

WHAT'S THERE TO LOVE?

Book 3 in For Love & Horses

By Barbara Ellin Fox

Chapter One

Lizzie Stratton slid a hand over her hip to make sure the clinging red fabric of the bridesmaid gown hung where it should. Here, during the dwindling hours of her best friend's wedding in Italy, she stood in the restroom, pulling her emotions together.

She forced down frustration and took a cleansing breath. Chad McCollough still treated her like a kid sister. Clearly, she could not have what she wanted.

Stretched to a full five-foot two-inches tall, compliments of platform heels, she grabbed the handle on the heavy wood door, jerked, and stepped into the bar. The door closed behind her with a thud. Conversation ceased. All eyes turned her direction.

Ugh. She'd rather clean horse stalls than be ogled by a bunch of clubbers. Head up, she pulled on her Southern training and glided across the dim room. Flaming pinpoints on her skin said a half-dozen pairs of eyes tracked her movement.

Chad's broad shoulders tipped forward, forearms resting on the bar as he nursed a drink. With measured steps, she approached and smoothed a hand across the back of his tailored dress shirt, fingertips bumping over ridges of muscle. He'd changed. No longer the awkward teen with a lanky boy's frame.

The bar stool squealed as he swiveled to face her. A smirk lifted the corner of his full lips. He slid to his feet and held out a tanned arm with a white sleeve rolled to the elbow. "Ready, Shorty?"

She huffed. "Such a childhood nickname." Her fingers grasped just below the shirt roll, rendering her cognizant of every dark silky hair. Did he never see her?

He chuckled. “Still fits, doesn’t it?”

She lengthened her core. Without platform shoes, she was a perfect height to ride racehorses, not a child’s sport. Except each time Daddy laid down another edict, she rode less.

Chad squeezed her hand close to his side. “Want to dance before we sit?”

She glanced up and smiled. “I’d love to.”

He led her to the ballroom and deftly pulled her into a dancing frame. Her body begged to sink close and absorb his scent of bergamot and jasmine, but no. He straightened and supported her firmly away.

“Remember the dance classes our moms made us take? Chin up. Shoulders back.” Having delivered his instructions, his mouth puckered, and he whirled them in a skilled waltz past elegant couples who swayed romantically.

Her heart galloped the way a horse thunders down the homestretch. How unfair that she had a million butterflies attacking her sensory system while he remained unaffected.

As kids, they’d been kindred spirits until Chad’s father died, and her friend left Kentucky leaving her behind. Later, she followed Chad’s adult activities through social media while he buried himself in oil deals and women. His obvious preference? Well-endowed blondes who stuck to his arm like cockleburs. Lizzie’s long black hair and petite form made her a double loser.

The music stopped. Chad led her past cloth-covered tables holding multi-colored freesia. Their sweet scent stirred with the movement. Lizzie smiled as he seated her and slid into his own chair. He rested his arm on the back of her chair as he focused on their friends, Jason and Rylie. How she wished, just once, he’d drape his arm over her shoulders and pull her close. Instead, his finger toyed with one long curl he’d lifted from her back, gently twirling and rewinding, shooting tingles through her scalp. Did he distract her on purpose? The boy she’d known had never teased.

Except everyone changed. Even her.

“The bride and groom sure shot out of here in a hurry.” Chad’s voice drew Lizzie’s gaze to the sharp line of his clean-shaven jaw.

Jason shook his head. “Can’t blame them. Some days I thought Rylie and I’d never reach the altar.” He kissed his wife’s cheek. “The wedding folderol tests a man’s stamina.”

“Lizzie’s next.” Rylie wore a devious smile. “She caught the bouquet.”

Chad turned his attention to her with a raised eyebrow. “Did you, Shorty?”

The muscles in her left cheek twinged. The nickname had been cute at twelve. Now it dug like a taunt. She draped a leg over her knee and wiggled a Louboutin open-toed shoe.

That smirk curled one side of Chad’s mouth again. “I bet Otis hasn’t put his stamp of approval on a future Mr. Lizzie yet.”

Everyone knew her father, Otis Stratton, expected her to marry someone who’d advance Stratton holdings. She lifted her chin and snagged his gaze. “I’ll marry the man I choose, or I won’t marry.”

He gave a crooked grin and nodded.

She’d always believed she’d marry Chad, but obviously she fell short of the contender’s list. Instead of marriage, she planned to immerse herself in Thoroughbred breeding to improve Stratton horses.

“How’s your filly?” Rylie’s hand weighted her arm.

Lizzie could kiss her friend for changing the subject. “Maizee’s doing great under saddle and breaks with confidence from the starting gate. You’d love her huge stride, and she’s a fast learner. The best.”

“You deserve a special horse after the way your dad sold Manchester.” Rylie’s stormy expression oozed sympathy for Lizzie’s pain.

Chad’s attention whipped in her direction. “The old man sold your horse?”

She swallowed at the memory of her show jumper. “He decided it wasn’t attractive for me to compete. Said I needed to move on to adult activities.”

Chad’s brown eyebrows lowered, and he pursed his lips.

Hands clasped under the table, she faced him. “Daddy held Manchester’s registration papers in his name. He had the legal right.” Pretending not to miss the horse she’d loved for seven years didn’t prevent the stinging in her eyes. She blinked to squeeze away moisture. “He has a good home, and his new owner has won scads of trophies with him on the Florida circuit.”

“Your father’s wrong.”

She wouldn’t discuss the point in public, even though she agreed. “Maizee surpasses Manchester. I planned the pedigree and witnessed her birth. She marks the first step to prove my ideas for stronger racehorses.”

Chad studied her as if he finally remembered their friendship. He slid his chair away from the table, then held out a hand. “Do you want to dance once more before they close this place?”

Not willing to miss a last opportunity to be in his arms, she slipped a hand in his and rose. Butterflies in her stomach became hovering hummingbirds when he pulled her close and tucked their hands between them. Lips brushed her ear. Her pulse bolted the starting gate. If only he’d hold her this way forever.

“Don’t believe Otis. You’ll always be attractive on a horse.”

Chad’s rumbling voice washed over her like a gentle rain on Kentucky Bluegrass. Lizzie settled her head on his chest and absorbed the compliment.

“Stick to your guns, Lizzie. Don’t let your Otis make your life into what he wants, even if you need to leave the Kentucky farm to follow your dreams.” He relaxed and rested his chin on the top of her head. “Call me if you ever need help.”

His muscular arms wrapped her in a cocoon, the tender hug reminiscent of their youth. She held back a sigh. A girl needed to maintain her dignity.

Security and warmth gave way as his arms loosened on the final musical note. Her hand still in his, he led her to their table. She motioned to his chair. He shook his head, and her heart squeezed. If only he’d stay a few more minutes.

“Sorry, kiddo. Midnight fast approaches. I fly out in the morning. I’m gonna hit the hay.”

Rylie held out Lizzie’s cell and nudged her arm. “Your mom called. She left a message.”

Lizzie took the phone and tapped the voicemail.

“It’s Maizee, sweetheart. Your father sold her. She’s gone.”

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