

The First Two Pages: “Unbridled” by Kristin Kisska

From *Deadly Southern Charm: A Lethal Ladies Mystery Anthology*

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When I wrote “Unbridled” for the southern-themed mystery anthology *Deadly Southern Charm*, I broke one of short story writing’s cardinal rules—intentionally, of course. Below is the first scene of my story in its entirety. Can you guess which rule I broke?

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 said, “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.

Did you catch my structural *faux pas*?

If you noticed that I didn’t kick off my story with a dramatic bang, then you aced my quiz. In fact, I waited for almost 800 words before introducing my story’s core mystery.

My core reason to delay the tension was to manipulate the reader. No spoilers, but by the time my readers reach the climax of “Unbridled,” I wanted them to be so invested in the surprise antagonist that they would as conflicted as the narrator during whodunit reveal. To pull that off, I used the pre-action quiet

time of the first scene to give the reader insight and plant a seed of empathy that would grow roots as the story progressed.

My decision was risky, yet I took a calculated gamble. Since the common theme across all eighteen stories contributed to *Deadly Southern Charm* was the Deep South, setting and local culture were expected to play a signature role in each short mystery. But even critically considering “Unbridled” as a stand-alone, my contemporary short story is centered in a unique and highly identifiable setting. Equestrian centers, which any horse enthusiast would attest, have a predictable blend of scents, sounds, textures, and especially biorhythms. When the temperatures and humidity rise, such as late spring in South Carolina’s Lowcountry, trainers and riders ease their schedules to help the horses cope with the uncomfortable conditions. By introducing the stable setting as true-to-form, I chose to present the reader with an accurate sensory experience one would find in most stables. Secondly, since the anthology was marketed as a collection of cozy mysteries, I hoped fans of the subgenre would indulge my world-building in exchange for a richer setting and payoff.

That said, even though the reader may not know the mystery yet, my first page and a half carried their weight for the story as a whole. The victim was mentioned in the first paragraph, when Courtney, my sleuth, observes, “I even glimpsed a flash of a horse’s tail as someone rode into the woods.” All major

characters except one were introduced, including my sleuth and the antagonist as well as their relationship. The crime occurred off-page during these introductory words.

Once the victim, Gina, is known to be missing, the pace of “Unbridled” ratchets up as agendas collide, tension escalates, the stakes are revealed, and a family secret long-buried surfaces.

Did my gamble work? Fingers crossed, I pulled it off. However, the verdict is up to each reader. So let me ask you, dear reader, would you have continued to read “Unbridled”?

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Kristin Kisska used to be a finance geek, complete with MBA and Wall Street pedigree, but now she is a self-proclaimed *fictionista*. Kristin contributed short stories of mystery and suspense to seven anthologies, including Malice Domestic’s *Mystery Most Edible* (2019). She is a member of International Thriller Writers, Sisters in Crime-Central Virginia, where she serves as vice-president, and James River Writers. When not writing, she can be found on her website at KristinKisska.com, on Facebook at *KristinKisskaAuthor*, and Tweeting @KKMHOO. Kristin lives in Virginia with her husband and three children.