How about it? Are you coming with us or not? It’s up to you.”

It was the first time she’d been invited to make a choice since that coffee she’d ordered in Miami and never received. “Not without a riding hat.” For Catherine, riding without a hat was like driving without a seat belt, or sitting down at a boardroom table without a jacket.

“You’ll find riding gear back in the tack room.” He pointed his head in that direction. “Get changed. Nobody will bother you there.”

In the tack room she did indeed find ample riding equipment, and then some! The hat, which naturally again fitted like a cast, a pair of fine dark-blue jods, riding socks, soft leather riding gloves and a brand new pair of long, beautiful riding boots made of fine Spanish leather. The boots didn’t have a brand name; they looked

handmade. Next to the chest lay a dressage whip and a jumping crop for the country. The pants were slightly baggy because Catherine had become so thin, and she couldn't pull on the boots because they were new and stiff. She rummaged about for boot pulls, couldn't find any and had to fight long and hard to get them on. When she did, she was astonished that the shaft height matched her legs so perfectly. Normally, riding boots always had to be altered for her.

When she re-emerged, everyone had disappeared. She walked along a path towards the paddocks, ogling the many fine horses, some together on the big meadows and others in their own smaller paddocks.

She spotted Rivas, mounted on the Andalusian, walking the horse on a loose rein along the paddock path. The herd enthusiastically greeted the imposing Spaniard, who strutted around with head held high and without neighing back. Rivas turned round and rode back to Sam who was waiting for Catherine in front of the paddocks with a bay in hand. Catherine strode nervously towards the bay, who paled in comparison to the stallion.

The Scot addressed her for the first time. As it turned out, he was not fond of using many words. "This is Pichon. Thorrrroughbrrred. Polohorrse. Rrrretirred. Verrry quiet."

"A quiet horse is good! My riding isn't up to much, you know."

"That's not what Ey hearrd."

They talked about her? About whether she was a good or a bad rider?

In the glaring absence of a mounting block, she stood around helplessly wondering how on earth she was going to get on. Sam noticed her distress, took a quizzical look at her short build and offered her a leg up. She declined and took Pichon to a small rock instead, led him to the right of it and mounted from there. Sam re-tightened the girth and adjusted the length of her stirrup leathers while she leant over Pichon's neck, stroking him and whispering words of endearment in his cute ears.

In the meantime, the black horse pranced impatiently on the spot. It didn't faze his rider. He kept the reins loose, just sat

straight and deep and stayed relaxed. Rivas seemed wholly at one with the powerful creature beneath him. Catherine saw herself standing face to face with a centaur. Her admiration turned into worship. Followed by timidity. What kind of a ride was she in for? She was no match for this pair and already saw herself being catapulted across the countryside at a full-speed bolt. The humiliation!

Rivas seemed to guess what was going in her mind. “Don’t worry, Catherine. I’ll keep an eye on you. I still need you.”

From this she took courage. There was no question that he wouldn’t easily lose control of his mount, if at all. And as long as the lead horse was kept in check, she should be safe. She nodded in agreement, glancing again at the black horse. He was so full of vitality that the base of his tail almost touched the ground in anticipation of the imminent use of his haunches. It was a wonderful privilege to go riding with these two. She could surely only gain in self-confidence.

“Are you good to go?”

“Mhm,” she nodded and took a deep breath. How heavenly it felt to be in the saddle again.

They crossed the yard to the first gate at a walk. That is to say, Pichon walked, the stallion piaffed in impatient indignation. He showed off his immensely powerful hindquarters through this highly collected trot, almost on the spot! Rivas just followed his movements discreetly with his lower back and seat. Catherine marveled at the paradox of so much excited impulsion being contained with the subtlest of aids, resulting in a calm and relaxed movement, despite the animal’s urgent desire to get going. It was a natural display, no force at play anywhere, and strikingly beautiful to behold.

Catherine’s bay horse, however, seemed unmoved by the stallion’s display of supremacy and marched calmly on behind them. What a sight in front of her. Dreamily she observed rider and horse from the rear. The rider seemed glued to the saddle, undeterred by the stallion’s strong movement. Rivas startled her out of her rapturous daydream by calling her to catch up. His horse, resentful of the pending conversation causing yet another delay, now raised his front hooves in a mild, disobedient attempt

at a rear, but Rivas refused to become involved in a dispute. He ignored the protests as if he was not even aware of them, which only infuriated the stallion further. Eventually his horse resigned himself to the fact that this newcomer to the yard seemed to be in charge of the pace and gave in after clearing his lungs and airways with a loud endearing snort. The reins still hung loose, the horse's neck was rolled up - it was incomprehensible to her. In terms of horsemanship, Rivas was far beyond anything she had ever seen.

“Come on,” he urged her. His horse snorted once more for all he was worth, likewise encouraging her to get a move on. She put Pichon into a light trot until she'd caught up, then they continued side by side. “He's not normally such a show off. He can actually be charmingly humble. You'll see when you get to know him better. It's just that he doesn't often get the chance to ride out with a woman.”

Catherine knew that some stallions tended to act up in response to a whiff of human estrogen. It closely resembled the equine version of the substance and this was also why the estrogen of mares was commonly used in human hormone replacement therapy. She was embarrassed by the hint and noticing it, Rivas said: “Sorry, that was said in bad taste. Are you okay? Can we trot?”

“Yes.” She shortened the reins to the trotting length to which she was accustomed.

“Don't take him too short. The horses here aren't used to it.” She lengthened the rein by an inch. “Better.” They trotted on and, mindful of his nervous companion, Rivas kept a modest pace. Every now and again they were stopped by a gate and Rivas opened and closed it without dismounting. The Andalusian naturally performed exemplary turns on the forehand to enable him to do so. The surroundings were so tranquil that neither said a word. Silently they trotted next to each other along the path until the pace became brisker as they crossed a meadow. “A little gallop?” he broke the silence.

“I don't know. I mean of course I want to. But what if he gets away from me?”

“Stay behind me. I’ll keep my horse checked until you feel okay. If he gets too strong, just shout. I promise you, my horse comes straight back.”

“You won’t hear me,” she argued hesitantly.

“Aim at his hind quarters. Let Pichon run into him if necessary. My friend here won’t kick, he’ll stop him.” Catherine was not convinced, and her facial expression testified to this. “Catherine, I can get him from a bull charge to a full halt in a microsecond. He’s a fully trained PRE!”

“If you feel like it.”

He let her dig pass. “No. It’s because he likes showing off his strength.”

“And I should rely on that?”

“You’ve been through a lot. I don’t blame you for being skeptical. Do you want to go back?” Rivas ended the tiresome debate with a shrug of the shoulders.

Turn back? No. No.

She gave in. “I witnessed his spectacular canter-halt transition in the jungle. I trust him.” His smile settled it and an unfathomable lightness set in. Horses were the best cure for any woe. She said aloud in German: “All the happiness on earth rests on the back of horses.”

“What did you say?”

“Oh nothing, a German saying. It’s lost in translation and doesn’t rhyme in English.”

“Try.”

She did.

“Very true,” said Rivas. “That’s completely true. That’s why I put you on that horse today. I want you to feel happy.”

“How can I believe you?” she sighed.

“Believe me,” he said, cantering on while watching her closely. Pichon kindly and calmly struck into canter without her having given him the aid. Rivas saw this and scolded Pichon for not waiting for his rider’s timing. By addressing the horse, he was of course tactfully reprimanding Catherine.

She liked it. She had no idea why....

Press review by Equimondi Magazine, Germany:

"A thrilling novel... For horse lovers, rounded off with a divine stallion and beautiful riding... It's an art to be able to pull the reader into a story. To allow him or her to escape reality and dive into the whirlpool of the captivating, dark and yet sweet world of a book. Annette Kinnear has managed exactly that. While other novels need pages and pages of preliminaries, the reader of *On the bit. Catherine* is swept along from the first chapter. Into the abyss of the human psyche. The reader is held by the strength and uniqueness of the characters and captivated by the dark passion on every page. This book is a rollercoaster ride of literature. And the reader sits in the first row.

Catherine, an ordinary young woman makes a careless mistake and is driven into the hands of a powerful, dangerous organisation. There she experiences the most terrifying but also the most beautiful moments of her life, which is turned upside down forever. A confident, attractive woman is kidnapped by a handsome man... What unites them is their love for a majestic black stallion.

When reading the book, I had to chuckle here and there about the countless clichés, not many of which were left out. However, these fade into the background. Most prominently I was impressed by the deep understanding of the dark psyche of the human. The horse rider in me cherished the educational presentation of finest Spanish riding. The woman in me tingled from its passion and sex. The adventurer in me delighted in the description of foreign countries and the nature scenes... "

For full and further reviews, visit www.on-the-bit-thriller.com

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