



THE DOUBLETREE KIDS

FOLLOW YOUR DREAMS



Gayle Farmer

THE DOUBLETREE KIDS

*FOLLOW
YOUR
DREAMS*

Gaule Farmer

This book is dedicated to my dear friend,

Shievon Mahoney Schlesinger

Other Books
by
Gayle Farmer

The Doubletree Kids Series

COUPLES
ALL IN THE GAME
HIGH HURDLES
RIDING HIGH
RIDING BLIND

Mysteries/Thrillers

SECRET LIVES
LETHAL INTENT
FIRE STORM
COLD FUSION

THE DOUBLETREE KIDS

FOLLOW YOUR DREAMS

Gayle Farmer

Omega Publications Palm Springs

Copyright © 2009 by Gayle Farmer

All rights reserved. This book, or parts thereof,
may not be reproduced in any form without permission.

ISBN 978-0-9822303-6-7

Visit Gayle's website is at
www.GayleFarmer.com

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Cover design and page layout by

Omega Publications

www.OmegaPublications.net

*FOLLOW
YOUR
DREAMS*

Chapter 1

The bright California sun peeked through the trees as Becky Edwards walked down the road to Doubletree stables.

Rounding a bend, she strode along, drinking in the sweet outdoor smells and the unmistakable scent of fresh mowed grass. Tall oaks threw shadows across the rolling, dewy lawns. White paneled turnout paddocks, empty now, flanked either side of the driveway.

The morning breeze lifted her red hair in a flame of long silky curls. Humming to herself in nervous anticipation, she hoped for the best but expected the worst. So far, that was what life had taught her.

A brown and white object charged her from under the shrubs, short legs a blur. Sliding to a stop, he sat at her feet, pink tongue hanging out in exertion.

Startled, she hesitated and stared at him, wary but amused.

“Hel-loo,” she said, drawing out the word as the dog cocked his head from side to side, listening to her voice.

Becky checked the surrounding lawn and shrubs, aqua eyes alert for larger, more formidable reinforcements.

“Are you the guard doggie?” Her voice rippled with laughter. Satisfied the little fella was alone, she returned her gaze to the grinning dog.

“Besides, you weigh like, what ... ten whole pounds? You’re the welcoming committee, aren’t you? Right?”

Slowly, eyes half closed and with as much dignity as he could muster, the dog sat up and begged.

She studied the plump little Jack Russell and following the direction of his eyes, she looked at her sack and then back at him.

“Gimme a break, dude, the starving act won’t fly. One thing you are not is hungry. Very cute, but not hungry.” She raised the bag to chest level, skirted the begging dog and continued her trek down the driveway. She rounded the final turn and the barn came into view.

Green-roofed and sporting a red spire, long white buildings extended from both sides of the clubhouse. Grooms tossed hay to the waiting horses, singing along with the radio as they filled water buckets and began their daily chores.

Becky stopped at the first stall and stroked the inquisitive nose that poked in her direction, loving the delicate feel of velvet lips, the salty-sweet scent of her coat. The horse nickered hello and lowered her muzzle close to the girl’s neck, drawing in long, *I’ll remember you* breaths. The mare lowered her head even more, inviting pats and hugs.

The nameplate on the stall door read *Windsom Angel*.

“I bet they call you Angel. Hi, Angel, I’m Becky.”

Like the purring of a happy cat, the mare made soft chuckling noises in her throat. The slender muzzle vibrated with the sound as she sniffed the girl’s cheek.

“I’ll be back in a little bit. Eat your breakfast.” She walked over to the groom and spoke in fluent Spanish. “Hi, I’m Becky Edwards. Is the barn owner here?”

The man smiled and replied. “Morning, senorita. My name is Carlos. Yes, he’s over at the next barn. His name is Jim.”

“Thanks.”

Rounding the corner of the barn, she saw a tall man counting off the newly delivered bales of hay. She stood off to one side and waited until he finished.

He saw her out of the corner of his eye. “Can I help you?”

She nodded. “I’m Becky Edwards. I’m looking for a job working with horses.” Rocking back on her heels, she looked up at him and cupped her hand over her forehead in an attempt to shield her eyes from the bright morning sun. Squinting, she said, “I love to

ride, but I can't afford my own horse."

Tone cool and dismissive, he said, "Sorry, but I don't have anything." He turned away and then hesitated. "Check with Karen Evans. She's the trainer and she might have something for you." He shrugged, pointing at the other barn. "She should be here any minute."

"Hey, thanks a lot. I appreciate that. I'll go talk with her." Becky straightened, determined to convey the pride and self-confidence she didn't feel. Shoulders back, head held high, she tried to swallow but her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. Her stomach flipped over twice and settled.

"Well." She cleared her throat, hands clenched behind her back. "I guess I'll head over that way and say hello. Thanks again."

Although tempted to say more, she drew on another of those things life had taught her and clamped her mouth shut.

So far, so good. At least he hasn't run me off.

That had happened before, and more than once she had been asked to leave the barn when it was apparent she had no money. Poor kids rarely succeeded in show jumping unless they had a wealthy mentor, but she couldn't give up on her dream of becoming a show jumper rider and then a trainer.

Becky turned and retraced her steps to the lower barn, back to Angel, who once again left her hay to come and say hello. Stroking the silky forelock, she caressed the mare, loving the fine thin skin around her eyes and muzzle. It felt so soft under her gentle fingers. She glanced at the sign again and giggled. "Someone doesn't know how to spell *winsome*, unless that's part of your lineage somehow. Like that race horse, Wyndy See. His name was spelled weird like that on purpose." Becky chuckled as the mare pressed her nostril against her hair, taking short little breaths.

"What a beautiful horse you are." She cupped the delicate muzzle in her palms and inhaled, drinking in the hay-scented breath. Running a practiced hand down Angel's neck, she said, "Whoever owns you is one lucky person."

Angel gave another equine chuckle, nostrils bouncing as she searched for treats, snuffling her new friend's pockets like a vacuum cleaner.

Sounds of a slamming car door echoed across the parking lot, shattering the tranquility of the peaceful barn.

Becky flattened herself against the stall door, hidden behind Angel and a large horse blanket hanging from a hook. She took a deep breath and held it, not quite ready to make her pitch to Karen.

This has to be good. I'll only get one chance and I'm not ready.

Peering around the edge of the blanket, she watched a tall blonde girl close the trunk of her car and stagger down the barn aisle toting several packages and a large plastic bag.

A lilting voice as sweet as gardenias floated down the barn aisle as she called, "Oh, Benny, I bought ya somethin'."

The chestnut gelding popped his head over the door and nickered at the girl, short little ears perked forward, an inquisitive look on his face.

She dropped her burden in front of his stall, opened the plastic bag and extracted a new blanket.

"Look here, isn't it a beauty? Monogrammed and all."

Shaking it out, she held it up to the horse. He sniffed it and then returned to his hay net. The quilted blanket of navy blue had silver piping on the lower left side:

INHERIT THE WIND ~ Benny.

Becky watched her enter the stall and close the door. Curiosity got the best of her and she crept down the aisle, listening to the girl croon to her horse in the most alluring, melodious voice she'd ever heard. It sounded like poetry.

"What an ungrateful dude you are, I'm sayin'. Here, let me see how it fits ya. Move over, buddy." She threw the new blanket over his shoulders, adjusted the chest and girth straps and stepped back to admire the blanket.

"It's a great fit. My, aren't ya just the handsomest fella around? Blue is definitely our color, huh?"

Undoing the straps, she swept the blanket over his back and folded it in fourths. She glanced out the stall door and saw a face peering back at her.

"Hi. I'm Becky Edwards, who're you?"

“Hey. I’m Melanie Young. Nice to meet ya.”

“Likewise. I just moved here from San Jose and I love horses. I’m looking for a job.”

“Here? Doin’ what? Groomin’?”

“Yeah, or whatever. I’ve had a ton of experience working with horses.” Large blue eyes watched Melanie finish brushing the chestnut gelding. “I’m almost fifteen, how old are you?”

“Sixteen.”

“Oh, that’s cool. Are there other kids here?” Becky asked.

“Um hum.”

“Our age?”

“Yeah, pretty much. There’s a group of little kids, but they don’t ride with us and a bunch of older ladies.” Melanie chuckled. “Technically they ride, I suppose ... take a couple of lessons a week, but bless their hearts, they’re the grandma contingent. They’re really into trail riding.”

“He’s gorgeous.” Becky’s eyes darted from girl to horse, admiring the gelding. “Do you jump?”

Melanie stepped out of the stall, latching it behind her. She folded the blanket tighter and mashed it into her show trunk.

“Oh, yeah. We love to jump, don’t we Benny?” She snapped her fingers to get his attention. “Say hello to our new friend.” She nodded at a bag of carrots next to her trunk and grinned.

“Help yourself, I’ll be right back.”

Benny hung his head over the stall, extended his long, graceful neck and made soft begging sounds. Becky pulled a carrot from the bag, broke it into several pieces and offered one to the gelding. She stroked his wide blaze, smiling as the soft gentle lips took each bite with delicate pleasure.

A sharp, irritated whinny echoed down the barn row. Angel stuck her neck as far over her stall door as she could get it and struck the wood with her front hoof. She whinnied at Becky again, her body language clear as she shook her head.

Silence ended as slamming car doors and raised voices tore a hole in the peaceful morning. Laughter preceded them as the Doubletree riding team, primed for a great lesson, surged down the

aisle.

Their trainer, Karen Evans, led the way, laughing. She tossed a witty retort to her teenaged daughters who followed right behind her.

“Mom, there’s no such thing as a nice sitting trot,” Jessi said, dark eyes dancing. “It’s an oxymoron.” The girls looked at each other and snickered.

Karen’s stepdaughter, Blair, nodded and gave Jessi a hip-bump. “A sitting trot on Foxie is like riding a box of rocks.”

They gathered buckets of brushes and prepared to head for their horses, still clowning around.

Billy Martin and his girlfriend, Shievon Mahoney, pulled up the rear, lost in conversation.

Melanie called out, “Hey, y’all, I have a new friend and I want ya to meet her.” With Becky in tow, she walked into the tack room and began introductions.

“Karen, this is Becky Edwards. She just moved here and wants a job workin’ with horses. Becky, this is Karen Evans, our trainer, and this is the Doubletree show team.”

The kids waved hello as Melanie introduced them, smiles wide and welcoming. They continued playing around as they gathered their tack.

Karen nodded at Becky, a wide smile on her lips. “Hi there, are you new to California?”

Becky smiled. “No. I just moved down here from outside San Jose.” She rubbed sweaty hands together and jammed them in her pockets.

Karen gathered a bridle and lunge line. “How do you like Del Mar so far?” She picked up a pair of splint boots and clutching everything to her chest, headed for the door, nodding for Becky to follow.

“Love it. The Doubletree is a great barn, has a good name around town, too. Saw an article about you in the paper and when I found out how near you were to me, figured to head on over and say hello. I have loads of experience and consider myself a good rider on the flat. Thing is, I’ve never had jumping lessons, but my dream is to be a successful show jumper. I just need to catch a break, you know how that goes. One day, though, I’m gonna be a

great jumper rider, just wait and see. My problem is no money, so I need to work off lessons, y'know, be a working student, something like that.”

She heard herself gibbering, unable to stop her runaway tongue. “I’ll do anything I can to pay my way—clean tack, groom, you name it. I do a great job pulling manes and no one does better at show braiding. I’ve done a lot of body clipping, but I don’t own clippers. I give a great massage.” The sentence ended in a gasp. Color flooded her milky cheeks.

Karen smiled at Becky. “How about helping me set up a new jump course? Then we’ll see about other stuff you can do.”

They chatted as they rearranged the jumps, setting up a tricky course. Not high, just tricky. Becky asked all kinds of questions, like why this jump was positioned so and what you needed to do to make that turn. Her enthusiasm was contagious.

Karen asked questions of her own.

“So, tell me a little about yourself. How much riding have you done?”

“Well, no formal training, really, but I’ve done loads of trail riding and read every how-to book out there. My neighbor had two horses and she didn’t like to ride alone, so I’d go along to keep her company. I learned a lot from her, but she didn’t jump. I’ve never had a professional lesson, but some day I’m going to be a great rider. I just know it. Up in San Jose I worked with a trainer there at a hunter show barn, that’s where I learned to do massage and braid. She didn’t have any horses for me to ride, so it was all ground work, but I learned a bunch. Do you think I could work for you in exchange for lessons?”

Becky held her breath, waiting for Karen’s response. She felt long overdue for a lucky day. Shivering in anticipation, she glanced at the trainer from under long, auburn lashes.

The faintest smile played on Karen’s lips. “Let me think about it for a little bit. We’ll talk after the class is over. If you want to, you can come out with me while I teach.”

Nodding, Becky followed the woman to the arena center. The invitation to accompany her was another good sign. Encouraged by Karen’s friendliness, she listened to every word the trainer said. The lesson began on the flat, with advanced riding

exercises.

“Okay, kids, at the trot, single file, please.”

The horses moved up the long side of the arena. They made a full circuit then Karen called, “Working trot, please.”

Becky watched the riders settle deeper into their saddles and take a little more feel of their horse’s mouths. Their speed did not increase, but the strides lengthened as the horses lowered their heads and rounded their backs, engaging their hocks.

She watched Blair lean back just a bit as Angel rolled into the gait, the mare’s body perfectly round. They performed the exercise in fluid rhythm then moved into spirals, keeping their cadence throughout the exercise.

“Walk, please,” Karen said. “Okay, take a breather. Has everyone memorized the course?” She nodded at Becky and pointed at the large chalkboard by the in-gate. “Okay, then, Melly, you go first.”

Benny picked up a crisp trot, transitioning into the canter. They headed down the line to the first fence, a simple post and rail and jumped it with ease. They held a controlled pace, waiting for the turn. With an opening rein, Melanie extended her arm into the turn, as though pointing the way and wrapped Benny around her inside leg.

As they came out of the turn, she closed both legs hard, sending the gelding forward. Just three strides out, her legs pressed again. Benny put in a big effort and they jumped over easy. They completed the course well and rejoined the team.

Karen grinned in approval. “Melly, I can always count on you to get the ride right first time out. How did you like the turns?” She pointed at the second fence on the course, a square oxer. “When the turn is ahead of you rather than behind, it’s easy to misjudge and undershoot the distance. You have to develop your eye, kids. Okay, Blair, next.”

Blair picked up a canter, heading aggressively to one. They jumped over and started the count, one, two, three, *now look*, turn, *here it is*, and two was perfect. The rest of the round went very well and they finished in style. Jessi and Shievon put in good rounds and then it was Billy’s turn to go.

Bitsy picked up her deceptively long stride, going straight

up the ring to one. They hopped over and his count was only *one, two*, before he began the rollback. Light on her forehead, Bitsy made a perfect turn, cleared the oxer with ease and then began the long gallop to three. With another quick turn, they finished their ride with a flourish.

Karen grinned at her team. "Wow, that was great. Talk about controlling the drift and watching your focal point. Okay, Becky, let's raise each cup two holes and they'll do it again."

For more than two hours, the kids re-rode the course, perfecting turns, collecting or lengthening their strides as the fences got higher and wider.

"Okay, team, that was absolutely super today. Tomorrow we'll work on combinations, get those down pat, too. Great rides, kids."

Karen chatted with Becky as they walked up to the adult barn. They stopped outside the stall of a little thoroughbred mare. Poking her beautiful gray head over the stall door, she nickered at them. Delicate black-edged ears pricked in their direction, working back and forth, while large liquid brown eyes blinked once. She lowered her head to Becky, allowing the girl to stroke her cheeks.

"This is Meadowlark, Lark to her friends."

"Oh my, aren't you beautiful." Becky straightened out the long black forelock.

Karen stood back, watching the interchange between girl and horse as they got to know each other.

Becky reached into her pocket and extracted a small bite of rubbery carrot. She offered it to Lark. Soft black lips snuffled her palm, gentle mouth opened, carrot received. She crunched the treat twice and it was gone. Lark made that horse-vacuum sound, sniffing for more carrots.

Becky turned to Karen. "Do you...?"

Before the sentence ended, Karen reached into her pocket and pulled out several sugar cubes. She handed them to Becky, who turned back to the mare.

"Oh, here, Lark. How about some sugar, pretty girl?"

The mare snuffled her palm again, crunching the sweet treat. As she accepted the second lump, she lowered her head into

Becky's body and sighed.

Karen removed the halter and lead-shank from the hook outside Lark's stall door and handed them to Becky.

"Why don't you just put these on her and we'll take her out for a walk. Her owner is sick right now, so Lark is lonely. She hasn't been out much this week."

Becky slipped the halter over the mare's ears and adjusted the strap. The mare stood quietly while Karen strapped the splint boots in place. They walked over to the turnout, allowing Lark to grab snatches of grass on the way. Becky led her into the paddock and closed the gate. Reaching up she slipped the halter off, stepped back several feet and waved it gently at the horse.

The mare followed her, snuffing at her arm. Becky reached up, stroked Lark's neck a couple of times and then climbed through the fence. She shook the halter again and clicked with her tongue. Once the mare knew she was alone, she went into high gear. Tail curled over her rump, she power-trotted up the paddock. Spooking at nothing, she gave a couple of big, explosive bucks and charged back to the gate.

She slid to a stop, snorted several times, then whirled and galloped up to the top of the paddock again, long black tail carried on the wind like an ebony banner. A couple of good rolls completed her time out and Lark trotted back to the gate.

"We'll have to rename you Mud Pie," Becky said, eyes shining as she reached up to smooth the dark mane, which fell over both sides of her neck.

"Do you suppose I could give her a bath? She got kinda dirty out there rolling. I mean, look, here's a grass stain." She bent over, pointing at a faint green tinge on one gray knee. "Can't put her back like that."

"Oh, I think that would be just fine." Karen smiled at her, nodding. "Just fine."

They walked to the empty wash rack and tied Lark in the first slot. Becky stripped off the boots with practiced care and turned on the water. Fingers testing the temperature, she twisted the nozzle to light spray. Starting at the mare's legs, she moved slowly upward to her belly, then to her neck and head. She adjusted the strength of the spray, taking special care not to get water in Lark's

ears when she washed her face.

She rinsed the mare well, cupping the water with her hand to make sure it ran clear. Turning the tap off, she pulled a sweat scraper from the little box by the faucet and scraped Lark dry. She replaced it and pulled out a comb and with short easy strokes, brushed out the mane and tail.

Karen glanced at her watch. "Well, I have ladies waiting in the arena. When you're done with her, come on back down. I have a couple of ideas." She gave Lark a pat and headed back down to the arena.

Becky's fingers trembled as she unhooked the crossties and headed back to the barn. Quick, inexplicable tears sprang into her eyes and she threw both arms around the mare's damp neck with a sob. "This has to be it, Lark, everything has to be okay. Today is our lucky day. It has to be good news."

Her stomach lurched. She knew it would be good. It had to be. "Karen has *ideas*, Lark. That has to be a good thing. Oh, I hope she'll give me a break. I'd love to ride you." Her heart soared one moment and then plummeted the next as she opened the door and led the mare inside. She reached up and removed the halter. Lark lowered her head, pressing gently into Becky's stomach.

"I hate to leave you, and I'll be back in a little bit, but I can't wait another second to find out what Karen has in mind."

Chapter 2

Becky hurried up the driveway. She'd played with Lark too long today, and now she was late for the bus. Her heart jumped into her throat with excitement as she increased her pace.

When Karen had told her she could ride Lark and take lessons in exchange for helping change jump courses and cleaning tack, she'd almost fainted. Becky vowed to clean the dusty tack until it looked brand new and she kept her word. Not only did she clean the tack she borrowed from Marie, but every night before she left the barn, she cleaned Karen's saddle and any bridles she'd used that day. The more valuable she became, the more secure her position. Deep in thought, she didn't hear the car pull up beside her.

"Hey, Becky, ya want a ride home? I'll be glad to drop ya off."

She glanced at her watch. "Hi, Melly. Nah, that's okay. I don't want you to go out of your way."

"Don't be silly, girl. Hop on in."

Not wanting to be rude, and considering she was already late, Becky got in and buckled her seat belt. She shot an uncomfortable glance at Melanie and settled back in the seat.

"Gee, thanks, Melly, I appreciate the ride."

"Happy to help. Where can I take ya?"

"To the bottom of Los Rios is fine. I can walk from there."

They proceeded down the driveway, turned onto Los Rios and wound their way to the bottom of the hill. Three roads branched off in different directions. Melanie glanced at Becky, eyebrows

raised in question. The only real road eventually ended up at the freeway or went into the town of Del Mar. The others were only country lanes that gave access to long, curving avenues leading to estates hidden by high walls and security gates.

As they pulled up to the stop sign, Becky unsnapped her belt and opened her door. "This will do just fine. Thanks so much for the ride. I'll see you tomorrow." She jumped out of the car before Melanie could respond and stepped onto the curb with a wave good-bye.

Disappointed, Melanie returned the wave, made a U-turn and headed back up the hill toward home. Just before she reached the driveway to Doubletree, she checked her rearview mirror and saw a bus stop at the corner. Becky scurried aboard, the door closed and the bus continued on its way toward town.

She turned into the driveway, reversed, and came down the hill again. Her curiosity got the best of her and keeping a safe distance, she followed the bus into Del Mar.

* * *

Becky peered out the window as the bus pulled away from the curb.

Oh, man, that was close. If Melanie and the kids ever find out where I live, they'll kick me to the curb in a minute. I can't let that happen.

Thinking about the events of the past week made her heart thud in her chest and it hurt to swallow. The lights of the shopping center brought her out of her reverie. Three more blocks and she was almost home.

The little bungalows huddled close together, looking old and tired. Dried out grass, dusty, faded flowers and peeling paint seemed the norm. Bikes, skateboards and a variety of toys littered the lawns and porches.

The uneven sidewalks rippled and cracked. It was dinnertime and the varieties of cooking smells, pleasant on their own, were offensive mixed together.

Halfway down the block she turned and mounted the steps of her new home. The neighbors were at it again, yelling at each

other, their bickering audible to a three-block radius. Opening the front door, she went inside. She never glanced around and failed to see Melanie's little BMW stopped at the top of the street, concealed in the shadows.

* * *

Boxes and cartons cluttered the tiny living room. Each bore a sticky note: Mom's room, kitchen, bathroom, Becky's room. Baskets of clean clothes waited to be folded and put away. She stepped over a pile of books and went into the kitchen to find another note on the fridge.

"Becky, meatloaf needs to be heated up. Please get all the stuff in your room put away. Hope you had a great day. I'll be home right after work. Love you, Mom."

She took a can of soda and the plate of leftover meatloaf out of the fridge as well as a half-empty pint of potato salad. Leaning against the counter, she pulled a spoon from the drawer. Too hungry to bother warming anything or even to sit, Becky polished off her meal. She threw the empty container in the close to overflowing garbage. Tying the ends of the bag, she walked the trash out to the dumpster.

She gazed at the star-filled sky and shivered again in anticipation. How many nights had she stood like this, hoping, praying for a day like today?

"Thank you, God."

Becky watched the stars a moment longer then turned back to the house.

Her room looked like a bomb hit it. Tossing a disgusted look at the piles of clothes and books heaped on the bed, she glanced at the empty shelves above her desk and figured the books would be a good place to start. Her room was so small she could hardly turn around and the mess made it worse.

Dozens of books explained how to do everything from a half-pass to riding a cross-country course, but the majority dealt with show jumping. She knew them by heart. Becky shivered as chills ran up her spine. *Soon*. She gathered the empty boxes, broke them down and trudged back to the dumpster.

* * *

Becky got off the bus and started up the hill. The sun rose over her shoulders, throwing long shadows in front of her. As she headed down the drive towards the barn, Toby scooted out of the bushes toward her, a smile of welcome on his face. Ears up, his eyes swept her body, looking for his morning treat. They had become good friends, due in part to the scraps Becky had her mom bring home from the restaurant.

“You’re in luck today, Toby. Wait ‘til you see.” She fished around in her jacket pocket, extracting a pile of leftovers wrapped in foil.

Toby’s pointy little face got pointier still and he licked his chops as he caught the aroma of steak.

Smiling, she held the meat scraps aloft. “Prime rib night at Mom’s restaurant. Okay, Toby, speak.”

The little Jack Russell sat up, begging, eyes closed to slits. He barked once.

She went through his little repertoire of tricks, rewarding him each time with a tasty bite. Toby rolled over, shook hands and did a half-hearted imitation of dead dog, although one hopeful eye remained open and he whined under his breath.

He sighed as he ate, ears flipping back and forth, head cocked to catch every word the girl said. She poured the remaining scraps on the lawn and gave him a final pat.

Becky continued down the drive, anxious to get to the barn. *Today is the day, yep. I’m gonna get to jump.*

Waving to Carlos, she walked down the aisle to shrill whinnies as the horses called good morning. She entered the tack room, pulled her bridle and saddle off the rack and grabbed up her bucket of brushes. Becky hurried down the aisle and opened the stall door, caressing the silky nose extended in greeting. The mare chuckled deep in her throat, large, liquid eyes gazing at Becky with obvious affection. Lark took the offered carrot, crunching away.

Becky put her bucket of brushes in the corner of the stall, extracted the currycomb and started to groom Lark’s immaculate body. She worked in small, circular motions. Silver hairs floated

upward and caught in the sunbeams, swirling like fairy motes dancing in the light.

"I'm feeling a little nervous here, Lark. See, something's gonna happen that I've been dreaming about all my life. We're gonna jump, girl. You and me. Yep."

Lark continued to eat her breakfast, gazing at Becky from time to time with soft dark eyes.

Grooming finished, Becky bent down to put the splint boots on Lark's front legs. She adjusted the buckles, making sure they were not too tight. She placed the pad on the mare's back and settled the saddle in place. Snugging the pad up into the pommel, she attached the girth to the billet straps, leaving the mare plenty of breathing room.

Becky's heart beat in a strange pattern, thumping against her ribs as she performed the simple tasks. Flushed at first, she felt trickles of perspiration slide down her cheeks only to shiver as a chill swept her body. She took several deep breaths, picked up the bridle and turned Lark away from her hay, allowing her to finish chewing before she inserted the bit and slipped the crownpiece over her ears. She chattered as she slid the straps through the buckle of the throatlatch.

"We're as ready as we're ever gonna get, girl. You're gorgeous." She led the mare out of the stall, snapped the stirrups down and nodded. "Whew, it's getting hard to breathe."

Becky puffed as she led Lark to the mounting block, sweating by the time she got there. She hopped up on the mare, pulled the girth a couple of holes tighter and headed for the arena.

Karen jammed the pole into the cups of the last jump on course and waved hello. "I've been looking forward to this almost as much as you have. How do you like your first course?"

"Oh, Karen." Her voice was a squeak. She cleared her throat and grinned. "The most exciting day of my life and it hasn't even started. I can't wait."

"Okay then, settle deep and give me a nice sitting trot. Don't ask for too much impulsion now, just a medium gait."

Becky took a soft feel of Lark's mouth, closed light legs on the mare's sides and asked for the trot.

Smooth as silk, Lark moved into the gait. With years of training under her belt, the mare anticipated Becky's slightest move, a change in leg or seat pressure.

"Very nice pace, very fluent. She's nicely engaged behind. Feel her mouth a bit now, settle a little deeper and close your legs to extend the gait."

Lark maintained roundness in her back, leaned on Becky's hands and extended her stride. Silver-black tail elevated like a banner, she strode down the long side of the arena.

"Okay, Becky. Walk." Karen grinned at her protégée. "Great job. Very good ride. It's so important to know how to collect and extend."

Becky nodded in agreement and glanced at the course again. She felt a gurgling ripple of glee in her stomach and bit her lower lip in anticipation.

Karen laughed. "I see that look on your face. I know you're anxious, but first things first. How about a nice canter? I want a working canter first, once around the arena and then a collected canter. Show me your best."

Becky straightened her spine, squeezed the left rein and tapped the mare with her right heel. Obliging as always, Lark rolled into the canter, accelerating as she felt the continued leg pressure. They settled into the working canter and Becky assumed a two-point position, floating lightly on the mare's back, maintaining leg contact, but lessening the pressure. Hands planted on Lark's neck, eyes up, heels down, she cantered along the arena rail.

At the completion of the first circuit of the arena, Becky resumed the three-point position. She arched her back slightly and drew on both reins, collecting the mare with light, squeezing tugs. As Lark decelerated, Becky closed her legs and sat deep.

Lark's strides shortened and became more animated as she rounded her back. They made one more circuit of the arena and then Becky came back to the walk, winded.

Karen nodded in approval, a wide smile on her lips.

"Really good job, Becky. When you get your breath back, go ahead and trot over that cross rail." She pointed at a fence off to the side. "Two point all the way through."

Becky and Lark hopped back and forth in easy, steady

cadence.

“When you jump the next time, maintain the canter and do the outside line.”

Becky turned for the cross rail once again. As they hopped over, she closed her legs on the mare’s sides to maintain the gait. They approached the first fence in perfect sync, jumped in easy rhythm and on to the next fence. There were six in all and Becky’s face turned pink from exertion as she reached the end. She pulled to a stop and grinned at Karen, panting.

“Oh, that was so much fun.”

“Very nice, very steady. You only bobbed a bit once. I think you kind of jumped ahead of her a bit on the third fence. That’s got a lot to do with timing and seeing your spot, which will come with experience. When you’re ready, do it again in the other direction. Start with an opening circle, just like you would in the show ring, do the line again, and then close with a circle.”

Opening circle completed, Becky approached the first fence.

“Press your hands into her neck, and settle a bit lower ... that’s a girl. Keep your crotch close to the saddle.” They came off the second fence and began the turn.

“No, stay in two-point. That’s how you bobbed the last time. Now count with me ... one, two, three. There you go.”

Timing perfect, they rolled over the little brick wall and then the last, a small gate. Her closing circle, although small, worked.

A glaze of tears turned her aqua eyes into glittering pools. “Oh, Karen,” she gasped. “Oh, that was wonderful. Can I do it again?”

Shievon watched Becky ride, her expression cold, eyes narrowed to slits as the intruder got hi-fives and wide smiles from Karen.

We do not need another team member and we sure don’t need you.

* * *

Exhausted from excitement and hard physical work, Becky stepped off the bus, wishing for a moment she had accepted Melanie's offer of a ride home. She trudged down the street, lost in thought. It got harder and harder to keep her secret and the look on Melanie's face when she refused her offer of a ride made Becky cringe.

I don't want to hurt your feelings, Melly, but my private life has to remain a secret. I can't invite you home and we can't be real friends because I'm not like you and the rest of the team Look at this dumpy neighborhood, all these crappy little shoebox houses. No, I can't take the chance. I can't lose Lark and that's exactly what will happen if you all ever find out the truth.

Becky stomped up the sidewalk, stuck her key in the door and entered the little house, banging the door closed behind her.

Chapter 3

Slipping the reins over Lark's head, Becky removed the halter and eased the bit into the mare's mouth. She adjusted the straps and stuffed the leather ends into their keepers. Her tight helmet gave her a headache and she rocked it back and forth trying to find a comfortable position. Karen had mentioned a place in town that sold used tack. She had to find a helmet that fit ... that or get a haircut.

Becky waved at Karen as she entered the arena. The course, a figure eight, would test her ability to get a smooth flying change at the canter. This test, when done properly, was almost undetectable, smooth and flowing. Done wrong, it was a fiasco.

More than an hour passed as Becky and Lark perfected their technique, getting smooth changes and all the spots.

The DT team, mounted and ready for their class, gathered at the arena rail, watching the end of Becky's lesson. As she and Lark came back to a walk, the kids gave her high fives.

"Ya look like a pro." Melanie gave her a thumb and a grin.

"Great job," Jessi added.

"That was sweet." Billy nodded, blue eyes half closed in a grin. "You make a cool teammate."

Shievon stared at Billy, jaws clenched. Voice pitched low, she said to Jessi, "Becky seems to be Billy's new best bud." She pulled off her helmet and ran a pale hand through her glossy brown hair. Settling the helmet back on her head, lips pursed, she tightened the harness and scowled.

"Karen's crazy about her, too, and I can't figure out why. What's so special about her, Jessi?" Round golden eyes now

fastened on Becky.

Jessi shrugged, glancing at her best friend. "I don't get it, Shievy. What do you have against her? She just wants to ride like the rest of us. Besides, she's lots of fun to be around. Mom's really likes working with her."

Pursing her lips, she glared at Becky. "Charm. It's overrated."

"Oh, Shievy, good grief. Get over it."

* * *

The girls sat on the floor of the storage closet in Melanie's garage, going through boxes of show clothes. One pile contained breeches, show shirts, a pair of paddock boots and leather chaps. Another included an almost new pair of tall field boots, a down vest, a velvet helmet and two show jackets.

"You are such a little pack-rat," Blair said, glancing at the growing piles. "Why in the world did you save all this stuff, Melly? I thought you passed these along already."

"Good thing for Becky you didn't." Jessi held up the paddock boots, a mischievous grin on her face. "Next size comes with motors, huh?" She collapsed with the giggles as Melanie made a face.

"It doesn't sound like she'd be able to afford to get new riding clothes for herself." Jessi continued to stack the things meant for Becky. "I wish I had something to contribute, but she's bigger than me, taller, anyway." She held up a pair of gray breeches and nodded. "Harry Hall's; she'll be styling for sure. I love that color."

Blair shook several monogrammed shirt collars at Melanie and grinned. "I don't think the MYM is going to be much good for Becky." She threw them in a corner then glanced at Melanie and frowned. "I'm not sure just dropping in on her is a good idea. What if she's not home? Maybe we should call first."

"Normally, I'd agree," Melanie said, "but in this case, I think a surprise is better." She remembered the night she followed Becky home and her continued refusal of offered rides. "Ya know, sometimes it's better to just jump in the deep end and go for it rather than all this beatin' around the bush."

“What’s that mean?” Jessi asked, eyes wide. “Beating around what bush?”

“Y’all will see soon enough, I’m sure.”

Shievon leaned back against the wall, silent, her normally pale cheeks stained red. Round hazel eyes darted from friend to friend.

Jessi plopped a pair of leather gloves on the growing pile. “Mom is sure impressed with her riding ... thinks Becky has real talent....”

“*Becky!*” interrupted Shievon, teeth clenched. “All we ever talk about anymore is Becky this or Becky that.” She got to her feet. “I’m sick of her. She has no business hanging around with us and she doesn’t really belong to the team. She’s nothing but a barn rat ... doesn’t even have her own horse.” Shievon stomped out of the garage, leaving the girls wide-eyed.

“What the heck was that?” Blair asked, stuffing the clothes into a bag.

“Beats me,” Jessi said. “She’ll get over it.”

“I think Shievy’s jealous.” Melanie rose with a chuckle. “Didn’t her eyes seem greener than normal?” She picked up a bag and headed for the driveway.

Jessi chortled. “Shievon jealous of Becky? Now there’s a wild concept. Jealous of what?”

Blair shook her head. “I hope she works it out quick. Mom would have a cow if she heard that kind of talk.”

“I’m hungry,” Jessi said, hopping into the back seat next to Shievon. “Wonder what we have for lunch.”

Beneath her feet rested a cooler filled with drinks and sandwiches courtesy of Lena, Blair and Jessi’s housekeeper. A colorful beach umbrella and two large blankets balanced on top.

Refusing to join the conversation, Shievon maintained her silence, staring into the distance.

Ten minutes later, Melanie pulled up in front of Becky’s house and parked in the driveway. It was the first time the other girls had been there.

Voice low, Shievon stared at the house. “Good grief, I do not believe it, Melly. You’ve got to be kidding.” She glanced around the neighborhood. “We’ll be lucky to get out of here without being mugged.”

“Knock it off, Shievy,” Melanie said with a glare.

“Well, you have to admit ... it’s...” Blair’s voice trailed off in mid-sentence, taking in the brown lawns and dreary flowers. “Really rough. Wow, I didn’t even know Del Mar *had* an area like...” Her voice trailed off again. She ran her hand through strawberry blonde curls and snuck a peek at Melanie.

“I don’t believe it. We just discovered we have a slum and Becky lives in it. Wait until my mom hears this,” Shievon said.

“I can’t believe ya just said that. What a little princess.” Cold blue eyes met Shievon’s in the rearview mirror; she dropped her gaze.

Jessi piped up then. “Mom and I used to live in a house just like this back in Ohio. We had five acres, a barn and a really nice ring. The house looks the same. Guess we’d better get this stuff inside. I don’t want to miss a minute at the beach.”

The convertible top was down and Jessi leaped out of the back seat, earning a scowl from Melanie.

“Pop the trunk,” she called, laughing.

* * *

Becky heard the commotion in the driveway. When she peeked out the window she almost fainted. There they stood, pulling bags of stuff from Melanie’s car. Her stomach turned over and her mouth flooded in panic.

Oh God! What should I do? Should I hide? She straightened then and took a deep breath. Nope, the truth’s out, might as well face it now as later.

She opened the door, mortified. “What’s all this?”

Blair grinned. “We’re going to the beach and thought you might like to join us. All this stuff is spring-cleaning. Melanie is letting go of some treasures. Wait until you see.” She handed a bag to Becky. “Lead the way.”

Jessi and Blair followed her into the house, controlling

their gaze, eyes fixed on the worn carpet. Melanie followed close behind and Shievon pulled up the rear.

“Hey, Becky,” Jessi said, glancing around. “I was just saying that Mom and I used to have a house like this back in Ohio. I bet the master bedroom is on the left, slider out to the patio, separate bathroom. Right?”

Becky nodded, grinning in spite of her embarrassment. “You’re right on. I think these houses are assembly-line models. You see ‘em everywhere. Hardly need to open a door to know what’s behind it.”

Jessi walked down the hall, grinning. “Uh huh, this used to be my room.”

“Drop everything on the bed if you can find it.” Becky turned to Melanie, shaking her head. “I can’t believe all this.”

She shook out the first of several pairs of hardly worn breeches and held them to herself. Length perfect, waist looked good. Bright aqua eyes glowed, mouth wide with joy.

Melanie took a navy blue wool show jacket out of the garment bag and said, “Here, try this on for fit.”

Becky slid her arms into it, adjusted the cuffs and did up the buttons.

“I’m sayin’, it never looked that good on me. See how nice it snugs in at the waist? There’s a gray one - here it is, that’s one of my very favorites. I only got to wear it once. It just didn’t look good on Benny, but it’s perfect for Lark ... matches her colorin’ just fine.”

Becky tried it on, glancing in the mirror. Hot tears burned her eyes as she turned away from her new friends. She walked to her closet and hung the jackets, clearing her throat several times and sniffing.

Jessi saw the tears start. She slipped her arm around Becky’s slender waist and gave her a hug. Turning to the other girls, she said, “Let’s go. You can save all this until we get back. Time is flying and I want to swim. Go put on your suit, Becky, and then let’s do it.”

They piled into the car and headed down the Pacific Coast Highway. The blue ocean spread as far as the eye could see,

merging with the sky on the horizon. The heavy traffic crawled along the highway as the tourists took in the sights.

Becky sat in the back seat with Jessi and Shievon. Their hair whipped in the wind, flying in all directions, creating static electricity.

Melanie flipped on her blinker and slowed, preparing to turn into a private driveway. They followed the tree-lined road down to high, wrought iron gates. She stopped, nodded at the guard, and said, "I'm Melanie Young, we're expected." Before she could complete the sentence, the gate swung open. "Thank ya, sir."

"Holy cow, who lives here?" asked a flabbergasted Becky as they parked at the end of the driveway. She gaped at the wide expanse of incredible white sand and the blue Pacific beckoning them.

"Holy cow," she said again, rolling her eyes. "A real live private beach." Her jaw dropped and then snapped shut with a click.

A familiar voice called to them. "Hey, guys, I almost gave up on you. I'm dying to swim." Billy emerged from what had to be a five-car garage, toting a large blanket and a ghetto blaster. Bob followed close behind, carrying several boogie boards and a cooler.

Becky stared above them at the most gorgeous house she had ever seen. Built of blindingly white stucco in the Mediterranean style so popular in the area, it was the perfect house for such an exotic setting. Her mouth fell open again. Palm trees of several varieties grew in the front yard, their fronds waving above the red tile roof.

Gardens chock full of blossoming flowers flanked both sides of the walk that wound up to the front door. In the center of the front courtyard, a small fountain with a pond housed several large Koi fish in all their glorious colors.

Becky turned her attention back to the kids as she heard them pulling their stuff from the car. She shook her head as she looked from the house to the beach in amazement. They got their things together and trooped down to the sea. Bob set up the umbrellas, dropped off the cooler and left.

To their right, snuggled into a large natural cove was a private dock. Tethered in separate slips, a speedboat equipped for

water skiing and a small sailboat shared space with a huge yacht named *Sea Nymph*.

In a state of culture shock, Becky shook her head. This wouldn't work, not in a million years. How could she possibly keep up with these kids? Never.

"Hey, Becky," Billy said, "I'm glad you could come. Water looks good. Do you boogie board?" He nodded at the pile on the sand. "Help yourself. We're going in. Come on, Shievy." He grabbed her hand and they ran down to the surf.

They hopped over the first wave, dove into the next, and stroking hard, made good headway in the outbound surf. Before long, they hit calm waters. They turned around and sat on the edges of their boards, waiting for a nice one.

They saw it coming and plopped back down on their boards, stroking like mad. The wave picked them up, held them a moment, then tossed them down the glassy hill, foam racing them to the shallow waters. The rest of the kids joined in, and they swam out just far enough to catch another good wave.

"Hey, y'all, look what's comin'." Melanie laughed aloud as they gazed over their shoulders, gaping at a huge wave bearing down on them.

They felt the water pull out from under their boards as the wave built, sucking them to the crest. Paddling furiously, they hit the top of the wave and seemed to hang for a moment. They popped out of the crest together, maintained their boards and rode the wave until they touched sand.

Melanie rolled off her board, howling. "That was the best fun. Man, like skiing. What a thrill."

They played in the waves for hours, and then headed back to the blankets, exhausted and hungry.

Becky sat on the blanket next to Billy. She took the last sip from her soda can and pointed it in the direction of his house.

"What a gorgeous place, Billy. Have you lived here long?"

"About ten years, I guess. Mom and Dad live up in Beverly Hills, but I hate it there, so I live here."

Becky frowned. "Oh, so that guy over there on your patio, that's not your dad?"

"No," Billy said, hesitating. "That's Bob. He's my

chauffer, drives the limo.”

“You have your own chauffer? Aren’t you old enough to drive?”

“I have my license, but part of the deal with my folks is that Bob stays around; he’s also my...”

“You are so rude, Becky,” snapped Shievon. “What’s with the cross examination? It’s none of your *business* who Bob is. Why don’t you tell us a little bit about *you*? Bet that’s quite a story, huh?”

Becky blinked. “Oh, I’m sorry. I’m just trying to be friendly. I didn’t mean to pry.” Her lower lip trembled and she blinked again.

Incredulous at the display of bad manners, Billy stared at Shievon. Eyes wide, he took her hand and gave it a squeeze. Turning back to Becky, he nodded. “Bob is a very good friend. He’s also my body guard.”

Chapter 4

Becky's alarm clock went off at five-thirty with a rudeness that deserved the slap she gave it. It fell on the floor and clicked off. Silence reigned again. She rolled over onto her back and rubbed her eyes.

Her fitful sleep did little to refresh her. The earlier scene at Billy's replayed in her head all night. What had she said that caused Shievon to snap at her? Queasy, she rose and shuffled across the hall to the bathroom.

Her normally high spirits returned as she brushed her teeth and ran a comb through her recently cut auburn hair. All the girls wore short hair and she'd had hers cut in a layered shag much like Melanie's. It fluffed lightly around her triangular face and wisps of hair feathered her neck. Deep-set aqua eyes fringed with thick coppery lashes looked back at her. Peering closer into the mirror, she inspected her short upturned nose and dimpled chin.

Yep, at least a dozen new freckles from one day at the beach.

Smearing sunscreen on her sunburned nose and cheeks, she put the cap back on and slid the tube in her pocket.

She dressed quickly and glanced in the full-length mirror. The breeches fit her to perfection, as did the paddock boots. The first riding gear she had ever owned looked custom made. Well, most of it was – just not for her. She drew a deep sigh of appreciation for Melanie and her generosity.

Chaps clutched in one arm, Becky checked her watch. Only ten minutes to catch the bus. She wrote her mother a quick note and left the house at a trot, arriving at the bus stop just in time.

“Good mornin’, little lady, getting an early start?” The driver took her money and gave her a big smile. She was the only passenger on the bus and took the front seat so they could visit.

“Mornin’, Fred, gonna be a nice day, don’t you think?” They chatted to the next stop where two more people got on. Five stops later, she got off the bus and hurried up the road to Doubletree, humming.

Becky brought Benny out to the crossties, pulled the step stool over to his right side and got to work.

“Now just stand a few more minutes, boy, I’m almost done.” She gathered a thin clump of mane and pinched it between her left thumb and forefinger. Holding tight, she pushed the hairs up towards the base of his neck with her right hand. With a sharp tug, she pulled out the hairs remaining between her fingers. She repeated the process until his mane lay against his neck, short and even.

“Wow, dude, that looks nice. You’re a handsome boy.” She stood back to survey her work, knowing Melanie would appreciate having the tedious job out of the way. Benny’s mane, now pulled to perfection, lay flat against his neck. He’d been long overdue.

Becky believed in repaying debts. The kids had taken her under their wings and for some reason went out of their way to make her able to fit in. No one pulled a better mane than she did, so at least she had one way of giving back.

Angel was next. Quick and efficient, Becky went to work, and the mare, who had a light mane in the first place, took no time at all. Next in line was Foxie. Becky had a regular assembly line going and it was just a bit after eight when she put Megan back in her stall.

She had hesitated to do Shievon’s horse at first, but figured in the end it would cause more comment if she didn’t than if she did.

Karen entered the tack room toting a couple of bags. “Leg wraps. *Buy one, get one free* sale. I couldn’t resist. Got you pink ‘cause it goes with your hair.”

Chuckling, she took four wraps out of the bag and handed them to Becky, looking at her for the first time. She saw the

breeches and boots and smiled.

“My goodness, don’t you look like a pro. And chaps, too?”

“Ah, this is all thanks to Melly. She gave me so many cool things, like jackets and shirts, and now I have a pair of field boots to show in. She’s just the best.”

They chatted for a moment and then went out to the jump arenas, changing the courses, moving fences here and there. Slamming car doors heralded the arrival of early riders. They heard the adults greeting each other as they headed for their barn. Before long, horses trooped down the hill to the arena.

For four hours straight, Karen taught class after class and Becky never left her side. Absorbing every word Karen spoke, she watched the riders in the advanced hunter group, noting how they negotiated their courses, what worked, what did not.

Becky focused on the lines. If you expected to have a good hunter round, you had to use the whole ring and ride with balanced turns and consistent, steady strides with straight, precise approaches—every time. It was easier to say than to do.

The adult lessons ended at noon and they had almost three hours before the kids got out of school. Karen and Becky sat in the clubroom, talking about the earlier lessons.

“I brought a huge lunch with me today. Would you like a sandwich?” Karen fished around in the cooler, extracting two huge baggy-wrapped rolls filled with chicken salad. A bag of chips and ice-cold sodas completed the meal.

“Mmm, really. Help me out here.” She shook one at Becky. “More than enough to share.”

“Oh, Karen, that looks delicious. Thank you.” Becky accepted the sandwich and a soda. They chatted, leafing through the latest horse magazines.

“Are you going to ride Lance today?” Becky asked. “He is just the cutest mover. I love watching you ride him. You two are perfect together.”

“Yes, I thought I’d get him out after lunch settles. He really is a nice guy, isn’t he? I’d like to start trotting over poles today, and if he stays quiet, we’ll finish with some cross rails and little verticals.” She cocked her head and nodded. “You don’t want to rush a young horse’s training, you know. It’s really important to

give them a solid foundation and that comes with taking your time.”

They chatted some more, reading, pointing out different articles of interest. Karen finished the latest gossip column and closed her magazine.

“Okay, guess there’s no time like the present. Let’s see if Lance wants to jump today.”

They walked out to the barns, reveling in the beauty of the early afternoon. A soft breeze ruffled the leaves in the trees. The sweet smell of jasmine combined with the heat beguiled the bees. Millions of furry little creatures held a nectar convention in the dark, glossy shrubs.

“I hear you’re thinking about going back to school.”

Becky brushed out Lance’s long silky tail. “Oh, I don’t know. At first I thought it would be fun going to school with the other kids. Then I started to think about it. College is not in my future. I want to work with horses and I have a wonderful opportunity here. It’d be kinda dumb to lose this gig just to go to regular school, don’t you think? And for what? Besides, this kind of deal may never come along again, especially Lark. I just have to find a job.”

She ran her fingers through Lance’s tail once more and then tossed the brush back into the grooming bucket. She looked at Karen, shrugging. “This is what I want to do for a living anyway, so school doesn’t seem that important to me now. I’m going to continue home schooling and I’ll graduate just like anyone else. Then, if I want to later, I can go to college, but I know I won’t.”

Karen shrugged. “Well, if college isn’t in your future and you’ve really made up your mind that horses are your life, I have to agree with you. I was a lot younger than you are when I knew. I never went to college, either, and for the same reason. I figured riding and training with George would be more important to my future. I moved to New Jersey and trained under him for three years.” Karen nodded at Becky and smiled at her expression, taking the bridle from her.

“*Morris?*” Becky stared at her, eyes wide. “Holy cow. You rode with George Morris? Heaven on earth, huh?”

Karen chuckled. “Without a doubt. He’s hard and he takes

no prisoners, but he's the best out there. Now I'm not him, but this is a good opportunity and Lark is perfect for you. With Marie paying the freight, you will be able to get a lot of expensive mileage free, including show fees. At the rate you're going, you'll be able to take over the beginning lessons by summer and that should give you plenty of spending money."

Karen adjusted the fit of the cavason and fastened the throatlatch. She stroked Lance's face and fed him a sugar cube. "Okay, buddy, you're ready." She led him over to the mounting block and hopped aboard.

Karen practiced trotting and cantering over poles, building his confidence for the bigger jumps to come. She kept him round and supple, doing serpentines and figure eights. Her circles started out large and round and she picked up where they had left off yesterday, doing spirals.

Lance went fine to the right, bending softly into the turns, haunches on the track, but when he went to the left, his stiff side, the flow was rough. After two fairly small circles, he started to pin his ears and swish his tail.

Karen relaxed the turn and proceeded down the rail. Lance regained both his composure and his attitude almost at once, tail now quiet, ears pricked forward, happy again. She pulled him back to a walk and floated the reins. When they resumed the canter, she tried another tight turn to the left. Lance pinned his ears again, hard, and switched leads behind. They came back to the walk.

"He sure is stiff to the left in tight circles. I think I'm going to get the chiropractor out here, see if she can find anything." Karen stroked the deep brown neck. "I think the tight work he's been doing all week might have tweaked a muscle. It's making him just sore enough to hurt when he has to get real round to the left."

"Before you do that, let me give him a massage, huh? I may be able to figure out what the problem is. I've done tons of massage, had a friend who was a certified masseuse. I learned a lot from Toni, yep. She had twelve horses in her string and they worked hard. We gave them massages all the time. Works great for sore muscles."

"Okay. We can do it this afternoon after the kid's lessons

are over. I want to give him a chance to cool down completely and relax. How about that?"

"Fine with me. It's always better to do it when they're calm and quiet. Hey, tell me what riding for George is like. I have all his books and he covers everything so clearly, it's like *he* is the horse or something. Hard to explain, but he makes it sound so easy."

Karen sighed and slipped an arm over Becky's shoulders. Pulling her closer, she said, "That's because the only person who knows more about horses than George is God."

Chapter 5

“Hey, y’all, check this out,” Melanie said, a wide smile on her face.

Draped over the lid of her show trunk was the biggest cat they had ever seen. He basked in the sun, asleep, while the tip of his tail swished. Every once in a while it would switch directions from up and down to left to right.

Jessi glanced from Melanie to the cat. “I’ve never seen him before. Gosh, he’s beautiful. Looks like a purebred Siamese, except he’s so fat. Usually they’re small and sleek.”

She advanced on the cat and as she stroked his back, he went into spasms of purring. Lifting his head, he opened the biggest, bluest eyes she had ever seen. They glowed like sapphires.

“Wow, wow, oow.” He rolled over on his back, his claws kneading the air, contentment written in every inch of his ample body.

The purring started again as Melanie petted his tummy. “Doesn’t look like ya miss too many meals there, buddy.”

She flipped the collar over and saw the name *Pounce* on the little tag. No address or phone number, just the name. “Hey, Pounce. Is that your name or your brand of choice?”

One lazy blue eye opened a bit. “Wow.” He stretched languidly and sat up like a Siamese Buddha. “Wow.” Rising, he stretched to his full height, arched like a Halloween cat and yawned.

“Oh, isn’t he cute? Where did he come from?” Blair asked, bending down and stroking the new cat. “Oh, he’s so soft and silky.”

Jessi grinned at him. “He speaks *Siamese cat*, too. They all talk like that. My friend Julie had three. They’re like dogs, some of them. One of her cats actually fetched. Really. She’d throw him little paper wads and he’d bring ‘em right back. Regular little retriever, he was—do it for hours.”

Pounce collapsed again and rolled over on his back. He radiated feline bliss. The purring resumed as Melanie scratched his chin.

Jim and Toby walked down the barn aisle just then. Toby came to an abrupt halt, short tail straight up, ears pricked. The tail jerked twice and went stiff. His eyes narrowed and it looked like he was smiling. Only, he wasn’t smiling.

“Aha,” Jim said, “so there you are, Pounce. You’re supposed to stay in the house. How’d you get out?”

Toby walked over to Jim’s side. The dog licked the end of his nose where three recent scratches showed pink on his white muzzle. Sitting next to Jim, he whined under his breath.

Mystery solved as Jim explained that he had won the cat-care lotto while his folks took a long vacation cruise. It seemed Pounce was consumed with curiosity, and insisted on checking out his new digs. The cat jumped down from the trunk and walked over to Jim.

“Wow.” He stood on his hind legs and patted Jim’s knee several times, ignoring Toby. The cat looked up at Jim. “Wow?”

“That’s all he ever says, but this time I think it means he’s hungry. They’re very talkative, you know. He never shuts up.” Jim bent down and scooped Pounce into his arms. The cat’s legs hung limp on either side of Jim’s arm, tail swishing in a uniquely feline rhythm.

His head rested on the inside of Jim’s elbow, eyes closed. Loud, growling purrs declared his happiness and contentment. Snuggling into a better position, he yawned again.

Toby sat up on his hind legs, begging, a toothy grin on his face. His body quivered in anticipation.

“Looks like Toby wants to get to know Pounce, doesn’t it?” Shievon asked, white teeth showing in a radiant smile.

“Oh, he tried that last night,” Jim said. “Got a tad too rough. Pounce sat back and slapped him right across the face. Toby

got the picture. Still wants a piece of him, though. Let me tell you, it's going to be a long couple of months. See you kids later."

They waved good-bye and went to get their horses ready for the lesson.

"Why Benny, don't ya look gorgeous. Who...?"

"Wow, Angel, when did you get to the beauty parlor? Who...?"

Shievon led Megan out of the stall. "Who did this?" she asked, hands on her hips.

As Foxy, Angel and Benny joined them in the aisle, the girls looked at each other, mouths wide, *who did it* looks on their faces.

"I'm sayin, y'all, this is nothin' short of professional. I've never seen a better pullin' job. It has to be Becky. I mean, who else could it be?"

"How much do you think she'll expect us to pay her?" Shievon said, scowling. "She never asked *me* if it was okay. I think she has a lot of nerve doing that without even asking."

"Y'know, Shievy, whatever's buggin' ya, it's time to say it plainly. Why are ya mad at Becky? She did ya a favor don't ya think? Like ya wanted to save that pullin' job all for yourself, huh?" Melanie released Benny from the crossties, pausing to hear the reply.

Shievon's face flooded to a dusky rose. "I'm not *mad* at her. I just don't like her, Melly. She's always brown-nosing up to Karen, looking for freebies, and man, did you get a load of her house? Talk about scary. She's not like us at all."

Blair harrumphed and made a face at Shievon. "Oh, yeah, she lives right in the middle of crime-ridden Del Mar. Gives me the shivers just thinking about it."

"If there was one, that's where it'd be. Besides, that's a load of crap and you know it. I saw the look on your face when we pulled into her driveway or whatever that was." Shievon stared at Blair and then shook her head. "Oh yeah, you just wanted to move right in, didn't you?"

Green eyes narrowed, lips pursed, Blair stared right back. "Gotta do better than that, Shievon. Becky's my friend and I don't care where she lives." She picked up Angel's reins and led her

away.

Black eyes snapping, Jessi sputtered, "I can't believe you just said that, Shievy. Where do you get off? Where someone lives doesn't matter. Mom and I lived in that exact same house back in Ohio." She pulled the reins over Foxie's neck.

"Hey, I got an idea. Why don't you just trot up to Mom and tell her how you feel about people who live in houses like that." Jessi stalked off to the mounting block, dragging a reluctant Foxie.

Melanie cast a quizzical glance at Shievon and sighed. "Well, girl, battin' a thousand so far. I'd give this some thought before ya go too far and do something ya might regret."

Blinking back tears, Shievon's face turned the color of paste. She followed the rest of the team to the arena, fists clenched as tight as her teeth.

As they entered the gate, Karen glanced at Benny, away and then back again. Her eyebrows rose. "Gee, Melly, when...?" She looked at the other horses' newly pulled manes and shook her head. "Great job, girls, absolutely fantastic."

"Not us, we didn't do this," piped Jessi, sing-songing, "but we think we know who did."

In unison they turned smiling faces to her and chorused "*Becky!*"

"Wow, you did all those manes, Becky? Today? When?" Karen inspected each horse and smiled in approval. "Great job."

Becky ducked her head in embarrassment, blushing. She looked at the girls in turn, settling on Melanie.

"You guys have been so nice to me. Just took me right in. I feel like one of the gang. Even after ... so I thought this was something I could do for you. Finished them this morning. They do look good, don't they?"

"Hey, what about me? Don't I rate?" Billy grinned at Becky and flipped Bitsy's mane back and forth. "How'd you miss her?" He smiled as he stroked the dark red neck. "She likes the wild-child look, I guess."

Shievon's face turned bright red as she stared from Billy to Becky and back again. She turned Megan to the arena rail, refusing to respond to Billy's greeting.

Karen cleared her throat and nodded. "Okay, we can

continue our love fest later, but time's a-wasting. I've set up some fun for you kids today. All singles, lots of turns. You need to warm up now. Let's trot."

While the kids practiced their flat work, Karen glanced at Becky, waving her over.

"You've talked about needing a job and I think we may be able to get a business started right here. When the lesson is over, let's talk." She turned to her team. "All canter, please. Starting with Melanie, move off the rail and perform a figure eight, flying change and then take your place at the end of the line."

Making good use of the arena, Melanie started the drill, performing the change directly in the middle of the figure, now heading in the opposite direction. While not exactly precision riding, this exercise took pace control and accuracy to avoid crashing into another horse.

"So team, gather on the right side of the arena and we'll start to jump. Who's first? Jessi?"

Foxie came to the first fence off the left lead and extended her stride. They cleared the vertical and rode straight towards the short side of the arena. Jessi glanced out her left eye, saw her spot and began to make the turn. It was perfect, three straight strides, and they were over two. An opening rein set them up, and they jumped diagonally across four, taking the straight line to five. They completed the course in style.

Karen nodded at her. "Good improvement on controlling the drift. When you ride a big horse like her, you need to start the turn sooner, huh? Good girl. You're ready for the show."

Each of the kids jumped, getting good turns, perfecting their rollbacks, lengthening and shortening strides.

Karen and Becky set up a grid on the right side of the arena and the team practiced bounce strides, everybody's favorite jumping exercise. Two hours later, the lesson concluded.

The kids worked in the wash racks, giving their horses the final touches of hoof polish and fly spray before leading them back to their stalls for a well-deserved snack. Before long, they would be going to Showpark and everybody was excited.

Pounce lounged on top of Melanie's tack trunk, catching a snooze. Across the aisle sat Toby. From the assorted tail reactions, you could tell they were aware of each other. The cat stretched and rolled over on his side, facing Toby. One large blue eye opened. His tail, which hung over the side of the trunk, waved back and forth. Pounce raised his right foreleg, unsheathed his claws and proceeded to give himself a bath. The cadence of his tail-wagging increased.

Toby's eyes narrowed to slits, his already pointy little Jack Russell face compressed, sucked in. He stood at stiff attention then stalked toward the trunk with slow, measured, menacing steps.

Pounce continued his leisurely grooming. Only his tail, which had increased its tempo, showed that he had even seen the dog move. About a foot from the trunk, Toby stopped. He was so still, so stiff, he looked stuffed. His lips lifted slightly and his tail jerked once and then he charged the cat.

Like a brown and white tornado, Toby hurled himself at his nemesis, but Pounce was faster. He reared up in one fluid move, sat on his haunches and gave Toby a slap across his nose so hard the kids heard it in the wash rack.

The strike, followed by Toby's shrill cries of pain and fury, got the horses' attention. Taking the direct line to the house, the dog tore through the middle of the open wash rack, howling every step of the way.

Benny took full advantage of the situation and reared high in the air, snapping the crossties tight. He stepped on Melanie's grooming bucket, jumped to the side and almost went down. Scrambling to regain his feet, he stepped on the bucket again, which tipped over and became airborne, sending combs, brushes, shampoo bottles and a bag of horse cookies flying in all directions.

As the bucket shot between her legs, Megan, always flighty, jumped sideways and tried to turn. She snapped to the end of her crosstie with such force that she lost her balance and slipped on the wet cement, hind legs doing the splits, steel-shod hooves sending sparks as they tried to get some purchase.

"Good grief," cried Shievon, pulling the quick release and allowing the mare the freedom she needed to recover her feet.

Jessi took firm hold of her lead rope. "What the heck ... whoa, Foxy, it's okay."

Wild-eyed, neck stretched as high as she could get it, the huge mare started to dance in place, ready for whatever came next.

"I'm sayin', y'all, is it a full moon or what?" Melanie stroked her quivering horse, talking in low, soothing tones as Benny rolled his eyes at the retreating dog.

Pounce went back to his grooming.

The kids gathered around Lance's stall. Becky worked with long strokes, fingers flat, moving down his neck, then up to the shoulder, on over the loins and down the barrel, watching for pain or sensitivity in the large muscle groups.

"Watch here, Karen." She made small circles on the gelding's back. Sure enough, as she reached the top of his back where the cantle of the saddle rested, he dropped away from her massaging fingers and flinched.

"Oh, that's sore, huh, old buddy? Here, let me ... ah ... there, is that better?"

She continued with gentle circular motions, smiling as Lance leaned into her rather than away, enjoying the massage once she relieved his initial soreness. A light sheen of sweat covered his body. As the massage continued, large beads of sweat gathered on his belly and dropped into the shavings as Becky increased the pressure of her fingers. Lance sighed and lowered his head, so relaxed his ears flopped off to the sides, eyes half closed. He was the picture of equine contentment.

Becky rubbed his upper foreleg vigorously and foamy sweat appeared under her fingers. She switched to his other side, started at the top of his neck below the base of his ear and worked her way down to his shoulder in small circles.

Finished, she Karen asked for the towel they had soaking in hot water. Becky shook it out until it was just the right temperature and then laid it across Lance's loins. Throwing a wool cooler on him, she led him out to the hot walker.

"He should move much better tomorrow. Lance may be one of those horses who need a massage every week. Toni swore it worked better than supplements. Her horses always felt good and they worked hard. I'll do him again next week, maybe sooner. He loved it. Yep, he did."

Karen went into the clubhouse, returning shortly with a check.

“Here, Becky, payment for your services. Put Lance on a weekly schedule. I know he’ll go better for it.” She turned to the kids and grinned. “Best fifty bucks you’ll ever spend on your horse. I suggest weekly.”

All the kids agreed, wanting massages for their horses, too.

At fifty dollars per horse, doing each one weekly, she could earn a tidy bundle just from the kids. When the adults found out they had a resident masseuse, her earnings could be quite substantial.

Becky’s heart soared. *I can get a new helmet, and a couple of DT show shirts and maybe even a saddle of my own. If the kids want to go out for a soda or a movie, now I can afford to go too. I can even do dinner. I’m gonna start saving for a car.*

Chapter 6

Jessi and Becky lounged in the Doubletree clubhouse, talking about the surprise party Saturday night. The girls had racked their brains, trying to come up with something spectacular for the twins' birthday. Expected home from Stanford for a long weekend, they wanted to do something memorable and romantic for their last year as teens.

Billy came up with the perfect idea, dinner at sea, and an evening cruise to Catalina on the *Sea Nymph*. A formal romantic, candle-lit dinner on the trip over would make this a birthday to remember.

"You've gotta come," Jessi said. "I want you to meet Jeff. He's *so* cute."

"Okay," Becky said, shrugging. "I'll go, but I've never met the twins. Won't they think it's strange for me to tag along?" She chuckled and nudged Jessi. "I have to admit, my curiosity is killing me. What do they look like?"

"Ah, Jeff. Blond hair, big blue eyes, a bit over six feet. Imagine what Melly would look like as a guy."

"And Kenny? Are they identical?"

Dark eyes dancing, she nodded. "Well, Blair and I can tell them apart, and Melly, of course, but you won't." Jessi chuckled. "At least not for a while. Their hair is cut the same, but they don't do the matching clothes thingy, so that helps." She laughed at the thought. "Plus, their personalities are very different."

Julia Young sat on the sofa, a magazine in her hands, waiting for the twins. She heard a commotion in the yard and hurried to the front door, narrowly missing a collision with Jeff as he burst into the room. He swept her off her feet and swung her around.

“Hey, Mama, how’re ya doin’? Been forever.” He gave her a resounding kiss and moved aside as Kenny repeated his performance with their slightly dizzy mother.

“I’m fine, fine boys, and y’all look great. Melly, come say hi to the twins.”

Melanie was already there, getting hugs and hair pulls, talking a mile a minute, so happy to see them she was almost in tears.

“I’m sayin’ y’all’ve grown another foot. Look at ya.” She hugged them both again, together, and the boys made strangling noises in pretended protest.

“Oh, my gosh, Mama,” Jeff said, “this is Pete Bogart, our friend from school. Pete, come say hi to Mama.”

A shy young man with dark brown hair and eyes extended his hand.

“Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Young. Thank you for inviting me for the weekend. I’ve been looking forward to it.”

“Hello, Pete, welcome. So glad ya could join us. I’m happy to meet ya, I’m sure.”

They chatted on the patio, catching up on the latest gossip and drinking tall glasses of home-squeezed lemonade topped with fresh sprigs of mint.

* * *

Becky peered into the mirror. “I don’t know what in the world I’m doing here,” she said. “I don’t even know the twins. I’m tagging along like a fifth wheel.” Smoothing down the pale blue turtleneck sweater again, she glanced in the mirror, self-conscious. The black wool slacks fit her beautifully. The mirror told her she looked great and her confidence level increased.

Jessi grinned at Becky. “No, they won’t. I told you they brought a friend home from college and we need you to be his

date.”

Blair leaned over and winked. “And don’t tell me you don’t want to come with us tonight. I won’t believe a word of it. Besides, Pete’s cute.” They saw headlights flash across the windows.

“That’s gotta be Billy,” Jessi said. “Here we go.”

Bob held the door, waiting for his passengers. Becky climbed in, nodded to Billy and Shievon and shrugged.

I am never going to get used to this. I’m sitting in a private limo, ready to go sailing to Catalina on a ninety-foot yacht owned by a friend. One of these days I’m gonna crash. Yep, I just know it. Until then....

The limo waited in Melanie’s driveway while the kids walked around back to the patio. Sounds of laughter, conversation and light music drifted on the night air. The twins met them as they entered the yard, accompanied by Melanie and her boyfriend, Dave Hastings.

Becky sighed in relief as the twins made the introductions. Big blue eyes roamed from face to face.

This might turn out to be a good night after all. The twins were gorgeous. No wonder Blair and Jessi talked so much about them. She slid a surreptitious glance at Pete, eyelashes veiling her gaze. He was about five-ten with a fit, slender build and sleepy dark eyes. He had thick brown hair and a pleasant voice, friendly in a laid-back kind of way that appealed to Becky. She didn’t like guys who felt they had to be *on* all the time. She smiled wide as he shook her hand.

Billy and Shievon stood together on the terrace, listening to the music. Becky and Melanie joined them, chatting as they waited for Dave and Pete to get back from the bar with their sodas.

“So, Becky,” Billy said, “how’s it working out with Pete? Seems like a nice guy.”

Shievon took Billy’s hand, a stiff smile on her lips. Round hazel eyes slipped from his face to Becky’s and back again.

“Oh, yes, he’s nice, friendly. Has a good sense of humor, too. Problem is he doesn’t know much about horses. Worse still, he doesn’t seem interested in learning. Blew the first fence, in a manner of speaking. Doesn’t look like a keeper.”

Billy pulled Shievon to him and then turned to Melanie, smiling. "We have to say hello to your parents. We'll be back in a bit."

Becky watched them walk away and then turned to Melanie, voice low. "How come Billy doesn't drive? It must be a big deal, considering how Shievon blew up when I mentioned it."

"I think it's because of his parents. Ya know about them, right?"

Becky blinked and shook her head. "Not a clue. What about them?"

"Billy's mother is Tracy Ruston on...."

"Another Life? You're kidding me!" Becky squealed. "No, really? *Ellen Spade*? She's my favorite on the show. Mom loves her, too. We never miss an episode. Gosh, she's so beautiful. I'm a really big fan, y'know. Have you ever met her, Melly? I wonder what it's like having a famous mother?"

"Oh, she's just gor...hush," Melanie said, glancing behind her. "Billy's comin' back and I don't want him to hear us gossipin'. I'll tell ya more later."

Becky nodded, suddenly guilty, but not sure why. *What's the deal? It'd be great to have a famous TV star for a mother. How cool would that be? Why would Billy need a bodyguard?*

Small ground lights lit up the private driveway, and as they rounded the bend, the gates to the estate swung open.

Becky looked over at Pete and grinned. "Wait until you get a load of this place. You're about to enter fantasy land."

They got out of the limo, overwhelmed with the beauty of the night. Trillions of stars twinkled in the black velvet sky and the harvest moon seemed full, almost swollen. It cast long shadows on the sandy expanse, illuminating the dunes off to the left of Billy's property.

Silvery waves crashed on the beach and then collapsed, disappearing into the sand. The water raced back to the sea, leaving little foamy tide lines in the sand.

The massive house, breathtaking in daylight, looked surrealistic in darkness. Ground lights directed their beams up the trunks of tall palm trees, ending at the top as lacy fronds swayed

and danced in the night breeze. Flower gardens ringed the house, each area illuminated in such a way as to throw mysterious shadows upon the house, much like a movie set.

Pete stared at Becky, nodding. "You weren't kidding. What a place. How many rooms does it have?"

"Oh, they lost count. And there's more coming. Just wait."

He threw his head back in laughter and took her hand. "You're so funny ... lost count."

They headed out to the *Sea Nymph*, its running lights on, huge engines purring. The magnificent yacht looked like a bright jewel set in the inky blackness of the ocean. Small lights lined the edges of the dock and lit up their path.

The dock seemed to have no end, disappearing into the waiting water. Insistent waves slapped the sides of the yacht causing her to rock in her confines. Ninety-five feet long, the *Sea Nymph* had two wide upper decks and an area in the stern usually set up for entertaining.

The main deck, complete with Plexiglas windshields for protection, contained several chairs and tables arranged in comfortable groupings and a dining table near the outdoor kitchen.

Tonight a red banner with white lettering flew just below the American flag. The streamer proclaimed *Happy Birthday, Jeff and Kenny*. Its ribbons whipped in the strong wind.

Becky could not believe her eyes as she started down the dock. She glanced at Pete and giggled. One of these days the bubble was sure to burst, but for the time being, what a ball.

"Can you beat this?" she asked, accepting the arm he offered.

Pete grinned. "Not even."

The kids walked up the short gangplank and onto the deck. The large stern area, set up for their dinner at sea, looked like something from the *Titanic*. Hurricane lamps cast shadows across the table. A low-slung bouquet of flowers made a colorful centerpiece. Once on board, Billy gave a nod to the captain, who engaged the reversing gears. The yacht backed slowly out of the slip.

They stood by the rail as the captain swung the prow around, engaged the forward gears and headed out to sea. Catalina was a little over twenty-five miles away and they expected to dock there in less than two hours.

Jeff grinned at Billy, cuffing his arm. "Cute little boat ya got goin' here. Ya got great taste in toys. I bet ya had some fabulous trips on her. Do ya ever get to play captain?"

"Oh, yes, best part about it. We went to Hawaii last year and I got to do some of the driving. Cool, isn't it?"

The rest of the kids laughed in agreement, signing up for the next trip to Hawaii. Or Alaska. Or San Diego.

One of Billy's CDs played on deck and some of the kids danced. The sea was calm, the night clear and the crisp and the gentle rocking of the yacht contributed to the dreamy quality of the voyage. Everyone grabbed a soda and then Billy took them on a tour. The main floor of the yacht, formally decorated in neutral shades, was elegant.

"Oh, Billy, it's just beautiful. This is incredible; it's so, so...." Becky searched for another word and gave up. She stared at a collection of crystal figurines on the buffet.

"Mom did all the decorating. She and Dad use the yacht for business entertaining so it's pretty formal up here. I like the lower deck better. It's a lot homier."

They followed him downstairs to a family area filled with photos: Billy and his parents on a ski trip, a long shot of Billy surfing, lots of family poses, and at least one picture of Billy on every horse he ever owned. The common thread in each ... smiles.

A color photo the size of a poster dominated one wall. Tracy Ruston, a striking beauty with large dark eyes and a cloud of black hair dancing above her shoulders, accepted the Emmy. Holding it aloft, she stared into the camera, a sheen of tears glistening in her eyes as she thanked those who made the win possible. Enchanted, Becky daydreamed, grinning at her favorite TV star.

Light, tinkling chimes notified them dinner was ready.

Melanie, Blair and Jessi, anxious to make this a grown-up event, provided the menu. None of their usual burgers, tacos, pizza or hot wings. Not this time.

First course, steaming cups of the best clam chowder they had ever tasted. As Bob removed their empty cups, the waiter brought out the next course, shrimp cocktail.

Becky glanced around the table. She knew she was rough in the manners department and watched Melanie spear a shrimp with a silly little fork and dip it in the sauce. Biting off about half of it, she put the fork back on the plate with the shrimp still attached. Becky picked up her fork and glanced at it. *Okay, I can do this.*

Next course, Caesar salads. No challenge there except for the thin strips of *whatever* that decorated the top of her salad. Becky paused and took a sip of water, waiting for someone else to start. Casting a sidelong gaze at Pete, she chose the same fork he did and slid the suspicious looking strips to the side of her plate. She glanced at Jessi just in time to see her cut one of the strips in half and pop it in her mouth along with some lettuce.

Becky looked down at her plate again and shook her head, unconvinced. Whatever they were, she'd pass. Tomorrow she would ask Jessi, but this was not the time to experiment. She still didn't know what you did with a mouthful of food you did not want to swallow.

When the main course arrived, Becky rolled her eyes, in disbelief. Bob and the waiter served platters of king crab, placing one between each couple. She eyed the food, smiled in anticipation and selecting a fat leg, brought it to her plate. She speared a chunk from the opened shell, gave it a butter bath and popped it in her mouth. *Oh, man, that's to die for.* She hesitated to swallow, hating to relinquish the sweet morsel forever.

They munched, talked, and laughed their way across the ocean to the accompaniment of a wide variety of music. Billy had spent hours compiling the CDs and he was proud of his work. The one they now enjoyed was a birthday present for the twins, an eclectic mix combining some new stuff and country as well as their much-loved classic rock. Best of all were their favorite old love songs.

Jeff lifted his soda glass toward Billy and proposed a toast.

"Nineteen will always be a birthday I'll remember. Thank you, Billy, this is outstandin'." Kenny contributed a hear-hear, and

the kids flashed a grin at their host.

They were about ten minutes out of Catalina when Billy took them to the top deck so they could enjoy the approach and docking procedure. The deck made a perfect dance floor, and the kids swayed to the beat of an old ballad. When the first, unmistakable, strains of *Lady In Red* started, Jeff took Jessi in his arms.

They danced, swaying to the beat of their favorite love song. The final whispery strains played in their ears as the *Sea Nymph* slid silently into the waiting slip.

Chapter 7

Billy sat at his computer, frustrated with his research project. He had plans to go to the mall with Shievon, but the paper came first, even if it took forever. He heard a knock on the door and frowned at the unwelcome intrusion.

Bob popped his head in the door. "Hey, Billy, can I talk to you a minute?"

Billy looked up from his report and nodded. "Sure, what's up?"

Bob shook his head. "I just finished cleaning up the yacht after last night's party and, ah, well, you know that Lalique dolphin your mother is so crazy about? It's gone."

"What do you mean, gone?" Billy divided his attention now between Bob and his computer. He saw the new file he wanted open, only hearing about half of what Bob said. "Where could it be?"

"I guess that's what I'm asking you. It was there last night when we sailed. It should still be there."

Resigned, Billy pushed away from the computer. He gazed at Bob, blue eyes hooded.

"Well, I sure didn't mess with it. Did you check the armoire? Could someone have moved it?"

"I doubt it, Billy. We are on reduced staff for the weekend ... that's why I cleaned up after the party. There's no one here to move it. I think someone took it."

Eyes and attention back on the computer again, Billy shrugged. "Well, check the staff or something. Maybe someone broke it and they're afraid to fess up."

“I already did that, Billy. Except for the captain—and Louie, who has been with you longer than I have, no one else had reason to *be* on the yacht. Besides, crystal dolphins? I doubt it. No, it disappeared last night. I think someone took it.”

“That’s ridiculous. Who would take it?” Billy jumped to his feet, slamming the chair up against the desk. “*I’ll find it.*”

“Hey, don’t shoot the messenger. It’s gone, that’s all I can tell you.”

Billy stalked out the back door and across the terrace, fists clenched. *Oh, man, I so do not need this.* Quick strides carried him up the gangplank and onto the stern of the *Sea Nymph*. He entered the salon and went straight to the dining room. He scanned the top of the buffet where the dolphin belonged. It was gone. A quick look at the armoire proved it was not there either.

Billy sat on the edge of the sofa and closed his eyes for a moment. He saw the dolphin clearly in his memory. One of the girls even mentioned it ... *Becky*. She’d exclaimed over it. Could she have picked it up later, maybe dropped it and been afraid to tell him?

Heaving a sigh, he headed back to the house. Bob waited in the living room, a mug of hot coffee in his hand. “You want some?”

“Yeah, thanks.” Billy added some cream to his cup and leaned against the back of the sofa. “You were right, Bob. It’s gone.”

They stood there in silence, sipping. Finally, “Your mother is gonna have an absolute cow. You know how much it meant to her. Your dad gave it to her for what, their tenth Christmas together? She is going to be furious and your dad won’t be too pleased either. What are you going to do?”

Billy shook his head. “I guess I’ll have to find her another just like it and hope she doesn’t notice. I’ll see if I can find one at the mall today. Shievon and I are going after I get my paper done.”

Bob’s chuckle was dry, mirthless. “I guess that’s one solution, especially if we can’t get it back. But you know that’s not the answer to the bigger picture here. Last night someone took it ... stole it. I hate to say this, but it had to be one of your friends.”

“That’s ridiculous and you know it. If they wanted one,

they'd just buy it. Bob, that's just nuts." Billy shrugged. "Nuts for sure. Let me talk with Shievy. Maybe she knows something. Maybe it was just an accident."

Her cell rang, showing a number on the faceplate as familiar as her own.

"Hey, Billy," Shievon said, "I thought you were incommunicado until you finished your report. What's up?" She slid the phone onto her shoulder and took a sip of her soda.

"Well, I've got a problem and I need your help. You remember that little crystal dolphin my mom has, the one you like so much? Well, it's gone."

"Gone? Gone how? What do you mean?"

"Bob cleaned up the yacht this morning and noticed it's missing. He told me ... and it *is* gone, Shievy. I checked."

"It was there last night, Billy. I remember showing it to Jessi and Becky." She paused, a subtle change coming over her voice. "What do you think happened to it? Did someone break it?"

"Doesn't look like it. Bob emptied the trash and he checked. It wasn't in there. He thinks someone stole it."

There was significant silence. "Bob name anyone in particular?"

"*Bob?* How would he know? He's convinced that's what happened, though. What other explanation is there?"

"Billy, I don't know what to say. You know I didn't do it, right?" Her voice was only half teasing, but his was irate.

"*Of course I know it wasn't you.* But who was it?"

"Who's most likely? I mean, we've known each other forever. Well, most of us." Shievon paused a moment, letting the implication of her words sink in.

"Except for Becky, of course. We don't know the first thing about her. Billy, it had to be her, there is no one else. I'll do some digging and call you right back."

She hung up before he could respond and redialed. "Hi, Blair, you have a minute?"

"Sure, Shievy, I'm just hanging out. Man, last night was so much fun. I'm still stuffed. What's up?"

"I just talked to Billy and we've got a problem. Remember

that crystal dolphin on the yacht? The one with the sapphire eyes? It's gone."

"Like how?"

"Like stolen."

"Get outta here, Shievy. Stolen? Who would do that? Did you check all over?"

"I'm still at home, so I haven't, but Bob and Billy did. It's got to be Becky. All the times we've gotten together at each other's houses, nothing like this ever happened. Not until she arrived. Strange, don't you think?"

"You can't be serious? Billy thinks Becky took it?"

"Well, what else would he think? None of us took it. Who else could it be?"

"I'll call you back. I want to talk with Jessi." Blair closed her cell with a snap and walked across the hall. She knocked once.

"Come in." Jessi sat cross-legged on her bed, phone to her ear. She looked at Blair, eyebrows up.

"Is that Jeff? Tell him you'll call him right back. We need to talk."

Jessi said goodbye and closed her cell. "So?"

"Shievy just called. Seems that Tracy's crystal dolphin is gone, disappeared. Last night was the last time anyone saw it. Billy thinks someone stole it."

"Us?" Jessi's voice rose in disbelief. "He thinks one of us took it? Man, *that* sucks. Who would take it?" Wide brown eyes stared at Blair and her tone shifted. "He suspect anyone in particular?"

Blair shook her head, hands outstretched. "Maybe Becky? What do you think?"

Jessi uncrossed her legs and leaned back against the pillow, lost in thought, talking it out. "I sure didn't take it, neither did you. Using stealing in the same sentence as Melanie is outrageous." She took a deep breath and shook her head. "You can't actually think maybe Becky...?"

"Well," Blair said, voice distressed, defensive. "Someone did. The only other possibility is Pete. We don't know anything about him, but still. Steal that dolphin? Doesn't make sense."

"So, because it doesn't make sense it could be Pete, we

naturally assume it's Becky? I don't believe it for a minute. There has to be another explanation."

"We've eliminated everyone else. Like what other explanation *could* there be?"

Silence reigned. Finally, Jessi said, "Hey, let's ask Mom. I bet her reaction will be the same as mine. It's not Becky."

They found Karen in the kitchen, finishing her final cup of coffee before heading to the barn for lessons. When they told her about the dolphin, her face darkened. "Did anyone see her take it?"

"No, of course not," they chorused.

"So why pick on Becky? Just because ... I mean, I just don't believe it."

"We're not picking on anyone, Mom. Who do you think took it?" cried Blair. "We were the only ones there."

Karen rose and shook her head. "Not Becky. I'll be seeing her in a little bit. Maybe she knows something, saw someone else. I don't know, but I could have done without this." She snatched up her purse and headed for the garage, muttering under her breath.

* * *

Karen pulled into the barn parking lot with a heavy heart and an upset stomach. She got out of the car, slamming the door so hard the Jag rocked, squeaking in protest at such unheard-of treatment.

Becky had Lark in the crossies and called out as she approached. "Hey, Karen, great morning, huh? Man, did the girls tell you about last night? You should have seen what we had for dinner. Sure wish I could have brought Mom a doggie bag."

Karen was silent so long Becky looked up at her in question. After adjusting Lark's splint boots, she stood.

"You look worried or something. Everything okay?" She reached a tentative hand to Karen.

"No, I'm fine, just a little tired. So you had a good time, huh? How did you like the boat ride?"

"Ha. Boat." Becky chuckled. "I take it you've never seen the *Sea Nymph*." She slipped the bridle on Lark, adjusting the straps as she talked.

“It’s beyond belief, Karen. Talk about everything money can buy.” She stood in front of the mare’s chest and bending, grabbed Lark behind the left front knee with both hands. Pulling the leg forward, she grasped the back of the mare’s hoof for support and invited Lark to stretch.

Drawing her lips back in an equine grin, the mare rewarded Becky with a shudder and a sigh. Becky repeated the procedure with the other leg.

Karen fidgeted, running a finger around the collar of her shirt. “Did you happen to notice a little crystal dolphin when you were there?”

Becky smiled. “Oh, the one with the blue eyes? Have you seen it? It’s absolutely darling, has a little smile on its face. So cute. Why?”

“Well, ah.” Karen hesitated again.

“What about it?”

“Billy said it’s gone, disappeared.”

“Nah, it’s right on the...” Bright blue eyes narrowed in appraisal. “It’s gone and Billy thinks it was stolen? Is that what you’re saying? Are you asking me if I took it?” Face set, she reared back on her heels, and looked Karen directly in the eye.

“Are you asking if I stole it?” Becky repeated the question.

“Well, no. No, but the kids ...”

“*The kids?*” Stunned, Becky collapsed on the mounting block, still holding Lark’s reins. Large tears welled up in her eyes, hung on her lower lashes a moment and then began the slide down her cheeks.

“I *knew* something like this would happen. It’s always the way, isn’t it? The *poor* kid gets the blame. Karen, I swear to you, I didn’t take the dolphin.”

* * *

Melanie stormed up the gangplank so red-faced Blair feared her friend would have a stroke. Long legs carried her across the deck and into the salon, the kids hot to keep up. She checked the buffet and the armoire, all the while muttering under her breath.

“It was there last night.” She shrugged at the buffet. “Right

next to that little thingy there.”

Pointing at a red enameled box, she nodded. “I know it was there. I saw it.” Melanie whirled on Billy. “Who cleans up around here? Who was here last night *after* we left?”

Billy’s face flushed to crimson. “No one. Bob cleaned the deck after dinner, but there was nothing to clean in here, Melly. Why?”

Melanie slid a finger across the buffet, pointing it at Billy. “Cause there’s no dust. There was a film of dust on it last night. Sorry, that’s rude, but I noticed. Look at it now, clean as can be.”

She slid her finger across it again and rubbed her thumb and index finger together. “Ha, smell that. *Lemon polish.*”

Billy closed his eyes and swore under his breath. He glared at Bob, then left the *Sea Nymph* and went into the house. He strode to the service galley off the kitchen where the laundry and all the cleaning supplies were stored.

“Morning, Senor Billy. Es nice day, no?” Maria loaded the cleaning rags into the washer, added soap and closed the lid. She glanced at him, waiting for his greeting. When he did not reply, she said, “Es problem, Senor?”

“Looks like you’ve been busy. That’s quite a load of cleaning rags for this early in the morning.”

“Si, I only have half-day to do all day work.”

“What have you done so far, Maria? By any chance, did you clean the yacht?”

“Si, Senor, I did.” She looked down at her hands as a subtle flush of red crept up her neck. Patches of color stained her cheeks. “I, ah, I brokit sonethin’, but I fixit.” Maria beckoned him to the small table in the corner, normally used for polishing silver. She raised the concealing towel and there, lying on its side, was the dolphin.

Lips trembling, she continued. “I was cleaning the yacht from the dust. On the accident, I bump it. But I fixit, see?” She pointed to one sapphire eye and a tube of super glue.

“The little fish felled over and the eye pop out. Madre Dios, was accident. But see, it’s all better now. I go put it back, no?” Her voice rose with fear. “Please, Senor, I needit this job. Please. No fire.”

Billy picked up the dolphin and stared at her. "It's alright, Maria, you aren't fired. But next time, please tell me or Bob."

"No next time, Senor." Maria nodded several times, speechless.

Billy turned on his heel and headed back to the boat. As he came into the salon, he saw Melanie on her hands and knees, trying to peer under the buffet. The rest of the kids glanced at him, then back at Melanie. In unison, their heads snapped back, seeing what he held in his hand. There was a collective gasp.

"Oh, my God," Blair whispered.

"Oh, Billy, no," Jessi cried.

"What now?" Melanie said as she rose from the floor. She saw what Billy held and covering the distance between them in quick steps, she glared at him.

"Found it, did ya? Didn't take long once ya knew where to look, huh?" She turned to face her friends, self-righteous fury in every line of her body. "And ya call yourselves friends? Ya accused Becky of somethin' she didn't do. Y'all called her a thief."

Hot, angry tears filled Melanie's eyes and her lower lip bobbed. Her breath became rapid, shallow. Cold blue eyes shifted from one beloved face to another, finally settling on Blair.

"I'm ashamed to know ya, ashamed to call ya friend. *All y'all*," she said, her voice a low hiss. "I thought I knew ya, but I was wrong." She burst into tears and ran for her car.

The kids stood there, rooted, stunned. Blair hid her head in her hands. Shievon stood next to Billy, peering over his shoulder at Bob.

Jessi whipped her cell from her pocket and hit speed dial. "Mom," she gasped. "Don't say a word to Becky. We found it, don't tell her..."

"What?" Karen screeched. "*What?* I knew she didn't take it. She just told me so. I ... you. Ugh!" The phone went dead.

Billy pulled away from Shievon and turned guilty infuriated eyes on Bob. "Can I see you at the house, please? Now?"

He placed the dolphin on the buffet, slid a sick look at Shievon and followed Bob back to the house. The girls heard Billy's raised voice as he stomped down the dock, across the patio and into the house. The door slammed and there was silence.

“What are we gonna do?” Blair said. “I *knew* she didn’t do it, I just knew it. What should we do?”

Jessi dashed both hands across her eyes and sniffed. “We’re gonna go back to the barn,” she said, her voice low and husky. “We’re gonna beg her forgiveness for even thinking such a thing and then we’re gonna pray she gets over it.”

“But what about Melly?” Blair said. “She said she was ashamed to be my friend. We’ve been best friends since we were little. Oh, God, I can’t believe this day.”

Shievon glanced from Jessi to Blair and edged toward the steps. “Well, I’m going up to talk with Billy. I’ll see you guys later.” She hurried down the gangplank and headed for the house.

The sun dimmed and the sky grew flat, cloudless. The birds stopped singing and even the sea turned quiet. Blair and Jessi walked off the yacht, made their way through the gardens and got into the truck. They were about to pay the price for wrong assumptions. After Becky, they’d face Melanie. Then there was Karen.

They shivered.

* * *

Karen shoved the cell back in its holder. A dull flush crept up her neck. She balled her hands into fists, jaw clenched so tight her cheek muscles popped. She knew Becky was with Lark, probably crying.

She peered over the stall door, unable to see anything except boot-clad legs scrunched up in one corner. Lark stood guard, alternately snuffling Becky and nudging with her muzzle.

“Can I talk with you a minute?” Karen stretched her hands in supplication. “I just heard from Jessi. They found the dolphin.”

Becky peered at her from under Lark’s belly. She got to her feet a moment later, moved to the mare’s hindquarters and started brushing her tail in slow rhythmic strokes.

“I don’t care about the kids, Karen. I was crazy to think I would ever be part of the DT team. It’s you. As long as you believe in me, I don’t care about anyone else.”

“You know I do, Becky. I always did; always did. And you’re wrong about the kids.”

The reply was sharp. “Why? How could they think I’d do that? Steal something from a friend?” Her voice trembled and a sheen of tears glazed in her eyes.

“They didn’t, Becky. It was just one of those weird things.”

“Humph.” Becky dashed a hand across her eyes and continued brushing.

“Well.” Karen hesitated. “Are you ready for your lesson? The kids should be here any moment. Are you okay?”

Becky turned to face Karen. “No, I’m really not. And why did they get you involved before they did a little bit of checking?”

“I don’t know, honey. It just snowballed. Nobody believed it, mostly just the process....”

“Of elimination. I know. Well.” Becky tossed the brush in the grooming bucket and came out the door. She looked at Karen, eyes red-rimmed and sad. “I think I’ll pass on the lesson today. I finished my work early, so there’s nothing left to do. I just want to go home and lie down.”

“Well, ah, okay, Becky.” Karen leaned against the barn, stunned. “Listen, I’m really sorry and I know the kids are, too. Please find a way to forgive us.”

Becky nodded. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

* * *

Melanie zipped up the Doubletree driveway. As she made the curve, she saw a familiar figure trudging up the road. She stopped the car and got out.

“Hey, Becky, can I talk with ya a minute. I ... oh, dear Lord, Becky, I’m so sorry.”

Becky turned to Melanie, voice hard. “I heard they found it. So how—”

Melanie interrupted before she could complete the sentence. “Before ya say another word, I want ya to know I never, not even for a minute, believed ya stole it. Ya can ask anybody.”

Becky nodded at her shoe. “That’s good to hear.”

“Hey, listen. Hop in the car and let’s go somewhere

private. Come on back to the house. We can sit by the pool and talk this out, just the two of us.”

“But you have a lesson. Aren’t you going to ride?”

“Nah,” Melanie said, reaching for her cell. “I got more important things to do right now.” She dialed as she got behind the wheel.

“Hey, Karen, I’m gonna pass on the lesson today. I’ll see ya tomorrow.” She snapped the cell shut, not bothering to wait for Karen’s reply.

“Come on, Becky, let’s go.” Melanie made a u-turn and started back down the driveway.

* * *

No Melly. That’s just dandy. Karen barely got the cell back in its holder when it rang again. This time it was Billy. He and Shievon would see her tomorrow. Karen swore as she fumbled the cell into the case. Just then Blair and Jessi drove into the parking lot. Karen watched two dejected bodies climb out of the truck and plod towards her.

“Dear Lord,” she said, as little bursts of light flickered behind her eyes. “I’m having a stroke. The show season is just about to start and we are in the middle of a full-blown crisis involving the whole team. I can’t believe it.” Eyes narrowed to slits, she watched her daughters approach.

“Mom, I can’t ride. I think I’m gonna be sick.”

“Me too,” Jessi whined. “I have a terrible headache. I just want to go home and sleep.”

“You’ve got five minutes to get those mares into the ring. Move it.”

Jessi glared at her mother from the safety of the crossties. She slanted a glance at Blair and made a face.

“This is all your fault,” she said. “I never believed it, y’know. The whole thing makes me sick. Why didn’t Billy look better? Why didn’t he just do that first? *But no.* We had to get everyone involved and now look. Mom is so mad, we’re gonna get the lesson from hell.”

“Me? How do you figure it’s my fault?” Outraged, Blair stared daggers at her sister. “It’s Shievon’s fault. She called me. I didn’t believe it, either and you know it. She started it. It’s always Shievon.”

Blair glanced from Jessi to the ring where Karen stood, arms crossed, foot tapping. She shook her head, then removed Angel’s bridle and put the halter back on.

“I’m so outta here.” Jerking her saddle off the rack, she headed for the tack room. She returned in a flash, snapped the lead shank on the halter and headed for the barn.

Jessi stared at her, hands on her hips. “Oh, you are in so much trouble, Blair.”

“Just stuff it.” Without a backward glance, she headed to her truck.

* * *

Becky and Melanie sat on the patio, shaded by tall palm trees, talking.

“I appreciate everything you’ve said, Melly. Your friendship means a lot to me.” She took a sip of her soda and lapsed into silence. “I hope you know that.”

“I’ve never had such a mornin’ in my life, I’m sayin’. By the time Blair called me, she had already involved Karen, which really ticked me off. I mean, why get the parents involved? I went stormin’ over to Billy’s right afterward. When I mentioned the dust and all, I guess he figured out what happened. He went back to the house and the next thing ya know, he waltzes onto the deck, dolphin in hand. The maid had it.”

Melanie squirmed, her face furrowed in a frown. “I was just so mad, I went ballistic.”

Becky shrugged, voice low. “Well, I’m not really surprised they thought I took it. Not really. I mean the rest of you guys go back forever and the finger pointed to the most logical person there. I’m just glad it turned up. At least they know I’m innocent.”

“The whole thing makes me sick. Bob started it, ya know. If he’d done a thorough job of searchin’ it never would have happened. Instead he starts right in pointin’ fingers.”

Hearing a familiar sound, she glanced over the veranda wall just in time to see Blair's truck zoom up the driveway. The sound of a slamming door echoed up the hill. Karen's Jag pulled into the driveway a short while later, Jessi in the passenger seat.

Melanie glanced at Becky and shrugged. "I expect we'll be hearin' from Karen in a bit. Looks like the girls missed the lesson, too. Ya wanna bet Billy and Shievon cancelled as well? My stars, Karen's gonna be mad as a wet hen."

Before she could reply, the cell went off. She pulled it from her belt, checked out the number and gazed at Becky, blue eyes hooded. "Hey, Karen."

Chapter 8

Becky listened to the one-sided conversation with a good bit of interest. While she was mad at the kids for doubting her, the last thing she wanted was to cause trouble for Karen or the team. She was not about to jeopardize her position at the barn, or Lark, or her future, over some silly misunderstanding that amounted to nothing.

She listened intently to what Melanie said. There was more at stake here than a point of honor or hurt feelings. Her whole career, her life, hinged on peaceful coexistence with the team.

“Hey, look, don’t start a war over this, it’s not worth it. Let’s all just forgive and forget. How about it?”

“Well, Karen’s not going to forget about it. She wants us to come down for a chat.”

“When?”

Melanie rose. “Now.”

“Man.”

They took the winding path that meandered behind all the houses on the block. The peaceful setting seemed at odds with their emotions. They came around a huge bougainvillea and saw Blair sitting in a corner of the patio, as far away from Jessi as she could get, a huge glass of lemonade in her hand.

Karen waved from the large table, inviting Becky and Melanie to sit with her.

“I appreciate you coming over, girls.” She glanced behind her and noticed Jessi lurking in the nook next to the doorway.

“Will you please have a seat, Jessi, and Blair, please join

us.”

Slouching deeper into her chair, Blair refused to acknowledge anyone. She took a swig from her glass and stared into space.

Karen glared at her and then turned her attention back to the other girls. “You kids need to hash this through and get over it, and in the future, you are not to involve me in your social problems. I don’t care what it’s about. I refuse to be involved in this crap again. I hope you’re all listening.” She glanced at Jessi and sighed.

“I am not the den mother, I’m your trainer. Most of you are paying good money to get to the top of your fields and this kind of crap kills us all. You notice Shievon and Billy are not here. Clean sweep. The whole team blew off their lesson and we go to Showpark in one week.”

Karen stole a quick look at Melanie. She was the key, and yet she chose the chaise rather than join them at the table. Earlier, Jessi had given her a tearful description of what Melanie said on the yacht. “I’ve made my peace with Becky. It’s behind us now.”

She got to her feet and glanced at the girls. “Do the same. Get it settled today, right now. We’re about to start show season and there’s no time for this kind of stuff.” She walked into the house, banging the door behind her.

Becky glanced from face to face. “Hey, guys, come on, let’s just forget it, okay? It was just a big misunderstanding. That kinda thing can happen to anyone. I know you didn’t really think I stole it. I understand, so let’s forget it. No hard feelings.” She looked at them, hopeful.

Blair leaned forward in her chair, green eyes intense. “I just want you to know I’m sorry, Becky.” She dropped her gaze and stared at the glass in her hands. Pink-tinged cheeks showed her discomfort and humiliation as she sucked up the last of the contents with her straw. “We—I’m not going to make excuses. I hope you can forgive me and that we can be friends.”

Before Becky could reply, Jessi shot an admiring glance at Melanie and chimed in. “Me too. I never believed it for a minute, but I’m sorry I didn’t stand up for you right away like I should

have.”

Now all eyes rested on Melanie. She took her time, raising her gaze slowly. Voice icy, she said, “Well, I don’t have to beg pardon from anyone.”

Steely eyes roamed from face to face. “It was outrageous from the git-go.” Her accent thickened with each measured word. “I, why, I never....”

Jessi slapped a hand to her forehead in parody and glared at Melanie. “Oh, shut *up!* You do righteous indignation like you were born to it. Miss Melanie, regular southern belle, all flags flying. Ugh.” Without another word she stalked into the house, slamming the door behind her.

Cheeks flaming, Melanie started to get up, but Blair stopped her cold. “Sit down, Melly. Jessi’s right and you know it. Everyone else wants to end this here. Why do you want to continue with it? Even Becky wants to forget it.”

Becky nodded several times and looked hopefully at Melanie.

“Imagine what if. What if Billy hadn’t found the dolphin?” Melanie stared at Blair, cheeks now pale as milk. “What if someone else had stolen it? They have a large staff, ya know. What then, huh? Y’all would still be thinkin’ Becky took it. Where’s the loyalty?”

“That’s just what I was going to ask you, Melly.” Blair stared at her. “We’ve been friends forever, and yet this morning it sounded like you never wanted to see me again.” Blair’s lower lip quivered. She rose to her feet and headed for the house. “Maybe I have to give that loyalty thing some more thought.”

The door closed with another bang. It opened a moment later. “Besides, Shievon said it first.” It slammed again, hard.

Becky turned to Melanie, arms wide. “I appreciate you standing up for me and all, but this is getting blown way out of proportion. This is really important to me and we’re screwing with my whole life.” She threw her hands in the air, voice desperate. “I’m asking you, as a personal favor, Melanie, please let it drop. Please? If you won’t do it for anyone else, please do....”

The door opened again and Karen walked out to the patio. “That went well. What’s wrong with you girls?” She turned her

gaze to Melanie, nodding. "Of all the DT team, you're the one with the clearest goals. Have you lost sight of that? We're about to start the show season. Are you ready to throw it all away?"

Melanie blinked at Karen. "Well, of course not. This has nothin' to do with that. I'm just mad...."

"At *what*?"

"It's just that Blair—I couldn't believe she brought you into this in the first place, Karen. How could she do that ... and why?"

Karen gazed at Melanie for a long hard moment and shook her head. "Whatever. One thing, Melly. I will not tolerate infighting at the barn. If you feel you've got to hold a grudge, I can't stop you, but it better not spill over into the team." She rose, placing both hands on her hips. "Don't make me do something we'll all regret. It's up to you. See you tomorrow."

Karen nodded at them and went back into the house.

* * *

Jessi and Blair snuck glances at each other as they set the table for dinner. The scene with Melanie upset them more than they let on.

"I just wanted to make things better," Blair said with a sniff.

Jessi nodded, black eyes sad. "I wish we could go back to this morning before the world blew up in our faces. I could strangle Shievon for starting this." She shot a look at Blair and shook her head. "You know I'm right. Billy never would have called us about it, but she did. Besides, he or Bob would have found the dolphin soon, anyway. Shievy's been laying for Becky from the start and jumped on the opportunity to cause trouble."

Blair placed the silverware on the table, frowning. "I know. What is that all about, anyway? Do you know? She's your best friend."

"She's jealous, I guess, but why? Just saying that sounds crazy. I mean, Shievy has everything and Becky ... I don't know. Doesn't seem much for Shievon to be jealous about, but what else could it be?" She put the bowl of chicken salad on the table and

then nodded at Blair.

“You can bet your butt I’m going to find out, though. Look at the mess we’re all in while she and Billy escape the whole deal, which *they* started, I might add. That’s not right.”

Blair made a face and pursed her lips. “Don’t bother. She’ll only deny it and then it’ll start the whole thing up again. Leave it alone. Her time will come, believe me. And when it does, she’ll be sorry.”

* * *

“Mama, can we talk a minute?”

Julia looked up from her book and nodded. “Sure, Melly, what’s wrong? Ya hardly said a word at supper. I thought ya might be sick or somethin’.” She patted the sofa cushion next to her, concerned.

“Mama, have ya ever started somethin’, ya know, somethin’ ya believed was right at the time ... and it got outa control?”

Julia looked at Melanie, eyebrows raised. “I probably have. Can ya give me more to go on? What’s this about?”

Melanie ran a hand through her hair and sighed. “Ya know last night we were on Billy’s boat, havin’ a party for the twins, right? Well, this mornin’ Bob discovered a little figurine of Tracy’s was missin’. He told Billy about it and they looked around, but they didn’t look good enough.” She paused, glancing at her mother. “Bob figured one of us took it.”

She brought Julia up to the present, filling in the important gaps. By the time Melanie finished, her cheeks flamed.

Julia nodded. “Once ya saw the dust was gone an’ Bob found the dolphin, that should have been the end of it. All’s well, right?” Julia’s eyes searched Melanie’s face. “Right?”

“Well, not exactly.” Melanie glanced at a photo on the table and blinked. Blair smiled at her as she blew out the candles on her tenth birthday cake, eyes lit up, hands clasped in excitement. The twins stood behind them, making clown faces.

Her gaze returned to Julia. “It was Billy, not Bob. When Billy came back to the yacht with that dolphin, Mama, I flipped out.

I mean, there they were, accusin' Becky of stealin' somethin' that wasn't even really gone."

Julia nodded in encouragement and glanced at her book. "But once it was found, that was the end of it, right? No need to discuss it much more, I wouldn't think."

"Well, it shoulda been, but it wasn't. Karen asked Becky about it when she saw her at the barn."

"Oh, dear," murmured Julia, "that's too bad. I'm sure Becky had hurt feelins'. Is that what's got ya upset?"

"Not exactly. Well, yes, of course. I was hurt for her, but more than that, Mama. I was mad. So mad, I went off on the girls. Said I was ashamed of them ... that they didn't even know what loyalty and true friendship meant if they could accuse Becky without a shred of evidence."

"Was Blair there? Did ya include her in the blast?"

Melanie nodded, cheeks pink.

Julia leaned back against the sofa and closed her eyes. "Oh, Mel'nie. Are ya tellin' me ya said that to Blair? That she didn't know the meanin' of friendship—that she was disloyal?"

"Yes, Mama. I did." Her lower lip bobbed.

"Girl, what were ya thinkin' to say that to Blair, of all people? I can't believe it." Julia's eyes widened and she shook her head. "But, y'all made up, right, an' everythin' is okay now, right?"

The silence was so long and thick Julia sighed, turning wide gray eyes to Melanie. "I take it the girls still believe Becky could do somethin' like that, even if this time she was innocent. Is that so?"

Voice low, almost a whisper, Melanie said, "No, Mama, they don't. Jessi insisted that she never believed it and Blair said pretty much the same thing."

"Alright, Missy, this is all gettin' too complicated here, like wonderin' which tooth to pull first. Let's drop the drama an' just say it." Julia was hard to irritate, but she was irritated now. "I still don't have the faintest idea why we're goin' on about this. *What?* They found the dolphin, so they know Becky didn't take it. The kids never really believed she stole it in the first place, just kinda eliminatin' the suspects, right? And everyone apologized and had hugs and such. So, what are ya so fired up about?"

“We didn’t apologize and hug, Mama. I ran off the boat after I blasted everyone. Went to the barn, picked up Becky and came back here. We talked it over. Then Karen called and asked us to come down for a chat. When we got there, I don’t know; seems Blair and Jessi were havin’ a spat, too. Karen said the only thing to do was apologize and make sure we never jump to conclusions again.”

Julia nodded. “So Becky is the one keepin’ this goin’, huh?”

“No, she just wants to drop the whole thing, forget it ever happened.”

Exasperated, Julia rubbed both eyes vigorously and then glared at Melanie. “So what in the world are we talkin’ about here? Everybody, includin’ Becky, wants to just ... aha, I think I got it, finally. Why do ya want to keep this goin’?”

“I don’t want to, Mama. That’s why I’m talkin’ to ya right now. I just don’t know what to do. I’ve never been in a fix like this before and now Karen’s mad at me, too. She told me she’s not gonna tolerate this kinda thing goin’ on if it affects the show team. We blew off our lesson today. All of us.” Melanie glanced at the photo again, tears glazing her eyes.

“Blair said maybe it was me who should think about loyalty and Jessi said ... well never mind. What should I do, Mama?”

“What did Jessi say, Melly?”

“She, ah, she said I did *righteous indignation* like I was born to it. She’s so rude.”

Julia rose from the sofa in one fluid move, turned her back to Melanie and bit her lower lip, drawing in several deep breaths.

“Well. Without a doubt, that was the most exhaustin’ conversation we’ve ever had, truly. I’m goin’ to bed. I know ya had the best of intentions and I admire ya ridin’ to the rescue, but ya better climb off that high horse and come down to earth with the rest of us, girl. The air up there is cloudin’ ya judgment. Everyone makes mistakes, Melly. Ya made one today, for sure.”

She glanced at her watch. “It’s not too late to do what needs to be done. Don’t sleep on this. The longer ya put it off, the harder it’ll be.” She turned towards the hall, book in hand. “Good

night, Melanie.”

“Night, Mama, and thanks. I appreciate what ya said. I’ll fix it.”

* * *

Melanie walked up the moonlit path, drawing in deep breaths of fragrant night air. The stars winked at the antics of the moon as it played hide and seek in the large puffy clouds. She sighed and increased her pace, happy to see a light on in Blair’s room. She went to the French doors off the patio and knocked. Blair looked up from the computer and blinked, waving her to come inside.

“Hey,” Melanie said as she closed the door behind her. “Can we talk a minute?”

Blair nodded. “You want a soda or something?”

“No, thanks, I’m fine. I don’t want anyone else to know I’m here. I want to talk to ya alone.” Melanie glanced around the room at the pictures. She joined Blair in so many of them. There was her life, neatly cataloged on the walls of her best friend’s room. She sighed.

“I’m sorry, Blair. I didn’t mean what I said today. Y’all are the best, most loyal friend anyone could ever have. I’ve been proud to call ya my best friend all my life. Can I still do that? Can I fix this? I’m so sorry.” She extended her palms to Blair, looking for forgiveness from the only one that really mattered.

“Oh, Melly.” Quick tears sprang to Blair’s eyes as she reached for her friend. “Of course. We’ll always, always be best friends.” They hugged a moment, patting each other’s back.

“You’ll never guess what I was doing when you got here.” She took Melanie’s hand and led her to the computer. The email said: ‘Melly, I don’t know how things ever got this far, but I’m sorry. Your friendship is everything to me and no matter what...’ The email ended there.

They stared at each other and then Melanie drew a deep breath. “No matter whatever happens to us in the future, Blair, nothin’ like this will ever happen again. I promise.”

“Whew.” Jessi stepped into the room, startling the girls.

She chuckled. "I'm sure glad that's over. All this tragedy, man, and Showpark just around the corner." She plopped on the bed, grinning. "Why, do you realize that this time next week, we'll be in packing mode? Gosh, I'm so excited."

"Where did you come from?" Blair said, astonished. "You little spy."

Jessi shrugged. "No, I'm not, not really. I saw Melly walking down the path while I raided the fridge and figured she wanted you. I heard you talking when I came down the hall. It was right after she got here and I didn't want to interrupt. You two had a lot to say to each other. I admit to eavesdropping, but your door was open."

Brown eyes wide and guileless, she turned to Melanie. "So, does that offer go for me too? The friendship, I mean?"

Melanie chuckled. "Of course it does. Besides, I really don't have much of a choice, do I?" Blue eyes alight, she grinned at Jessi. "I mean, what with ya being Blair's sister and Jeff's girlfriend. Besides, ya were right. I parked the high horse."

"Oh, well," Jessi said, returning the grin. "For the most part, it fits you well. I hope you're in my corner when I need you. You're a formidable champion and you can stick up for me any time." She swung her legs off the bed and headed for the door.

"Well, you guys chat or whatever. Mom will be glad to hear the good news. She's filling Daddy's ear with all kinds of dire predictions for the show season. Might as well let her get a good night's sleep."

They watched her leave, and then glanced at each other.

"Hey, let's go for a trail ride tomorrow after our lesson, just us?"

"Sounds like a plan, Melly."

Chapter 9

Flashbacks haunted Becky's sleep as the terse words between Karen and Melanie replayed in her mind. She remembered all those cold eyes, staring each other down and the repeated slamming of the door. She jerked upright and cringed.

If Melanie keeps this up, the team will suffer and then Karen is going to be mad at me. Just like the stupid dolphin, it'll end up being my fault.

The glowing numerals on the clock radio said it was the middle of the night. She tossed her pillows into a pile, fluffed them and then buried her head, trying to hide from her memories. It didn't work.

Outtakes of the terrible day played over and over again. First, she saw an irate Jessi, black eyes snapping fire as she told Melanie off. Jessi was the first to slam the door. The sound echoed in Becky's mind. She saw the shame on Blair's face as she apologized and then Melanie just sitting there, stone cold and refusing to make up.

"Don't force me do something we'll all regret." Karen had made her intent clear, her voice ominous.

Disgusted, Becky swung her legs over the side of the bed and sat up. She pulled on her robe and headed for the bathroom. No point in just sitting around. There was plenty to do at the barn.

The full moon shone down on the Doubletree as Becky approached. She had never seen the barn like this, so quiet, so remote. Only the muffled sounds of someone hammering broke the

night stillness.

She pulled the keys from her pocket, unlocked the tack room door and turned on the light. Yawning, she went to her tack box and removed a can of leather cleaner and a sponge. She heard the pounding again and wondered which of the grooms had started to work so early. It came again, louder and harder.

Becky felt the hair on her arms rise. She put the sponge down, wiped her hands and walked out into the aisle. Benny, Angel and Foxy stared at her, heads hanging over their doors, nickering hello and hoping for an early morning handout. She stroked Angel then approached Megan's stall, wondering why the mare didn't come to say hi. She peered into the dark stall.

Unable to see Megan, she opened the door and stepped inside. There, wedged in the corner, head stuck under the feeder, lay the mare. Sweat bathed her body and ran in rivulets down her sides. Megan was cast.

Becky raced to the tack room, flipped on the barn lights, grabbed a lunge line and ran back to Megan. Light flooded the stall, telling the story. Blood ran down the side of the mare's head as she thrashed in her attempts to rise. Her left hind leg was wedged under her haunch, useless and ineffective in that position. The right hind leg lay against the wall.

Becky pulled the halter from the hook and approached the mare's head, talking in low, soothing tones.

The inability to rise is one of a horse's deepest fears and when Becky reached for her head in an attempt to put the halter on, Megan began to thrash. The top of Becky's hand smashed into the feed bin.

Jerking backwards, she tripped and slammed into the wall. Breath reduced to a raspy wheeze, she stared at her hand for a moment, unable to feel it. She tried to make a fist, but the pain was too intense. Becky retrieved the halter and clipped it to the lunge line. *If I can slip the halter onto Megan's hind leg, maybe I can pull her over.*

It was easier to say than do, with Megan fighting her every step of the way, but easier than getting the halter on her head. Becky succeeded on the third try. The noseband of the halter stopped below the hock, giving as much support as possible. Becky

tried to pull with one hand to no avail. She fed the line out behind her, stepped in front of it and wound it around her waist. Now she could throw her whole weight into the line.

Twice the mare almost made it only to fall back into the wall. On the third try, she succeeded. Megan flopped onto her other side and lay there, panting. Becky removed the line from her waist and pulled the halter from Megan's leg. She picked up the lunge line and backed out of the stall.

Now they needed the vet. After reaching him and being assured he was on the way, she called Karen.

Becky opened the first aid kit and withdrew the cold pack. Shaking it several times, she placed it on her hand, wincing. The pain subsided, although she still felt sick to her stomach. She walked slowly down the aisle to Megan's stall, pleased to see the horse on her feet. Blood continued to drip from the mare's nose as well as the cuts on her head.

The Jag screeched to a stop in the aisle. Karen jumped out and ran to the stall. "What happened, Becky? Is she okay? Why are you here so early?"

"I couldn't sleep, so I figured I'd get a head start on the day. Guess it's a good thing I did. She was cast bad."

Karen saw the cold pack on her hand. "What happened to you? Are you okay?"

Before Becky could answer, they heard cars coming down the driveway. Dr. Harmon's huge truck pulled up behind the little Jag. He joined them, black bag in hand.

Blair parked by the tack room and she and Jessi hurried down the aisle, looks of fear on their faces.

The vet nodded hello and beckoned Karen to him. Together they haltered Megan and he began his inspection. Karen held the mare while Dr. Harmon filled a syringe. He injected a sedative into her vein, a tetanus booster in her neck muscle and began to clean the injuries on her head. Her nose stopped bleeding and five stitches closed the cut over her eye. She had several long scrapes on the insides of her legs from thrashing and she was bound to be sore for a day or two, but her prognosis was excellent.

"When they cast themselves like that, getting to them in time is half the battle," Dr. Harmon said. He handed Karen a bottle

of Bute and a loaded syringe.

“Two tabs twice daily for three days. She has good gut sounds and she’s already moved her bowels twice, so I don’t think she’ll colic, but if she does, give her the syringe of Banamine and call me right away. If Becky hadn’t found her in time, we could have lost her. Lucky mare.”

Jessi glanced at Blair. “Lucky Shievon, too. I can’t wait to see how she reacts to this. Better be a whole turn around in attitude or else.”

“Or else what, Jessi?” Blair asked.

“Uh huh.” Dark eyes glanced at Blair as she pulled her cell from its holder and dialed.

“Hi, Shievy, it’s me. Hey, get over to the barn as fast as you can. Becky just saved Megan’s life.”

The little PT Cruiser roared into the parking lot, spraying gravel. Shievon shot from behind the wheel, not even bothering to close the car door. Face ashen, she raced to Megan’s stall where the others gathered.

“What ... what happened?” Shievon glanced from Becky to Jessi, reached for the door latch and entered the stall. She laid a gentle hand on the mare’s neck, murmuring in sympathy.

“Meggie, look at you, poor baby. You have bumps all over your head and, oh my God, look at your legs. What happened to you?” She bent down for closer inspection, noting the scrapes from knee to fetlock on her front legs, staining the white fur scarlet. Five stitches advanced from just above her eye towards the large star in the middle of her forehead.

Megan stared at Shievon, eyes half-closed, still sedated from the shot and the shock she had endured. She made small, pitiful chuckling sounds in her throat, interspersed with soft snorts as she talked to Shievon.

“Well,” Jessi said. “The vet told us if Becky hadn’t been here so early, Megan could have died. He figured she’d been down for at least an hour.” She nodded at Becky and then turned cold eyes to Shievon. “Quite a lot to be thankful for, huh?”

Shievon buried her face in Megan’s mane as reality set in. Small sobs poured from her open mouth.

“Oh, Megan, I could have lost you. Oh, God.” She stroked the sleek neck, fingers tangled in the mare’s mane. She heaved a deep sigh and fixed her gaze on Becky.

“I don’t know ... oh, Becky, how do I thank you? Words just don’t seem....” She started to cry in earnest, her bottom lip puffed out, eyes squeezed to slits. Tears poured down her cheeks.

“I’m glad I was here, Shievon. I love Megan. She’s a great horse. I’m just glad I couldn’t sleep.”

Shievon dashed her hands across her eyes, patted Megan one more time and walked out of the stall.

“Becky, can I talk with you? Maybe over at my car? I forgot to shut the door.”

“I want to come too,” Jessi said. “I’m curious to hear what you....”

Blair laid her arm around Jessi’s neck and pulled her into a close hug. “Shut up.” She dragged Jessi to the end of the barn.

“What are you after? Satisfaction? You want your pound of flesh? Let them settle it. I have so had enough of this crap. Let them end it, okay?”

“Well, but I....”

“Never mind.”

Chapter 10

Becky and Lark walked around the arena while Karen set up the course. She reached down to stroke the sleek gray neck. For some reason her mind went back to several weeks ago when Karen told her to continue down the outside line after she jumped the cross rail.

They approached the fence and Becky looked down, her eyes riveted to the ground. As Lark hopped over, she lost her grip on the mane and slid down the mare's neck like a wet noodle, her landing so soft there was barely a puff of dust raised. Lark stopped in her tracks.

"Don't say it. I already know. I looked down." She stood, dusted off her breeches and grinned at Karen. "It was like my eyes were glued to the ground. Why did I do that?"

Karen gave her a leg up, chuckling. "It's probably the one fault every rider deals with from time to time. We'll talk more about the psychology of it later, but now I want you to fix it. Find a focal point. Do you know what I mean? Pick a tree, a rooftop, anything in the air in front of you. For this jump, fix on the weathervane on the barn, okay? So...."

That was the first and so far the last time she came off, but she never forgot why it happened. Still, every time she jumped she wondered if she'd fall again. She wasn't afraid of falling. It was more of a philosophical question than anything else. Falling was part of the sport. Becky came back to the present when she heard Karen's call.

She and Lark jumped the course, getting their spots and finished with a smooth circle.

“How high are they? I feel like I’m ready to go up another hole. What do you think?”

“Absolutely. They’re at 2’3”; I’ll bump them up to the next hole.” Karen raised the jumps to 2’6” then nodded at Becky to begin.

She made a large circle and cantered down to the first fence on course.

Karen started the count aloud. “One, two, three,” she called across the ring. They were over it quietly. “Just maintain the pace and keep the canter soft.”

They continued down the line, Becky counting to herself as they approached the jump. They found an easy, soft spot and went over beautifully.

“Wow, Becky that was sweet. How about the whole course? I think you’re ready for oxers, too, so how about it?”

Becky nodded in happy agreement, catching her breath while Karen adjusted the fences. *Now this looks like a course. A little course, maybe, but a course nonetheless.* Her heart pounded in her ears.

“Just make a nice circle here and do the entire thing. Keep your legs on so you don’t chip.”

Becky asked for a canter, they made a large opening circle and completed the course in style.

Karen grinned in satisfaction. “That was wonderful. Would you like to do a Long Stirrup class or two at the show? The fences are low and I think you’re ready. How about it?”

The look on Becky’s face said it all. “Oh, Karen, yes, yes. I’d love to. And guess what? I bought a saddle. I’ve saved darn near all the money I earned from the massages. It really added up. Plus, Mom doesn’t need my help with finances. They promoted her to Banquet Captain, you know. Big increase in pay and she’s doing great.” She smiled, clearly proud of her mother. “The money’s really good right now.”

Becky hopped off and slipped the reins over Lark’s head. “I put down a deposit on a nice saddle over at Mary’s. It looks brand new.”

“Ah, Becky, your first saddle. How exciting. What kind is it?”

“It’s a Beval just like Blair’s ... close contact, in excellent condition. There’s not a mark on it.”

“Good for you. That’s a great saddle, really good choice. Does it come with fittings? And how about a pad, stuff like that? I’ll go with you if you’d like me to.”

“That’d be neat. I planned to pick it up today and figured I’d have to schlep it home on the bus. I’ll treat us to a latte at that little coffee shack if you’ll give me a ride. They’re terrific, especially the double-double chocolate. Mmm.”

They walked back to the barn, Lark’s tail swishing with the rhythm.

“I have a couple of things to do in the office. I’ll wait for you there.”

Becky led Lark to the wash rack and stripped off her tack. “Can you believe it, Lark? We’re going to the show. Isn’t that a kick?” She stroked the soft, silky muzzle that snuffled at her pockets looking for treats. Out came two lumps of sugar.

Lark took them with gentle velvet lips, crunching on the exquisite sweetness, eyes half closed, her ears lopped off to the sides.

* * *

Karen and Becky hurried to the vast saddle racks at Mary’s. Becky saw her saddle and picked it up, hugging it to her chest. Face beaming, she handed it to Karen, pointing at her name scrawled on the sold tag.

She flipped it over several times and grinned. “Very nice, oh yes.” Karen turned the saddle over and inspected the tree and the stuffing. The stitching was still tight and it looked virtually brand new. She turned the tag over and saw the price.

“Wow, that’s a great deal. Excellent choice. Look, not even a mark on the flaps.”

They walked to the wall where girths, pads and stirrup leathers hung. Becky selected a fleece-covered girth, a pair of jointed stirrups and leathers the same color as her saddle. She tucked one of the popular new sculpted saddle pads under her arm

and grinned.

Karen picked up a pair of black show gloves as well as three new magazines.

Becky paid for her purchases, smiling with delight and pride as she counted out the money to the cashier.

With their stuff safely tucked away in the trunk of the car, they strolled over to the coffee shack. Becky bought two double lattes topped with thick whipped cream. They sat on a shady bench, watching the activity at Showpark. Huge flatbed wagons loaded with jumps headed to their assigned rings. Becky glanced at the barns and shivered.

"Mmm, that's delicious." Karen followed her glance across the street to the show grounds. "Excited?"

"Oh man, you have no idea."

They finished their lattes, chatting about the upcoming show and relaxing in the warm afternoon breeze. Karen sucked the last of the whipped cream off her straw and threw the empty cup into a nearby container. "Do you want to take your saddle home or back to the barn?"

"Well, if you don't mind, I'd love to take it home to show my mom. She's been so supportive of me and she's dying to see it. She's getting a kick out of all these changes in my life. Do you mind?"

"No, of course not. Show me the way."

They turned at the light and passed the shopping center. Karen turned left at the bottom of the street. As she slowed down for the first stop sign, Becky said, "I take it that Blair and Jessi told you where I live."

"Oh, sure. Jessi said we used to live in a house just like yours in Ohio, and there it is." She chuckled at Becky. "It's amazing, ours looked just like it."

Karen pulled into the driveway and parked behind a middle aged Chevy Malibu. Becky got out of the Jag and took her goodies from the small trunk.

"Can you come in a moment, meet my mom? She's probably getting dressed for work, but I know she'd love to chat with you."

Karen shook her head. "I'll have to take a rain check and meet her next time, Becky. Joe is taking me out to dinner at some big hospital fundraiser and I need to get his tux out of the dry cleaners before it closes. I only have about fifteen minutes, otherwise I would. You were great today, I'm so proud of you, and I love the new saddle. Way cool." Karen waved goodbye as she drove down the road.

Becky fished around in her purse for the keys, shifting the saddle to get a better grip. Just then, the door opened wide.

"Hi, Becky. I thought I heard something. Here, let me help you." Her mom took the bags from her hands, holding the door open as Becky scooted inside.

"Oh, Mom, wait 'til you see. I got the saddle. Isn't it beautiful? The leathers match perfectly, and look, jointed stirrups just like everyone else. And a new saddle pad. How about that?"

Marty Edwards smiled at her daughter, sea blue eyes crinkling at the corners in pleasure. She was a slender woman of medium height with creamy, white skin. She wore her auburn hair in a long layered cut that framed the sides of her face, just brushing her shoulders.

"Honey, it's beautiful. I'm so happy for you. I only have about twenty minutes and then I have to leave for work, so tell me about your lesson real quick. Did you have fun?"

"Mom, it's cool. Jumping is like flying, and Lark takes such good care of me. I love her. You have to come out to the barn and meet her, and everyone else for that matter. Karen is so neat. I know you'll like her."

Becky carried the saddle into her room and piled everything on the floor. She spread a towel on the comforter, flipped the saddle down on the bed and proceeded to give it a good cleaning. She looked up at her mom, smiling.

"Karen says I'll be able to do a couple of classes at the show coming up. She calls me a born rider, yep. Said so a bunch of times. Do you think you'll be able to make the show?"

"Are you kidding? Nothing in the world could keep me away, Becky. Isn't this just the most amazing luck? Imagine, of all the barns you could have hooked up with down here, you found Karen and Lark." Pausing, she watched Becky clean the saddle.

“Have you reached any decision about going back to regular school? I know you’ve tossed it around.”

Becky sighed. “Mom, you know I’m not going to college. All I want to do is work with horses and become a trainer. Karen is offering me such an incredible opportunity, I can’t pass it up.” She picked up a clean rag and wiped off the copper fittings.

“I’m only doing massages part time now, but I made more than fifteen hundred dollars last month. I paid cash for all this.” She waved at the saddle and the rest of her new tack. I’ll have enough to buy a car in no time. Then, I’m saving up to go to school to become a certified equine masseuse.” She turned the saddle over, admiring the patina of the clean leather.

“Mom, did you know qualified masseuses make a hundred bucks per hourly session? I’m charging half that now and I’m making a ton of money. I think I’ll just continue with the home schooling and leave it at that. The kids are including me in so many of their social activities I don’t feel like I’m missing anything. Please don’t be disappointed in me.”

“Of course I’m not, honey, how could I be? I just wish I could afford to send you to college.” Marty slipped an arm around Becky’s shoulder and hugged her.

“But this was *always* your dream, wasn’t it, a career with horses? I just hope you’re not missing too much fun stuff.”

Becky chuckled as she started cleaning the new leathers. “Well, let’s see. So far this summer, I’ve cruised to Catalina on a mini version of the QE2, attended an incredible birthday party, gone surfing and shopping with my friends and learned to jump. Next week I go to my first horse show. As I see it, it’s the most exciting time of my life.”

They talked for another couple of minutes and then Marty looked down at her watch. Glancing in the mirror, she gave her hair a pat and picked up her purse.

“Darn it, I have to get going. Honey, there’s dinner in the fridge. A huge party is coming into the restaurant to celebrate an anniversary and we’re expecting it to last forever. Should be a great night for tips. I’ll be late, but I’ll brown-bag you home a treat. Wait until you see what’s in the fridge for your dinner. Give me a kiss, baby, I have to run. Love you, Becky.”

“Have a good night, Mom. I love you too.”

About an hour later, she brought her new saddle into the living room and laid it on the sofa. She went to the fridge where a white box rested on the top shelf, a big smiley-face scrawled across the top. Becky opened the box slowly, drawing out the suspense.

Inside was a slab of ribs and a baked potato with everything. She grinned in anticipation, thankful that her mom worked at such a great restaurant. Most nights, dinner was not only plentiful, it was delicious. Perhaps a bit lonely, but definitely good.

Sliding the food out onto an aluminum plate, she popped it into the oven. By the time she returned from her shower, the spicy smells of barbecue filled the room, making her mouth water. Becky rewound the tape and turned on the TV. The lead-in theme for *Another Life* started as she pulled the tray from the oven and grinned at her dinner.

It'd been a long day and she felt her hungry stomach rumble in anticipation. Placing the tray on the table, she pulled up a chair, grabbed a rib and blew on the sizzling meat. She munched away, eyes tearing, drawing in side breaths of cool air. She took a swig from her soda.

Memories of the day's events flitted across her mind, beginning with Megan's rescue and the subsequent conversation with Shievon. She remembered the determined look on Jessi's face as Blair dragged her into the tack room and away from their conversation.

Becky's heart went out to Shievon. The words of her apology echoed in her ears.

“I'm so sorry,” she had said, full lips trembling. “I don't even know where to begin. When I think about what might have happened if you hadn't gotten to the farm early, I just....” She gulped and then cleared her throat. “I've been such a bitch to you and I'm sorrier than you'll ever know and I don't deserve your forgiveness, but I'm asking for it. I don't even know why I acted so ugly and mean, tell the truth. I'm really not like that at all, y'know. I just behaved like a spoiled *Bebe*, I guess.” Sad hazel eyes, gold flecked and wide, begged forgiveness. Tears gathered at their corners, tangled in the thick black lashes and began to fall.

“I was so totally wrong about you, Becky, and I’m never going to be able to thank you enough for saving Megan. I know I don’t deserve it, but if you’ll give me another chance, I would like to be your friend. I’m so sorry for everything.”

“Shievy, please.” Clearly uncomfortable, Becky raised both hands in protest. “Let’s just pretend all this never happened, huh? Like, *hi, I’m Becky. Nice to meet you.*” Smiling wide, eyes tip-tilted like a doll, she extended her hand. “And you are?”

Lips trembling, she took the offered hand. “Pleased to meet you, Becky. I’m Shievon Mahoney. I’m going to be the best friend you ever had.”

Chapter 11

The twins burst in the door that evening, getting excited hugs and kisses all around. Suitcases piled in the middle of the foyer made a challenging obstacle course.

“Oh, Mama, I’m so glad to be home I can’t stand it,” Kenny said as he picked Julia up for another hug. “Feels like it’s been forever. Mmm, what smells so good?” He handed his mother over to Jeff and followed his nose to the kitchen, planting a kiss on both of Sally’s plump cheeks.

The boys had only been home a moment when the front door bell rang. Jeff answered it, tickled to find Jessi and Blair on the front porch. He scooped Jessi into his arms, planting a kiss on her upturned lips.

With a shout, Kenny rounded the corner, grabbed Blair and gave her a hug.

They walked back to the kitchen, arm in arm, where Julia helped Sally, fussing with the final preparations for dinner. She turned a wide smile on the girls.

“Hey, Blair, Jessi. Good to see y’all. Got enough to feed an army here, so y’all’re welcome to stay for supper.”

Blair grinned, nodding. “Hi, Julia, Lonnie. Thanks, but we can only stay a second. Mom and Dad expect us home in a little bit. We’ll take a rain check, though. We just came over to say hello.”

Jeff leaned down and flicked a lock of Jessi’s hair. “Hey, sugar, after supper is over, how about if we go down to Baskin Robbins and get an ice cream?” He looked at Blair and Kenny. “Want to join us?”

They nodded.

“That’d be great, Jeff. What time, about seven-thirty? Dinner should be over by then. We’ve got so much to talk about.”

“Come on, Jessi,” Blair said. “We have to get back home. They’re probably waiting dinner for us. See you later.”

* * *

They sat at a back table, big scoops of multi-colored ice cream melting in their dishes as they talked about the past couple of days.

“I’m dyin’ to find out what y’all did about the disappearin’ dolphin?” Jeff grinned at Jessi and prepared to feed her a bite of Mississippi Mud.

“Oh, Jeff, you haven’t heard the half of it.” She took the offered bite of ice cream and shuddered as it hit her teeth. “Shievon was so nasty to Becky, like from day one at the barn, she took every opportunity to snipe or make rude comments or wise cracks. When the dolphin turned up missing I guess she took advantage of the situation and decided to hang the theft on Becky. Even though Billy found it pretty quick, the damage was done. Everyone freaked out. I’ve never seen my mom so mad before in my whole life.”

“Melanie went ballistic, got all up in our faces, talking about loyalty.” Blair nodded. “Becky was so upset about everything she couldn’t even sleep. Around four, she headed for the barn, and it’s a good thing, too.”

The girls recounted the whole story, including the good news that Megan was fine and Shievon and Becky had patched their difficulties.

“Shievy apologized to Becky and said she wanted to be friends.” Nodding, Jessi took another bite of her Chocolate Peanut-butter Chunk ice cream, blinking as her teeth connected with a wedge of frozen chocolate. She shivered and held up her index finger. “Evidently Billy pitched a fit with her about getting us involved in the first place. Then when Mom got so mad, he figured it was time to clear the air, starting with Shievon. He’d noticed how she was with Becky.” Dark eyes wide, she stared at Jeff. “I think

she was jealous, but I can't figure out why. Anyway, she told me he was so mad at her she was afraid he'd break up right there and then."

Jeff chuckled, leaning forward to kiss her cheek. "Oh, ya gotta love her 'cause she's so cute, but I think Shievy is just a spoiled brat. Being the youngest of five is bound to do that to ya and she sure is possessive of Billy, don't ya think?"

Blair and Jessi nodded, chuckling.

"She's still my best friend, y'know." Jessi shrugged. "We all have our days."

Kenny shrugged. "Well, glad that's all settled. Dumb anyway. Not to change the subject, but I'm so excited about the new condo. Have y'all seen it? Mama says it's really nice with a big pool and several tennis courts. We're goin' down tomorrow and register for classes. Do ya think y'all might be able to meet us, too?"

"Yeah, when'll ya finish with ridin' lessons? Maybe we can get together for lunch? It'd be cool if ya could help us get the condo sorted out. How about it?" Jeff grinned at Jessi and made a kissy face.

"Hey, that'd be neat," Blair said. "We can do that, no problem. Lessons will be over by eleven, so we should be able to get down before one. Sounds like fun. I can't wait to see the condo." She looked at Kenny, a shy blush tingeing her cheeks.

"Tomorrow?" Jessi said, a playful look on her face. She rolled her eyes. "Oh, dear, I can't. I have to wash my hair."

There was dead silence for a second and then they burst into laughter.

"Yeah, right," Blair said with a giggle. She scooped a spoonful of ice cream from her bowl, her expression curious. "Say, Kenny, did your folks seem okay to you? Melly said they acted really weird all week long. She'd catch them talking, but they'd stop whenever she came into the room. She said it got obvious after a while."

Kenny shrugged. "Papa seemed to have somethin' on his mind, but he never said anythin'. 'Course, we just got home so they've hardly had time to say much. Are they mad about us leavin' "

Stanford, d'ya think?"

Blair shook her head, still chewing nuts from her Jamoca Almond Fudge ice cream, and shrugged. "Your mom seemed thrilled about that. No, it's something else. At least Melly thinks so."

Jeff shook his head, a frown furrowing his forehead. Then he chuckled. "I bet it's the condo. They're such old fashioned parents, y'know, they probably think it's an *occasion of sin*."

He hesitated and then turned slowly to Jessi, a leer on his face, blue eyes closed to slits. "Which, of course, it *is*." He chuckled with glee and buried his lips in her neck. Jessi threw her arms around him and started to giggle. He pulled back, grinning. "Only kiddin', y'all. Don't ya know a joke when ya hear one?"

A look of disappointment crossed her face.

Jeff scooped a spoonful of Mississippi Mud ice cream from his bowl and fed it to her. "Now repeat after me, Jeff loves Jessi."

She nodded, a smile lighting her eyes. "She loves him, too."

They talked for a while longer and then it was time to go. They dropped the girls off at home, promising to give them a call in the morning.

* * *

"Rats!" Jessi threw off her covers. She drew the robe across her shoulders and hopped out of bed, searching for slippers. She opened her door and glanced across the hall, hopeful.

Seeing the light under Blair's door made her smile. Jessi knocked on it a couple of times, and when she got no response, opened the door a tad and peeked inside. She glanced across the room and saw Blair sitting on her patio.

"Hey," she called as she walked across the room toward her sister. "Can we talk a minute?"

"Sure, what's up?" She leaned forward as Jessi took a chair. "Everything okay?"

Jessi hesitated and then shrugged. "Well, I'm just wondering, y'know. About the condo and all. How do you feel about it?"

Blair gazed up at the stars and shook her head. "Tell the

truth, it makes me a nervous wreck. I've been sitting out here for the last hour thinking about it."

"I know. I feel the same way. What'll we do? Are we gonna have sex?"

Blair sighed, hesitating. "Well, two or three years ago, this girl we knew at school got pregnant. It was such a miserable thing for everyone involved. I mean, like, fourteen? The boy dumped her, of course, and now she has a three-year-old kid to raise alone. She didn't even get to finish high school with her class." Blair pursed her lips and sighed again.

"Melly and I made a pact that we'd wait to have sex until we got married. It's worked fine so far, but now, with..."

Jessi nodded several times and lowered her voice. "The *condo*. I wonder if Mom and Dad have put it together yet. Do you think they're going to ground us from going down there?"

"It's the weirdest thing," Blair said. "I figured the minute they heard the twins had changed schools, we'd get *the talk* at the very least. But they haven't said a word about it."

Jessi started to puff. "What are you going to do if they ground us from visiting the twins?" The puffs got faster.

"Listen, don't get worked up yet. Julia told them about the condo days ago and they haven't said anything. Don't look for trouble where there isn't any."

Jessi nodded. "You're right there. I'm not gonna mention it, that's for sure." She twisted her hands together and started to puff again. "I just wish they would, actually. How do you feel about being down there with them, alone and, y'know, alone?"

"It makes me wish we were grounded," Blair said. "It'd be a relief if they'd take the whole thing out of our hands. I mean, the temptation to go too far is hard to resist."

Jessi leaned back in her chair and puffed harder. "Oh, man, if we ever got--Dad'd kill the twins. Then Mom'll kill us. And Julia? Oh, my. Just try to imagine that for a minute, would ya? What a total mess." Jessi shook her head. "Not cool. Definitely not cool. Besides, I'm just not ready to deal with all that yet. Maybe the best thing would be to have the guys come home on weekends. That way it would be the same as it's always been. Yeah, that's how we'll do it." She rose, stretched and yawned again.

“Well, I’m glad we got *that* settled. I’m so crazy about Jeff I’m not sure how long I’d keep our pact.”

“You have a pact, too?”

“Yeah, I just joined you and Melly. There’s room for another sister in there, isn’t there? How about Shievon and Becky? Shall we invite them, too?”

“Fine with me.” Blair stood, hooked an arm around Jessi and grinned. “We can have meetings.”

“What? Like AA?”

“Yeah, kind of.”

“Cool,” Jessi said with a chuckle. “A support group. We can all sit around and console ourselves with our virginity.”

“Oh, great. Weekly to start?”

* * *

Karen raised the jumps two holes, widening the oxers a bit. “Okay guys, they’re up to four feet now. Let’s try that one again. Billy, go ahead.”

He made a circle and headed towards the vertical. He closed his legs two strides out and Bitsy jumped over easy. They cantered past the wing of two, waiting for the focal point. Sitting up extra tall, he lengthened his spine, waiting. *Turn here. Here.*

Billy opened his inside rein, bringing Bitsy’s nose around to the right and executed a perfect rollback turn.

Three big, strong strides and they cleared two and galloped down the bending line to three. *Easy girl, it’s just a little fence.* He rode his eye through the turn to the combination, got perfect spots and finished in excellent form. Billy grinned as he resumed his place in line.

“You should be proud of that one, Billy. Very nice ride. You two are ready for the show. Okay, Melly, you’re next.”

Benny had finally grown up, his playful days now just a memory. As Melanie opened his stride, the powerful gelding sighted on the first fence. His ears pricked as they approached the oxer. Over easy. He settled back and waited, ready when Melanie asked for the rollback turn. As she saw her focal point, she looked right. Benny felt her weight shift. He looked right, dipped down and made a smooth, tight little rollback, only two strides out. He

gathered himself, put in a tremendous effort and they were over the vertical.

They finished the rest of the course in fine style. "That's enough for you, Melly. Great ride. Let him cool off. You two are going to knock 'em dead. He's really going places."

"Okay, Blair, you're up."

Angel and Blair also had a good round, making all the spots with a fast time.

"Good girl, Blair, really nice ride. You two are having a ball, aren't you? Okay, Shievy, you can go."

Their round was also excellent and Karen smiled when they finished. "Shievy, you're going to do so well at the show. I cannot stress how much your riding has improved. You'll be joining Melanie in the juniors pretty soon, huh?" She turned to her final rider. "So Jessi, last but not least, my little sweet pea."

"Mom. *Please,*" Jessi whispered, blushing. "You're embarrassing me."

Foxie was on today, long strides carrying them to the first fence. At seventeen hands, Foxie was a big horse by any definition. Holding her together in the turns required quite an effort for a small girl like Jessi.

You have to control that drift, Jessi; otherwise, you lose ground, time, and sometimes the fence. Her mother's words came back to her as she rode. All those hours of practicing paid off and their turn was perfect. They continued the course, and their ride through the combination was quite stylish.

Karen grinned. "You're doing so much better in the tight turns. I'm really proud of you, sweetie. Great job."

She turned to the rest of her team. "So, team, are we ready to go out there and kick some butt?"

Their response was a resounding yes.

"Alrighty, then, let's get the tack cleaned like new, get the show clothes back from the cleaners and be packed and ready to go. It's almost showtime."

Chapter 12

The long awaited day arrived. Becky stood in front of her open closet, checking her show clothing. Three pairs of breeches, two starched and pressed show shirts with matching collars, and her gray show coat hung on hangers. She slipped the garment bag over the lot and zipped it closed.

Her tall black boots stood stiff in their trees, polished to a high glow. Two pairs of long nylon riding socks peeped out of the tops; into the boot bag they went.

Becky had saddle-soaped her new bridle twice and now it hung next to her clean saddle. She glanced again at the new brass nameplate attached to the back of the cantle and grinned. *Becky Edwards*. Karen had given it to her last night as a good luck charm and they had already screwed it in place.

My very own saddle and my first name plate.

The new sculptured pad rested on the saddle, the fleeced-lined girth lay across the top. She didn't have a fancy trunk like the rest of the kids, but she had a reasonable facsimile. She opened the lid once again and checked the contents, ticking them off her mental list: new low-profile helmet, hairnets, a variety of horse products and a tube of stick'em. The new black show gloves smelled of soft, supple leather. Becky smiled, remembering the look on Karen's face when she handed them to her.

"Your lucky gloves," she'd said. "You're my rising star."

Becky had tried them on once for fit and then slipped them back into their plastic bag. She would wait for show day to wear them. Another quick glance and she nodded, ready.

For the past several days her stomach did flip-flops for no reason at all, and the very thought of riding in her first show made her breath catch and her heart race. It was like sitting at the top of the roller coaster at Magic Mountain.

Earlier in the week, Karen gave her an entry form for Showpark, grinning. She had entered Becky in the entire Long Stirrup division, which consisted of two jumping classes and one under saddle. Karen also signed her up for her first Maiden Equitation flat class. The tests would be easy and of all the classes, Becky was most excited about it. That brought the total number of classes she would ride in to four, a nice show ring debut.

Becky knew she had little chance of placing in the over fences classes, even with Lark's many years of showing know-how. She had not been jumping long enough to place, but the experience of the competition itself would be invaluable. Every journey began with a first step. She shivered and hugged her arms across her chest.

* * *

Karen and Becky sat through three light changes before they finally turned into the Showpark lot. Everyone within a fifty-mile radius had come to the show today.

The Doubletree horses filled one side of the second barn, next to the warm-up rings. The grooms had finished the setup the night before, pictures, plants, chairs and tables all placed in the familiar pattern that never varied.

The horses stood in their stalls, heads hanging out the doors, eating from their hay nets. Shrill whinnies greeted the kids as they called good morning.

"I'm going to sign us in and get our numbers. I'll meet you kids in the warm-up ring as soon as I can."

Karen turned to Carlos. "Will you please take Lance out for a lunge? Just about ten minutes or so in each direction. I want to school him when I'm done with the kids. Thanks."

Melanie worked in Benny's stall, putting on his splint boots. She adjusted the straps and slid the ends into their keepers.

"We're goin' out on the Grand Prix field, Benny. Isn't it excitin'? We're movin' up with the big boys? Are ya scared?"

He snuffled her cheek in reassurance. She stroked his broad face, smiling.

“Nah, me neither.”

Blair led Angel out of her stall and handed the mare to Juan, smiling. “Momento, por favor?”

She bent over, swiping the tube of *stick'em* down the calves of her boots. It really helped keep the legs in firm contact with the saddle. The kids called it rider’s leg glue.

Billy came out of the tack room just then, calling hello to his teammates.

Blair offered him the tube. “Hey, Billy, how are you this morning? Excited about your first jumper show? Poor Magic. Did you see the look on his face when the van left yesterday? He made me feel so bad I gave him all Angel’s carrots. He ate them, but he was still mad, poor dude.”

Billy clucked with his tongue and took the tube from Blair. “It makes me feel like such a bum. I don’t know what else to do but sell him.” He shrugged and made a face.

“I’m going to have Karen check with the other trainers and see if anyone is looking for a nice Eq horse. He deserves a new buddy and I’m not going to be able to ride both horses. I can see that already.”

One by one, the kids mounted up and headed to the rings. Showpark has two huge warm-up arenas placed side by side. The dividing line between them is open on both ends, so the riders can move from one ring to the other without using a gate. In the busy area at least thirty horses worked on the flat.

Several fences, set up at various heights and widths, gave horse and rider something to warm up over, jumping back and forth under the supervision of their trainers. It was controlled chaos and very intimidating.

Horses moved in worked in directions, trotting or cantering in small circles, spiraling in and out. Others fidgeted, balked and acted downright cranky with an occasional buck thrown in for good measure. The circus was definitely in town.

Angel minced into the ring, Bitsy, Lark, Megan and Foxie right behind her. They got on the rail, fell in behind a well-behaved

bay mare and followed her sedate path up the arena.

Becky took another breath and glanced around her. "Well, Lark, that wasn't so bad, kind of like getting on the freeway during rush hour." She cast a covert glance around the ring and wiped a trickle of perspiration from her cheek. Both hands shook and she had a death-grip on the reins.

Melanie and Benny were not so lucky. As they entered the ring, a big chestnut gelding disagreed with his rider about the upcoming jump. He switched leads a stride out, dropped his shoulder and spun.

The rider cleared the fence by a good foot. However, he had a firm hold on his reins. The bridle slipped over the gelding's head and wrapped around the top pole of the fence. Down it came with a clatter, bringing the standard with it.

The loose horse tore up the arena, bucking, squealing and having a good time. A merle collie jumped down off his golf cart and gave chase, barking at the horse's heels. Behavior of this type is highly contagious and as the gelding raced up the middle of the warm-up arena, several horses tried to join him in his antics.

Benny rocked back on his hocks, ready to riot, but Melanie turned into the corner of the arena rail, giving him nowhere to go. He danced in place, humping up and threatening to buck.

No one fell off, but several came close. The gelding left the warm-up with a flourish, narrowly missing a group of juniors on their way to the Grand Prix arena. He was last seen tearing down his barn aisle, tail held high in the air, the dog still on his heels. The rider and his trainer jogged across the ring, red-faced from embarrassment and exertion.

Benny and Melanie soon caught up with the rest of the group. "Good grief, can y'all believe that?"

Jessi nodded, her lips pinched white. "I thought for sure he was going to run right over us. He scared Fowie so bad she kicked at him. Big time. Almost had me off. Man, I hate when that happens."

The kids glanced at each other, wide eyed.

Shievon stared at Blair. "What's next, a marching band?"

They sighed with relief when Karen walked into the warm-up arena, waving to them, and they headed toward her at a trot. Just her presence had a calming effect and soon they started jumping

back and forth over the fences, sharpening themselves for their first class. Their minds focused now on the job at hand.

Becky stood in the corner of the arena, recovering from the previous incident. Her stomach had rolled up into a little ball in her throat which made normal breathing impossible. Raspy, miniature breaths led her down the road to hyperventilation and tears misted her eyes. The horse had missed colliding with them by inches. Lark had stopped dead in her tracks as he flew by and Becky almost took a header into the rail.

Hands shaking, she focused on what Karen did with the other kids and talked to herself. She watched their approaches, how they handled things like when other horses got in their way as they tried to jump. The biggest difficulty was avoiding horses that crossed their path three strides after they had jumped.

What a zoo. I'll be lucky if I'm not killed in here. Stop it, Becky. Deep, slow breaths.

“Okay kids, you’re ready. You’ll be showing over there on the grass field.” Karen shrugged at the upper ring. “Go learn the course and I’ll be with you in a minute.”

She waved at Becky, beckoning her over. “How are you feeling, honey? You okay?”

Becky swallowed twice in an effort to stop squeaking. “I don’t think I’m ready for this. I’m really scared. It’s so ... busy.”

Karen’s voice took on an almost sing-song quality. “I know how you feel. You’re just having your first case of horse show jitters. Blair calls them the willies. Everybody gets them, Becky. Just take a couple of slow, deep breaths....”

“*I am, Karen. I’ve been doing that.*” Becky’s voice hissed between clenched teeth. “It doesn’t help at all.”

Karen continued without missing a beat, “...and concentrate on what we’re doing. You’ll be fine, honey, just relax and trot. Go on, trot.” She bent down and lowered one jump to a cross rail.

“Okay, trot back and forth over this a couple of times. Lark is nice and quiet, so don’t worry about her. Just back and forth, nice and easy.”

After three or four times at the trot, Karen made the fence into a little vertical, which they cantered. Three or four more times

and the vertical rose to the height of the fences in her class. Becky jumped confidently and with ease, just like home.

She felt much better after the school and offered Karen a weak smile as they walked out of the ring.

“That’s enough for you right now,” Karen said. “Very nice. Just remember when you get in the ring to show, you’ll be alone. Piece of cake after the schooling arena, right? Your class won’t go for hours yet, so give Lark to Carlos and let’s watch the other kids go.”

Blair, Billy, Jessi and Shievon gathered around the board, learning their course. This was their first ride on grass, which required that the horses’ shoes be drilled and tapped. Jumping on grass at speed required studs. Unlike the usual flat sand arenas, this one had several trees, sloping terrain and natural, uneven footing.

Karen checked out the board and then looked into the ring, getting the placement of the jumps. “This is an easy course, don’t you think? Except for the rollback turn, it’s quite straightforward. Let’s go walk it and see how it rides.”

They trooped off together, checking out the footing, picking their focal points for turns, getting familiar with the slopes and little mounds they would soon gallop across.

“Now for this turn here, you could go either way. I think you should try for the left lead over the fence then sit up, opening rein and power out of the turn. Don’t get going so fast you run out of room to the last fence, though. It’s going downhill, so there will be some natural build. Any questions?”

The kids shrugged, confident. They walked back to the waiting horses. Carlos and Juan gave them each a leg up and they turned to watch the first rider enter the ring.

“Excuse me,” said a voice behind her. Karen turned to stare into the darkest eyes she had ever seen, shiny like pieces of licorice. “My name is Steve Bianchi. You train Billy Martin, right?”

Karen grinned. He wasn’t the first kid to ask her that. “Yes, I do.”

“Well, I’ve been a fan forever and I just heard he’s planning to sell Magic. Is that true?”

Karen nodded. “Yes, Billy’s switched from medals to jumpers. Do you ride equitation?”

The grin on Steve's face showed perfect white teeth. "Oh, yes. I do my 16-17 age division and then the whole limit division. I'm anxious to start medals."

"Are you showing here? I'd like to see you ride."

His handsome features grew somber. "I lost my old horse a couple of weeks ago. Colic. He'd already had one surgery. At his age, the vet said there was nothing to do but put him down."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Karen said. "That's always rough, huh? Hey, my team is about ready to show. Why don't you come with me and after they go, I'll introduce you."

Chapter 13

As Blair watched the rounds go, she thought back to the conversation she'd had with Melanie that morning. When they picked up their assigned numbers, she let out a little gasp. Eyes wide, she turned the number towards Blair. 122.

"So, what's that mean? A lucky number?"

"It's the number I wear in that dream I keep havin'. Been goin' on for ages. I'm here, standin' in the tunnel, waitin' for the rider ahead of me to finish his round. Then Benny and I gallop out onto the field and start the course. It's always the same and it ends as we're clearin' the fourth fence. Spooky, huh?"

Blair nodded. "Gosh, I'll say. I remember the first time you told me about it. Figured it had to be way in the future if you're riding here on the Grand Prix field. But now that they're doing other divisions in there, it really is strange." She hummed the intro to *Outer Limits*.

Blair came back to the present with a start as she heard the announcer call, "Next on course in the Children's Speed class, 118, Foxie Lady, Jessi Allen-Evans the rider."

As Jessi and Foxie galloped into the arena, the whistle blew. They approached on the left lead, opened the stride and jumped on a diagonal over the wall at one. They extended even more, over two with ease. The turn to three was very misleading. Jessi got wide and they chipped, barely clearing it. They settled, though, and the turn back to four was super. Next came the complete rollback and this time she nailed it, powering out of the turn and tearing for five. Huge, ground-covering strides took them

to the next fence. Over in a flash and the ride to six was perfect.

Now for the combination. With Foxie's powerful strides being so long, they crossed the field in a blur, and Jessi half-halted coming to the first element. *Press. Now.* One stride, jump again, two more strides to three. *Great.* She looked for the turn and urged the mare on. They came into eight strong, *too strong.* Jessi gave a light half-halt as she saw her spot, and smiled. Foxie leaped in the air, clearing the oxer with inches to spare. They raced through the timers.

The crowd clapped and whistled as the announcer came on. "118, Foxie Lady and Jessi Evans charge into the lead with a time of 44.097. Next rider on course, 119, Sign The Card, Shievon Mahoney rides. 119."

Shievon and Megan entered the ring with the whistle and opened up fast. This was not the best course for the short-strided little mare. All that galloping and constantly adding strides took their toll. Megan was better at turns, and that was how Shievon had to ride if she hoped to win.

They came at the first fence from a different angle, slicing the wall on a direct ride to two, then another diagonal slice and over easy. Shievon kept the stride open and when she saw her focal point did a tight, powerful rollback turn. They reversed direction then with only two strides to get straight. *Yes.* Megan dug in for another rollback, tore down to five, over, on to six and then the combination.

Shievon pressed forward out of the turn, there's one, over, then two, on to three, clean and they rolled back to eight. She shaved the wing of fence two so close in her turn that the audience gasped, but they made no contact, and whizzed down to the final oxer at eight. Through clean, through fast, but not fast enough.

"119, Sign The Card and Shievon Mahoney, move into third place with a time of 47.110

Blair's tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth, her breathing shallow. Little puffs of air barely moved her chest as she watched Shievon exit the ring.

"I don't like this course, Mom," she said to Karen. "Way too much galloping."

"You'll do just fine, Blair. Remember what we've

practiced at home and put the lessons to good use. Just watch that turn back to eight. Shievy almost hooked it. Stay focused and be careful.”

“Next to see in the Children’s Jumper Speed Class, 121, Windsom Angel, Blair Evans in the irons.”

Blair decided to ride the course like Shievon had, use Angel’s short strides and incredible turning ability to their best advantage. They approached one on the diagonal, over, now on to two. Wait, *wait for the focal point*, turn here. *Now*. Blair sat up extra tall and wound Angel around her inside leg. Another sharp turn got them straight and they moved on to four. The strides were off and they rattled the top rail of the vertical.

Not letting the rail distract her, they rode their course focused on the goal, finishing the round fast and clean.

The crowd erupted with a cheer and a gasp, and then held their breath for the time. Clean and very fast. The crowd went ballistic.

“121, Windsom Angel and Blair Evans, in a time of 45.075, move into second place.”

Billy stood on the berm watching Blair finish her ride. Sweat glistened on his forehead and upper lip. He was on deck.

Karen reached up and slapped his knee. “No going for broke out there, Billy. I mean it. I want this to be a good learning experience for both of you, nothing more.”

Billy nodded in agreement. “I don’t expect to place. I just want a nice, tight forward ride with no faults. No problem, huh?”

Too bad they had neglected to tell Bitsy. After all her years of show experience, she knew the difference between practicing at home and the real thing.

“Next to see, 120, Valley Girl, owned and ridden by Billy Martin. 120, on course.”

They trotted into the ring. Halfway through their opening circle the whistle blew, and so, in a manner of speaking, did Bitsy. Her head came up, along with her tail, and her ears nearly touched at the tips. She lightened her forehand, engaged her hocks and as they approached the first fence, she locked on and accelerated.

Over clean, she hesitated, waiting, felt him look left, and focused on two. Up and over. Billy waited for his spot and as he

looked right, so did Bitsy. She knew what came next. Over three, and the quick turn to four was outstanding. The rollback was so quick, so tight, he lost his balance for a second. Enormous, ground-covering strides took them down to five, then six, and there was the combination. Pop, pop, pop, and out.

Billy made the wider turn around two, but eight still came up quick and he did a half-halt. The mare settled, clearing it going away. As they flew through the timers, he whispered, "Good girl, Bitsy, what a good girl. What an awesome girl." He slapped her neck as they circled and exited the ring amid cheers from the crowd.

"120, Valley Girl and Billy Martin move into eighth place with a time of 50.899."

Karen smiled and frowned at the same time. "What a great round. I thought I told you I just wanted ... but it was excellent, wasn't it? Why did you go so fast? Good job." She grinned up at him and then frowned. "Next time, follow orders."

"Honest, Karen, I didn't push her at all, I just sat there. Except for the gallops, it didn't feel that fast to me. Isn't she just the most marvelous mare? Every time I look at her, I thank God I found her." He ran his hand down the silky red neck and then hugged her. Bitsy reached around for her treat. Two sugar cubes, incoming.

"I know this sounds weird, but I think she reads my mind. Really."

"Well, maybe," Karen conceded with a grin. "But most of what you're sensing is her background. When a horse has that much show experience, she does read your mind in a way. At least, she reads the signals you give, even if they are as subtle as turning your head. Not that we needed it, but there is your justification for spending so much money on her. What a girl."

Karen stroked the soft, silky nose and then glanced at Steve. She chuckled and shook her head.

"Sorry, let me introduce you. Billy Martin, this is Steve Bianchi. He heard Magic's for sale and wants to try him. You guys talk, I'll be back in a little bit."

A blush of admiration stained Steve's cheeks as he shook Billy's hand. "I've been a fan of yours for ages. Watched you wipe 'em up at the Nationals last year. You won every class you entered, but that Maclay final, man. Talk about sweet."

It was Billy's turn to blush. "Magic is just the best, isn't he? You're into equitation, huh?"

"Oh, yeah. I want to win the Maclay and I think Magic is the horse for me to do it on. Y'know, my trainer just moved to a barn I hate and I'm looking for another. How do you like training with Karen?"

"She's the best around, in my opinion. She studied under George, you know, and follows all of his concepts. I've done a couple of clinics with him, and he always comments on how he recognizes my riding style."

"Wow," Steve said, voice reverent. "*George Morris*. Does he still give clinics around here?"

"Every year in November. I have an old entry form. I'll make a copy and give you one. The classes at the lower levels fill in a week or so, but at the higher levels, there is always room for one more. How high do you jump, Steve?"

"I show at the 3'6" level. At least, I did until my horse died a couple of weeks ago. I haven't ridden since, but I need to get started again, for sure. Can we go to your barn after the show today? I'd love to try Magic."

"You bet. I'll check with Karen and see how much longer we'll be here."

Becky huddled between Blair and Melanie. They stared at Steve as he talked with Billy.

"Oh, my," Becky said, her voice a purr. "Is he gorgeous or what?"

"I'm sayin', y'all. He's...."

"Gorgeous," agreed Blair.

Voice dripping honey, Melanie grinned. "Why, I think it's high time I made my manners."

"Not alone, you won't," Becky said, pale cheeks pink in a blush.

The girls strode over to Billy and Steve, wide smiles pasted on their faces. Steve took an involuntary step backward as they descended on him, hands extended. Grinning, Billy made the introductions.

Melanie, an even bigger local legend than Billy, was no

stranger to Steve and he remembered Blair from her equitation days. She had beaten him more than once.

Then he looked down into the most amazing eyes he had ever seen ... aqua and heavily fringed with lashes the same color as her glorious red hair. His mouth opened once and closed. He nodded, cleared his throat and said, "Hello, Becky. I'm so glad to meet you."

Color flooded his cheeks as he realized he still held her hand. He opened his fingers, but her hand remained in his.

"Are you really gonna buy Magic?" she asked, unable to tear her gaze from his. "You'll keep him at our barn, right? You should, actually, you'll love it. Great group of kids and Karen is the best trainer...." She stopped babbling, glanced at their hands, then slowly back to his eyes. "Yep."

They watched the remaining riders go, several with very good rounds. Except for Jessi, they lost count of the placements in the class and didn't know who was where. They gathered around the announcer, waiting.

"The winner of the Children's Jumper Speed Round, sponsored by Mary's Tack, is 118, Foxie Lady, owned and ridden by Jessi Allen-Evans. Congratulations, Jessi." He continued to call the other winners. "...fourth, 121, Windsom Angel, Blair Evans, owner; fifth place, 284, Merlot...."

Melanie sat alone on the bleachers next to the Grand Prix arena, staring intently at the colorful jumps. Unable to control her rapid breathing, she felt beads of sweat pop out on her forehead. The announcer called the first six riders on deck.

"Hey, Melly," Blair said, glancing at her friend as she sat on the bench. "Are you okay?"

Melanie stared at her, blue eyes huge, voice just above a whisper. "I checked out the course. Just finished walkin' it. The first four fences are the same as the dream. It's new from there on, but man, it's so weird. It's givin' me the willies. How can that be? I'm sayin'."

"Whoa, it's really eerie, that's for sure."

"It's so scary. I'm wonderin' if I ought to tell Karen. What

do ya think she'll say?"

Blair shrugged, eyes wide. "Gosh, Melly, I don't know. What can she say? Did you win?" She chuckled, uncertain. "How'd it work out?"

"I don't know. Like I said before, I only get to the fourth fence and then I go to sleep, I guess. It's creepin' me out real bad. D'ya think it's an omen or somethin'?"

They heard Karen in the background, calling Melanie to get on Benny and warm up.

"I don't feel good about this, Blair. Pray for me."

"You'll be fine, Melly, nothing different here than what we jump at home ... at least not much." She looked at the huge leaping dolphins that served as wings for the third fence and blinked.

"Well."

Melanie and Benny had an excellent school and as they waited in the tunnel for their turn to go, she looked up at the homes that hung out over the cliffs on Via de la Valle.

"We've never been here before, but it's familiar, huh, Benny?" As she leaned down to stroke the long golden neck, she saw her hand shake. "We can do this, no doubt about it. Right?" She adjusted her helmet and snugged up the chinstrap.

"Dear Lord, please protect us," she said, a quiver in her voice.

"Next to see, 122, Inherit The Wind, owned and ridden by Melanie Young."

They trotted out of the entry gate tunnel onto the grass field and came down to a walk in the center. Melanie blinked, her eyes taking a moment to adjust to the bright sunlight after the shade of the waiting area. The whistle blew and she reached down to stroke Benny's neck. She put the gelding into a canter, his long strides eating up the ground, bringing her to the vertical, the first fence on course.

A left bending line flowed to a huge square oxer, its wings shaped like grocery bags. Over easy and they galloped on for the wall at three. So far, the ride copied the dream. They performed a very tight rollback to four, powering out of the turn, up and over, clear.

The dream ended there, but the remainder of the course still

beckoned. Melanie took a deep breath as they made a wide turn, shot a quick prayer heavenward, and moved on to the five combination. They flowed through it in style.

A left bending line took them over the triple bar at six. They made the bend to the right and jumped diagonally over the vertical, its wings formed like sail boats. Complete change of direction now, and they opened up the stride for the eight combination.

Over easy, they galloped to the final fence at nine and tore through the timers, stopping the clock. Clean and safe, but not very fast. Melanie rose in her stirrups and stroked Benny's neck as they made their closing circle.

"See, I told ya, Benny, nothin' to it. I'm never afraid when we're together." *Lord, I felt Ya every step a the way.*

The announcer said, "122, Inherit The Wind, Melanie Young, clean in a time of 55.623. 122 moves into eighth place."

Karen stared at Melanie, eyebrows arched as they rode through the tunnel and out into the warm-up arena. Hands firmly planted on both hips, and an *I'm not very happy with you* look pasted across her face, she advanced on Melanie.

"Good grief, girl. What the heck was that? I know it was your first trip out there, but why did you back off so much? What was that all about?" Karen shook her head in surprise. "You *knew* you had to gallop that course. What happened? Is anything wrong?"

Shamefaced, Melanie looked down at Karen and shrugged. "Oh, no, nothin's wrong. I just got myself so spooked before the class I lost my confidence. Should'a come and told ya about it right away, I'm sure, but I thought it would pass. I'm okay now." She told Karen about the dream then, large blue eyes crinkling in wry amusement.

"Well, that's, wow ... that's incredible. Same number, same course? No wonder you rode so defensively. I take back what I said earlier, you did the right thing. But you are over it now, right? You can just carry on, right?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am. We handed 'em that one. Won't happen again, I promise." She hopped down and gave Benny to Carlos. She fished a couple of sugar cubes out of her pocket and fed them to the gelding. Reward time.

Chapter 14

Becky and Lark trotted around the miraculously quiet warm-up arena. They popped back and forth over the little vertical while Karen reassured Becky every step of the way.

“Okay, that’s good. Now let’s go over and check out your ring.”

They stood in front of the board, tracing the course with their fingers, checking the placement of the fences. This was the Long Stirrup division, the starting point for most hunter riders, uncomplicated, no surprises, just a soft, easy course.

Karen patted Becky’s leg. “Honey, there are only a few things you need to remember here. Use the entire arena, do not cut the corners and keep your pace even. Make a big opening circle on the left lead and give yourself plenty of room to establish your pace.”

Karen looked up at her and smiled. “This course is simple. Just don’t forget your closing circle. Okay, you’re on, honey, have fun.”

Becky felt her legs shake and for a moment thought she might throw up. She and Lark entered the ring at a trot. She took a deep breath, made a large opening circle and picked up the left lead. They established a soft, easy canter and advanced on fence one. She began the count down, *one, two, three*. They were over with a perfect spot. Lark maintained the steady pace, the count was there and they cleared the second fence.

She took Lark to the end of the arena and waited for her focal point. She made the turn for the diagonal line too wide and

they got a bit crooked, making their line to three a bit ragged. Lark adjusted her stride and four was a bit short, but still decent.

Going deep into the corner again, she set Lark up for the lead change, which they skipped into, and headed for the other diagonal line. They maintained an even pace, but five came up a bit short, causing Becky to bobble as Lark chipped. Six was very good and they used the rail all the way around. They turned toward the original line. Just fence two, then fence one and her first round was done. She made a polished closing circle to the cheers of the entire DT contingent. Melanie's rebel yell pierced the air.

The look of pride and joy on Becky's face as she exited the arena brought quick, sudden tears to Karen's eyes. "Oh, Becky, that was wonderful. I can't tell you how proud I am. Great first trip."

"Becky, oh honey, you were wonderful," said her mother, mouth wide, beautiful blue-green eyes reduced to slits. She introduced herself to Karen. "I'm Marty Edwards. So nice to meet you. Oh, isn't she the best?" She hugged Becky's knee, tiny tears gathering in the corner of each eye. "She was wonderful, wasn't she?"

Karen nodded in agreement. "She sure was, Marty. And she's just started. She'll be going into the flat class soon. We're confident, hey, Becky?"

"You, bet, Karen. That was just a first time jitters kind of thing. Over it now, yep. Hey, why did I chip at five? And I didn't keep my leg on, so we bulged on the turn, huh?"

"There's a lot to think about in there, Becky. Overshooting a turn happens a lot at first. You just need more mileage."

Becky turned to her mom, grinning. "So when did you get here? I looked for you earlier."

"I've been here for about twenty minutes, sitting in the bleachers with Blair and Jessi. I was afraid I'd make you nervous. Oh, Becky, I'm so happy for you."

"It was really good, wasn't it, Mom? I'm so glad you could make it. I wasn't scared," she said. Leaning down, she grinned at her mother. "Yeah, right. I always chew on my heart."

The rest of the kids gathered around Becky, praising her fine performance, lifting her up. They'd all been there and knew how much team support meant, especially in the beginning.

The announcer came on. "We are now ready to pin the Long Stirrup Hunters, round one. In first place..." He read out the names of the first seven winners. "Eighth place to 124, Meadowlark, ridden by Becky Edwards."

The DT kids went ballistic. Eighth, out of sixteen, in her first class at her first show. They weren't surprised. They knew a born rider when they saw one and Becky was born to ride. Now the judges saw it too.

Carlos brought Lance to the mounting block, holding him while Karen prepared to mount. The gelding looked around, not nervous, but definitely excited to be involved in so much activity. As he and Karen headed for the warm-up ring, he pranced, head high in the air.

The sun bounced off his burnished coat, glints of reddish highlights mingled with deep fudge. Four little socks glowed white in the sun, hooves polished to a silky sheen. Becky had braided his mane and tail for the hunter ring and he presented a stunning, gorgeous picture.

She stroked his neck, smiling at the admiring glances thrown their way. "It's okay, buddy, nothing to worry about. You're just fine." They moved into Lance's long, low trot, skimming over the ground as Karen limbered up his muscles. She saw several trainers pause to watch him work and nodded to herself in satisfaction. They came back to the walk and she stroked his neck again, reassuring the youngster.

They moved into his soft, rocking canter, flowing down the rail. When they reached the end of the ring, she made a diagonal turn towards the center of the arena and asked for a lead change which Lance gave her, and they glided back down the opposite rail again.

Blair acted as her grounds person, setting up a couple of practice fences for Lance to hop over. Soon, the fences were up to two feet six inches, the height they would be jumping in the Baby Green class.

After about ten minute's warm-up, Lance was ready to go

to work. They walked over to the hunter ring and checked the board. Like all hunter classes, this was a straightforward, easy ride, with no surprises at all.

“Next to see in the Baby Greens, 126, we have Sir Lancelot, Karen Evans in the irons. 126 on course.” Karen entered the ring at a trot, letting the judge see Lance’s spectacular movement. She sat a stride and asked for the right lead which he gave her. They made a beautiful opening circle and headed to the first fence on course, a little vertical.

“Easy, buddy, just like that, whoa, okay.” Karen closed her legs for the last three strides, and they nailed the first fence beautifully. They proceeded down to the outside line and Karen once again steadied him around the turn, maintaining the even pace, no changes in speed or impulsion. As Lance came around the corner, heading for the second fence, he locked in on it and increased his stride a bit.

“Whoa, buddy, easy there, no rush.” Karen saw her spot about five strides out and relaxed her hold on the reins slightly, letting Lance flow down through the combination. They had a good round so far and everything went as planned until they made the turn for the diagonal.

A water truck employed to keep the dust in the hunter rings under control parked under a shady tree at the bottom of the ring. Just as Lance approached, the driver decided to flush his tank. The gelding was about ten feet away when with a loud swishing sound, water sprayed out of the back of the truck in all directions.

All that strange activity was just too much for the young horse. He veered off the line, switched leads and swung around to face the truck. He came to a dead stop, ears almost touching, startled eyes wide. Hooves planted, he snorted in apprehension.

Karen closed both legs hard, pulled his head around in the direction it was supposed to be and resumed the canter, but the damage was done.

Lance settled down again somewhat, but his attention remained divided between the truck and the jumps in front of him. They finished their round well enough, but he kept one eye on the truck the whole time.

Karen shook her head. *Well, an inauspicious beginning, to*

say the least.

They finished their closing circle and came back to the walk. She glanced at the judge who gave her a consolation smile and a shoulder shrug, but that was all Karen would get out of this class.

“I’m sayin’,” said an angry Melanie. “What in the world was that guy thinkin’? Ya really had a nice ride goin’ there, too. What rotten luck.”

“Mom, for two cents, I’ll go over there and give him a piece of my mind,” Jessi said. “What a bummer. You guys were doing so good, too.”

“Hey, you know what, kids? That’s what they mean about *breaks*. This just wasn’t our day; nothing for it. And I have to confess, all things considered, he did pretty well. At least he didn’t buck.”

Karen hopped off, giving Lance a sugar cube and a pat. “It wasn’t so bad in there ‘til the world exploded, huh? You’re good boy. Lance.”

Carlos took Lance from her and led him back to the barn, patting his nose in sympathy.

“What a shame, Karen,” Joe said, slipping an arm around her slender waist. “He went so nice in there. He has wonderful style, really uses himself well. I have the whole thing on tape; it should be interesting to watch when we get home. Are you okay?”

“Oh, yeah, like I said to the kids, I’m disappointed, but it could have been a lot worse. I was surprised that he took it all in stride. Just came to a dead stop. Oh, well, he’ll be even better tomorrow.”

They headed back to the barn.

* * *

The DT contingent gathered around their setup, talking about their exploits and enjoying all the goodies the parents had brought them.

Shievon selected a thick, chewy brownie and grinned at Melanie. Staring at it in speculation, she took a bite and closed her eyes as the sugar rushed through her body. *Energy blast*. Her lids

flew open, golden eyes wide. She chuckled.

Melanie waved an apple in her direction and then turned to Becky. "Off to a fine start, aren't ya? Way to go, girl." She spread her fingers and made the victory sign.

Jessi sat next to Joe, telling him about the loose horse and the scare it had given everybody. She looked over at Becky and winked. It was just a funny memory now and they made a big joke out of it. Jessi's eyes crinkled at the memory. "Then this dog came shooting out of nowhere, right on his heels, barking like crazy. The horse went even faster, kicking out, squealing and being a real menace." She started to giggle. "Daddy, you should have seen the looks on the rider and trainer's faces as they went by. Boy, somebody's gonna get a spanking for sure."

"Oh, Becky," Marty said. "Were you there with the loose horse?" A look of concern clouded her face.

Becky gave a deprecating wave of her hand and nodded. "It was funny, let me tell you. He came flying by us and Lark just stopped. She's way too well behaved to want to get into that, but several other horses thought it looked like a pretty good plan, hey, Melly?" Becky giggled.

Melanie smiled back at her and nodded. "Benny's always ready to play."

Karen came around the corner of the barn just then with Steve Bianchi in tow. She nodded at the team, and then turned to Billy with a grin. "Hey, you want to go over to the barn and let Steve try Magic?"

"Sounds good to me. When?"

"We're done for the day. We can go now if you want." Karen glanced from Billy to Steve and nodded. "Okay, boys, let's go. Joe, I'll see you at home. Blair, can you and Jessi get dinner started? I'll only be about an hour or so." She waved good-bye and led the way to the parking lot.

Steve followed Billy's limo as it wove its way through traffic and climbed the hill, soon turning down the tree-lined driveway. Doubletree spread before them.

"Oh, man," Steve said under his breath, heart pounding as he got out of his car.

Magic stood in the crossies, tacked up and ready to go. Jose finished rubbing the coal black body, putting a shine on his gorgeous coat. Thanks to Karen's earlier call, the horse was ready to go. Magic chuckled as he saw Billy then shifted his curious gaze to the approaching stranger.

Steve walked up to Magic and extending his hand, offered the tasty carrot chunk resting in his palm.

"Hello, big boy. You're even more beautiful up close," he said, voice pitched low in that soothing singsong way of horsemen when they make friends with a strange horse.

Magic took the offering with gentle lips, finished the carrot in three bites and lowered his muzzle. He drew in deep breaths, ears working back and forth, tasting the new smells. He rested his forehead against Steve's chest, making light contact. Raspberry red nostrils flared as he drew in another deep breath.

Slowly he raised his head, sniffing Steve's cheek, his ear. Delicate lips gathered several strands of hair together, tasting them. A pink tongue popped out. Slowly, Steve reached his arms around the gleaming black neck. Magic lowered his head and they embraced.

Karen took two deep swallows, cleared her throat and turned to Billy.

"I think your horse is sold. Have you decided on a price yet? It should be in the same range as Bitsy was, maybe a bit more."

Billy looked at her, tears in his light blue eyes. In a shaky voice he replied, "Whatever you think is right. I'll leave that up to you. The most important thing to me is that Magic gets a great new friend." His voice quivered. "I think he just got him."

"How will you feel seeing them every day? Is that going to be a problem for you? Steve wants to stay here, at least short term."

"That's fine with me. It'll be easier than watching Magic hop a van and ride out of my life." Without another word, Billy got back into the limo and closed the door.

Karen shook her head in sympathy. *Oh, dear, rough times.*

Steve and Magic clicked and Karen felt confident they would be a good match. He was a quiet rider and the gelding enjoyed himself from the start. She classified Steve at intermediate level with enough skill to make the gelding a good choice. Karen

smiled. *Best combination in the world is a veteran horse and a talented, up and coming rider.*

Before the hour was over, Steve had put down a deposit check and told her the vet would be there in the morning. He had also decided to stay at Doubletree, at least for the time being, and see how he liked it.

Karen leaned on the trunk of the limo as she watched Steve and Magic. She took a deep breath and looked in the car. The darkened windows hid all but Billy's silhouette as he waited in stony silence. She looked away again.

These days were always hard, but he was doing the right thing for his horse. Magic was too young and talented to hang around the barn like an old pet. He deserved to belong to a show owner, and even though Steve would make a super replacement, it didn't make Billy feel one bit better.

Chapter 15

Catalina Eddy socked the coast in good and it looked like the trees were sweating. Big drops of water fell off the leaves, plopping to the ground in the early morning mist.

Becky worked in Lark's stall, getting the mare ready for their first class of the day. Leading her out into the aisle, she bent down to check the splint boots again. They were a loan from Blair and looked cool.

Hunters never showed with boots of any kind, but in equitation and Medal classes, they could wear them, front and back, just like the jumpers. No one knew why.

She finished the last of Lark's braids and stood back to admire the mare's silver coat glinting in the watery sunlight. Lark looked gorgeous and the braids, flat and tight, outlined the muscles in her long dappled neck.

Carlos held Lark at the mounting block as Becky hopped aboard. She looked at the display of colorful ribbons strung across the front of the canopy and grinned. She owned the brown and one of those blue ribbons fluttering in the breeze.

Becky slipped back to yesterday, reveling in the memories. The Long Stirrup Hunter Under Saddle class had been big. When they entered the ring, Karen said, "Keep to yourself as much as possible, don't hesitate to circle if you see trouble and watch the horses in front of you. Now, go do your best."

Becky walked into the ring and picked out an empty place along the rail. The call came to trot, and she'd barely nudged Lark when the mare moved into the trot. Two circuits of the ring and

they came back to the walk. Next was the canter and Lark stepped down into the stride as the announcer made the call. Perfect. The judge had been watching her when the call came and made a little notation on her pad.

Ahead of her, a dark brown mare picked up the wrong lead. The rider brought the horse back to the trot, causing a major logjam for the riders close behind and several other horses broke gait, adding to the confusion. Becky avoided the problem by crossing the arena and cantering down the far rail alone.

The judge looked at her in appraisal and made another notation on her pad. The call came to walk and then reverse and the whole thing repeated in the new direction. Then he asked them to line up.

Becky held her breath. Their performance had been faultless. "We are ready to pin the Long Stirrup Under Saddle class. Give the first place ribbon to...." she held her breath, "124, Becky Edwards and Meadowlark."

She could still hear the cheers ringing as she and Lark stepped out of line and walked to the judge to get their ribbon.

"Very nice job, young lady, very nice," the judge said with a smile as he handed Becky the blue ribbon.

"Senorita." Carlos tapped her foot, interrupting her reverie. "Karen wants you."

It was time for them to warm up. Still smiling, she waved back at Karen, slid her feet into the stirrups and started over to the ring.

The warm-up ring was a zoo again, but this time Becky was on the lookout for trouble. They worked on the flat for a while, performing the sitting trot, which was the only difficult test they had at this level. They practiced it without stirrups just in case. Lark's trot was so smooth, Becky never moved except in quiet rhythm with the gait.

The entire Doubletree contingent sat in the stands today, holding their collective breath, waiting to see if Becky could pull off another win. With her excellent equitation, their money was on a blue in this class.

The announcer called the Maiden Equitation class into the

ring and twelve little hopefuls proceeded up the rail at a trot. Becky thought she would use the time to her advantage, and rather than follow the line of riders, she did a fabulous sitting trot right across the middle of the arena, giving the judge an unobstructed view.

The judge watched her take a place on the far rail. The class had not officially started yet, but she saw what she saw.

“Maiden Eq riders, you are now being judged at the walk. All walk, please.”

The judge marked down all their numbers and nodding to the announcer, she held up two fingers.

“Trot, please, all trot.”

Becky had *read* so many books on how to ride an equitation class that she knew exactly what to do. Add to that the intense lessons she’d taken from Karen on a horse with a decade of show experience, and you could almost read her mind.

She oozed confidence. It was apparent in every move she made.

Becky kept her hands steady, maintaining light contact with the bit. Heels well down, calves quiet against Lark’s side, she gave a polished, skilled performance.

The judge saw it too.

Back nicely arched, spine straight, arms close to her sides, hands and heels perfect, she kept the gait at medium speed. When the call came to extend the stride, she still had plenty of trot left. They extended well, keeping the pace even and flowing.

“All walk, please, all walk.” Almost immediately came, “Canter please, all canter.”

Becky’s departure was textbook as they rolled into the rocking gait, smooth, steady. She rode like the *little cork on a quiet pond* that Karen always described.

Lark had a ball. She understood the words the announcer spoke and reacted to them simultaneously with Becky.

The announcer asked them to line up in the middle of the ring with their backs to him. As the judge walked to the front of each horse, she asked the rider to back up several steps. One by one, the riders complied. This was a rather difficult move performed in a precise manner, testing both the horse and rider.

Some riders pulled on the reins too hard, causing the horse

to raise his head high and the back-up was crooked. Others applied too much leg, causing the horse to step forward before it backed.

Becky made light contact with the reins as the judge nodded to her and applied even pressure with both calves. Lark lowered her head and took four precise, straight, even steps backward and halted squarely. The judge looked Becky in the eye and nodded. A smile played on her lips as she made a note on her sheet. She moved to the next rider.

The announcer's mike crackled slightly as he said, "Awards for this class, Maiden Equitation on the Flat, are presented by Seaside Pool and Spa. In first place, 124, Becky Edwards."

The DT cheerleading squad howled and screamed for her. They caused a commotion in the stands as they decamped, heading for the gate at a trot. Marty held the lead, big tears streaming down her cheeks, arms akimbo, determined to be the first to congratulate her daughter.

Becky collapsed on Lark's neck, hugging her, praising her. They stepped out of line and walked to the judge.

"Excellent ride, young lady. I expect to see more of you. Congratulations."

As Lark and Becky exited the gate, the Doubletree wave swamped them. Marty cried, jumping up and down and slapping Becky repeatedly on the leg. Karen did the same thing on her other side. They jerked her back and forth, so excited for her win they couldn't stand it.

Steve watched Becky from the sidelines, a shy smile on his lips. He stared up at her, mesmerized. When the crowd thinned, he approached her and laid a gentle hand on Lark's neck. "That was really great, Becky. Congratulations."

Delighted, she grinned at him, blushing with pride. "Thank you."

* * *

Blair and Shievon grinned at each other. Today they showed in the covered arena instead of the big grass field. This was the kind of course their horses excelled at, with lots of tight turns and only one long gallop, the last fence on the course.

Jessi panted hard for the very same reason. Foxie was so big it was difficult to hold her together for this kind of course. *Why is it that Jeff always seems to miss my wins and attend my losses? Just not fair.*

As Melanie came up behind her she said, "I can read ya from a mile off, Jessi. Cool it. Ya just need to keep her in front of your legs and get the *whoa* started a little quicker. She's kinda like steering a boat, a big boat. And remember, when ya don't go in with a mind to win, determined and all, then ya lose."

"Melly's right, honey," agreed Karen. "I know she's hard to hold together, but Foxie can cover the ground so well, you can make up for the turns if you'll just concentrate on staying calm." She patted her knee and said, "Come on, let's jump those fences over there."

Jessi felt better after a good school, her confidence restored. Even though the arena was much smaller than the grass field, there were still places she could gallop and make up time lost on the turns.

Karen had a hard and fast rule. Friends, family and non-riding DT's stayed in the stands. No exceptions. Everybody buzzing around the riders, chatting, encouraging and giving course suggestions was nerve wracking, making the already tense riders ready to scream. Besides, Karen wanted them focused on the upcoming class and she expected their undivided attention.

The Doubletree supporters attended in full force today, excited, ready to root for their team. Billy's parents, Tracy and Tom, sat in the second row, chatting with Becky and Marty. Tracy, incognito in huge sunglasses, wore a floppy-brimmed hat that effectively concealed her face from curious eyes. Right behind them, Melanie sat with Julia, Lonnie and the twins.

Shievon's parents and all four sisters sat in the first row, their million dollar smiles lighting up their faces.

Steve Bianchi sat alone on the top row. He smiled at Billy and got a wave in return. Steve gave him the thumbs up and grinned. His gaze shifted to Becky and he sighed.

This course would run under Table II, Section 2c and it

was the favorite of most jumper riders. If the first part of the course stayed clean in the time allowed, the rider moved right on to the speed portion, the jump-off round. No stopped clock, no waiting for the second whistle.

The kids gathered around Karen as the first rider started the course. They watched the hard turns, saw the drift and shook their heads as the horse stopped dead at the first element of the four-stride combination. As the rides got better and better, Karen commented on one particular option that worked very well, pointing out problems to avoid.

Blair was ready when they called her number. It never bothered her to go early. It was the hanging around that made her crazy.

"Next to see, 121, Windsom Angel, Blair Evans rides." As Blair entered the ring, she made quick eye contact with Kenny and smiled. He smiled back and blew her a kiss.

The whistle sounded and they were off. Angel covered the ground at speed and the first fence came up fast. They sailed over it, and Blair looked for her next focal point, the left wing of four-a.

As they came abreast of it, she turned her head and looked over her shoulder. Blair lifted her inside rein and Angel wrapped herself around the pressing left leg, and feet digging into the sand, she powered out of the turn. Over two in a flash, then a bending line galloping to three. *Whoa, Angel, easy.*

They made a hard right turn then, galloping on to the combination at four-a, over, then b and c were done. Maintaining their stride, they galloped on to five.

They rounded the short end of the arena and charged for the combination. Pop, pop, and they tore through it, racing down to eight. They hit it straight on, then a hard rollback turn left to nine. They were over the first part clean and now they really turned on the speed.

Blair sent Angel on and they dashed around to two, on to three, then the rollback turn to nine. It was so tight, Angel's driving hind legs threw little clumps of sand into the air. They galloped toward the combination, three quick jumps and they were through it.

Powering down to five, over, and now six, then seven. The

little mare opened up. Legs driving like pistons, she tore down the arena like an express train, heading for the final fence.

By this time, Angel was in full gallop and she jumped flat as she skimmed over the top of the fence. One trailing hind hoof smacked the top pole hard and popped it up out of the cups. It hung precariously on the edge for a moment and then settled back into the cups.

The crowd erupted in screams of delight as Angel and Blair tore through the timers. Rebel yells brought down the house.

The announcer chuckled as he said, "Looks like we broke the sound barrier today, folks. 121, Windsom Angel and Blair Evans in a time of 41.576. Now, that's the lead."

Karen grinned big as she strode over to Blair. "What a way to go. Sure did put down some incredible tracks in there, but you really lucked in, didn't you? Needed a little half-halt there. You could easily have had that rail."

They watched the next rider tear around the arena and shook their heads in dismay as rails fell at two fences and a refusal put them out.

Karen shook her head, glancing at her team. *They're charging around in there like a bunch of maniacs.*

Shievon and Jessi stood side by side, looking at each other, jaws slack, eyes wide. How the heck were they going to beat Angel? Only one answer, *go faster.*

"Next to see, 119, this is Sign The Card, Shievon Mahoney aboard."

Megan picked up a sedate canter as the whistle blew and headed for the first fence. In this portion of the round, you only had to go clean in the time allowed, and Shievon took her time. They completed the course clean and as they sailed over the last fence, she clamped both legs on the mare's sides.

They whizzed around to fence two, so tight they almost climbed it, but Megan put in a big effort and cleared it going away. On to fence three. An opening rein set up the diagonal jump and they flew on to nine. Next came the tricky combination. They were through it in a flash, over easy, tearing on to five, then six and seven. Clean again.

The last fence beckoned and now Megan ran. Body low to

the ground, frame lost, white legs a blur, she sped ever faster in response to Shievon's squeezing legs.

Shievon didn't see a spot and neither did Megan and everything came up way too fast. Their spot was short and they just kissed the top rail, which chose to hit the ground this time. Cheap rail and four faults.

"Shievy!" Karen exclaimed. She scowled as they came out of the arena. "Had just a little too much horse coming into the last fence, don't you think? I keep telling you kids ... it's like I'm talking to the wall. Man, a nice little half-halt about three strides out would have kept that rail up. It cost you the class. Worse still, you never saw a spot—neither did she, which is dangerous. You were totally out of control. How many times do I have to tell you not to *run*?"

Shievon looked down at Karen and nodded in humiliation. She snuck a peek at Billy, who made a sympathetic face at her and shook his head.

Karen intercepted the glance, not liking the look on his face. "Now listen here, Billy. You kids are getting wilder by the minute. I *do not* want a repeat of Shievon's ride. It's dangerous. I mean it; you don't have the experience to gallop in here."

Billy just looked at her and smiled. He had a plan. If it worked, he could win this and not have to run too much. Just the last fence. The announcer came on. "120 joins us now. This is Valley Girl. Billy Martin rides."

They made their opening circle and then the whistle blew. Just like yesterday, Bitsy reacted with curled tail and pricked ears. She raised her head, front end light, ready to go.

Billy rode the course tight, controlling the impulsion and psyching himself for the second half. As they cleared fence nine, he closed his legs and sent Bitsy on toward two. Tight turn, over they went.

He wanted to jump the next fence on the diagonal, avoiding the bulge to the outside that everyone else dealt with as they crossed the arena. He would cut down three strides doing that and still keep to the inside of the combination.

As they headed for five, he pushed Bitsy sideways with his inside leg until he had the perfect angle. An opening rein brought

her to five, six and seven set up just right, and now they thundered down the center of the arena, huge, ground-covering strides carrying them to the last fence at high speed.

Four strides out, he realized the strides were off. *Whoa, Bitsy, whoa.* She collected hard, ran out of room and chipped. Rocking back on her hocks, she jerked her knees to her muzzle and rocketed over the fence, bringing the crowd to its feet.

Her jump was so round and high that she jumped Billy up out of the saddle, causing him to lose both stirrups. They landed hard and he grabbed mane, frantic toes jabbing for the stirrups as he rocked in the saddle. He recovered one as they charged through the timers, and worked hard not to jab Bitsy with his unsupported heel. Sliding his foot into the other one, he let go of Bitsy's mane and settled. His smile spread into a wide grin when he heard the announcer's voice.

"120, Billy Martin and Valley Girl, with a time of 41.777, move into second place. A bit white around the lips, he came out of the arena and then looked at Karen in triumph.

Her face was a thundercloud as she called to him, "I'll be with *you* in a minute. Jessi's next."

Jessi sweated bullets, her mouth so dry she couldn't talk if she wanted to. She glanced up at Joe, who smiled, ready to film her round, and tried to smile back.

"Next to ride, 118, Foxie Lady, with Jessi Allen-Evans aboard." After watching so many of the rounds before her, she knew this course like the back of her hand. At least she wasn't going to go off course like before. The whistle blew and they cantered to the first fence.

Over, and on to two. Nice tight turn, and the big mare leaped easily over and they cantered on to three. The rest of course rode fine and as they approached fence nine, Jessi closed her legs and the huge mare accelerated, opening up her long, ground-covering strides.

Foxie had improved at the turns, anticipating Jessi's moves, what they meant, and what came next. They made the hard turn to two, then three, turn again, and nine was perfect. They galloped through the combination in style and then five. Six and seven followed, smooth and easy, and then they made the bending

turn across the arena.

Jessi did a great job of controlling the drift and pressed Foxie on. They tore along like a huge freight train as the mare's incredible strides carried them swiftly down to eight. They hit the spot, jumped it in stride and raced through the timers.

The announcer came on again. "Clean ride in a time of 43.376, moves 118, Foxie Lady and Jessi Allan-Evans into fourth place." The DT's screamed in delight while the rest of the audience clapped and hollered right along with them.

Jessi exited the ring with a smile like a neon bulb. *Clean, fast and best of all, on course. Okay.*

She looked towards the audience and grinned at Joe. Jeff took the steps two at a time as he hurried over to see her.

By now, the remaining competitors had divided into two camps. There was the *I'm not gonna kill myself for a ribbon* camp, defeated before they entered the ring, and the *I know I can beat that time* camp, truly scary to watch. The rides got wilder and the downed rails kept the ground crew hopping.

One horse stopped dead in the middle of the combination, launching his rider over the fence. He landed on his stomach, the air knocked out of him. He got up unassisted, wiped the dirt off his face and walked stiffly out of the ring with his properly chastened horse following close behind, making *I'm sorry* moves with his muzzle and hoping for a treat. *No sugar for you, my man.*

The remaining riders went, but no one came close to Blair's time, and soon the announcer said, "We want to thank Air Express Flowers for sponsoring this class. In first place, with a smokin' time of 41.575, 121, Windsom Angel, owned and shown by Blair Evans. Congratulations, Blair. Second place, 120, Valley Girl and Billy Martin, third to 201 Oliver Twist, Robert Farrell in the irons; fourth place, 118, Foxie Lady and Jessi Allan-Evans; fifth..."

The grooms took the horses back to the barn for a bath and a well-deserved snack.

Karen had the kids in a corner for a long overdue huddle. Face beet-red and hazel eyes narrowed to slits, she sounded off. She didn't bother to lower her voice as she read them the riot act; she

was talking to anyone within earshot. Billy, white-lipped, mortified and still scared from his near fall in the ring, nodded in agreement.

Shievon's head hung down, her cheeks flushed, both hands clasped in a tight ball.

Blair and Jessi stood just outside the group, knowing they weren't on the hot seat this time, but still expected to listen and take heed. Thrilled at being able to do so well in front of Jeff, Jessi grinned with pride. Blair was ecstatic with her win.

Karen shook her head. "So, enough. Just remember, *I'm* the trainer, and when I tell you not to run at the jumps, *I mean it*. Now, let's go out and check Melanie's course." She put an arm around their shoulders.

"Worst part of it for you, Shievy, was that your time was measurably faster than Blair's. Running cost you the win."

Karen turned to Billy. "*You* have no respect for the fences and neither does Bitsy. Only difference is, she has more mileage than you so she can get away with it. Get your neck broken that way. Not only are you jumping higher and wider than ever, but you're trying to do it at speed on a horse you've only owned a couple of months. Just wait, it will come."

Chapter 16

The Doubletree contingent followed Karen to the Grand Prix field. They took seats in the bleachers while Karen joined Melanie. They glanced at the board, then out into the arena, getting the fence placements and memorizing the course. It was very long with lots of galloping, and they looked at it in two sections. Clean first—then speed.

Carlos stood under a wide shade tree, holding Benny and checking his equipment one last time. All the keepers were in place. He dabbed on another coat of hoof polish and then adjusted the splint boots slightly as he waited to give Melanie a leg up. Crooning in Spanish, he wiped Benny's muzzle with a clean rag and stroked the silken neck.

Karen warmed them up and Benny was really on, his ears pricked, waiting for Melanie to tell him what she wanted. As they entered the on-deck tunnel, she saw the DT crowd perched on the edges of their bright blue stadium seats, ready to cheer her to victory. Tension ran high.

Karen stood in the tunnel with Melanie, verbally riding the course once more. As the announcer called her name, Karen slapped Benny's neck. "Go get 'em, kids."

They galloped out onto the field, the late afternoon sun casting deep shadows on the field. Several of the jumps had developed ghostly shadows on the ground, either in front or behind, making the fence look twice as wide as it really was.

The whistle blew as the announcer said, "On course now, 122, Inherit The Wind and Melanie Young, 122."

They picked up the left lead and advanced on the first

fence, a vertical with huge brown grocery-bag shaped wings. Over easy, and the two combination rode very well. They made the tight turn back to three, over the oxer with ease, three more quick strides and four was theirs, then five. Six followed nicely, then the round turn to seven, over the dolphin jump, and the close, quick turn to eight. Another tight turn took them to the triple combination, and they were through it easily.

They flowed on to ten and Melanie began to pick up the pace. The landing after this fence started the speed portion and she wanted to land going away. They scooted between fences, galloped to seven, and made the flowing turn back to the triple combination at nine. Pop, pop, pop, and they galloped back to eight, clearing it with inches to spare.

Now it was time to run, and she opened up his stride even more, leaning forward on Benny's neck in a two-point.

They tore to the big oxer and three strides out, Melanie sat up and did a half-halt, collecting him. The turf in the center of the fence was uneven, chopped up by previous hooves, so she stayed to the left of center. She had a plan and rocking Benny back onto his hocks, put in two tight strides and leaped over. Faster now, five more long strides, and he cleared oxer. They galloped on and the fence came up just right.

The turn to the last fence was so tight the audience gasped, but they cleared it with ease. Clean and fast. The cheers of the crowd erupted over half the show grounds. Two distinct male rebel yells rose above the din.

"122, Inherit The Wind and Melanie Young move up into first place in a time of 46.811."

There were twenty some riders left to see, so the kids decided to go back to the barn for a soda and a snack. The class pinned about forty-five minutes later, and Melanie had done well enough to hold onto third. She couldn't have been happier. In this division on the Grand Prix field, it was an honor to place. No mercy ribbons here. Every one was well earned.

* * *

The horses lounged in their stalls, full water and feed

buckets in front of them, big pillow wraps, smelling of strong Absorbine liniment cushioned their tired legs. They hung over their stall doors, munching from their hay nets and having a chat.

Benny, nickered Angel in a conciliatory tone, you did really well today. Good job.

Hey, Angel, thanks. You did great too.

She lifted her lip at him. You're welcome. You deserve it. Thank you back.

Oh, Please! Megan snorted rudely through her nose at both of them and pulled her head in over the door. She was still mad at herself for pulling that last rail and in no mood to hear Angel being nice to Benny. She snorted again, hard, poked her head over her door and went back to her hay net.

Foxie turned toward the little mare and chuckled. You really need to jerk your knees up more, old girl. It was your fault you pulled that last rail.

Megan struck her stall door with her front hoof and lifted her muzzle in a sneer. What? You? You of the mack-truck moves? Don't you dare go telling me how to jump, you moose. We were just going too darned fast is all. I couldn't help it. Shievon kept squeezing me. It was her fault, so just shut up.

Foxie's ears went flat to her skull and she bared her teeth in response, running them along the top edge of her stall door. Moose? Make that a blue ribbon winning moose. Huh.

Retreating to the interior of her stall, she turned her butt to the door. Foxie knew how to make a political statement when it was called for. Backing up until her butt was against the stall door, she curled her long, shiny black tail over her rump and dropped a steaming load right in the aisle. Shut up back

Carlos took one look at the pile and went to get the apple picker. "Nice job, Foxie," he said as he scooped it into the muck bucket.

Chapter 17

The kids milled around the parking lot, trying to decide where to go for something to eat. They finally agreed on Chevey's, a cool Mexican place just up the road from Showpark. The restaurant was busy and it took a couple of minutes for the staff to set up a big table.

Jeff had his arms around Jessi as she leaned back against him. Shievon and Billy held hands, deep in conversation about their rides and throwing covert glances at Karen.

Karen and Joe grinned at Tracy as she described her feelings at seeing Billy ride his first jumper course. "Man, I've never been so scared in my whole life. When he started for that last fence, I knew what they were going to do. I could see it in his face. It was so exciting, my heart stopped beating. This is very different from the Medal division, Karen. I think I need a stopwatch."

Tracy's well-known voice rose just enough that people at nearby tables stopped talking. Eyes searched the faces of their fellow diners as they tried to find the famous soap star.

Joe chuckled. "I know exactly how you feel. The first time I saw Blair ride a jumper round, I was almost sick to my stomach."

Tom nodded in agreement and they all laughed.

Sometime during the day, Becky and Steve had struck up a friendship. They chatted about Magic and Steve's excitement at becoming a Doubletree teammate. When the host came to escort them to their table, Steve took her lightly by the arm and followed him. The rest of the group fell in behind.

Half the customers still wore show gear, and the kids waved hello as they recognized fellow competitors. They bantered

back and forth, laughing and making snide comments in return.

The table segregated as usual, parents at one end, kids at the other.

Steve took the end chair, holding the one next to him for Becky. She slid into it and smiled as Melanie sat next to her. Blair sat on Steve's other side, grinning wickedly at Kenny over some private joke. She leaned over and planted a kiss on his cheek, causing him to blush.

A momentary hush fell over the room as Richard Spooner, reigning equestrian heartthrob and leading Grand Prix rider of the West Coast, entered the restaurant, wife on his arm.

"Look out," Melanie said, nodding at Jeff. "Grab Jessi. Richard just walked in the door."

Jessi twisted in her seat, eyes alight, lips parted. She turned back to Melanie. "Oh, man, he's so cute. Did you see him and Robinson today? Wiped 'em up. Let's go over and say hi."

"Jessi," Melanie said, shaking her head. "He positively runs when he sees ya comin'. He's gonna think about a restrainin' order here soon."

The kids laughed aloud. They all knew about Jessi's crush on Richard and teased her every chance they got.

Jeff put his arm around Jessi's shoulders and pulled her close. "She doesn't look much like a stalker to me."

"Looks are deceiving." Billy turned to Tracy and shook his head, an impish grin on his lips. "See, Mom, that's how it happens. They're all the same." Knowing his opinion of his mother's fans, the kids grew quiet a moment, waiting to see what Tracy would say.

She glanced at her son and then grinned. "I love my fans."

The kids chatted, leaning back as the busboy brought baskets of chips with individual little bowls of the best salsa in town. Starving, they dove in. The waiters returned with their drinks, took their orders and headed to the kitchen.

"I heard back from the vet today, Billy," Steve said. "Magic passed with flying colors. We need to get together after dinner and make the final exchange." He looked down for a minute then back at Billy. "I know this is hard for you, but I can tell you one thing, he'll have a great home with me, promise."

"Thanks, Steve. Knowing that makes it a lot easier, that's

for sure. He's a great horse."

There was a momentary pause and then Blair said, "Where did you used to ride, Steve? Anywhere local?"

"I used to train at Haster Valley Farms 'til they lost their lease. About that time, maybe a month ago, my old horse had another colic episode and we had to put him down. He'd already had surgery and the vet said he couldn't take another." He swallowed and cleared his throat.

Colic. It was the most universally feared word in the entire horse world, whether you owned expensive show horses or back yard buddies. It was an equal opportunity killer.

Melanie leaned over and looked at Steve. "I'm so sorry. It's the worst, huh?" Sympathy glazed her blue eyes.

He nodded in agreement. "The worst."

The arrival of waiters laden with steaming dishes ended the somber conversation. Happy sounds went up and down the table as they checked out their dinners. Silence reigned for the first couple of minutes as they satisfied their hunger pangs. Slowly, conversation resumed. Classes were re-ridden, re-analyzed and critiqued to death.

Billy teased Blair about how close he and Shievon came to beating her. "Remember, tomorrow is another day," he said, reducing the girls to a fit of the giggles. The giggles ended when they saw the look on Karen's face.

Tom glanced at his only son and then turned his eyes to Karen. "He has a flair for the dramatic, doesn't he? Can't imagine where he gets it."

Tracy reached over and tweaked his chin, that legendary smile lighting up her beautiful face. "I think he comes by that naturally, honey," she replied, blatantly batting her eyes at him. Tom chuckled.

As the heavy food hit, they turned their thoughts to sleep. They had another hard day in front of them tomorrow.

They said good-bye, piled into various cars, and drove off into the night.

Steve arrived at the show grounds early on Sunday morning, entering the empty lot just a bit after six. He pulled his white Fiat up to the side of their barn, got out and locked the doors. As he headed for the stalls, his heart fluttered, increasing its tempo.

It always happened when he got around horses, his or anybody else's. He loved everything about them, their smells, the salty-sweet tang of their coats, the fabulous aroma of fresh hay and clean shavings. He'd felt that way as far back as he could remember.

The horses greeted him with soft little nickers, inquisitive heads turned in his direction. Large brown eyes followed his movements, nostrils drinking in his scent. Their ears flicked back and forth, hoping for a treat.

Lark poked her head over the door and chuckled at Steve as he approached. He reached out and stroked the velvet gray muzzle, offering her a cube of sugar. She took it gently, her eyes half closed as the sweet treat filled her mouth.

Steve plopped on the bench, picked up a copy of *The Chronicle of the Horse* and leafed through the east coast stats for this year's Medal winners, especially the Maclay. He leaned back on the bench and watched the groundskeepers dragging the arenas. Tractors whizzed around in all directions, preparing the footing for the start of the day's events.

The grooms talked in rapid Spanish, laughing and playing around as they worked. Light-hearted now, they teased each other, bickering with rival barns as to who had the best horses, bragging about the number of blue ribbons fluttering from their setups. With the arrival of trainers, owners and riders, the mood changed. Their actions became competent and professional.

Steve looked at his watch again and hoped Becky would get there soon. He'd wanted to talk with her after dinner, but the night ended before he knew it. Stuff like that happened to him all the time. It was the price he paid for being shy.

A loner by nature, content with his own company, he'd never considered himself much of a people person. Becky was so comfortable to be around, so easy to talk to and make friends with, he felt like he'd known her forever.

Best, most important of all, she loved horses. Besides, she

was so cute, he wanted to get to know her better. He thought about those gorgeous aqua eyes with their thick, curly lashes and his stomach trembled. And that hair. He *loved* red hair and hers was so bright, so full of life, with those soft curls bouncing around her face, he knew if he touched one, it'd be softer than silk.

As though a trumpet sounded, the parking lot came alive, jerking him out of his reverie. The sound of so many car doors slamming shut at once sounded like firecrackers. He rose and walked down the aisle, hoping to see Becky.

She and Karen talked as they made their way to the setup. They carried a cooler, one of them on each end, laughing and struggling under the weight.

As Steve came into sight, they called hello. Seeing their burden, he hurried toward them. "Gosh, here, let me help with that."

Becky and Karen took one handle while he held the other. They laughed their way down the aisle, the heavy cooler bumping against their legs as they talked. With a sigh of relief, they placed it on the table.

"Steve, this thing is filled with all kinds of goodies," Karen said with a sigh. "Wait 'til you see what we have. Well worth carting it over."

"Wow, this is super," Steve said, as he accepted a sandwich from Karen. "Mmm, this is delicious. Did you make these, Becky?"

She giggled and blushed. "I make a great bran mash, but this is way beyond me. Lena made all this."

"Who's Lena?" he asked, taking another bite of his sandwich.

Becky had a mouthful of cinnamon roll, so Karen answered.

"She's our housekeeper. Blair's mom died when she was only five and Lena took care of her and Joe. Now she takes care of Jessi and me, as well." She grinned and popped a strawberry in her mouth.

Blair and Jessi rounded the corner just then, took one look at the cinnamon rolls and salivated. "Aha," they cried in unison.

"I knew I smelled these this morning. Isn't Lena just the best?"

“Delicious.” Eyes closed to slits, Jessi popped a corner of the cinnamon roll into her mouth and purred. “Mmm.”

The tide had turned and the once-quiet show grounds buzzed with activity. Several riders, anxious to beat the morning rush, hacked their horses around the arena, getting ready to jump.

“Hey, Becky,” Steve said, “let’s see how Lark is doing. She said hello to me when I first got here this morning so I gave her some sugar. I think she remembers me.”

“She’s a little beggar, isn’t she? Sells her chuckles for sugar.”

They walked down the aisle to Lark’s stall.

“Are you excited?” He smiled at Becky, suddenly shy again.

“Yeah, but I’m maintaining.” She shrugged. “This is my first show, y’know.”

“Do you get her ready or do the grooms do that for you?”

“We do most everything for ourselves when we’re home. But here at the shows, Karen wants us to leave the grooms alone to do their jobs. We’re supposed to concentrate on showing. She’s really big on being focused, y’know. She’s big on clean, too. Presentation is important, ‘cause we represent her and Doubletree.”

She looked up at him, hesitant. “After the show’s over, everyone gets together at Melanie’s for a barbeque and a general rehash of the weekend. I know you’d be welcome if you’d like to come.”

Steve looked at her and smiled. “How cool. Are you going to be there?”

She ducked her head, bashful for some reason, and nodded. “Wouldn’t miss it for the world. Do you want to come?”

“You bet,” he nodded in agreement. “Thanks a bunch. You can count me in.”

* * *

Karen smiled at Becky and gave her an approving nod. “Okay, Becky, very good. Now come at that again from this direction. Keep the pace even and sit quiet. Okay, here we go, one, two, three. Great. Do it just like that in the class. Let’s hurry over to

your ring. They've got an open card for the jumpers and we have four in that class, so I want to get them spaced out right. Let's see if I can bump you up in your order of go. I've just gotta figure out how to clone myself and then we'll be just fine. See you over there."

She turned to Steve. "Can you stay with her?" she asked, glancing at her newest team member.

"I'll walk over with her, Karen. No problem."

Karen grinned and sprinted across the ring, heading for the starter's gate.

Steve and Becky walked along the tree-shaded path to the hunter ring, dodging around golf carts, bikes and kids in strollers.

"How do you feel, Becky?"

"Just super," she said between clenched teeth. "Great."

Surprised at her tone, he glanced up at her face. They might not know each other that well, but it didn't take a long-time friend to see how she felt. One look at her face told it all. Her eyes had narrowed to slits, her breathing hard and shallow. She'd sucked her normally full bottom lip into her mouth. Two bright red spots of color stained her pale cheeks.

He put on his most supportive smile and nodded in encouragement. "Hey, Becky, you're going to do just fine. Remember yesterday? You were great."

She shuddered. "Yep, remember yesterday just fine. Today, I think I'm gonna hurl. Really." She took several deep breaths while various shades of pink played over her face. In moments, the color receded and her complexion took on a ghastly shade of gray. Her eyes had dilated to black, her breathing quick and thready. They arrived at the board just in the nick of time and Steve started pointing out the course.

"Look here, easy one, Becky. Single, to the outside line, to the diagonal line, far outside line and back out over the other single. Cool, right?"

Becky's face recovered its ivory whiteness and her pupils contracted to normal. Breathing deep and regular, she and Steve memorized the course together.

Then Karen was there, a reassuring smile on her face. "If you're ready, the starter said you could go next. This is an easy one,

right? Pick up a soft left lead out of your circle and establish a flowing pace. Ride straight to the end of the arena after one and don't cut the corners anywhere. Use the whole ring. Same thing when you get to the diagonal. Don't let yourself get sucked into turning too soon. Just remember your focal point, maintain your pace and have fun."

"Next to see, 124, Meadowlark and Becky Edwards, 124 on course."

Becky blinked as Steve patted her leg. He gave her an encouraging smile and nodded. "Good luck."

They entered the ring at a smooth trot, made a large opening circle at the canter and advanced on one. The count was there, one, two, three, and they jumped it out of stride. Becky continued to the end of the arena, made a smooth turn to the outside line and two was there. Six easy, measured strides and they were out over three. Becky kept on the rail, waiting for her focal point. There it was, and she looked towards the diagonal line.

Lark saw it too and accelerated slightly out of the turn, hit four just right. Six more strides and five was theirs.

Now easy, watch for the point. This turn is tricky.

They began the turn just as a white paper bag blew into the ring and wrapped itself around the mare's hind leg. This was too much, even for the normally unflappable Lark. She kicked out and spun, trying to see what had attacked her.

Becky sailed over Lark's shoulder and landed on her feet. She let go of the reins, took two staggering steps backward and sat on her butt. Mortified, she rose immediately, waving off the steward and the EMT.

Lark stood next to her, quivering. Becky took the reins, patted the mare's neck and walked out of the ring.

The crowd clapped for her courage as well as the great round she'd had until the fall. The team met her at the gate, full of sympathy, sharing similar stories.

Karen slipped her arm around Becky's shoulder and gave her a hug. "Miserable break, honey, and you had such a super ride going. Remember that, and not the stupid piece of paper. That was just a fluke."

Blinking back tears, she pursed her lips and shrugged. "I

know, darn it, and that's the worst part. What a great trip we had going and then to blow it with a paper bag. And poor Lark." Becky turned to stroke the mare. "She was scared to death, poor girl."

"Oh, Becky, that was a super round. I'm so proud of ya, way to go," Melanie said. "Forget the fall. Just remember that diagonal line, girl; sweet. Ribbons don't matter."

"What a bad break for such an awesome round, Becky," Shievon chimed in. "That last line was fabulous."

* * *

"I *hate* this table," Jessi whined in dismay as she looked at the course board. Table II Sec. 2b. After the power section, the rider had to wait for the whistle to blow a second time before they could proceed to the speed round. "It's like ... I don't know, I lose the flow waiting for the whistle. This table usually makes me go off course, too. Man."

Blair nodded in agreement. "This one is not my favorite either. Oh, well, everyone has to do the same thing, so I guess it's fair." She memorized the first part of the course, tracing the path with her finger, glanced at the field again and shrugged.

We may not like this Table either, but the course isn't so bad, even if we are back on the grass again. The tight turns and short gallops played to Angel's strengths. *Hmm, maybe this won't be so bad after all.*

"This one's easy, Jessi," Shievon said, as they watched the first horse enter the arena. "Just stay at the bottom of the field and when the second whistle blows, go right back over the combination to the triple, then four, roll back to five and you're done. At least this one's not too long."

As luck would have it, their order of go was almost back-to-back and Karen had her hands full. Their schools went well and Shievon wore a huge grin as she stood at the gate. She winked at Billy as she entered the ring.

"Next to see, 119, Sign The Card, Shievon Mahoney the rider. 119, on course."

The whistle blew as they started their circle, and they advanced to one in a controlled medium canter. Over easy, opening

rein, and back around to two. Three came up easy, and they rounded the turn for the triple combination. Piece of cake, over, and there's five. Rollback again to six, seven was equally easy and they approached the last two fences on course. They went clean and Shievon circled, waiting for the whistle. She circled twice more, finally looking over at the starter. *What, taking a coffee break?*

When it finally blew, she and Megan glided into a full gallop. They came into nine strong, over, then on to eight. They made a tight turn to the triple combination and Shievon started the reverse in mid-air, bringing Megan's nose around to her knee.

Closing legs drove Megan ever faster and they whizzed over seven. Another rollback, started in mid-air, brought them to the last fence with two strides to get straight. Megan jerked her knees up and sprang into the air. Over clean, they raced through the timers to the screams of the audience.

The announcer chuckled at the crowd reaction. "120, Sign The Card gallops into first place with a resounding lead in the time of 39.587. Now that's the time to beat."

Shievon's breath came in sharp shallow gasps. She could only smile in response to Billy's, "Shievy, that was the best round you've ever put in. Unbeatable, I think."

"Super job in there, Shievon," Karen agreed. "See, that's how to set the pace and still keep control of the course. Good girl."

Karen glanced at the rest of her team. *Oh, boy, here we go again.* She saw the set expressions and knew what each of them planned.

Billy was next and as the announcer called his name, he took a quick look at the board.

"Remember our agreement, Billy? Do not run. Play by my rules, okay?" Karen stared at him.

He nodded, face grim. "I won't run, I promise."

"Next to see, 120, this is Valley Girl, Billy Martin rides."

He rode the first part of the course just the way Shievon had. It was power first and then speed. Bitsy was so focused, so intent on the fences that he had a little trouble rating her as they circled at the bottom of the field, waiting for the whistle. He reached down and stroked her neck.

"Hey, girl, easy, easy."

The whistle blew and they were off. They galloped down to nine, over, eight, over, *whoa, Bitsy, whoa*, and he made the turn for the triple. They charged on to five and did a crisp but slightly wide turn back to six. He half-halted again, *steady girl*, over, now seven, clear, *easy, easy*, and they made another not-so-tight turn back to the final fence. Over clean.

“120, in a time of 44.227, Billy Martin and Valley Girl move into fifth place.”

Billy was more than satisfied with his round. It'd been fast, but controlled. He wasn't anxious to tear at the fences again, but when the time came, he knew Bitsy was ready. The fear he felt yesterday when he lost his stirrup still gave him shivers and Karen's outrage at his performance was all it took. He decided to follow her instructions down to the end. She was his trainer. She'd tell him when he was ready to run.

Chapter 18

Jessi waited on deck, chewing on the thumb of her glove while her stomach did the jig and little trickles of perspiration ran down both sides of her cheeks. *All these tight turns.*

She leaned over and stroked Foxie's neck and nodded to Jeff who waved at her from the stands. She saw Joe fix his camera on her as she entered the ring and smiled.

"On course, 118, Foxie Lady and Jessi Allen-Evans rides."

Jessi knew they'd have no trouble doing the first part of the course in the allotted time, so they cantered around, not much faster than a hunter pace, clean through the first part. It seemed that they'd barely cleared the last fence when the whistle blew, directing her on to the speed portion.

How sweet is that, Foxie? No hanging around. We're off.

As they accelerated, Foxie's huge strides carried them back around to nine, then eight and the turn to the combination was excellent.

She set up for the triple, pop, pop, pop and they were through clean. Jessi sat up over the top of the final fence, looked over her shoulder and made a super turn to seven. Another turn in mid-air brought them back around to three, over, and they tore through the timers to resounding cheers.

Jessi slapped Foxie's neck as tears filled her eyes. *Good girl, Foxie. Look what we did. Clean, clear and no going off course.* That was enough of a victory for her. She grinned at the screaming DT kids waiting for her at the gate.

"Hey, Jessi, that was wonderful. You had a great ride

through the combination,” Blair said, a happy grin on her face. “Good job.”

“I’m so proud of ya, Jessi. My cheeks hurt from grinnin’. Ya looked great out there.” Jeff smiled at her, his pride clear on his handsome face. He patted her knee several times in excitement.

The announcer came back. “118, in a time of 43.987, Foxie Lady and Jessi Allen-Evans move into fourth place. Next on course, 121, this is Windsom Angel, Blair Evans in the irons. 121.”

They copied the previous rides, keeping well within the allotted time, but not galloping. Like Jessi, the whistle blew for Blair almost immediately. She accelerated to nine, clear, and then on to eight. The bending line to the triple rode great and they started the tight rollback turn to seven.

As Angel landed, her inside supporting hind leg slipped out from under her. She threw her head and neck up in an effort to regain her balance, hind legs vainly seeking solid ground. One foreleg tried to brace but failed and the mare went down in a heap of wildly flailing legs.

Blair sailed through the air, landed with a thud and slid ten feet or so to the right, clear of Angel’s frantic struggle to rise.

Karen and Kenny raced into the ring, the EMT right behind them. Karen fell to her knees next to Blair, calling her name.

Kenny froze, holding his breath. *She’s not movin’.* Blair. As he knelt down, the EMT said, “Step away from her, please. Let me get to her.”

They backed off as the EMT unfastened his little bag. Blair moaned and opened her eyes, glancing from Kenny to Karen.

“What the heck happened?” she asked, groggy. “Is Angel okay?”

Karen heaved a sigh of relief and nodded. “She’s just fine, Blair, Carlos has her. She got up and walked off sound. I don’t think she’s hurt. But how about you? Are you okay, honey?” Karen stared at her pale, ashen face.

Blair pulled herself to a sitting position and took a deep breath. “I think I’m okay, too. Just got the breath knocked out of me.” She glanced around and shook her head. “What happened? I thought I had a good turn going there. Did I ride it wrong?”

Taking Kenny’s arm, she struggled to her feet and then

winned as she felt the throbbing in her ankle.

“Ouch,” she said. “Hey, guys, let me sit down again, oh, owie, and let’s get this boot off before my leg swells. I’m not letting anyone cut off my new Dehner’s.” She flinched as they pulled the zipper down and unlaced the boot. She held her breath, waiting for the pain, but it came off without too much trouble.

Kenny scooped her up in his arms and carried her off the field. Karen grabbed the boot and followed him, with the EMT bringing up the rear.

“I was so scared when ya went down, I saw my life flash before my eyes, honest.” He set her on the ground and hugged her tight.

Joe tore around the corner of the starter’s gate, his face a mask of dread. He’d been on the far side of the arena when they fell and his sprint to reach her had turned his face a strange combination of colors.

“Blair, are you all right? What happened?” Joe gasped, panting from fear and exertion.

“I don’t know, Dad, her legs just went out from under her, I guess. It shouldn’t have happened. She’s got her studs on, right? Have you ... oh, there she is.”

Carlos led Angel over to them. There was a little rivulet of blood on her cannon bone, just above the top of her boot, where the stud hit her when she went down. A long gash ran the length of the boot, marring the leather. A grass stain smeared her entire haunch green, but other than that, she seemed fine.

“Well,” Joe said, color flooding his face. “I have it down for posterity.” He patted the video camera and swallowed a couple of times. “Should be interesting watching. We’ll get to see exactly what happened.”

Kenny carried Blair to the setup and placed her on the bench.

Karen went into the tack room, returning in a moment with the first aid box. She pulled out a fresh cold-wrap, broke the seal and shook the bandage back and forth. It froze in seconds.

“Here, honey, let me wrap your ankle. If we can stop the swelling before it gets too bad you should be okay in a couple of days.” As Karen removed the sock she said, “Oh, Joe, look at this.

Does she need an x-ray?" Streaks of blue and green shot up from the base of Blair's swollen foot.

"Absolutely. Let me bring the Escalade around and we'll get her over to the ER right away." He pulled Karen to her feet and gave her a reassuring hug. "Honey, she's going to be fine. Kenny and I can take care of this. You go ahead and finish up with the kids. Melanie still has to go, right? We'll be just fine. I'll call you the minute we hear anything."

She had no choice but to agree. Kenny settled Blair in the back seat and climbed in front with Joe. She waved as they drove away.

* * *

Karen stood in the warm-up ring with Melanie. Their school had been great and they felt sharp, anxious to go. She was six trips out. Melanie looked out at the course and ran a finger around her tight collar, a preoccupied expression on her face.

Karen's cell phone rang. "Hello, Joe, how's Blair?" A happy smile spread across her face. "Oh, I'm so relieved. That was such a scary thing to watch. I'm still tasting my breakfast." She paused, listening. "Okay, honey, see you later. Bye." She smiled at Melanie's questioning look.

"Blair's going to be just fine. It's a small sprain and she should be back riding by the end of next week if we're lucky. So, after that little adventure, I want you to keep your wits about you, right? You're new into this Grand Prix field stuff, Melly. Ride to win but don't kill yourself doing it."

They moved into the holding tunnel, watching as the horse in front of them took down one fence after the other.

"122, Inherit The Wind joins us now, Melanie Young in the irons. 122 on course."

Karen watched them gallop out onto the huge field, unable to hold back her smile. The afternoon sun turned Benny's bright chestnut coat to burnished copper. The white of his legs rose well beyond his leather boots and the beautiful face with its broad white blaze told of courage, intelligence and breeding. Small ears flicked back and forth, listening to Melanie. They waited for the whistle

and when it blew, they picked up a smart gallop.

Karen caught her breath. They made a gorgeous picture as they approached the first fence, a huge vertical. The gelding took a wide-eyed look at the dancing dolphins that served as wings.

Squeeze Melly, squeeze.

Benny stood back, jerked his knees up to his ears and cleared it with inches to spare. The look on the gelding's face said he feared they might jump up and bite him. Karen grinned.

They continued with a controlled ride, getting all the spots, making tight turns and powering out of the corners, but saving the best for last. As they cleared the final fence on the power portion of the round, the second whistle blew and Melanie opened up the stride, extending the gallop.

Karen nodded as Melanie set Benny up, jumped and started the rollback turn in mid-air. They landed going away and she nodded in approval as Melanie closed her legs even more, urging the gelding ever faster. Pride filled her heart along with gratitude for the opportunity to train such a talented pair. Every trainer dreamed to be so lucky.

Set him up, whoa, don't get flat. Good spot, there you go.

Melanie did a soft half-halt, and they were through it in a flash, accelerating again.

Look, Melly, don't take your eye off. Wait, wait ... okay.
Now.

Benny charged down the line, high white legs a blur, neck outstretched as he galloped.

Karen focused on the gelding as Melanie increased the pace. She held her breath and whispered. "Whoa, Benny, whoa."

Four strides out, Melanie half-halted twice and rocked Benny onto his hocks. They leaped high into the air, made a tremendous effort and jumped clear.

Karen started to holler before they cleared the timers.

Fantastic ride. I couldn't have asked for better. The crowd screamed in delight.

"122, Inherit The Wind with Melanie Young in the irons, moves into first place in a time of 44.246. Now, that's the time to beat, folks, and there are only four riders left to do it. Don't go away, Melanie."

The remaining riders chased her hard, but rails or the time clock put them out of the money.

Melanie and Benny stood on the Grand Prix field, silhouetted in the setting sun, accepting the blue ribbon. The DT's went berserk, cheering for their shining stars; the rest of the crowd joined in.

* * *

The savory smells of barbecue wafted through the trees. The chilly evening breeze played in the morning-glories and bougainvillea that edged the large patio of Melanie's house. The sunset left the sky red and large puffy clouds, white in the center and edged with pinkish gold, approached from the sea. Soon the moon would rise and the stars would perform their nightly ritual, winking in the black velvet sky. Twilight fell.

Rock music played in the background, just loud enough to hear without annoying the adults in the group. It was a hard-fought compromise and someone was always sneaking into the den to adjust the volume.

Julia supervised the food prep, watching as Lena and Sally worked over the grill. "Y'all watch close, y'hear, and don't let the fire get so hot it burns my ribs. They catch fire at the drop of a hat, y'know. Makes 'em get as bitter as gall. An' the corn. Ya gotta study 'em or all the little leaves get black, but the corn is still raw. I don't know, girls, does that look like enough food? Where are the rolls?" Distracted, she shook her head, frowning. "An' the fruit?"

Sally shook her head, reaching out with a tender hand. "Now, Miz Julia, why don' ya jus' go on an' visit with the comp'ny. I'm sure Lena an' me'll do jus' fine. Come out to check things from time to time, but go on now, honey, an' have some fun. It's been a stressful day." Sally patted her arm, gently turning her towards the approaching guests. "We'll be jus' fine here."

Julia nodded at the grill and smiled. "Well, then, I believe I'll go have a visit with the guests. Thanks, Sally."

Sally looked over at Lena and shook her head. "Miz Julia sho' did get spooked by Ms. Blair's fall. When she come home t'day, I thought somebody died for sure. She was all pinched-in

lookin', an' white 'round the lips. Po' lil thing."

"Madre Dios, I know what you mean," Lena said. "Joe swears he sprouted a new crop of gray hairs over it. I'm glad I wasn't there. Horses scare me to death anyway, they're so big."

Sally nodded, a knowing smile on her face. "If it isn't one thing with kids, it's another. Ya can count on it, though, it's gonna be somethin'." She went to the kitchen to get the rolls and the platter of fresh fruit.

Still stressed from watching the accident, Julia shivered at the memory and closed her eyes. She loved Blair like her own child and seeing Angel fall had given her a bad scare. She remembered the stricken look on Kenny's face as he raced to Blair's side. She imagined something like that happening to Melanie and shivered again.

"Lonnie, I think I'll have a nice glass of iced tea. Extra mint, please."

"Here ya go, Jules," he said as he handed her the glass. "Ya feelin' any better, honey? Ya still seem a little nervous to me. It sure was a scary moment, wasn't it?"

She looked up at him, gray eyes clouded with poorly concealed fear. She took a long swallow of her drink and nodded. "Do ya think there's any chance at all that we can get the girls interested in dressage? Seems a lot less dangerous to me."

Lonnie snorted in reply. "Not a chance in the world. This is what they live for. I wouldn't even bother to bring it up."

"How about tennis? Do ya...." The look on his face stopped her in mid-sentence.

"Now, Jules, listen. They've been doin' this forever, my goodness, since they were tiny. This is the first time I ever remember the horse fallin'. Kids yes, left an' right in the beginnin', but not the horse."

Lonnie sipped his drink, remembering. "I have to admit, it scared me good, too. My heart stopped dead in its tracks. Honest. But these kinda things are freak accidents. Just part of the game, I suppose." He patted her hand in reassurance and smiled.

Julia sighed. "It's the jumpin', Lonnie. Now saddle seat is very elegant and refined, very ladylike...."

Lonnie threw his head back and roared.

The kids gathered around the family room, talking. Becky sat on the floor next to Steve. Shievon and Billy sat across from them.

Blair stretched out on the chaise, her bandaged foot resting on a pillow. Kenny fussed around her like a mother hen, bringing her little plates of goodies from the buffet table and refilling her soda.

Melanie looked up at her brother and then over at Blair and grinned. "I think ya got a good thing goin' here, Blair. Hmm, doesn't hurt too much, does it?"

"No, not really, just a dull ache. I didn't even need crutches, just that little cane," she said, glancing at it. "But I'm not looking forward to school tomorrow, that's for sure. I may just sit that one out." She shifted her foot slightly and winced.

"School? Ya should be in bed," said a doting Kenny, stroking her golden blond hair. "Ya scared me to death today, pure an' simple. Thought I'd break my neck, runnin' to ya. Almost took out the show photographer."

Jeff grinned at his twin and chuckled. "Hey, Kenny. Maybe the one who ought to be in bed recoverin' from the vapors is you." He'd been scared for Blair too and looked at Jessi with different eyes. *My God, if somethin' like that happened to her, I'd have an attack of the vapors, and then some.*

Jessi looked up at Jeff and grinned. "*Vapors?* That's a new one on me. What are vapors?"

Melanie chuckled. "It's an old southern sayin'. It used to apply to ladies who fainted at the drop of a hat." She looked at her brothers and smiled. "We've kinda upgraded it to describe most any situation where ya feel like faintin' from fright."

Just then, Joe arrived. Conversation stopped as he slid the show tape into the VCR and hit the play button. He rolled the tape back to Blair's fall and everyone got quiet as they watched the accident again, this time in slow motion. In agonized silence, they stared at the screen, holding their breath even though they knew what happened next. It could have been so much worse.

Blair had lost her stirrups in the turn and catapulted off Angel's back as the mare's hind legs slipped from beneath her and

her haunches hit the ground with a resounding smack. Angel slid in one direction, Blair in the other.

Had Blair tried to stay aboard, struggled to maintain her seat, the weight of a thousand pounds of fast-moving, hard-falling horse would have crushed her leg. The damage the flailing, steel-shod hooves could inflict had she been within their range brought everyone up short. They remembered what the studs did to the leather boot.

They all looked at Blair, whose face had blanched. "Wow, I lost my stirrups. I don't even remember that." She shrugged, rolling her aching shoulders. "I bet Angel is sore tonight. Did you check in on her, Mom?"

Karen nodded and smiled. "Sure did, honey. I gave her a couple of tabs of Bute to make her feel better. She's a little stiff, but that's to be expected. Carlos rubbed her down with Absorbine and Becky's going to give her a massage tomorrow."

"I checked her out before we came over," Becky said. "She's going to be sore for the next couple of days, but I figure you'll both be ready to get back to work about the same time. I'll massage her every day for a while."

"Well, that's a relief," Blair said. The color flooded back into her cheeks, making them peachy pink again.

Joe rewound the tape, starting at the beginning of the show. The kids reviewed each other's rides, complimenting, teasing about mistakes and psyching themselves up for the show next month.

With school looming ahead of them and a strenuous weekend behind, the party started to break up around nine.

Steve slipped into his jacket and turned to Becky. "Can I give you a ride home?"

Smiling, she shrugged at him. "Melly invited me to spend the night, but thanks anyway. I'm so glad you came to the party. It was fun, wasn't it?"

"It sure was. And thank you for including me." Large dark eyes swept her face, settling finally on her lips.

"Okay. Well, I guess I'll see you at the barn tomorrow," she said, blushing. "You must be excited to start riding Magic. He's a great horse, you know. You really got lucky when you bought him."

Steve nodded, gazing into her eyes. “What time do you get to the barn? I should be there by two-thirty. Maybe we could take a trail ride together, if there’s time.”

“I’d love that, Steve. We should be able to work that in, yep. That’ll be fun. See you tomorrow.” She waved goodbye.

Chapter 19

Melanie grinned at Becky as she came out of the bathroom wearing borrowed pj's and an oversized bathrobe.

"What a wonderful first show ya had, Becky. I remember every minute of mine."

A faint blush tinged Becky's cheeks. "I wish I could tell you what all this feels like. More than just the horse show, although I have to admit it's the highpoint of my life so far. It's meeting you and the team. Even Shievy has accepted me and I know it wasn't easy."

"She's a great little gal, Becky, she really is, but she can be a bit stuck-up and spoiled. Comes from being the baby, I guess. They treat her like a little pet and whatever she wants she usually gets. But one thing's for sure, once she's your friend, ya couldn't get a better one. Shievon's proven that to me more than once."

"How far back to you guys go?" Becky asked as she fluffed up her pillow and jumped into bed.

"Well, Blair and I've been best friends since we moved to this neighborhood in first grade. We met Shievon and Billy a year or so later. We were in the same pony club and rode at the same barn and that's when we formed the Doubletree team."

"It must be neat having friends you've known all your life. Every barn I ever was at, I was always the odd man out. We never had any money for lessons, let alone a horse, so I was mostly the barn scrounge, always on the outside, looking in. To have my life take such a huge turn is a miracle. I'm still having a hard time taking it all in. Karen changed my life—gave me an opportunity I'd

never get anywhere else.”

“The day Karen came to DT, all our lives changed. I boarded at a barn I hated, which was bad enough, but I spent half the day commutin’ on the freeway just to get there and back home.” Melanie took a swig of her soda and made a strange face at Becky.

“Ya might not have noticed as yet, but my folks are very, ah, competitive. We have the money and they’re not shy about spendin’ it, but ya better be at the top of the game. When our old trainer left the DT, they moved me to a new barn. Ya can’t progress without a good trainer and Jim couldn’t find a ready replacement, so I had to move.”

“Why did the old trainer leave? What’s her name?” Becky asked.

They sat cross-legged in their beds facing each other.

Melanie shrugged. “Susan Springer. She was great at first, but she kinda went round the bend after a couple of years. It came to a head when she got into a big argument with Shievon’s dad about Megan.”

Becky stared at Melanie, eyes wide. “What kind of argument?”

Melanie snorted. “Huge. She found the mare for Shievy, and it turned out great in the end, but Megan wasn’t nearly as well trained as Susan said and certainly not worth the price they paid. When he found out she had a financial interest in the sale of the mare, he just about had a cow.

“As if that wasn’t bad enough, at first Megan stopped. Hard. She threw Shievy into so many fences, it’s a wonder either of them still jump let alone do it so well. Anyway, her dad was the one who made Susan leave the Doubletree. By that time, Jim didn’t like her much either, so out she went.”

Becky nodded. “That was a good thing, I guess. Everything changed when Karen came to the DT, huh?”

Melanie chuckled. “Well, it was the strangest thing, really. I moved back to Doubletree the day Karen started. She must have been here for a couple of months before she finally met Joe. Met him again, that is. They were high school sweethearts, can ya imagine? Took them less than six months to decide to get married. Blair was thrilled, well, y’know her story. Positive miracle for her.

Jessi, too, an' Joe." She sighed. "Hard to believe that one woman could have such an impact on so many lives."

Melanie stared at Becky, a grin quirking her lips. "I really like Steve. Seems like a nice guy and handsome to boot. Maybe a little shy, but I think he's gonna make a good addition to the team, don't ya think? A real keeper?"

A blush tinted Becky's cheeks pink. "Oh, yeah, he's a keeper, really cool. Loves horses and wants to follow in Billy's footsteps, I think. He's got the horse and the trainer to get him there. He's cute, too, don't you think? His eyes are like Jessi's, so black I can't see the pupils. Yep. He's a great addition to the team."

She glanced at Melanie, then down into her lap. "What do you think he'll do when he finds out about me? Do you think he'll accept me the way the rest of you do? He wanted to drive me home tonight."

"If he's worth anythin' at all, it won't make a bit a difference. If it does, well, then he was nothin' much in the first place. If he wants to be part of the team and knows what's good for him, he'll treat ya with the same respect as if ya lived in a castle." Melanie grinned as she turned off the light. "Besides, I think he likes ya. I saw how he stared at ya. Everythin' will be just fine."

Chapter 20

Steve turned his Fiat into the lane a little after ten. Tiny ground lights illuminated the low-growing shrubs. Giant California oaks towered above him, their leaves rustling in the night breeze. Flowers packed the gardens and walkway, indistinct in the hazy moonlight, their colors blurred and softened.

Instead of parking in the garage, he turned around and backed under a spreading oak, the nose of his car pointing toward the main road. He kept to the shadows and cast a wary glance at the second floor. Like the rest of the huge house, it was in semi-darkness. The only lights came from his father's study and the one he always left burning in his bedroom.

Steve entered the house on tiptoe. He closed the door behind him, flipped the security switch and stopped in the middle of the hall. His eyes searched the winding staircase, half expecting to see his mother hiding there in the dark. A shiver of fear swept through him as he remembered the palpable hatred on her face last week as she glared at him through the banister. Bathed in shadows but still visible, nothing hid in the staircase tonight.

He crept down the dim-lit hall and entered his father's study. Nick Bianchi sat at his desk, the computer screen glowing in the corner, a small pile of papers stacked in front of him.

"Hi, Steve. Did you have a good time today?" He smiled at his son, dark eyes glowing. "How are you doing with your new horse?" Twirling his pen in his fingers, he fidgeted.

"Fine, Dad, just fine. Magic is a wonderful horse and I can't wait to get started. We have our first lesson tomorrow after

school.”

“Do you think you’ll stay at Doubletree? It’s a nice convenient location, that’s for sure. It can’t be three miles from the house.”

Steve leaned back in his chair and rubbed his hands together. He crossed and uncrossed his legs, his foot bouncing with the beat of some unheard song.

“I like it there a lot, Dad. The trainer, Karen Evans, is excellent, has a great reputation and actually trained back east with George Morris. He’s the best there is, you know. A great group of kids board at Doubletree, they’re mostly my age, and they’ve already accepted me as a member of the team. They mostly ride jumpers, but there’s a really neat girl there who rides hunters. Name’s Becky and we’re scheduled to take our lessons together.”

In one abrupt move, he rose and started to pace, picking up magazines, rearranging framed photos, an ashtray. Anxious black eyes darted from place to place, searching.

“Where is she?” he finally asked, voice tense.

“Upstairs in her room. Have you had dinner? I could ring the kitchen and....”

“No thanks, Dad. I went to a party after the show. They had tons of stuff to eat, best ribs ever. Is she awake?”

Nick Bianchi took off his glasses, rubbed tired, bloodshot eyes and looked at his son. “I’m not sure. The music went off about an hour ago. I guess it’s safe to assume....”

“She screamed at me when I left this morning. I get so scared when she’s like that. I don’t know what to do. She’s crazy, isn’t she?”

Skirting the question, Nick asked, “What was she upset about?”

“I don’t have a clue. It didn’t make any sense at all. Something about cleaning the pool after I used it. Like I’d ever step foot in that pool again after....” Bitter eyes bored into Nick. “She was out of control. Where were you?”

“I had an early surgery, Steve. I’m so sorry I wasn’t here. Did she hit you?”

“No. I didn’t hang around long enough for her to get close to me. I just jumped in the car and drove off. I left her standing on

the front steps, screaming like ... like something possessed. Where in the world was Mildred? I thought she was supposed to stop this kind of stuff before it started.”

Steve chewed on his thumbnail, black eyes fixed on his father. “Mom’s getting worse every day. Now she’s drinking in the middle of the night, I guess. How else could she be drunk at five in the morning?” He looked at his dad, hoping for an answer, knowing there was none.

“Son, when she decides to drink, the time of day doesn’t matter. The other morning I realized the water glass next to her bed contained vodka. I asked Mildred about it, but she didn’t have a clue where it came from. She swore your mother hadn’t been out of her sight for days. There must be bottles stashed all over the house.”

Nick wrung his hands, looking at Steve. “As much as I hate to do it, I’m thinking about taking the steps to have her committed. Best place for her right now would be the Betty Ford Center up in Rancho Mirage. I just hate....”

“It can’t be soon enough for me, Dad, and that Helen? She’s a real nut job, positively scary.” He rose and headed to the door. “It would be nice to sleep in peace.”

“Do you overhear them talking, planning anything? She and your mother are a bad combination.”

“No, not really. I do my best to stay away, especially when Helen is here. I hear snatches of conversation, but I keep moving. It’s better that way, I think.”

Nick sighed. “Probably. Just keep yourself out of situations that could have, ah, bad results.”

“I will, Dad. Good night.”

Father and son walked out of the study towards their bedrooms. Upstairs, they heard music.

* * *

Steve woke with his usual jolt, feet on the floor before his eyes fully opened. He slipped into a pair of tan slacks and grabbed a blue and white checked shirt from the chair. A quick glance told him the dead bolt on his door remained locked.

He went into the bathroom to brush his teeth, buttoning his

shirt as he walked. Steve ran a quick comb through his soft dark hair and then cocked his head, listening. It came again, the sound that woke him. The floor above him creaked. She was awake. He had to go.

Gathering his jacket and keys, he snuck down the hall. Three long strides took him across the foyer and out the front door. He closed it behind him and ran to the Fiat. He started the car and engaged the clutch, rolling slowly out from under the tree.

His mother appeared in his rearview mirror as she leaned out an upstairs window, waving her arms and screaming at him to come back. He gulped as she shook her fist, face contorted, crimson with rage. It was the last thing he saw as he drove down the driveway toward town.

Ten minutes later, he pulled into the Denny's lot. Being a regular, the waitresses all knew him and reserved his favorite window-side booth every morning. A carafe of coffee waited on the table. Steve scanned the menu, but he knew it by heart.

"French toast and crisp bacon, please, and a glass of milk. Thanks." Staring absently out the window, he had to blink twice to believe it. Was that Becky walking up the street? Where could she be going? The bus stop?

"I'll be right back. I forgot something," he said to the cashier. He hurried to the parking lot and called, "Becky?"

It *was* her. She turned in the direction of his voice, a smile of pleasure lighting her face as she recognized him.

"Hey, Becky, can I buy you some breakfast? I've got an order of French toast going in there. Please come in and join me."

"Thanks, Steve, I'd like to, but I'll miss my bus."

"I'll drive you to school or wherever. Please."

Becky made a quick decision. "Hey, why not? Actually, I'm already starved and I forgot my lunch again."

They walked back across the parking lot and into the restaurant. Becky slid into the booth and moved towards the window, making room for him on the bench.

Steve sat beside her, heart pounding as their elbows touched. He couldn't believe how close she was. Her hair smelled of flowers and every time she moved, the heady scent wafted

towards him. He poured her a cup of coffee, surprised his hand wasn't shaking as his heart fluttered a staccato beat. *Can she hear that?*

After Janice, their waitress, took her order, Becky turned to Steve. "Do you come here a lot for breakfast?"

"Every day, just about. The food's good and their coffee is the best, so it's my favorite. Say, where were you walking to?"

She hesitated. "I was going to the bus. I live around here."

The waitress arrived with breakfast just then, giving Becky a welcome reprieve.

"That looks good, doesn't it?" Steve checked out their plates.

She smiled at him and took a bite of her scrambled eggs, nodding.

"So, Becky," he said, savoring the sound of her name. "Where do you go to school?"

"I wasn't going to school, Steve. I'm on my way to the barn. I home school." She spread strawberry jelly on the toast and bit off another small piece. "Where do you go?" Smiling up at him, she reached for her glass of milk.

"Bryce ... it's a private school. What's it like to home school? I can't imagine having the self-discipline it must take to study on your own. I'd be at the barn twenty-four-seven."

"Well, it's not on my own, exactly. I have a meeting with my teachers every week to check my progress and take my tests. I get all the usual assignments, reports, books to read, stuff like that. The hardest part is that I have to use a school computer to do the research and testing. I don't have my own, so I end up borrowing one. It's a real pain, let me tell you."

His eyes widened in disbelief. "You don't have your own computer? Wow, how come?"

"I've never been able to afford one, but that's changing fast. Yep. I've saved up almost enough to get a nice rebuilt one out of the paper. Sounds good, although I don't know much about them, tell you the truth."

Steve stared at her, baffled. *She can't afford a computer? How can that be? Something doesn't fit here.* He ducked his head, a shy smile on his lips as an idea came to him.

“Well, it’s funny you should say that. Computers are my thing, after horses. I’ve built several, actually and I have a great idea. How about if you take one of my extras? Save your money. I’ll show you how to use it, help you get acquainted. I can teach you everything you need to know. How about it?”

“You built it? Like, from scratch? Wow, how cool is that? I can’t imagine.” She looked at him in wonder and smiled.

Basking in her expression of admiration and friendship, he waved a deprecating hand and shrugged. “That stuff just comes easy to me, I guess. I designed several programs for them, games, too; they do everything. Dad says I must be related to Bill Gates.” He chuckled.

“I’d be happy to bring it over to your house, help you get it set up. Do you have your own phone line or will you be using your house line?”

“I guess it’ll have to go off the house line. But that’s really no problem. Mom’s at the restaurant when I do my homework. Besides, now that I’ve got a cell phone, it’s all I use.”

Steve looked down at his watch, frowning. He reached for his wallet. “Man, it’s getting on towards eight. I have to fly. You said you’re going to the barn, right?”

Becky nodded in agreement, wrapped her toast and three untouched bacon strips in a fresh napkin and tucked them into her pocket.

“Lunch,” she said with a grin, finishing her milk in a small series of swallows. She patted her lips with her napkin and laid it next to her plate. “The barn it is,” she said.

They hopped into his car and turned onto Villa de la Valle. They were at the Doubletree in moments.

“You never did say, is tonight a good time to bring you the computer?”

“That would be wonderful of you, but I feel like I’m taking advantage of your generosity or something. Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. How many of them can I use at once?”

“Okay, then, let’s go for it. You figure you’ll be back here around three, right? After we take our lesson we can go over to your house to get it. How’s that sound?”

“Fine with me, Becky. Okay, got to run. See you this

afternoon.”

With a wave of his hand, he drove off.

Chapter 21

Becky walked down the barn aisle, deep in thought, unaware of the noses poking out towards her. *Well, here comes the moment of truth, it's all going to be out on the table now.* She grimaced. Steve never batted an eye at Melanie's house, hardly noticed, actually. Like it was no big deal. Not a good omen.

Then there was Magic. Becky had no idea how much he'd paid for the magnificent gelding, but it had to be huge. And he had computers ... plural? Add to that a brand new little Fiat, great clothes and perfect teeth. Some orthodontist had made a bundle there.

Karen popped her head out of the tack room, calling hello.

"Do we have lessons soon?" Becky asked.

"In about twenty minutes. Can you go up to the arena and drop everything down to two feet or so? You can leave the course as it is."

"Oh, sure, Karen, I'll get right on it." Becky grinned in anticipation. *The ladies rode today.*

* * *

Around two-thirty, Becky began to sweat like a death row inmate. She knew she was going to have to talk to Steve about her situation before she took him over to the house. *How in the world do I start a conversation like that?* She didn't have a clue. The kids had found out about her on their own, sparing her the task of having to break the news.

Becky figured she'd have a good idea where he was coming from when they went over to his house to pick up the computer. Maybe she could say something funny, something amusing, make a little joke without sounding like she lived in a cave. After all, it wasn't *that* bad.

Actually, hers was the cutest house on the block and the whole neighborhood had improved a good bit. A couple of weeks back, thanks to a huge tip and a fit of civic pride, her mom bought a large sack of grass seed and several flats of flowers at Home Depot. Together they stuffed the front garden as well as the walkway with impatiens, mums and pansies. The flowers vied for their little place in the sun, colorful faces bright and perky. Three hopeful jasmine plants lined the front of the house, valiant as they began their slow climb up the new trellises.

Somehow, Marty had broken through the cold reserve of their landlord, Mr. Statler, who was now Walt. On top of the plants and flowers, their house sported a brand new coat of paint, inside and out and much-needed new carpeting.

Becky grinned, remembering the day the painters finished the job. She and her mom had stood out on the front lawn, nodding at the house.

"How much do you want to bet that we've started a trend? It won't be long before this idea catches on. See how much nicer everything looks?"

She'd been right. Painting may have exceeded the financial ability of most of their neighbors, but putting away the toys and bikes that used to litter the lawns was within everyone's control. Somebody complained to the right city official about the cracked sidewalks and now a new sidewalk ran the length of the street.

Next, the neighbors started planting flowers and shrubs and the occasional little tree. They watered their yards regularly, taking pride in where they lived, and voila, the neighborhood began its transformation.

Becky finished tacking up Lark and led her out into the aisle. Her mane, still crinkled from the show braids, flopped on both sides of her neck. Becky took a damp sponge and started brushing it flat. It was so fine, even though the braids had been out

for three days, the little ends still stood up, waving in the faint breeze.

Magic's stall was on the other side of the barn, so she didn't realize Steve was there until he called out to her from the arena.

She waved at him and led Lark to the mounting block. As she got closer, her heart fluttered. He and Magic made a handsome pair. No doubt they would catch the eye of every judge they showed under.

"Steve, I've been thinking a lot about the computer. I want to pay you for it."

"Pay me? You don't have to do that. It's a gift. Besides, like I said, I have several of them."

"I really want to. Even if you won't take money, I can still repay you. Magic was on my schedule of massages anyway. So why don't you figure out how much the computer would cost and I'll make it up in massages. How does that sound?"

"Well, I'd rather just give it to you, but if it makes you feel better, that's okay, too. What do you mean by massage schedule?"

There it was, the perfect opportunity. The door opened and she stepped through.

"When I first came to DT, I needed a job ... working student, or groom, stall cleaner, anything that would give me access to a horse and some lessons. I started working for Karen that day and when the kids found out that I do massage, they all scheduled weekly sessions. Then the adults caught on and, well, I have a full-time job doing something I love and making great money to boot. The best part of it all, though, is Lark. I get to ride her because her owner had a bad accident and can't ride anymore."

"*Get* to ride her? What does that mean? Lark doesn't belong to you?"

Karen's arrival ended their conversation as she called out, "Okay, guys, spread out a bit and let's trot. Drop your irons, please."

They worked on the flat for almost an hour, practicing figure eights, spirals and lots of work without stirrups. Then Karen pointed to the cross-rail to her right and said, "Trot down over this one, please. Keep a nice distance between you. Very nice, Becky,

squeeze, good. Try a little whoa, there, Steve and ease up on your leg pressure. There you go. Very nice.”

Karen raised the outside line to two feet, six inches, and nodded to them. “Trot over that first fence, pick up a canter and go down over this line.”

Becky watched Steve ride the course, admiring his quiet seat and hands. Every once in a while her hands flopped at the canter, especially at three-point. When it was her turn to go she made a conscious effort to press her elbows to her sides and keep her wrists soft and supple. As she started the canter, she moved into a two-point, knuckles resting on Lark’s neck. They rode the outside line well and Karen waved them on to the diagonal.

Steve never took his eyes off Becky. She stayed so light on the mare’s back, legs quiet, eyes up, looking for the next focal point. They learned from each other as the lesson progressed.

“Very nice rides, today, kids. I think you’ve found yourself a great partner, Steve. He likes you.” Karen smiled at them and waved good-bye as she turned back to the fences, raising the heights for the next lesson.

“Let’s go for a trail ride, Becky. Sound like fun?”

She grinned at him and nodded. “This is my first time. I’ve been looking forward to it. It gets dark so early now, I run out of light before my work’s done.”

They walked up the trail single file, Magic leading the way. When they got to the clearing, they exclaimed in surprise.

“Wow, look at this. Jessi told me about it a while back, but I forgot ‘til now. She said it’s all set up ... got some halters over there. You want to stop for a while?”

Steve nodded and they dismounted, picked two suitable halters from the pile in the bucket and tied their horses in the crossties.

They sat across from each other at the table, enjoying the beauty surrounding them.

Steve smiled at her. “I went by the house before I came back to the barn, so I’ve got the computer in the car. I figured it’d be getting late and I didn’t know what you have scheduled this

evening.”

“Oh, that’s fine. I just have to study, nothing much. We can go whenever you’re ready. I, ah, have to tell you something first, though.”

He looked over at her and nodded.

“I’m not like the other kids at Doubletree.”

Steve raised his eyebrows in surprise but kept his silence.

“I started to tell you before our lesson. For one thing, my mother works at the Prime 10, and we live right down the street from the shopping center. It’s about the poorest part of town, certainly nothing to brag about.”

Becky’s face flushed in shame. The peachy tinge covered her otherwise ivory cheeks and spread to the silken skin of her neck. “I’ve been meaning to tell you all week, but I just couldn’t figure out how.”

Steve stared at her, clearly fascinated by the color-play going on in her face. His eyes roved from lips to hair.

Becky shrugged. “The rest of the kids don’t seem to care, but I thought it was only fair to tell you about my ... situation before you came over tonight. I didn’t want to mislead you.”

He looked at her with dark, solemn eyes, his smile grim. “You can’t possibly think that would matter to me, do you? Besides, you call that a *situation*? Shoot, I met your mother. She’s wonderful. Why, she was so thrilled for you at the show, she cried. I’d give anything....” His voice trailed off.

“Becky, I have something to tell you, too. My mother is an abusive alcoholic with dementia. How about that for a *situation*?” He looked down into his lap, embarrassed.

“Oh, that’s terrible, Steve. I’m so sorry. Do you have any brothers or sisters? Does your dad live with you? Is he any help?”

“I’m an only child, like you.” His face brightened as he continued. “Dad is the greatest, very supportive. We’re real good friends. The problem with my mother is rough on him, too. He’s talking about sending her to the Betty Ford clinic. Of course, he’s been talking about that for quite a while. He’s just afraid of the publicity, I guess.”

“Publicity? What do you mean?”

“Dad’s a plastic surgeon and the last thing he needs is for

the press to get hold of something unsavory like that. Not exactly good for business, but it's getting to the point where I don't know what else he can do."

Becky glanced at her watch. They rose and walked back to the horses. Removing the halters, they mounted and started down the trail.

"When you said she's abusive, do you mean that she's cruel to you—like violent?"

Steve looked at her and nodded. "It's not as bad as it used to be. I'm bigger, of course, and now I drive, so I stay out of the house as much as possible. That's why you have an open invitation to breakfast every morning. I get there about six." The smile flitted across his lips and disappeared.

"When I was younger, it was pretty bad. She's a screamer, too. It makes me crazy. I hate it when people scream."

Becky waited. When it seemed as though he had nothing more to share, she said, "You know, we don't have to talk about it right now. We've got all the time in the world to tell each other stuff, to get to know each other. No rush."

He looked at her and nodded, grateful. They rode back down the trail in companionable silence, enjoying the glorious sunset. Steve followed her to the barn, happy, carefree. He hopped down and backed Magic into the crosssties.

Becky glanced at him, chuckling. "I'm so excited. Tell me more about the computer. I can't believe I'm about to have one and it's all thanks to you."

He smiled. "It has all the bells and whistles, including a scanner and a color printer, too. I figure it'll take you some time to get up to speed on everything. We can go over to your house in the afternoons after our lesson and I can teach you how to use it.

"Plus, if you've never had the chance to play with one before, you'll need hours of education. Just learning how to use the search engines could take days, weeks even. And the programs. Man, there's just so much to learn. It'll take a long time."

His heart soared in anticipation. They could study together and have dinner, too. He never went home before nine and now it looked like he would have somewhere to spend his time besides Denny's or the barn.

“Isn’t it funny how one thing leads to another? If I hadn’t bought Magic, I’d probably never have met you. Believe it or not, I had just about settled on another horse when I heard he might be for sale. Two days later and, well ... I’m glad things worked out they way they did.” He stopped at the light then turned in her direction.

“Here it is.” She pointed to the left. “It’s this one. You can pull right up in the driveway. Mom’s already gone to work.” She ran up the walk, unlocked the front door and propped it open. She turned on the lights then went back to help unload the computer components.

The third bedroom, the size of a generous walk-in closet and previously used as a junk room was transformed into a tiny study. Her desk and chair lined one wall.

Steve got right to work, and it wasn’t long before the screen came to life. He signed on, hit a couple of buttons and the familiar AOL logo popped up, announcing, “You’ve got mail.”

She looked at Steve and giggled. “I have mail? How can I have mail? No one even knows me yet.”

“I set it up for you before I brought it over. Go ahead, see what it says.”

She clicked the mail button and there was one email in her box. It was from someone named SBIA and the message was ‘secret admirer’. She opened it.

‘Hi, Becky, I hope you enjoy your new computer. Your friendship means a lot to me. I’m so glad I met you, Steve.’

She turned huge eyes to him and blushed, pink coloring the pale skin of her cheeks. One little red curl hung just above her right eye. “You are too much.”

“You have the most beautiful hair in the world,” he said, his voice husky. “I gave you the email screen name of littleredhairedgirl@aol.com. You’ll definitely want to change it to something less specific, but I thought it fit you.”

“You are the sweetest boy I’ve ever met. Thank you so much.”

They looked into each other’s eyes for a moment longer.

“Hey, how about a Coke?” she asked. “Then maybe you can give me a couple of pointers on old Bessie here?”

“Bessie, huh? I think it fits.”

They walked out into the kitchen and Becky opened the fridge. Inside was a huge go-box, virtually bulging at the seams. She handed sodas to Steve, needing both hands to get the heavy box onto the counter without dropping it on the floor. Inside was a filet mignon the size of a man's fist and a huge, deluxe baked potato stuffed with all kinds of goodies and rolled in rock salt.

The note said, "Two people didn't show up for the banquet last night, so I snagged this one for you, Becky. Hope you enjoy your dinner. Love you, Mom."

"Wow. Look at that? Are you hungry? It's more than enough for both of us and here's a bag of salad, too. Come on, stay for dinner with me."

Steve let out a chuckle. "You don't have to ask me twice. That looks great. Can I set the table or something while you heat it up?"

"Sure. Plates are there." She shrugged at the cabinet next to the sink. "Silverware is in the drawer, here."

Becky popped the meat and potato on an aluminum tray and shoved into the oven. "I'll be right back."

Steve set the table for two. A quick cruise through the cabinets yielded a large glass bowl. He got the bag of salad and a jar of Ranch dressing out of the fridge. He shook the bag of salad into the bowl and glanced at the jar. *Ranch?*

"Hey, Becky, you have any ... never mind, I found it." A large storage cupboard produced the olive oil and vinegar he wanted. Finding a glass in another cabinet, Steve made a quick vinaigrette dressing.

Becky took the large candle from the shelf above her bed and brought it to the kitchen. She placed it in the center of the table and lit it, enjoying the light floral scent.

He leaned against the counter watching her, dark eyes glittering in the candle light.

She caught his glance and blushed. "Silly, aren't I?"

"I don't think you're silly at all. I think you're wonderful."

Blushing again, she giggled. "Okay. Well, something smells great. I think our dinner's ready." She opened the oven door and removed the sizzling steak. The potato steamed and they laughed as they burnt their fingers trying to cut it in half.

“There,” she said, as she gave him the lion’s share of the meal. “That looks fabulous.”

Steve held her chair for her as she sat at the table. They talked and laughed their way through dinner, the filet so tender they cut it with their forks.

They played a major game of catch-up and Becky went first, telling Steve what little she knew of her father, how he had abandoned her mother before she was born. She talked with candor about the financial struggles they dealt with, her abiding love of horses and the latest chapter, which he knew a bit of, that led to the Doubletree.

Then it was his turn to talk. It was a rough start, but soon the whole, sad story came tumbling out.

“My mother’s folks drowned in a freak boating accident when she was about sixteen. They were sailing when a quick storm blew in and before they could do much about it, they were battling heavy seas. The boat capsized. Mom had her life jacket on and she found some debris she could hold onto when the boat went down, but her parents weren’t so lucky.”

He paused. “She floated out there in the pouring rain for more than twenty-four hours. The Coast Guard picked her up on a routine patrol. She was half-dead from dehydration and exhaustion.”

“Oh, Steve, how terrible for her. Out there all alone, knowing her parents had.... My goodness, she must have been scared to death. I’m sixteen and I can’t imagine....” Becky’s voice faded. The horror of the idea brought quick, sympathetic tears to her eyes. “Oh, the poor little thing.”

Steve nodded. “Yeah, she was pretty bad off, had a nervous breakdown and spent over a year in a private clinic. She’d lost touch with reality, calling for her mother all the time, things like that. She had terrible nightmares. After a while she came to grips with it, I guess, and was well enough to live at home, but still needed a caregiver and intense therapy.” He glanced at Becky and shrugged.

“By the time she met my father, she was doing much better. I guess they fell in love at first sight, ‘cause they only knew each

other about six months when they married. Then she got pregnant with me and it seemed to set off some kind of awful chain reaction.

“Mom was sick most of the time, and I was born at home while she was there alone. They had to do a hysterectomy and I guess she blames me for it.” He stared down, afraid to meet her eyes. “As I got older, she’d hit me all the time and scream wild stuff. I had my dad, of course, but he spent as much time as he could at work. One day, she threw me down the stairs and broke my arm. From then on, she’s had round-the-clock nurses, at least that’s what they’re called. Their real job is to keep her in order and away from me and the booze. Doesn’t always work out.”

Becky’s heart squeezed in sorrow. “My God! That’s just terrible. I know what a lonely life feels like, but nothing at all like that. Mom and I are real close, like best friends. She’s always worked nights and most weekends, at least it feels that way. It was such fun eating dinner with you tonight. Dinner for me is usually standing by the sink and watching TV but it’s always great and plenty of it.” She glanced at the candlelit table and grinned. “I like it a lot better with you here.”

Steve gazed at her, black eyes inscrutable, searching. “We don’t need to eat alone any more, not if we don’t want it to. We have a great time together and with so much in common, I bet we’ll never run out of things to talk about.”

“What about your dad, don’t you eat with him?”

“No, I never go home before nine, usually I’m out later and so is Dad. He’s a plastic surgeon and his schedule is erratic. I have several favorite restaurants in town and I just skip around, depending on what I want. I’d love to take you with me, see if we have the same taste in food.” He glanced at her and shrugged. “What will your mom say? Do you have restrictions about bringing friends over when you’re alone?”

“No, it never came up until now, but I know she’ll be happy. It makes her feel guilty knowing I spend so much time alone.”

“I can meet you at Denny’s for breakfast then take you to the barn. After our lessons are over we can have dinner and work on the computer, do homework.”

She chuckled. “You’re going to be sick and tired of me in

no time.”

“You’re the first real friend I’ve ever had. I’ll never tire of you.”

From the moment he saw her at Showpark, Becky fascinated him. She was everything he was not ...friendly, outgoing, self-confident and riotously happy. He found her personality irresistible.

Steve leaned back from the table and looked deep into her eyes. “I have a great time with you. How do you feel about me?”

“I knew you were special the moment I met you. First, you love horses, and that’s number one in my book. Then look at how you stood by me at the show, gave me courage when I was ready to cut and run like a scared rabbit. You acted like a true friend before you knew a thing about me. I’m thrilled we met.”

They talked for hours. The candle flickered, then finally burnt out, sending a small stream of smoke into the air.

He grinned at her. “Wash or dry?”

“I’ll wash.” She grinned at him, blue eyes crinkled at the corners. She put the stopper in the sink and ran the hot water.

Steve hummed as he dried the dishes. The little homey activity was a novelty to him. He had never dried a plate before in his life.

“What’s your favorite subject in school?” Becky asked as she wiped the table.

“Oh, my government class, I guess. I really like it a lot. I want to go into federal law after college.” He placed the dried dishes in the cabinet and reached for the silverware. “How about you?”

“I want to be a horse trainer like Karen. I’m going to go to school to become certified in horse massage therapy, but I’m not going to college. School is just something I’m getting through. Actually, I do love creative writing. I’m working on a novel about horses. I’ll have to show it to you sometime, but it’s not ready yet.”

They finished the dishes, snagged two more sodas out of the fridge and went into the study to start on the computer.

“First thing, let’s change your screen name. Every weirdo in town will be bothering you. Got any ideas?”

“Yeah, how about horsecrazy?”

“That’s probably in use. Let’s see.” He checked and it was. They tried other horsy names, but every one they wanted was taken.

“Oh, gosh, I’ll use my initials like you did. How about BEDW?” She looked at it and laughed. He checked, but it was also taken.

“Do you have any suggestions?”

He smiled and typed SBBE. It came up open. “How about that one?”

“How cute,” she said, smiling. “That’s our initials linked together, right? I think it’s great. Go for it.”

Steve hit a couple of keys and made it hers. “Okay, Becky, sit here and let me show you the most important things first.”

Smiling, he drew the other chair next to hers and began the lesson. There were two less lonely people in the world that night. They recognized each other as kindred spirits and knew there would be more nights like this.

The End

Author's Note:

This is the first in the Doubletree series. If you liked it, may we suggest you read Couples.

Thank you for your support!
Gayle

Visit my website at
www.GayleFarmer.com

