



Rent a Riding Instructor

by Katy Wise

Rent a riding instructor?

I'm not sure I signed on for this.

Well I mean I did sign on to this, it's my job. But I was expecting more like blushing brides, or pretend sisters, dates or best mates. Even the odd mother of the bride... as long as the bride was super young of course.

But a riding instructor? I only had my nails done yesterday.

Sighing, I looked down at the newly shaped coral fingernails, as elegant as a falcons talons and almost just as long.

I wonder if this is the correct attire even?

Obviously not, as a fierce looking 8 year old girl in pigtails carrying a shocking pink riding crop appeared at the gate, looked me up and down and frowned. She shook her head.

"I have clothes. Follow me."

I fumbled with the gate latch and followed her across a cobbled yard picking my way daintily in my knee high suede boots over sludgy, strong smelling water which

trickled down to an ancient drain plugged with old hay and horse hair.

I looked at her mortified as she held up a pair of rubber black short boots, old baggy beige breeches which sagged at the knee and bum and a tweed jacket thick and heavy for the middle of summer with a musty, dusty smell.

"I'll meet you out in the menage in 5 minutes," she said, and promptly stomped out.

Ten minutes later I was still deliberating, wondering whether to just quit. I had adorned the provided costume with some horror through bouts of sneezes due to the old Jacket and was still wondering what a menage was. Presumably enquiring as to one would very quickly blow my cover?

But it was my first day on the job, and I decided my acting skills would see me through; and besides, if I could do this job, I could do any.

I followed the sound of squealing children, or where they ponies?

The outdoorsy unfamiliar setting was an onslaught to the senses, but as I neared what must be the menage, I softened a bit at the site of children on ponies. They looked like those Thelwell drawings I remember being doted around an old Great Aunt's house.

My child saw me coming and hauled her fat, stocky black pony to a stop at the gate.

"We have to wait our turn," she said, and tactfully steared me away from the other riders and instructors.

"This is Buttons," she gestured to the pony, who plucked at the pocket of the old tweed coat.

We stood in silence as we watched one instructor and pony rider follow the other, doing loops and jumps, springs, and flurries across the arena.

It might as well have been a Russian ballet for all I understood of it.

"Ok, it's nearly our turn." The child, who I now knew to be called Janey, lent down and said to me.

Practically paralysed with fear I replied, "But what the hell do I do? And why am I here?"

"It's a special Pony Club rally day, we all get to bring our own personal instructors and show everyone how much we have improved over the summer."

"But I'm not an actual riding instructor?" I was starting to sweat now, and not just from the jacket.

"No. But I don't have one, Mum and Dad can't really afford one, and Dad is very allergic."

I wondered idly if she meant allergic to horses or instructors.

"I got given Buttons by a travelling circus, a neighbour lets me keep him on his farm for free if I help out sometimes. I have taught myself to ride mostly, but this lot don't know that. And I don't want them to find out."

The hard little expression I now realised had been determination, and had been momentarily replaced with sadness and then hope as she looked down at me.

Swallowing a lump in my throat, I tugged at the bottom of my tweed jacket to straighten it. After all, I knew how it felt to try and fit in to a world you were not born into, and I knew for Janey and Buttons sake this had to be an Oscar winning performance.

"Don't worry," she said, kicking Buttons forward, "just follow our lead."

I recalled every Black Beauty, National Velvet, Flicker, Horse Whisperer film I had ever seen and strode out on to my stage.