



THE DOUBLE TREE KIDS

HIGH HURDLES



Gayle Farmer

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By Gayle Farmer

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THE DOUBLETREE KIDS

HIGH HURDLES

Gayle Farmer

Omega Publications Palm Springs

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H I G H H U R D L E S
By G a y l e F a r m e r

Chapter 1

“They should be here any minute, Becky. Is the stall ready?”

“I just put a couple of flakes of hay in there, Karen. Carlos had it done before I got here this morning.” She ran her hand through her cap of auburn curls. Wide-set aqua eyes looked at her trainer in question. “What’s the new guy like?”

“I haven’t met him yet, just talked with him on the phone. Seems nice and friendly. Looks like we’re going to meet him in a minute. There’s the van.”

They looked down the driveway as Bob Hubbard’s huge red commercial horse van rumbled down the driveway toward the barn.

The Doubletree horses stuck their heads over their stall doors, watching the activity. They knew the arrival of a van meant someone was either coming or going and they were curious to see what happened next.

The van stopped near Karen and Becky, the air brakes making a sharp, hissing sound as the driver turned the engine off. Two men climbed down from the cab of the truck, waved hello to Karen and Becky and prepared to unload the horse. They pulled the wide ramp from under the bed of the trailer and attached the side rails, forming a chute for the horse.

One of the men walked up the ramp, reappearing with his charge. The large buckskin mare paused at the top of the ramp and gave a shrill, ringing whinny. The other horses neighed to her in welcome.

Just then a young man of about eighteen drove into the yard and parked behind the van. He hopped out of the car and hurried to the ramp.

“Do you want me to take her?” he asked the handler.

“Nah, that’s okay. She’s fine, just looking around.”

With that, they stepped onto the ramp. About half way down, the mare spotted the boy. She raised her head, whinnied again and lunged forward, dragging her attendant with her.

The boy grabbed the trailing lead rope as she went by him, calling, “Whoa, Connie, it’s all gonna be fine, girl. Easy.”

At the familiar sound of his voice the mare swung her huge body around to face him. She buried her muzzle in his stomach, made solid contact and pushed hard, sending the boy reeling backwards. Raising her head again she looked around the farm, eyes intense. Her whinny was so loud and high-pitched, Becky put her hands over her ears to shut out the sound.

The mare pawed the ground in front of her, just missing the boy’s legs. A light film of sweat covered her pale gold coat as she danced in place, dark legs doing the two-step. She shook her massive head again, grinding her teeth. Black mane and forelock flew in the breeze and she lashed her tail in anger. Another step brought her closer to the boy.

The look on her face, eyes staring now, ears laced flat to her head, brought a fearful cry from Karen. “Watch out”

The mare snapped at the boy, just missing his arm.

“Stop it, Connie, knock it off.” He reached up and stroked her neck, murmuring to her in consolation. Searching his pockets he extracted a sugar cube and offered it to the mare. She snatched it from him, crunching hard.

He turned toward Karen and extended his hand, smiling. “I’m Larry Klein and this is Connie. She’s mad right now, can’t really blame her, I guess. We just weaned her yesterday and she’s missing her baby.” He stepped aside as the mare snapped at him again.

Karen looked at the mare, then at Larry, hazel eyes wide. “Okay. Well, ah, do you want to turn her out and let her run or should we put her in her stall?”

“Maybe a nice run is just what she needs. She’s been on the road for hours. Where can we turn her out?”

Karen led him to the arena, holding the gate open for them. Larry slipped the halter off, and stepped back out of range of her hooves.

The mare exploded. Connie jumped straight up in the air and took off down the arena rail, bucking and squealing every step of the way. After three circuits, she screeched to an abrupt halt and threw herself down on the soft dirt, rolling back and forth in the sand. She banged her head repeatedly, throwing a horse tantrum. She erupted from a prone position into a gallop and did another half a dozen circuits, frantic for her baby, screaming to the heavens.

The introductions continued as they watched the mare.

“I’m Karen Evans and this is Becky Edwards, my assistant.”

Larry had a ready smile for them, glancing down at Becky and Karen. He was a handsome kid, tall

for a jumper rider, with bright blue eyes and wavy brown hair.

The mare neighed again, banging her chest against the arena gate to show her displeasure.

“I guess she’s had enough. If you’ll tell me where the wash racks are, I’ll give her a bath.”

“I’ll show him around, Karen. We have the ladies in half an hour or so. I should be done with the tour by then.”

“Thanks, Becky. I’ll start setting up the course. If you see Carlos please tell him to come up and— never mind, there he is.” She waved goodbye and headed for the arena.

Larry halted the mare and led her from the turnout, following Becky up the trail.

“What’s her name? Gosh, she’s gorgeous. I love buckskins, yep. Don’t see many of them in the jumpers, though. What’s her breeding?”

“She’s a Swedish Warmblood. Her registered name is Constant Battle, but I call her Connie. She’s a total idiot, very quirky, but she can jump the moon. If she’s in the mood, that is. We retired her for two years hoping that having a foal would settle her down some. So far, I haven’t seen a bit of change. When my father transferred down here from San Jose, we thought it’d be a good time to wean her. We sold her colt ... beautiful mover ... to a big dressage barn in Rolling Hills.”

He cross-tied the mare and turned on the hose, adjusting the temperature and the spray. Connie stood there pawing, grinding her teeth and casting baleful looks at Larry. Twice she snapped at him.

“Does she ever make contact or is that a political statement?” Becky watched amazed at the antics of the mare.

“She’s a zero in the manners department. She’ll push you as far as you let her, but it’s all empty threats so far. She’s all show and no go.” He jabbed a finger into her side, making her step back out of his space. “You just have to be on your toes around her. I get to the point where I’m just about ready to place the sale ad and then she goes and jumps her heart out, and I’m back to square one. She’s a challenge that’s for sure, but I love her.”

He reached up to Connie’s face, petting the slender velvety muzzle. She was quiet for a moment, enjoying the strokes. Then she threw his hand off, shaking her head up and down several times.

Her bath finished, Becky led them down the aisle to Connie’s new stall.

Two mares nickered a welcome hello to the new arrival, getting nothing from Connie but laced-back ears and bared teeth. They tossed their heads and disappeared into their stalls.

“The tack room is right over there. You can pull your car right up to the door to unload. You’ll see an empty saddle rack and there’s plenty of room to stow your trunk underneath.” Becky tossed him a grin and turned to go.

“Hey, I have to run. The decrepit intrepids are riding in about five minutes and I have to meet Karen in the arena. After you’re settled in come on up and watch. It’s hilarious.” With that she was gone, red hair glistening in the warm sun.

Larry stroked Connie’s silken neck, crooning to her. He stepped toward her flank, ran his hand over her

side, and looked at her full bag. Little dots of milk glistened on the ends of both teats. He laid a gentle hand on her udder, checking for heat. She cocked a hind leg in menace and ground her teeth.

“It’s all right, Connie, I won’t hurt you. Looks like the shot is working just fine. The milk should dry up in another day or so. I’m sorry you’re sore. Poor girl.” He stepped back to her head, feeding her several lumps of sugar, which she took like a lady.

“Okay, Connie, you be a good girl. I’ll be back in a couple of minutes.” He just secured the latch when Connie charged the door, giving it a solid thump with her chest. She screamed at him to come back, striking the door with her front hoof as he walked to the arena. Steel-shod hooves struck the walls of her stall as she registered her frustration.

* * *

Karen and Becky stood in the center of the arena as six little old ladies trotted down the rail, half of them on the wrong diagonal. Karen was about to tell them to bounce once when her cell phone went off.

“Hello? Hi, Blair ... you what? Can’t you catch a ride with Melanie? I’m just in the.... Oh, fine, where are they? Okay see you in a couple of minutes.” She snapped the cell shut, looked at the ladies and then at Becky.

“Can you handle them today? Blair locked her keys in the truck. I have to get her spare from the house and take it to school. I’ll get back as quick as I can.”

“Sure, no problem. I’ll be fine, don’t worry.” Becky grinned and turned to the riders. “Check your diagonals, ladies. Okay, let’s get a little distance between horses. You’re all piled up there. Mrs. Davis,

how about if you cut across the arena and bounce once, please. Everybody check your diagonal again.”

Larry sat in the bleachers watching Becky teach. He chuckled as the ladies cantered, bouncing around on the backs of their aged horses, hands flopping in rhythm. They had such a rollicking good time it was fun watching them. They popped over the little cross rails, clapping and cheering for each other, faces pink with exertion. Permed white hair peeped out from under their black velvet helmets.

“Okay ladies, I guess that’s it for today. Are you going out on the trails?”

They nodded in unison as Mrs. Kingman turned to Becky and chirped, “Oh yes, we found a new trail that heads down to the ocean. We’re going to give it a try.” The other ladies smiled in anticipation.

“You have a cell phone with you, right?” They had a tendency to get lost.

“Oh, yes,” the ladies chorused, “four of them.” They turned for the trails; tinkling laughter floated back to the arena on the warm breeze.

Spring had arrived early this year and the flower gardens that lined the trails glowed, alive with purple Elysium. Little birds rustled in the shrubbery, busy building nests while bees crawled around in the bougainvillea, collecting nectar. The trees that shaded the extensive trails sprouted tender new leaves.

The heady fragrance of citrus blossoms filled the air with breathtaking sweetness. It was almost too much. The ladies disappeared in a bend in the trail.

The silence ended when the parking lot sprang to life as the kids arrived for their lessons.

Becky walked up to Larry with a smile. "I have to get ready for my class. Come with me and I'll introduce you to the rest of the team."

The tack room became a beehive of activity as the kids pulled saddles and bridles off the racks. They teased Blair about locking her keys in the truck, making good-natured comments on her memory.

"Hey, guys, I want you to meet Larry Klein. He just moved his mare in today. Larry, this is Melanie Young, Shievon Mahoney and Blair and Jessi Evans."

The girls said hello, smiling in welcome. Two more kids came in the door, filling up the room.

"Billy Martin, Steve Bianchi, this is our new team member, Larry Klein."

"Great," Billy said, "another guy."

The boys smiled and waved hello, asking Larry what division he rode in, who his last trainer was, all those getting to know you questions. They headed for their horses still talking with Larry, who joined the procession.

"What division do you show in, Larry?" Melanie asked. Beautiful white skin flushed to a dusty rose as she gazed up at him.

"We show Open Jumpers to level ten. How about you?"

"Wow," she said in admiration, "that's really gettin' up there. Almost Grand Prix level. Benny and I do the Hi-Juniors, but some day soon we'll move up to level nine."

Melanie stroked Benny's muzzle and fed him a cookie. Opening the door, she slipped on his halter, fastened the lead shank and led him to the crossties. Benny looked at Larry and extended his muzzle,

begging for a treat. Larry chuckled, stroked his nose and fed him a sugar cube.

Benny backed into the slot between Angel and Megan. The huge chestnut gelding made the diminutive mares look even smaller.

Blair glanced over at Larry. "Have you lived in Del Mar long? Where did you come from?"

"We just moved down here from San Jose. Mom really lucked in and found us a great house just up the road." He pointed at the hill behind them. "It can't be a three minute drive from here so the Doubletree was ideal. When I read the news article about Karen and how well you guys did at the Del Mar show it sounded like the place for me."

"Is your house on Willow Trail? Is it the split level with the red roof?"

Jessi and Blair made eye contact with Melanie as Larry's words sunk in.

"Yes, we just moved in yesterday. Mom's still in a tizzy, why?"

"We're neighbors. How cool is that. Ya live across the street from Blair. I live at the top of the hill. Gosh, it sure is a small world, I'm sayin'."

"Guess that's a double welcome—barn and neighborhood," Jessi said as she led Foxy over to the mounting block.

Chapter 2

Larry left somewhere in the middle of the three hour lesson. He had loads to do at home, including setting up his computer. As he pulled into his driveway, he glanced at the huge moving van and the pile of empty cartons in front of the garage and grinned.

He imagined his mother darting around the house, directing the moving men and trying to keep his sisters out of their way. Stepping around a pile of boxes in the foyer, he called, "Hey, Mom, I'm home. Where are you?"

"We're back here," was the muffled reply.

Larry poked his head into Amber's room ... empty. Then he heard them again, farther down the hall in Gina's room.

"Hi, honey, did you get the mare all settled in? What's the barn like?" His mother turned to him with a smile, an armful of clothes clutched to her chest. She walked to the closet and began to hang them up.

"Hi, Larry," said his sisters.

"Hey, girls. It's really cool, Mom. I met the neatest bunch of kids, too. Such a friendly group, they made me feel right at home. My new trainer and her daughters live across the street. Another girl, Melanie, lives at the top of the road. We all take lessons together."

They talked for a couple of minutes and then Larry said, "Is there anything to eat? I'm starved."

His mother grinned at him, bright blue eyes, so much like his, crinkled at the corners. "I figured as much. I got a bunch of lunch meats and cheeses and a

bag of salad from the grocery. Everything's in the fridge."

"I'm hungry too, Mom. Let's take a break," Amber said.

Weaving their way through the cartons and bags they went down the steps into the bright, sunny kitchen. The back of the house was all windows with glass doors and an excellent view of the hills. Sliders opened onto the wrap-around veranda. Several mature California oaks shaded the large patio and the intermittent sun threw leaf-shaped patterns on the cool blue surface of the pool.

"How does Connie like the new barn?" Amber asked, merry brown eyes alight. "Did she throw a fit?" She put the other slice of liberally buttered bread on top of her turkey and bit into the sandwich, shrugging long, dark-brown curls away from her face.

"Oh, you know how she is. She's furious with me for taking her baby away, but she'll get over it in another couple of days. I hope." Larry looked at his mom and shrugged. "They stayed together longer than they needed to, so I hope she adjusts quickly. You'd think she'd be glad to get rid of him. I mean, six months?"

"Weaning is always a hard time," Gina said. "Very traumatic for the first few days and then," she snapped her fingers for emphasis, "it's all over. Mom, is there anything more about when we start school? They're on some kind of track break or something now, huh?"

"Yes. You'll start on Monday, all three of you. I talked to your orientation teacher today, Larry, and you got all the classes you requested. They have tutors

for your French and math if you have trouble catching up on anything.”

Tricia plopped onto the barstool with a sigh, glancing around the messy kitchen. She turned weary eyes back to her daughters and ran a hand across her forehead.

“Middle school has the same courses you had in San Jose so you girls should slip in without a problem.” She gazed around the room and then ran her hand through her dark hair, pushing it behind each ear. “Can you believe this kitchen? It’s going to take us forever to get settled. Well, time’s a’wastin’, so let’s go. We’re almost finished with Gina’s room.”

Tricia rose from the stool and stretched her arms high above her head. “Most of your stuff is already in your room, Larry. Last on, first off, you lucky boy. I know you’re dying to get your computer hooked up.”

They trudged back down the hall, overwhelmed with the task before them.

* * *

The doorbell rang a bit after four. Larry answered it to find Melanie standing before him, bearing fragrant gifts. She carried a casserole along with something wrapped in aluminum foil.

“Hey, Larry, I brought a little supper over for y’all. If ya can show me to the kitchen, I can put this down. It’s still hot. And heavy.” Melanie shifted the casserole and smiled. Wide, powder-blue eyes gazed up at him. She blushed.

Larry led her out to the kitchen. It had undergone a serious change in the last few hours. Although there were still several boxes to unpack,

Tricia had put the majority of the stuff away. She stood at the sink, loading the dishwasher for the fourth time.

“Mom, this is one of the girls I was telling you about. This is Melanie Young. Melanie, this is my mother, Tricia Klein.”

Melanie smiled. “Nice to meet you, Ms. Klein. Mama thought y’all might like this casserole and a helpin’ of corn bread. No one wants to cook in the middle of movin’.” She put the bowl on the counter along with the oven mitts she had worn to carry it over.

“Oh, Melanie, please thank your mother for me. What a kind thing to do. Smells like chili.” Tricia lifted the lid, eyes half-closed in weary appreciation, salivating as the spicy aroma assaulted her nostrils.

“Oh, it *is* chili. One of my favorites. I’d planned on more sandwiches until you brought this. Umm, smells wonderful. Thank you.”

“Mama said she’d come down tomorrow and make her manners. She’s dressin’ for a cocktail party in San Diego right now, or she’d be here with me.” Melanie glanced around the beautiful kitchen and smiled at Tricia. “It looks like y’all have plenty going on and I don’t want to interrupt. Welcome to the neighborhood, Ms. Klein.”

“Melanie, please call me Tricia. And please tell your mother she’s a lifesaver. I’ll bring the bowl back tomorrow. Which house is yours?”

“We’re the last house at the top of the hill on the left. She’ll be delighted to meet ya, I’m sure. Well, y’all have a nice night. I’ll probably see ya at the barn, Larry. Are ya gonna ride tomorrow?”

“Oh, yeah, I think it’s about time Connie got back to work. She’s led a lazy life for the last couple of years, waiting for her baby and then playing mom.” He

turned to Tricia. "I'm going to walk Melanie back home, Mom. I won't be too long. When are you planning to serve dinner?"

"Dad could be home any minute if he doesn't get lost. But then, there's the traffic, so at least another hour."

Larry walked Melanie to the door, opening it for her. "Okay, Mom, see you in a little bit."

The afternoon turned chilly as the sun set. The tops of the trees now tinted pink and gold, waved in the gentle breeze. They walked in companionable silence for a while and then Larry said, "What time is the lesson tomorrow? I forgot to ask Karen before I left."

"Normally it's at three, but since we're on break, Karen pushed it back a couple of hours. It's at noon, like today."

"I'll be there for sure. So, tell me about the team. Do you all show Junior jumpers?"

"No, we're all over the place. Billy, Blair and Jessi show in Children's jumpers, Shievon does Lo-Juniors, Steve does Equitation and Becky's stuck in hunters." Melanie chuckled, remembering Becky's frustration. "Karen's draggin' her feet about movin' Becky up. She's a stickler for not over-facin' us and even though Becky knows as much about horses as anyone, she's still only been in trainin' about a year." She rolled her eyes at him and grinned.

"She'll wear Karen down, though, I know it. Becky's like me, very single-minded when it comes to her ridin'."

"So Steve does Equitation. That's cool. I did a lot of that when I was younger. How about Billy? Didn't he used to show in Medals?"

“Oh, my, yes. He won the Maclay regional qualifier at the end of last season. Guess he figured that was as far as he wanted to go. He sold Magic to Steve—that’s how he joined the team. Billy bought a new horse named Bitsy. She’s a super jumper, wait’ll you see.”

As they approached her front door, Melanie turned to face him. “Would ya like to come in and meet my brothers? They’re probably playin’ pool.”

“I’d like that a lot. It’s so nice of you to introduce me around. Moving to a new place can be the pits.”

They entered the side door and turned right to the family room. They heard the sounds of two male voices raised in banter.

“I told ya I could do it. Now see if ya can do it, too.”

“That was pure luck, Jeff, and ya know it as well as I do. Set it up again.”

“Hey, y’all,” Melanie called, “I’d like ya to meet a new friend. This is Larry Klein. He and his family moved into the Adamson place. Larry, this is Jeff and Kenny.”

The twins turned toward Larry and nodded, calling hello. They exchanged greetings, asking Larry how he liked Del Mar so far, and if he was settling in. Identical faces with smoky blue eyes met his, blond hair falling softly on either side of their faces.

“What year of school are ya in,” Kenny asked, resuming his studied attack on the balls. He bent over the table, sighted the cue stick, and gave the white ball a poke. It bounced off the side of the table and dropped into the pocket.

“Way to go, bro.” Jeff glanced at his brother with a laugh. “Let me show ya how it’s done.”

“I’m a senior,” Larry said, watching the table. “How about you?”

“We’re sophomores,” Kenny replied. “I go to San Diego State and Jeff goes to USD, pre-law.” He glanced over at his twin with a grimace. “One more shot and then I have to pick up Blair. We’re goin’ for pizza and a movie.”

He tried the shot and missed again. Jeff grinned at him as Kenny hung up his stick and stalked out of the room.

“Ya play pool, Larry?” Jeff nodded at the table. “Want to play a game with me?”

“I’d love to, but I have to get back home. I’m only half unpacked. Give me a rain-check though, okay?” He turned to Melanie. “Thanks for the chili and for....”

Melanie zoned, gazing up at him from under thick, gold-fringed lashes. A rosé blush tinted her creamy cheeks. He gave her the shivers ... so cute with those bright blue eyes and dark wavy hair. *What a beautiful, ready smile and that dimple....*

“...making me feel so welcome. I’ll see you tomorrow at the barn.”

Melanie walked him to the door and waved good-bye, watching until he disappeared down the curving driveway. She sighed.

* * *

The kids bounced around the tack room pulling saddles and bridles off the racks. They headed for their horses, excited. After their lesson they planned on taking a long trail ride. The temperature, already in the

mid-seventies, hinted at the coming summer; there was not a cloud in the blue, forever sky. Karen adjusted the last of the fences, smiling at the kids as they trooped into the ring. Steve and Larry talked about the last six weeks of school and plans for the summer.

“I can’t wait until the water warms up a bit. Do you surf?” Steve asked.

“Oh, yeah, as much as I can. How about you?”

Conversation ceased as Karen called out, “Okay, kids, let’s get some space between each other and trot.”

The lesson proceeded through the flat phase as the kids practiced turns and spirals. The course was a simple setup with two fences on either side of the ring, and two jumps set on the diagonal in the middle, creating a figure-eight course.

“Who wants to go first? Becky?”

Becky picked up a soft canter and headed for the first fence. Lark got the sweet spot in and the five strides to the next fence came up perfect. They turned toward the first diagonal line, and Lark lengthened as she saw their spot. The ride remained fluent and soft throughout, a perfect hunter round.

Melanie went next, followed by Jessi, Blair and Shievon. Then it was Larry’s turn.

Connie powered into the first fence and accelerated down the line, leaving out a stride. She did a fantastic rollback turn toward the diagonal and powered through the line, leaving out another stride.

As they headed for the other outside line, Karen called to him, “See if you can collect her a bit and get to the base of the fence.”

Larry performed several half-halts, raising the mare’s front end and engaging her hocks, holding her

to the base. Connie exploded over the oxer with a round, back-cracking jump, clearing it by a foot. Competitive as always, the big mare fought Larry every step of the way through the line.

“Very good, Larry. She’d rather go for the long spot, huh? That’s okay when the jumps are low like this, ‘cause it’s a great way to shave time off the clock. But considering the division you show, the fences are much higher. You can’t jump 4’6” like that, and if you let her get into the habit, she’ll jump flat all the time and it will get you in trouble.” Karen raised both hands to her waist, rhythmically squeezing with her fingers.

“Subtle half-halts work. Make her go to the base. Once she sees that’s what you want, she’ll do it. She’s just headstrong, plus, it’s been a while, huh? Okay, Billy, you’re next.”

Two hours later, Karen called it quits.

The kids trooped up the trails laughing in the warm sunshine. Shievon and Billy led the way, with Melanie, Blair, Larry and Jessi in the middle.

Steve and Becky pulled up the rear. “Hey,” he said with a grin. “Do you want to come over for dinner tonight? I thought we could walk on the beach later and maybe barbecue on the patio. Sound good?”

“Sounds great, Steve. I have two more massages to do today. Larry wants Connie added to the list. This is her first day back to work and she’s gonna be stiff. I’m free after that. Whew.” Lifting her face to the sun, she squinted up at the deep blue sky.

“It’s so warm. I’m ready to start on my tan. How about if we lay out for a while and catch some rays?”

“Great idea. Let’s see if the rest of the kids want to come too.”

Becky smiled at him, eyes hidden behind dark sunglasses.

“Hey, guys,” he called up the trail. “You want to come over to my house and lay out on the beach for a while? We can have a barbecue later.”

A buzz of conversation started as they reached the crest of the hill. They pulled up under a huge shade tree, talking at once.

“I don’t know what Jeff has planned, but if it’s okay with him, I’d love to,” Jessi said.

“Kenny and I were just going to hang out tonight. You can count us in.”

Shievon and Billy grinned in agreement. “What should we bring? You have the menu planned?”

“I haven’t had much time to think about it, Shievy. What’s everyone want to eat?”

It was burgers by unanimous vote. Steve glanced at Melanie.

“Are you and Dave busy tonight?”

“We don’t have plans so count me in.” Her cheeks stained pink, Melanie turned to Larry. “Can you come?”

“Oh yeah, sounds like fun to me. I’m almost unpacked. I found everything I really need, anyway. My room looks like it took a direct hit, though, and I don’t even have any drapes up yet. I’m looking for something special. You girls know of any good stores? I haven’t been anywhere but the barn since I got here.”

Before Melanie could respond, Jessi piped up.

“Oh, Larry, you need to talk to Blair about that. She’s going into interior design and has the most wonderful ideas.” Melanie scowled at Jessi from under the visor of her helmet, her jaw set.

Blair asked, "What kind of drapes are you looking for or haven't you decided yet?" She smiled at Larry. "I know a couple of neat places at the mall. Lots of different styles and fabrics. I could come over for a visit and you can show me your room."

Larry grinned at her. "That's a great idea. I'm going into interior design, too. I have a nice portfolio of sketches and ideas." Larry leaned forward, swatting a fly on Connie's neck. "Mom leaves all the decorating up to me. She's very artistic, but not that way. She's an author, you know, writes mysteries. They keep her so busy she hardly notices what's going on around her."

They turned their horses back down the path toward the distant barn. A light breeze played in the trees and the bougainvillea, packed with glorious petals of deep red, orange, and pink fed nectar to the dozens of little hummers hanging in the air, their wings beating so fast they blurred.

Pounce hid under the bushes, just his deep blue Siamese eyes visible as he watched the feathered appetizers suspended above him. His tail lashed back and forth as they studiously ignored him. His one dream in life was to catch a bird. His tail increased its tempo and a ridge of hair rose on his back as he fantasized.

The gardeners buzzed around on riding mowers, cutting the lush green grass. The citrus trees, white with glorious blossoms exuded their sweet heady scent entrancing the bees that crawled around, collecting pollen. The smell of spring was delicious.

Chapter 3

Becky and Steve drove down the Pacific Coast Highway, enjoying the afternoon sun. As usual, heavy traffic clogged the streets as out-of-towners gawked at the shops, the parks and the huge houses perched on the cliffs, their gaze snapping from one side of the street to the other. Traffic slowed even more as the road opened up and the ocean came into view.

Deep blue water spread as far as the eye could see and a variety of boats drifted across the placid surface. Everywhere, surfers cruised the waves, waiting for the big one. Black shafts darted back and forth through the waves, scampering in front of them, teasing them and then disappearing into the tube. Emerging triumphant on the other side, they zipped up the face of the looming wave, looking for another.

Interspersed between the surfers, boogie-boarders raced down the faces of the waves, scooting just ahead of the breakers, grounding out in the shallow water.

“What do you think of Larry?” Becky asked.

Steve glanced at her as they waited for the light to change. “I like him. He seems like a real nice guy, friendly. And he sure loves that mare. What a jumper she is, huh? That leaving out strides stuff makes my stomach flip, but I’ll get over it.” The light changed and traffic picked up speed as the road widened.

“He’s really into photography, like me. I’m going to show him the new camera when he comes over tonight. Boy, this’ll be great fun, don’t you think?”

“Yep. I can’t wait to start my tan. I look like a dead fish.” She glanced down at her legs, ivory skin the color of porcelain, and grinned. “Very dead.” Running her hand through her fiery auburn curls, she laughed in delight. “Have you alerted your dad to the party tonight?”

“He won’t mind, he loves it when the gang comes over. It’s such a change since ... well, I never used to do that, you know, so he’s more than willing to let me make up for lost time.”

Becky hesitated, not sure what to say. They hadn’t talked about his mother since her death a few months earlier. Childhood memories filled with her alcoholic binges and bouts of violence and rage still haunted him, but the changes he and his dad made, starting with the sale of the old house, scene of so much misery, went a long way toward improvement.

In Steve’s case, new starts had worked. His dad purchased a beachside place, all light and windows and open space and the change began. As each day passed, Steve relaxed into his new life, no longer fearful of physical or emotional assault.

Becky said nothing in the end, simply taking his hand and giving it a reassuring squeeze.

They turned onto a sandy lane that led toward the beach. Steve reached for his remote, clicking it on as they came abreast of the house. He parked the Fiat in the garage and closed the door.

Becky spent almost as much time at Steve’s as she did at home and had an emergency stash of clothes stored in the guest bedroom, including two bathing suits and a variety of shorts, jeans and tops.

“I’m gonna run in and change. Back in a flash.”
With that, she headed down the hall, in a hurry to hit the beach.

Steve filled the little cooler with sodas and ice. He flung two huge fluffy beach towels over his shoulder as Becky came down the hall, a big smile on her face.

“Let’s go.”

Steve opened the slider that led to the patio, closing it behind Becky. They skipped down the short flight of stairs and stepped onto the white sand. Brightly colored umbrellas offered minimal shade and the smell of suntan lotion competed with the salty sea air. The cool breeze, invigorating on this early spring day, gave her goose bumps. He spread the towels on the warm sand and they flopped down, fishing around in the beach bag for their sunscreen.

Steve poured lotion on Becky’s back, rubbing it in with slow lazy motions. She was so white and with that fabulous hair blowing in the wind, her coloring always reminded him of a cream-sickle, especially when she wore peach, as she did today. He remembered the first time he’d done this and smiled, lost in reverie.

They heard voices behind them and waved as Blair, Jessi and the twins got closer.

They cavorted across the sand, playing around, bright colored towels waving as they jostled each other. Jeff shook out a large blanket, anchoring one end with a cooler, his flip-flops and their towels. The strong ocean breeze rippled the blanket, flipping sand around.

Blair flopped down next to Becky and put her bag on the corner of the blanket while Kenny slipped off his sandals.

“Hey, Jessi, put somethin’ on the corner there, honey, the beach bag will do fine.” Jeff smiled down at her as he took off his shirt, long lanky body already off to a nice tan. He flopped down beside her and waved the bottle of sunscreen. “Who’s first?”

She grinned from ear to ear and made a kissy face at him as she rose to her knees. “It better be you. I always fall asleep before you’re finished.” She took the bottle and knelt behind him, dousing him with lotion and rubbing it slowly on his back and shoulders. Within minutes, they both glistened with oil.

A familiar couple appeared in the distance, walking down the beach hand in hand.

“Hey, Shievon.” Blair waved at them.

Billy and Shievon threaded their way through the other sunbathers, two huge towels around their shoulders.

“We decided to walk,” Shievon said as she sat next to Jessi. “What a beautiful day.”

The kids lay out, crisping away.

“Wonder where Melly is? Has anyone heard from...?”

Just then, two voices called out, one immediately recognizable.

“Hey, y’all.” Melanie waved as they crossed the sand. Smile wide, she helped Larry spread out their blanket. “What a gorgeous day. I’m already developin’ an appetite from all this fresh sea air.”

Larry glanced at Steve in admiration as he settled on the blanket.

“What a beautiful place. Melly said you just moved in a couple of months back. Is that your house?” Larry pointed behind him and grinned.

“Talk about a super location. I love to surf. If I lived here, I’d probably be in the water all the time.”

Melanie slipped her cover-up off her shoulders and stepped out of it, looking like a blonde goddess. With a long graceful figure and tiny waist, any kind of clothes looked fabulous on her. The sapphire-blue bathing suit was no exception.

“Would ya do the honors?” Voice coy, she handed Larry the bottle of lotion.

“Oh sure,” he said, continuing his conversation with Steve.

Kenny let out a wolf-whistle of appreciation as he gazed at his sister. “That’s a new one, Melly. Love that color on ya.” He looked at her and winked, elbowing his twin.

Squinting up at her, Jeff nodded. “Mama’d have a stroke if she saw ya in that, but it sure is beautiful.”

Billy and Steve glanced at Melanie, made inadvertent eye contact and returned their attention to Shievon and Becky.

Sunscreen or not, by the time they decided to pack it in, new freckles and pink-tipped noses attested to their first day at the beach. They trudged back across the cooling sand, sapped by the sun and out of gas.

The girls, anxious for a rinse-off, headed straight into the cabana. The warm water brought them back to life and cries of *I’m starving to death* ripped through them like wildfire. They changed into slacks and tops and turned the cabana over to the boys.

While the kids rinsed off, Steve lit the barbecue. The girls ran up the steps to the porch where the glowing grill waited, ready for their burgers. Steve turned the cooking chores over to Becky, gave her a hug and started down the hall to shower.

Becky turned to Melanie. "The burgers are in the fridge. You'll see a bunch of other stuff too. Steve and I went to the store earlier and got some great veggies. Check it out."

Blair stood in front of the sink, rinsing off the tomatoes and onions Melanie piled on the counter.

"I hope it won't be long until dinner. Gosh, I could eat rocks right now. Jessi, open those chips before I pass out." Blair reached into the open bag, piling her mouth full of the salty treat. "Umm, that's better. Dying of starvation must be horrible."

She grabbed another handful, placed them on the counter and continued slicing tomatoes and onions.

"Hey, Jessi," Becky called from the patio, "I'm putting on the burgers. Could you bring out the buns? I like mine toasted. How about the rest of you?"

The kids sat at the large table, watching the sun sink into the sea like a fiery red ball. Bright shots of color painted the horizon and tinged the clouds with gold. Little sand pipers darted along the edges of the waves, looking for supper.

"Where's Dave tonight?" Kenny glanced over at Melanie just in time to receive a glare from cold, icy blue eyes.

"I'm not sure, Kenny." Blue eyes narrowed to slits, she stared her brother down. "Why?"

"Oh, just wonderin'," he mumbled, looking at Blair.

“Who’s Dave?” Larry asked. “Does he ride?”

“No, he’s my best friend,” Kenny glared at Melanie. “He plays on our tennis team.”

“So, Larry, did you enjoy your first lesson with Karen?” Jessi asked, deftly steering the conversation in another direction. “She’s just the best, isn’t she? And not because she’s my mom, either ... she just is.”

The rest of the kids chimed in on that one and Dave’s whereabouts never came up again.

Around eleven, they started to clean up the kitchen. Saturday lessons started early and they wanted to be on top of their game, not dragging in like a bunch of half-dead beach bums. Karen could exert vengeance in the form of endless sitting trots without stirrups if she thought they slacked off. It just wasn’t worth it.

Larry pulled into Melanie’s driveway, put his car in park and got out to open her door. He escorted her to the house, thanking her for a fun evening.

“Would ya like to come in for a soda or somethin’? Sally just made a batch of her wonderful brownies. There’s plenty to share.”

“That sounds fine, Melanie. I can’t stay long, but I’d love a brownie. Tell me more about the kids. I take it that they’re all paired up.”

She led him to the kitchen table, placed the plate of brownies on the table and got two sodas from the fridge.

“Well, let’s see. Jessi and Jeff are goin’ steady, so are Kenny and Blair. Shievon and Billy have been goin’ together for quite a while, too, and Becky and Steve practically live in each other’s pockets. Why?”

“Oh, no reason really. I’m just trying to get to know everyone.” Larry took a sip of his soda and

smiled at her. “Steve’s house is really nice, right on the beach like that. Do you guys get together there much?”

He took a bite of the moist brownie, feeling his taste buds go off like a geyser. “Gosh, those are wonderful,” he mumbled.

“I told ya, Sally makes the best brownies in the world.” She took a bite and nodded, grinning. “Even better’n Lena’s.” Her eyes crinkled with delight.

“Who is Lena? I don’t think I’ve met her.”

Melanie giggled. “Oh, you will. She’s taken care of Blair since her mother died ... Blair was just a little kid, only five. It was pretty rough.”

“Her mother died? I thought Karen was her mother.”

“Karen married Joe about two years ago. It was a dream come true for Blair. She was a lonesome little kid, used to live for the videos she had of her mom at horse shows. Betsy qualified for the Olympic Team, you know. Beautiful rider—great rapport with her horses. Then, shortly after the qualifying show, she died ... killed by a drunk driver.”

“Oh, Melanie, that’s so sad. Was she killed coming home from the show?”

“No, it was a couple of days later. Blair had a fever and Betsy went into town to pick up her prescription. She was killed on her way back home.” Melly’s eyes glazed with tears. “It was a terrible time.”

They sat there for another minute or two as the silence deepened.

“That’s so sad.”

The twins came in the door then, saying hello. Spying the plate of brownies they headed for the table, blue eyes wide with joy.

“Just what I needed. How could y’all forget dessert tonight?” Kenny asked, a grin on his face.

“Brownies, what a treat,” agreed Jeff, taking a big bite, cheeks popped out like a chipmunk.

They chatted for a while and then Larry stood and walked to the kitchen door. “I had a wonderful time tonight, Melly. Thanks for inviting me along. See you at the barn tomorrow.”

He waved goodbye and then door closed behind him. They could hear the rumble of the Porsche as he started the engine and drove down the driveway.

“Hey, Melly,” Kenny said, “what’s goin’ on with you and Dave? Did ya break up or have a fight or somethin’? He sure didn’t say a word to me about it. And what’s with you and that Larry anyhow?”

“Kenny, nothin’s goin’ on with Larry. We just went to the beach together.” Her face as bland as a baby, she glanced over at him, wide-eyed. “Y’all were there, remember?”

“Ya don’t fool me for a minute, Melanie, so quit the play-actin’. I saw ya flirtin’ with him. Just what do I tell Dave when he asks me about it?”

Fire in her eyes, she said, “I don’t particularly care, but the truth might work, Kenny. I drove over to Steve’s with Larry. After dinner, he brought me home. We had a brownie and a soda, and then he left. Seems pretty simple to me. Why’re ya makin’ a federal case out of it?”

Melanie pushed her chair back with a jerk, carrying the empty soda cans to the trash. “Good night.”

She flounced out of the kitchen and down the hall to her room. She turned on the light and changed

into her pajamas. Stomach churning, she walked over to the bed and drew down the comforter. Fluffing her pillows, she propped them up against the headboard and slid between the sheets, deep in thought.

What am I doin'? She glanced above her dresser at her most recent picture with Dave. His light brown hair swept back from his brow and a wide grin showed his dimples. Large hazel eyes glowed with love as he looked at her upturned face.

Melanie got out of bed and approached the dresser, staring at the picture. They had been close friends since grade school and for a while she felt like they might move past the *just friends* stage, especially during the cruise to Hawaii.

From the moment she met Larry, Dave disappeared into her memory like a puff of smoke. Laying her finger on the photo she traced the lines of his mouth. *Oh, Dave, what am I gonna tell ya?* She turned back to the bed with a deep sigh as memories flooded her mind unbidden, unwanted.

There was the surprise birthday party he threw for her last month with the help of Blair and the twins. *What about all those skiin' vacations and the fun hikin' trips, not to mention sailin'?* Melanie gulped and began to cry. All the horse shows he had attended over the years, cheering her on, always being there, through victory and defeat. Memories flooded her mind and tears blurred her vision as she remembered all the good times they'd shared.

It was hard remembering a time without Dave. As Kenny's best friend, they grew up together. What would life be like without him? Of course he would still be friends with Kenny, so she would see him all

the time, like it or not. *Oh, what am I gonna say to him? What am I gonna do?*

Melanie's other voice chose that moment to chime in. *And just what happens if Larry does not return ya feelin's, Melanie? What then? Do you want to be alone? Oh, and by the way, what about the prom? Ya given that any thought?*

She sat bolt upright in bed, eyes wide in horror. The prom ... graduation celebrations ... baccalaureate! *Oh, man, what am I gonna do?* She collapsed back onto her pillows, heart beating a painful rhythm in her chest.

Mama is gonna kill me, Kenny will hate me forever, and I'm ruinin' everything. She burst into tears, burying her face in the pillow to muffle her cries.

Chapter 4

Melanie awoke with a heavy heart and a blinding headache. She went into the bathroom and peered in the mirror. Red-rimmed eyes looked back at her, ash-blond hair ruffled. Squirting a line of toothpaste onto her brush, she began her morning ritual.

* * *

Larry rose early, anxious to get to the barn. He grabbed his keys from the nightstand and left a quick note for his mother. He slipped out the front door, closing it behind him. The thick morning fog caused droplets of water to fall from the trees, splattering the blacktop driveway.

He slid into the front seat of his car and turned the key in the ignition. The windshield wipers slapped back and forth as the defroster cleared the window. He put the car in gear and headed down the road to the Doubletree.

The silent barn, still shrouded in wisps of fog, hid in the gentle valley. Sleepy horses gazed out their stall doors, yawning, greeting their first visitor of the day with loud whinnies. They were hungry and talking about it.

“Hi, Angel, how are you today?” He stroked the extended muzzle and fed her a sugar cube. She chuckled at him, large, liquid amber eyes following his movements as he continued down the aisle.

Larry stopped outside Connie’s stall, slipping the halter and lead shank off the hook by the door. “Hi, girl, how about a nice long trail ride?”

He slipped the latch, stepped inside the stall and leaned on the door. Connie stood in the corner, her butt to him, one hind leg resting. She swung her great head around to him, finally acknowledging his presence and the carrots he held.

Larry pulled the day sheet off, slipped the halter over her head and led her out to the crossties. He ran the body brush over her glistening coat, picked out her feet and went to the tack room for his saddle and bridle. Leading her over to the mounting block, Larry hopped up on the huge mare's back and stroked her neck.

Connie stood quiet, ready for the signal to move off. Her attitude had mellowed a good bit and with the baby gone, it was time to get back to work. She was always a quirky sort, prone to moods and temper tantrums, but the incessant screaming for her colt was over and she even allowed herself to make friends with some of the other horses, especially Benny.

Shards of sun broke through the mist and the fog lifted as they ascended the trail. Little critters scurried away at their approach, peeping out from under the dense underbrush that lined the trail.

Larry lost himself in thoughts of Melanie. What a beautiful girl she was, those gorgeous eyes and porcelain skin. He'd been thinking about her a lot the last few days, especially after last night. It was obvious the twins didn't like him much, but he couldn't figure out why. Maybe they were just over-protective of their little sister.

A rabbit shot across the trail, causing Connie to leap sideways in the air. Larry stroked her neck in comfort.

“Easy, girl, you’re okay.”

Recovering her aplomb, Connie proceeded up the trail at a long, ground-covering trot. Her gaits were so smooth, he didn’t bother to post.

Sitting in two-point, he enjoyed the easy rhythm as his thoughts drifted again to Melanie.

He had the uneasy feeling she wanted to be more than friends and he couldn’t let that happen. Larry wanted to return her feelings, but couldn’t. Why did life have to be like this? It was so unfair. No matter what, he didn’t want to hurt Melanie’s feelings. He valued her friendship so much. Why couldn’t everything just stay like this? Why did he have to be different? More than anything else, he wished he had someone to talk to, confide in.

He hadn’t talked to his old friend, Kevin, since the move, and he missed him very much. A wave of loneliness swept over him. When he got back home, he promised himself to make that call.

Of all the kids he’d met since moving here, he felt closest to Steve. They had a lot in common. Maybe Steve would like to go surfing today ... maybe after their lesson. He looked down at his watch, surprised at the quick passage of time. He turned the mare around and headed back to the barn.

* * *

Pounce and Toby strolled down the barn aisle in companionable silence, their former adversarial relationship replaced with mutual respect. Over time, they became good friends, playing on the lawns and ganging up on the birds and squirrels.

They rounded the corner of the barn and headed for the oleanders. A fat gray squirrel sat at the base of a huge oak tree holding a treat in his front

paws. Toby stopped dead in his tracks, tail stiff, ears pricked. He smiled and then charged the squirrel.

It ran up the tree, chattering every step of the way, one cheek plumped out with his hastily stored treat. He sat on a limb above Toby, berating him at the top of his lungs. Several squirrels joined the fray, scolding the barking dog.

“Wow.” Pounce gazed from the screaming squirrels to Toby.

The Jack Russell barked louder, his face compressed to a point as he glared up at the ranting gang of squirrels. *Just come on down here and say that. I dare you.*

Pounce slithered under the oleanders, bright blue eyes fixed on the birds flitting above his head. The white blossoms drew the little hummers like a magnet.

One of these days, I'll catch one. I just know I will.

His tail lashed back and forth raising little puffs of dust in the still air.

Karen worked the team on the flat today. They practiced serpentines up and down the arena, single file, working on maintaining their cadence at the trot, making round, full circles.

The next exercise was half-turns in reverse, which took all their attention. This move required concentration and skill as they cantered the tight circle into the arena rail. Perfecting the half-turn in reverse could mean time saved on course, and although hunters never used it, even the equitation kids benefited from knowing how to do it.

The control, the balance, riding strong into the turns and maintaining the round bend while keeping the horse in a frame—all these moves had to become second nature if they expected to win in tough competition, and they expected to win.

A nervous Melanie led Benny into the crossties next to Larry. She glanced at him, a wide smile on her face.

“Connie sure has come around, hasn’t she?” She bent down and removed the splint boots from Benny’s legs, stroking the ruffled hairs down, feeling for heat or swelling.

“Yeah, she really loves the flat work. We did a lot of those exercises back in San Jose. My old trainer focused more on the flat than the actual jumping. Pretty much the same philosophy as Karen. Guess that’s why I feel so comfortable here. Familiar patterns and all.”

Larry slipped the bridle off Connie’s head and replaced it with her halter. She pushed her muzzle into his stomach and gave him a shove, demanding sugar or carrots.

“Ya doing anythin’ tonight?” Melanie asked. “Mama’s makin’ barbecue. Would ya like to come over for supper? She always makes enough for an army.” She smiled her most winning smile, cheeks flushed pink.

“Gee, Melly, that sounds like fun, but I’m going to have to pass. I have to catch up on my studies tonight. I’m a little behind in math and I have a couple of hours of homework scheduled. Thanks for the invitation, though. Maybe another time?”

Larry unhooked Connie and led her to the wash rack.

Melanie watched them walk away, amazed. She couldn't figure out why Larry didn't seem interested in getting to know her better. Making friends came easy for her and she'd never experienced this kind of rejection before.

"Well, maybe it's not rejection," she whispered to Benny. "He just has to study."

Tomorrow she'd invite him over for a game of tennis. Surely he wasn't busy every minute of the day. She finished grooming Benny and led him to his stall.

"Hey, Melly."

She turned and looked over her shoulder. Dave walked across the grass toward her, a big smile on his face. He slipped an arm across her shoulders and gave her a little hug.

"You feeling better, honey? You look great to me."

Her face flooded with color and she ducked her head. Shrugging, she moved away from his arm.

"I'm feelin' lots better now, Dave. Musta' been a little bug bit me. What're ya doin' here?"

"Oh, I just thought I'd pick up my best girl and see if she felt like taking a drive with me. It's such a beautiful day I thought we could go down to the beach and get a couple of those great fish tacos you're so crazy about. Maybe take in a movie?"

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Larry hop into his Porsche. She turned back to Dave and nodded. "Sounds like fun, Dave. I'm starved. Just let me put away my tack. I'll be right back." Melanie gathered up her stuff and headed for the tack room.

Blair hung up her bridle as Melanie came in the door. She looked over at her friend, a question in her eyes.

“Hey, Melly, what the heck is going on? Do you have a crush on Larry or something? Kenny’s on a tear. We’ve hardly talked about anything else all week. What’s up?”

Melanie looked at her friend, finding it hard to make eye contact. “I don’t know what I’m feelin’ anymore. I really like Larry, he’s so cute. I’m tryin’ my best to make friends, but he keeps me at a distance and I can’t seem to break through.” She slid her saddle onto the rack and threw her bridle on the hook.

“Do you like him enough to hurt Dave like that? ‘Cause that’s what’ll happen if he ever finds out. And believe me, he will. Kenny is foaming at the mouth, he’s so upset. I’ve never seen him like this. What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know, but I can’t keep stringin’ Dave along, that’s for sure. I just don’t know what I’m gonna say to him. He’s been my best guy friend since fifth grade. We had such good times together, but it’s never been like ... well, like bein’ in love.”

She raised agonized eyes to Blair. “I not in love with him. He’s like, I don’t know, like the twins, I guess, like a brother. I have to do somethin’, that’s for sure, regardless of what happens with Larry.” She glanced out the tack room door watching Dave pet Benny.

“I guess I’d better set things straight. It’s the honorable thing to do. Problem is I don’t feel very honorable right now; I feel miserable.”

“Oh, Melly,” Blair said. “This is awful.” She reached for her friend, hugging her. “If you feel that

way there really isn't anything else to do. Poor Dave, he's gonna be heartbroken."

"I think I'm gonna be sick, Blair. I'm not sure I can do this." She heaved a deep sigh and shook her head. *Oh God, give me the right words to say.* Melanie drew a deep breath and walked out the door toward Dave.

* * *

"You know, Kenny, it's none of our business," Blair said. "You can't make someone love you just because you want them to. Melly is upset enough right now. I think you need to cut her some slack."

"Well, it sure is my business," he said, face indignant. "My little sister and my best friend make it so. I can't *believe* ya don't care." Kenny slapped the steering wheel for emphasis. "She's breakin' his heart, Blair. I'd just die if ya did that to me."

Blair took his hand. "Kenny, I *do* care. I like Dave a lot. Shoot, I've known him forever but it's Melanie's feelings that matter most to me. And Kenny, I'll never leave you. I love you, I'm *in* love with you. But it wasn't the same with Dave and Melly, you have to know that."

The light changed and they continued down the highway, quiet now, reflective. The late afternoon sun warmed their skin as they drove down the highway toward the Beach House.

"She's makin' the biggest mistake of her life, Blair. I just feel it. Poor Dave."

They pulled into the parking lot, handing the car over to the valet. Kenny took her hand as they walked up the steps.

"Can we get a seat on the patio?" he asked the hostess.

She led them to a beach-side table and handed them menus.

“We’ll have a pitcher of iced tea to start.”

Blair looked at him, brow furrowed with concern. “I think she’s telling him now, Kenny. He came out to the barn this afternoon and they drove off together. I hope, well, I don’t know. I hope everything’s all right. She sure was upset.”

The tea arrived and they took long steady swallows, concentrating on not looking at each other.

Kenny shook his head in resignation. “Listen, Blair, I know ya hit it right on. She wasn’t in love with Dave. But this Larry ... why him? What’s so special about him that she’d break up with Dave?”

“I don’t know, but from the moment she laid eyes on him, it was like that. Tell you the truth, I really like him, too.”

Kenny’s jaw dropped and his eyes popped wide open. “*What?* What’s that supposed to mean?” He leaned forward, taking both her hands in his. “*What’re ya sayin’?*”

Blair smiled at him and squeezed his hand. “Not what you’re thinking, silly. I just mean I like him. He’s smart, he’s fun to talk to, very interesting, and he’s a great rider.”

“Aha, *there’s* the bottom line with y’all. He’s a great rider. The ultimate prerequisite in a guy. Gotta be a great rider, ‘cause if ya can’t ride, out ya go.”

“Now you’re just being ridiculous, Kenny. You don’t ride and I love you to death. It’s just like, y’know, an added perk, having horses in common. But it has nothing to do with her not loving Dave. Come on, get serious.”

He grimaced at her then and shrugged, knowing his attitude was unreasonable. "It's just that it was so much fun having my little sister and my best friend datin'. I really enjoyed that." The smile changed to a frown.

"Now, it'll be that Larry instead and I don't like him, don't plan to."

Blair smiled at him and shrugged. "Oh, once you get to know him, I'm sure you will. He's really a nice guy, just give him a chance."

"Don't wanna'."

"Kenny, for Heaven's sake."

* * *

"So Becky, how about a swim?" Steve rolled over on the blanket, kissed her neck and ruffled her red curls.

"Race you to the water."

Becky murmured something unintelligible and Steve turned over on his back. She was up like a shot, charging for the shoreline, sounds of her laughter floating back to him on the breeze. Steve caught her at the water's edge.

She got in two more giant steps and then he tackled her. Under the waves they went, then popping up like two corks, laughing and spitting out the salty water.

"Hey," he said with a grin. "That's unfair advantage. You didn't say go."

"Unfair advantage? You're two hands taller than I am, for Pete's sakes. Much longer strided." She turned just in time to duck under the next wave.

Becky climbed onto his back as Steve started the long, slow pull toward deeper water. Delicious ripples of laughter poured from her mouth as his strong

arms took them up the side of the wave, legs kicking furiously as they hit the crest.

They reached the rollers and she slid off his back, staring at him in admiration. "Each time we do that it just blows me away at how strong you are."

She looked at him and batted huge aqua eyes. "My hero."

Becky giggled again and dipped her head into the water, skimming her hair back with her hands.

"I've been lifting weights at home, and it's really paid off. I started because I think it helps my equitation. Magic doesn't pull or anything, but if I can maintain control with just my fingers and wrists, it looks so much smoother. Besides, I'm thinking of asking Karen to put me in the jumper lessons."

"You're kidding," Becky said. "I thought you wanted to stay in equitation. Of course, I know where you're coming from. Karen's keeping me in hunters another year and then I can do jumpers. I know she's right. I'm not ready yet, but I want to change so bad."

"Oh, not showing, just the lessons. I want to try to make my mark in equitation. It's Magic's specialty and all I've dreamed of for years. Besides, I have to get a new horse first. Magic's no jumper, but we can handle the height in the lessons, no sweat. I'll just ride the courses like an equitation round and still learn the tricks, only in slow-mo." He chuckled in anticipation.

"I want to perfect the moves so that when I do make the switch I'll already have a good technique. The best part is I'll get to ride with you again." Steve smiled at Becky, dark eyes full of love. "I miss training with you."

"Me, too, and it'll be fun shopping for a new ... oh look, here comes a big one. Let's take it."

He nodded and they rolled onto their bellies. As the swell passed beneath them they started kicking hard, arms stroking for all they were worth. They hit the crest together and rode the wave all the way in, giggling as they grounded in the shallow water.

They flopped back down on the blanket, and Becky started applying sunscreen to Steve's back.

"What to you make of Melly? I think she's got it big for Larry."

"Yeah, I noticed. I don't think he feels the same about her, though, do you?"

"I'm not sure. I really like Larry a lot. He's fun to talk to, yep, and smart. And of course, he's a great rider. But you're right. I don't think he acts any different toward Melly than he does to any of us."

Becky sat back on her haunches, thinking.

"I know he wants to be friends with us all, but I sure don't get any vibes from them. Strange, too. Dave is such a nice guy, even if he doesn't ride." She flopped down in front of him, handing him the bottle.

"I guess we'll find out pretty soon. Things like this have a habit of coming to a head pretty quick. Kind of like scours, y'know what I mean? Comes on real fast."

Steve nodded as he rubbed lotion onto Becky's back, lost in thought. He didn't think Larry had any interest in Melanie beyond being friends. *Oh boy, there goes the summer.*

* * *

Jeff and Jessi sat together in the Jacuzzi, patting the bubbles and talking about Melanie.

"I've never seen Kenny so mad in my whole life. He's takin' this all way too personally. I know Dave's his best friend, but for Pete's sake, Melly is our

sister. She knows her mind and if she's wantin' to break up with Dave, Kenny needs to stay out of it."

"I know. It's just weird how it happened so fast. It was like love at first sight or something." Jessi turned dark eyes to Jeff, giving him a quick kiss. "I know what that's all about." She hesitated, unsure.

"Hey, Jeff, have you ever had a girl like you that you didn't like back? 'Cause I don't think Larry likes her the same way. I mean, no sparks, no nothing. He treats her like everyone else and I don't understand that. I mean, Melly is so beautiful, any guy would fall head over heels, don't you think?"

"After you, little girl," he leaned forward and kissed her lips, "I think Melly is the most beautiful girl I've ever seen; 'course, I'm prejudiced. And yes, I have had some experience with girls chasin' me, if that's what ya mean. Is she doin' that? Melly is a determined sort, but prideful, too. I can't imagine her chasin' him or any guy."

"Well, Blair thinks so. I haven't noticed much one way or the other, but she knows Melly better than I do. Boy, this is sure going to screw up the summer if she starts dating Larry. Kenny isn't, well, I don't think he'll be happy about it. Man, what a mess."

* * *

The strong sea breeze blew through Shievon's hair as she turned the chicken on the barbecue. She glanced over at Billy, wondering why he was so preoccupied.

"Hey, Billy, could you hand me the sauce? I think these guys need another basting."

He turned to her with a grin, picking up the bottle on his way over. “Umm, that looks great. Is it time to put the corn on yet?”

She nodded, brushing the sauce over the chicken. “Yeah, just toss them on the other side of the grill. With any kind of luck everything will be done at the same time.” She grinned at him, beautiful teeth glinting in the setting sun.

“What a novel concept, hey? But I’m getting better.”

Billy gave her a hug. “I’ll get the salad and rolls. Be right back”

Shievon basted the chicken again and turned the corn over. She’d overheard Melanie ask Larry to dinner and his subsequent refusal.

What guy would shy away from a chance to date Melanie? Billy sure wouldn’t.

She harrumphed at the idea and shook her head. Over the years, they’d had more than one discussion about Melanie.

And yet, as impossible as it sounded there it was. Larry didn’t seem interested in any of them except to be friends and riding buddies. He enjoyed spending time with the team but he never offered much about his life in San Jose or what he planned for a future.

The biggest surprise was his lack of reaction to Melanie. Not only was she gorgeous, she was so sweet and such fun to be around, everyone loved her. But not Larry. She knew it in her heart. If Melanie liked Larry as much as she seemed to, bad things were ahead for sure.

“Penny for your thoughts, Shievy.” Billy placed a bowl of salad and a loaf of Italian bread on the table and then slipped his arms around her waist.

“That’s about what they’re worth,” she said. “I was just thinking about Larry and Melly.”

Billy snorted. “I don’t think there *is* any Larry and Melly. She’s chasing the wrong guy.”

Shievon frowned, golden eyes narrowed in worry. “What do you think is going to happen? She’s going to break up with Dave, I just know it. What a shame, especially now.”

Billy shrugged, shuffled the corn around the grill and sprayed them with water. “I don’t know that it’s a shame, Shievy. Did you ever really see Dave and Melly as more than just friends? I sure didn’t. Certainly not like the rest of us. I mean, I don’t think she should continue going with Dave just because it’s a comfortable habit, do you? She should find herself the right guy. But it sure isn’t Larry.”

“Why do you say that? Has he said something to you?”

“No, but he didn’t have to. It’s obvious, at least to me.” Blue eyes half closed, he felt a familiar flush creep up his neck as he thought about Melanie. He turned away from Shievon.

“I mean, Melly is stunning, you have to admit. What guy would think twice about dating her? Larry just isn’t interested.”

“Why not?”

“Well, I think he’s gay.” He shrugged, glancing at Shievon. “Mark my words.”

“*Gay*? Oh, man, you have *got* to be kidding. Melly’s gonna have a cow.”

“I know. Now, Shievy, should I turn the corn?
The ends are burning.”

Shievon let out a little squeak and squirted them with the water bottle, still reeling at Billy’s statement.

“Rats,” she said, squirting them again. “I hate burnt corn.”

Chapter 5

Melanie sat in her dark bedroom, trembling. Her whole body ached. She drew her knees to her chest and hugged them, shuddering again. Her mind whirled at such a pace she couldn't think straight.

"Well, at least it's over," she murmured, dragging a hand through her hair. Her heart beat so hard it hurt to swallow. She leaned back onto the headboard of her bed and sniffed.

Excess, extravagant emotion always made her crazy and tonight Dave had reached the ultimate in excess. Alternating between pitiful tears and righteous anger, he switched back and forth, frantic in his efforts to understand what had happened to him. His recriminations, interspersed with pleas for another chance and demands for an explanation, broke her heart.

His words rang in her ears no matter how hard she tried to shut them out.

"How did this happen? How did I let you down? Why are you doing this to us? But I love you!" Angry tears sprang from his eyes. He'd dashed a hand across his face, furious at the weakness, ashamed.

"Why, Melanie?"

"Oh, man." She put her head on her knees and sobbed. She heard the gentlest of knocks on her door, followed by a whispered "Melanie?" The door opened a tad and Julia peered inside.

"Come on in, Mama."

Julia sat on the edge of the bed and took her daughter's hand. "Melly, what's wrong?"

“Oh, Mama, this has been the worst night of my life. I told Dave I couldn’t see him anymore. He didn’t take it very well.”

She gulped, barely able to see the outline of her mother’s face, but the love and support poured out to her, making her cry all over again. Melanie threw her arms around Julia and buried her head in her lap.

Julia stroked the pale blonde hair, crooning like she had when Melanie was a child.

“It’s gonna be all right, Melly. This day had to happen, y’know. I’ve been waitin’ on it for quite a while now.” She continued the strokes, wiping Melanie’s tears with soft, gentle hands.

“There, darlin’, it’s gonna turn out fine. Ya did the right thing. Ya can’t make feelin’s happen when they aren’t there. It looks miserable now, I know, but things’ll get better by and by. Don’t fret so.”

They sat in the dark, quiet. After a while, Melanie’s spirits lifted a bit and she gave her mother a wan smile.

“Thank ya, Mama, for comin’ in to keep me company. I was feelin’ pretty blue there, but I’m better now. I think I can go to sleep. Ya must be tired. It’s okay to go back to bed.”

Julia drew Melanie to her, hugging her. “Go ahead and put ya head down on the pillow, baby. I’ll just stay here for a bit ‘til ya fall asleep. How’s that, honey?”

“That’d be just fine. Mama. I love ya.”

“I love ya back, Melly. Now go to sleep.” Julia continued stroking her hair until the soft, steady breaths deepened with sleep.

Poor child. Although the breakup came as no surprise to her, she still wondered what prompted Melanie to do it now. She knew there was some tension between Melanie and Kenny and she resolved to have a talk with her first-born tomorrow and get to the bottom of this whole mess.

Julia rose from the bed, looking down at her sleeping daughter. Her heart squeezed in pity; she closed the door silently behind her.

* * *

It was a little after seven when Melanie heard a tapping on her study door. She dragged herself out of bed, threw on her bathrobe and walked into her study. Blair stood on the other side of the door, a worried look on her face. Melanie nodded and unlocked the door.

“Hiya, Blair. Come on in.”

Blair followed her, an expression a mix of curiosity and concern on her face.

“You okay, Melly?” She peered closer. “You don’t look so good. How’d it go with Dave last night?”

“About as well as could be expected, I suppose. Want a cup of coffee?” She hefted the little pot in Blair’s direction, a question in her eyes.

“Sure, thanks. You know how I like it.” Blair waited while Melly fussed with the coffee.

Finally she turned around, tears glazing her eyes and handed a cup to Blair.

“It was awful. He was so mad. He kept askin’ me why I didn’t want to see him anymore. That was bad enough, but then ... then,” her lips started to quiver and she put her hands over her face. “He ... he started to cry.”

She raised sorrowful eyes to Blair. “It was the worst moment of my life. I didn’t know what to do, what to say. Then he asked me if we could still go to the graduation dance together and I said no, which set him off again. He asked me if I was seein’ anyone else and I told him no. I guess that’s skirtin’ the issue a bit, but there really wasn’t else to say. He just sat there cryin’.”

Melanie heaved a sigh and got up to refill her cup, glancing over at Blair, who shook her head in response. “Then he wanted to know if we could still be friends and that he couldn’t stand the thought of not seein’ me anymore. He kept talkin’ about all the fun we had over the years and how could I be so cruel an’ heartless.”

“Oh, Melly, that’s just the pain talking. You aren’t heartless or cruel. You just didn’t feel the same way about him. This is probably long overdue. You can’t make love happen just because you want it to. It’s either there or it isn’t. Regardless of what happens with Larry, you did the right thing. What’s really cruel is stringing someone along for convenience, for someone to fill in the gaps. Now that’s heartless.”

Blair slid an arm across Melanie’s shoulders and gave her a hug. “You did the right thing. Dave’s just playing all the guilt-cards now. No one ever died of a broken heart. He’ll find someone else to date and when he finds the right girl he’ll thank you for cutting him loose.

“I know that’s true, but it still hurts.” She glanced at the photos scattered about the room, pictures going back through her years with Dave. They chronicled the passing of their time together.

“I guess my bedroom needs a major overhaul. Hey,” she said, suddenly brightening at the thought. “What a great idea. It’s a super opportunity. I’ll ask Larry if he wants to come over and work on decorating it with me.” She looked over at Blair, expecting more of a reaction.

“That’s a great idea, don’t ya think? It’s right up his alley. It’ll give us some time to get to know each other better. Gosh, Blair, he’s so cute. I’ve never felt so attracted to a boy in my life.”

“He sure is a talented designer. Imagine a guy knowing the difference between curtains and drapes.” Blair looked at her best friend with a grin. “I agree with the makeover and you really need to put the pictures away. Are you about ready to get rid of the canopy?”

Melanie glanced up at the swath of gauzy material that festooned the top of the bed. She looked at Blair, a smirk on her face.

“Yeah, I guess it is a little childish, isn’t it? How about a sleigh-bed? I saw one at the mall the other day. It was just gorgeous.”

Blair chuckled at the return of Melly’s good humor as well as the idea of a sleigh-bed. “Always the romantic, aren’t you?” She glanced at the clock, eyes wide.

“Man, look at the time. We’d better get going or we’ll be late for our lesson. Gotta run, see you at the barn.”

Blair waved goodbye as she slipped out the study door and walked down the path to her house.

* * *

Melanie pulled on her tall boots and reached into her trunk for her helmet. She heard cars in the

parking lot and her heart leaped. *Maybe it's Larry.* As she headed for Benny's stall, she saw Steve and Larry talking in the parking lot. Stepping into the stall, she removed the gelding's sheet and slipped the halter on his head, chuckling as Benny sniffed her pockets for treats.

She led him out to the crossies, loving how the sunlight brought out the dapples in his bright copper coat. She got to work with the curry-comb, round firm strokes loosening the short hairs that floated away in the gentle breeze. She started to pick out his feet when Larry led Connie to the slot next to her.

"Morning, Melly. Beautiful day, isn't it?"

"Hey, Larry, it sure is."

Jessi dragged a reluctant Fokie up to the crossies and began brushing her in quick hard strokes. "Man, I overslept this morning, how're you guys?"

They saw Karen in the ring, setting up the course. Becky, Steve, Billy and Shievon trotted large circles and Blair prepared to mount Angel.

They saddled up and joined the show team, excited and ready to go.

"Morning, kids. Great day, isn't it?" Karen adjusted the last fence, smiling at them. "Let's get some room between you and trot." Around they went, practicing lengthening and shortening the stride. Then it was time to canter, reverse, and do it again.

"Alright, kids, I think we're ready to jump. This course is set up to test your eye. Fence one is the single vertical in the center there. Sharp left turn and back over the combination. Back to the original single and then right to the outside combination. You see what you need to do. Who wants to go first? Billy?"

Billy and Bitsy pulled out of line. He picked up a soft left lead and headed for the first fence. They weren't going for the speed today, just the tight ride. Two strides out, Billy did a soft half-halt and Bitsy hit the perfect spot. At the top of the fence he opened his left rein, upper body turning in mid-air, eyes fixed on the next fence. It came up great, as did three and he kept the turn round and forward, back to the original fence. This one was tricky.

As he cleared the vertical, Billy looked ahead for his focal point. Five forward strides, he figured. At the fifth stride he looked right, starting the turn to the combination, which came up okay, and Bitsy powered over it, three more strides to six and they finished.

"That was super, Billy. How did it look to you, Blair?" Karen glanced at her daughter.

"Really nice ... loved the turn to two. I wasn't sure about the turn to five, though. Bitsy's so strong, she handled the shorter spot. I think I'll put in an extra stride before I make the turn."

"I agree with you. Larry, give it a go."

Connie cantered off the line, black tail raised like a flag. She was *on* today and snatched at the bit, snaking her head as Larry took hold of the reins. They jumped over one with ease, making the same tight turn, but going much faster than Billy. Over fence three he looked left again; shaving two strides off his ride, he sailed over four.

He also did five strides before the turn, opening his rein and winding Connie around his inside leg. They powered into the oxer and left out another stride in the combination.

"Excellent ride, Larry. She's looking great this morning. Let's work on her doing the correct number

of strides, please. It's important that you get her to the proper place. I don't want to keep saying that."

Larry nodded at her and stroked Connie's pale gold neck

"You want to go next, Becky?"

Becky rode Champ in the group lessons, saving Lark for the private lesson she had later in the day with Karen. The gelding moved into his smooth canter, hopping over the first fence with ease. Becky waited a full stride after landing before she looked to the second fence. Their turn was round and smooth and they flowed through the combination in that soft, easy hunter rhythm.

Another round turn brought them back to the first fence. She counted for six strides before she made the turn to five, pressing the big horse through the turn, which got a little wide. She corrected, and they were through the combination.

"Good job, honey. You rode that very well. Just remember to keep contact with your outside leg. Gotta watch the drift. Okay, Blair, you're next."

The kids handled the course well and then it was Melanie's turn to go.

Benny picked up a strong canter and moved on to the first fence. They turned in mid-air and her opening rein brought the gelding's nose around to the second fence. Huge strides carried them through the combination. They turned in mid-air again, flying toward the next fence. Over easy, and Melanie counted four strides.

She turned hard and clamping both legs on the galloping horse, powered into five also leaving out a stride in the combination. Cheeks pink with exertion, she glanced at Larry as she ended her round.

He smiled at her in admiration. "You rode that one like a pro, Melly," he whispered as she resumed her place in line. "Great horse."

"Super job, Melly," Karen said, as she raised the jumps up another hole. "Okay, kids, let's do it again."

It went on like that for another hour or so. They'd be doing this for real at Showpark next weekend and Karen stretched them to their limits.

"Really good job today, kids. Let's meet in the clubhouse after you're finished. I've got the premiums for the show and we need to get the entries filled out and faxed over this morning."

They sat around the clubhouse table, filling out their entries. Karen hadn't made any changes this year.

Steve would remain in his equitation division, Jessi, Blair and Billy in Children's jumpers, Shievon in Lo-Juniors and Melanie in Hi-Juniors. Larry would show in the open division. Becky, still mired in hunters, shook her head and sighed.

"Have you ever been to Showpark, Larry?" Melanie glanced across the table at him, smiling.

"No, but I've heard all about it; seen it on TV bunches of times. How does it ride?"

"Oh, they have the best grass field. Huge, lots of gallopin' room and a couple of neat slopes thrown in for good measure. I love it. You will too."

Entries collected, the group started to break up. Melanie followed Larry out to the parking lot.

"I sorta' have a favor to ask ya. I want to redecorate my room and thought ya might be able to come over and give me some ideas."

"Why, sure. I'd love to. What do you have in mind?"

“Oh,” she sighed, “furniture for starters. I kinda like the color of the walls, but I’m thinkin’ of addin’ a strip of wallpaper at the top, ya know, up where the ceilin’ meets the wall? Maybe a huntin’ scene if I can find it.”

Larry grinned. “Yeah, a border really pulls a room together. When do you want to do it?”

“Well, I’m anxious to get started, so whenever is good for you. Are ya doin’ anything today?” Huge blue eyes sought his and the pulse at her throat beat visibly.

“Sounds fine with me. I’ll go home, change and grab a bite to eat. How about an hour or so?”

“Ah, that’s just fine with me, Larry. And bring a bathin’ suit. We can have a swim later. It’s gonna get hot today.”

“Okay, see you in a little bit.”

* * *

Larry glanced around her bedroom, taking mental notes. “So, what furniture are you getting rid of? This chaise is really beautiful. It stays, right?” He slid a hand over the soft blue brocade, fingers feeling the patina of the rosewood chaise that had belonged to her grandmother.

Melanie smiled, nodding. “Oh, yeah, it’s a family heirloom. My Gramma passed a couple of months ago and she left it special to me ‘cause I’ve always loved it.”

“Where did she live,” he asked, inspecting the handcrafted workmanship.

“She and Poppy lived on an old plantation, about an hour from Atlanta, near Jonesboro. Family home since before the War. Beautiful old place, covered with moss. They raised cotton once, then

Poppy took a fancy to peaches and the next thing ya know he's got an orchard. I miss them both so much." She paused with a sigh, remembering them and the beautiful old house.

"Anyway, it's mostly the bed. Just doesn't seem to fit any more. I've had it for ages and I'm lookin' for somethin' a bit more sophisticated. I saw a sleigh-bed at Taft's the other day. Just exquisite."

"Taft's? Oh, that's my favorite store for stuff like this. Would you like to drive over there and check out more things? They have a great selection of borders. What did you have in mind? Any change of theme?"

"Not really. That's where you come in, I guess. I'm not very good at this so I need all the help I can get."

She looked over at him, a soft smile playing around her lips. The dimples deepened as the smile turned into a grin. "One thing for sure, the canopy's gotta go."

"Well, don't worry; I'm very good this. Come on, let's go to Taft's and see what works. You're going to keep up the horse motif, right?" He glanced around the room at all the photos of her and her horses. He walked over to one of her on Benny. The long blue rosette fluttered from the bridle as she accepted the trophy. He straightened the picture and said, "Showpark, right?"

"Yeah, that was last September." She looked around at the replacement photos and sighed. The room looked strange to her with out Dave smiling at her from everywhere. She sighed again. "I'm ready if you are."

The huge furniture store sprawled over three floors, segregated into types of furniture. Bedroom suites, positioned into pleasing *rooms* with related themes and groupings, filled the first floor. Beautiful quilts and bedspreads, garnished with a variety of pillows, set off the furniture to perfection. Appropriate art, flower-filled vases and beautiful sculpture completed the scene.

Melanie took a sharp left turn and made a beeline for the middle of the floor. Directly ahead of her was the target. The arched headboard of inlaid oak glowed. A graceful flowing headboard led down to the fluted side-rails that connected the footboard by carved slats. The stunning footboard, shaped like a graceful wave, curled over the base. She smiled.

“Wow, Melly, it’s out of this world. Perfect for you.” Larry bent down, running his hands over the slats.

“Smooth as glass. Oh, girl, you just *have* to have this piece.” He looked at her and grinned, eyes lighting up his handsome face. Turning back to the bed he nodded in satisfaction.

“Golden oak is my favorite of all woods. Look at the patina of the finish. It’ll still be beautiful a hundred years from now. It’s perfect for your room.”

Melanie stared at Larry, mesmerized. *I’d rather look at you. Funny how many different shades of blue eyes there are. Yours are as blue as a bright summer sky. Mmm, and those lashes, why I could just ...* She snapped out of her reverie as Larry tapped her arm.

“What about nightstands, Melly? How about these?”

They cruised the store for another hour, gathering up a beautiful blue comforter and matching pillows for the new bed.

“Gosh, Larry, what fun. I can’t thank ya enough for helpin’ me out.” The sun rode high and the temperature hovered in the low eighties as they crossed the parking lot to his car. “How about a swim?”

He glanced down at his watch, then over at Melanie. “Sure, sounds like fun.” He held the door for her while she settled into the Porsche.

* * *

Larry watched Melanie behind dark glasses. The sun lit up her beautiful face as the breeze ruffled her hair. She was so lovely to look at, a delicate porcelain figurine dressed in pastel shades of rose. His heart pinched.

Why not? Why not give it just one more try? Maybe it would work out this time. Maybe.

Kenny glared out the kitchen window at Larry and Melanie, talking to himself. “Why did this have to happen?” He didn’t hear Julia approach him from behind.

“What’s up, Kenny?” she asked as she followed his glance out the window.

“Hey, Mama. Nothin’s up. I’m just lookin’ out the window.”

“What’s so fascinatin’ and why the glare? Who Melly likes is up to her, don’t ya think? I know how mad ya are at her for breakin’ up with Dave but I have to say it’s none of your business. How’s he doin’, by the way?”

“I don’t know for sure. I haven’t seen him since she broke up with him. He’s gone to ground, I guess. I

can't find him anywhere and his cell is off. It really makes me mad, Mama."

"I know it does, but it shouldn't. I don't like the attitude, Kenny and comin' from y'all just really surprises me. This is Melly we're talking about here ... your little sister. Family's what's most important and ya need to remember that."

Luminous gray eyes, shadowed with concern, sought his. He would not make eye contact. "Is it more than just Dave? What's really botherin' ya? Larry seems like a nice kid, very polite. I don't understand."

"Mama, I can't put my finger on it, exactly. I just don't like him." Cloudy blue eyes met hers. He glanced away, ashamed. "I know I'm not being reasonable. Blair read me the riot act the other night. She said I was bein' silly, but I can't help it. I just know he's not the right guy for her." He glanced out the window again. "Well, guess I'll pass up the pool today."

Jeff sauntered into the kitchen just then, rummaged in the fridge for a soda and gave Kenny's arm a sharp cuff.

"Hey, bro, how about a game of tennis? Work off some of that aggression. I'll beat the pants off ya, give ya somethin' else to think about."

"Take a hike, Jeff."

Kenny stormed down the hall and into his bedroom. Julia winced as the door slammed shut. She started after him, furious at his behavior.

"Mama, leave him be. He's really mad right now and no good is gonna come from hollerin' at him." Jeff shook his head, disgusted.

"Man, he hasn't done that in years."

“Well, he better not start it again, let me tell ya. I will not tolerate that kind of...”

This time it was the front door. Every hair on Julia’s head stood straight up.

“Uh! That does it,” she said, starting toward the hall.

“I’ll get him, Mama. Please let me handle this.”

Jeff left before she could reply. He took the steps two at a time, heading for the garage. He heard the Mustang’s engine turn over as he strode through the open door.

“Turn off the car, Kenny, before I jerk ya outta there and give ya the beatin’ ya deserve. What the *hell* is goin’ on? Mama’s in a tizzy and if she tells Papa about the door slammin’ again, there’s gonna be bigger trouble than ya can handle. *Turn it off.*” The engine died.

Identical, furious faces stared each other down. Jeff walked around to the passenger door and got in.

“This has to be way more than just Dave. What do ya have against Larry anyway? Seems nice enough to me, treats Melly fine from what I’ve seen. Come on, ya know ya can be honest with me. What’s up?”

“I’m not sure, Jeff, I just have this strange feelin’ about him. If I’m wrong, I’ll get over it, but if I’m right, Melly’s gonna end up with a broken heart or maybe way worse.”

“Just get to it, Kenny. I’m gettin’ the creeps. What? A serial killer? A terrorist? Listen to yourself, for Pete’s sake. *What?*”

“I just get these eerie vibes from him or somethin’; can’t really put my finger on it, but Jeff, I think he’s gay.”

“Get outta here. Because of what? What gives you that idea?”

Kenny glanced at Jeff, eyes narrowed. “Billy thinks so too. We were talkin’ about it the other day, after we had dinner at Steve’s. He knows lots of ‘em, friends of his mother’s from Hollyweird, y’know.”

Jeff sat back, silent. He knew Kenny better than anyone in the world, even Blair. Never before in his whole life had he known his twin to misjudge anyone, but he had to be wrong about Larry.

He had to be. In the first place, why would a gay guy hang around with a girl, especially since it was obvious that her interest in him went beyond friendship? Kenny had to be wrong.

“What did Billy say about him? Why does he think Larry’s gay?”

“Well, for one thing, it can’t have escaped ya that Melly is drop dead gorgeous. And smart, and funny. I mean, what’s not to like? Plus, he likes all that girly stuff, y’know, the decoratin’ and all. But it goes way beyond that. He doesn’t look at her like a guy looks at a beautiful girl. Are ya tellin’ me ya haven’t noticed that?”

“Kenny, that’s ridiculous. He’s sittin’ at the pool with her right now. Sounds like he likes her just fine. Don’t let a wild imagination run away with ya. Just because a guy knows about drapes and such does not make him *gay*.”

Jeff paused then, thinking back to the time he’d spent with Larry, and a cold little trickle of concern ran through his stomach.

Kenny looked at his twin, an agitated expression on his face. “Remember when we went to the beach and she had on that new bathin’ suit? The

blue one? He was the only guy there that didn't notice. Shoot, *we* even commented on it. But Larry, he was more interested in askin' Billy about surfin'. Then he spent the rest of the night talkin' with Steve about his new camera. *And*, how about the way he waves his hands around when he talks?"

Kenny parodied the moves, wrists limp, and grimaced. "I'm sayin'."

"He doesn't do it like that, y'know." Jeff hesitated, and then shook his head. "If he's gay, and I'm still not convinced, we need to find out pretty quick here. 'Cause if it's true it'll just kill Melly for sure."

Jeff pulled his cell phone from his pocket and dialed. "Hey, Billy, it's Jeff. Listen, Kenny and I wondered if ya had a little while to talk. We ... yeah it's about Larry. Okay, see ya in a minute."

"Start the car and let's go see Billy."

Chapter 6

“If he’s gay, Billy, why is he sittin’ at our pool with Melly right now?” Jeff asked.

Billy shrugged and shook his head. “Maybe because he’s not sure how he feels. Maybe he doesn’t want to admit it even to himself. Being in denial about their sexuality is something all gay people go through. They just don’t want to accept it at first. How do you think *you’d* feel if you were gay? Not something you’d want to shout from the rooftops, is it? I mean, look at your reaction to him.”

Kenny shook his head, lips pursed. “Hey, man, that’s bull and you know it. My only concern is for my sister. I don’t care one way or another whether he’s gay, but Melanie sure will.”

Billy looked at his friends with concern and heaved a sigh. “You know, maybe I’ll have a talk with him. I’ve had several gay friends over the years and sometimes all they need is a little sympathy and understanding. He’s really a nice guy, Kenny. He can’t help being gay any more than you can help being blond.”

* * *

The sun shone down on Larry and Melanie as they lounged by the pool. She was just about to ask him if he wanted another glass of lemonade when his cell phone went off. He got up from the chaise and walked over to the table, fishing the phone from his pocket.

“Hello?” A wide smile spread across his face. “Hey, Billy, what’re you up to?” He paused and smiled again.

“No, Melanie and I are sitting by her pool, toasting.” Larry glanced over at her and smiled and then returned his attention to Billy. “Sure I can. I have a couple of errands to run. How about in an hour or so? Cool, see you then.”

Returning the cell to his pocket he turned to Melanie. “That was Billy. He wants to get together in a little bit. I have to go anyway. I have a few things I have to do in town.” He slid his feet into his shoes, tying the laces.

“This was really great fun. I enjoyed shopping with you. When the bed comes in, I know you’ll love it. Be sure to let me know. I want to see the end results.” Larry pulled his shirt on and smiled at her again.

“See you at the barn tomorrow.” He smiled, waved goodbye and walked down the path to his car.

Melanie sat on the chaise, stunned. The day certainly had not turned out the way she’d hoped. Why did he leave in such a rush? She was just about to ask him if he wanted to stay for supper. Dejected, she picked up her towel and lotion and went inside the house.

Julia sat at the kitchen table, reading the newspaper. “Hi, honey, did ya have a nice swim? I saw Larry leave a minute ago.”

“It was okay, I guess. Sure was fun shoppin’ and he had some great decoratin’ ideas, but I don’t know, Mama, I don’t think he likes me. He’s friendly and all, but—”

“Why, honey, sure he likes ya. What a strange thing to say.”

“Oh, Mama, ya know what I mean. He likes me fine as a friend, but I don’t think he has any romantic

feelins' for me." Sorrowful eyes sought Julia's. She always had the right answers.

Julia looked at Melanie's sad face and her heart squeezed. "Maybe he's just a little slow to show his feelins', honey. Some guys are just bashful."

"It's not that, Mama. He just doesn't like me that way. He doesn't want to touch me. He's never even tried to hold my hand. What am I doin' wrong?"

"I don't know, honey. Just give it a little time and things'll work out." She patted Melanie's hand, wishing she had the answers, but she didn't have a clue. Larry was a stranger to her.

* * *

Billy sat on the back veranda with Larry, looking out at the ocean. The *Sea Nymph* rocked at her moorings, dwarfing the ski boat that rode the surf beside her.

"You know about my mother, don't you?" he asked, grinning.

"I sure do ... Melly told me. She's one of my favorite actresses. I've watched that show for years. I feel like I've grown up knowing her. Does she come down here much? I'd love to meet her."

Billy chuckled. "They're driving down tonight. Should be here any time. Would you like to stay and have dinner? Shievy's down in San Diego taking her SAT's so I'm batching it tonight."

A wide smile split Larry's face. "You don't have to ask me twice. No plans for me."

Billy glanced over at Larry, eyebrows raised. "Did you have fun with Melanie today? Great girl, isn't she? Easy on the eyes." His cheeks flushed.

"Yeah, she's very nice. We went to Taft's today, shopping for furniture. She's giving her

bedroom a makeover and wanted some advice. We found the most marvelous oak sleigh-bed. Just stunning.”

He hesitated, staring out at the ocean. “She’s fun to be around, but I’ve got a problem and I don’t know what to do about it.”

“What problem?” Billy said. *This is going to be easier than I thought.* “Not your type, huh?”

Larry blushed. “No, she’s not, and I think she has a crush on me.” He rose and walked to the edge of the veranda, staring at the silvery beach. “I don’t know what to do about it. It’s so unfair.”

“You aren’t into girls, are you? I mean, romantically?”

He hesitated, unsure, and then sighed. “No, I’m not. Is that why you asked me over here, to check me out?” Larry’s voice trembled with emotion.

“Yes, in a way I suppose so.”

Billy joined him and they both stared at the pounding surf. “Being gay isn’t a crime. It’s just the way you are. My mom has lots of gay friends ... like half the people she works with are gay. I have no prejudice whatsoever.”

The sun dropped into the ocean like molten lava, staining the clouds crimson. Silent for a moment, the boys watched the nightly display as the stars peeped out, still dimmed by the sun’s lingering rays.

“Does everyone else know?” Larry asked, his voice tight with anxiety. “Is this the latest barn gossip?” His tone was bitter as he glanced at Billy.

“No, I don’t think any of the girls know. I guess I figured it out first and Kenny has strong suspicions, but here’s what you have to remember. Our only concern about you being gay is for Melanie. I

don't think she's going to take it very well. What are you going to do? I think she deserves an honest answer, don't you?"

"What should I do, just walk up to her and say 'Gee, Melly, you're cool and all, but I'm gay?' Something like that?"

Billy cocked his head, lips pursed. "Yeah, something like that. She's got a big crush on you, so really, you don't have a choice. What else can you do? Or are you trying to change, trying to be straight? 'Cause if you are, I don't think it's going to work."

"Shoot, Billy, you make it sound so easy. The kids will hate me. They'll never understand." His voice rose. "Believe me, I know."

"Well, I don't know what's happened with you before, but the team won't hate you. They're a great bunch of kids, very sophisticated. You aren't the first gay friend we've had. Shoot, they never batted an eye about my mom. And Becky—she thought we wouldn't accept her because she's poor. Well, compared to us, anyway."

He looked Larry in the eye, wanting to make himself clear. "You won't shock them. But if you break Melly's heart they'll be mad as hell at you and so will I. You have to tell her, the sooner the better."

"I know you're right. How?" Larry looked at his friend, twisting his hands on the railing.

"You and Melanie are good friends, right? Could you tell her for me? I know I'm the world's biggest coward, but I can't face it. Please?"

"Yeah, I can do that for you. I just hope she doesn't transfer her anger at you to me." Morose, Billy stared at the sea. He sighed. *There goes the summer.*

The limo pulled into the driveway just then and stopped at the front steps. Bob got out and opened the doors for his passengers. He pulled three large suitcases from the trunk, along with several garment bags.

Billy and Larry went down the steps to greet his parents and the men with them.

Tracy, beautiful as ever, wore a teal sundress that showed off her fabulous figure to perfection. She threw her arms around Billy, hugging him tight. When she let him go, he shook his dad's hand and turned to the guys by the limo.

"Hi, Scott, Eric, how's L.A.?" He glanced back at Larry, beckoning him over. "Mom, Dad, I'd like you and Scott and Eric to meet my friend, Larry Klein. Larry this is my mother, Tracy, my dad, Tom, and Scott and Eric. They work with mom on her show. Eric is the director and Scott does the scripting."

Larry shook hands with them all, speechless at the sight of Tracy.

Her dark hair, piled on top of her head in a soft little pouf, framed her face in soft strands, and tendrils floated around her head and neck. She looked about twenty. Large brown eyes, fringed with thick lashes, smiled at Steve as she shook his hand. She turned to Eric and winked.

"Wouldn't he be great for Marci's love interest on the show?" She turned back to Larry and smiled again. "Ever thought about acting? You remind me of John Travolta—about thirty years ago."

"Oh, Mom, he's going to be a famous designer one of these days."

Larry murmured something unintelligible, still unable to take his eyes off the famous star. She was even more beautiful in person than on TV.

Well aware of her effect on people, Tracy smiled at Larry then turned to Tom. "Well, I have to slip into something comfortable. This dress is itchy." She headed for the stairs. "Tom, if you'll fix the guys a drink, I'll meet you on the patio in a minute. My feet hurt." She walked up the steps and disappeared into the house.

Subtle lighting along the edges of the patio and one wall threw shadows on the veranda as they sat at the table. Tom mixed a pitcher of martinis, plopping an olive into all but one glass. Tracy preferred a thick twist of lemon. He brought the drinks to the table.

"Here you go, guys. I'll take this to Tracy and join you in a moment. I'm sure she'll appreciate it. What a miserable drive down, huh? I thought we'd never get here."

"Oh, I don't know, Tom," Scott said. "Thanks to Bob knowing every side street in the state, we avoided most of the tie-up." He waved a hand at the boys, handsome face now serious.

"*No* one survived in that little car, let me tell you. I'll have nightmares tonight, I just know it." He looked over at Billy and grimaced. "Flat as a pancake."

"Now, Scott," Eric said, "don't dwell. I know how you feel, it really was terrible, but you'll give yourself fits. The kids today all drive like maniacs. Present company excluded, I'm sure." He turned to Billy and smiled, small, white, teeth glinting in the soft light.

“How’s the riding going? Your mom told me you’d switched over to jumpers or something. She showed me a couple of your tapes. Positively hair-raising.”

“Well, it’s quite a change, I have to admit, but it sure is fun. Larry does jumpers, too. He has a wonderful mare ... oh, thanks Bob.”

Bob placed a platter of appetizers on the table as well as napkins. He walked over to the bar and brought back the pitcher, refilling cocktails and the boy’s ice tea glasses.

“Umm, oh my. I may just make it through the night after all.” Scott leaned over to peruse the canapés. “Look, Eric, crab puffs, your fave.”

He took a small bite and rolled his eyes in culinary appreciation. “To die for. Here.” He popped the remaining bite in Eric’s mouth. “Yum, yes?”

“Very,” Eric said, selecting another crab puff.

Billy slanted a glance at Larry, correctly interpreting his reaction.

Just then, Tracy and Tom walked onto the veranda. She’d exchanged the sundress for a voluminous white silk caftan, her favorite mode of dress for relaxation; her hair flowed loose around her shoulders. They rose as she approached the table, her feet bare.

“What a glorious night,” she said, staring at the sky. “Look at the moon, would you? Huge.”

“Darling, you’re going to get splinters,” Scott said with a grin of warning. “No time off for wounds, self-inflicted or otherwise.”

Dinner was lively and the conversation revolved around Hollywood, TV production and life in L.A.

“What kind of design are you interested in, Larry? Set design, by any chance? Or will you be the next Versace?” Eric asked, a grin on his face. “I imagine you’re a hit with the ladies.”

“Interior design,” Larry said, flattered by the attention they paid him. “I love to work with fabrics, ever since I was a little kid. I don’t know where it comes from, ‘cause my mother doesn’t know burlap from suede.” He glanced around the table and chuckled.

“I’ve decorated the last three houses we’ve lived in. We traveled around a lot in the past couple of years. Mom’s an author.” He shrugged as if that explained both her wanderlust and decorating deficiency.

Billy looked over at his mother, smiling. “Larry’s going to Sinclair in Beverley Hills. Maybe when he graduates you can give him a boost. You know everyone up there.”

Tracy smiled at Billy. “You bet I will.” She looked at Larry. “Do you have a portfolio? I’d love to see it. That’s a great field, very fulfilling.”

“Pay’s great, too,” Scott said in agreement.

The conversation wound down around eleven and Larry rose to go. He approached Tracy, hand extended. “It was a pleasure to meet you. Thank you so much for dinner, it was delicious.”

“You’re welcome, Larry. We enjoyed your company and hope to see you again soon.” Tracy waved as they headed for the driveway. “Don’t forget the portfolio.”

Billy walked Larry to his car. “How’d you like Scott and Eric?” he asked. “They’ve been together as far back as I can remember. Great guys. They helped

my mother so much when she first started on the show. She says they made her what she is today.”

“They’re cool.” Larry glanced at Billy and shrugged. “I appreciate you including me tonight, Billy. It was very interesting in lots of ways. Kinda makes me feel better about myself, more confident that I might have a normal future.”

He slid behind the wheel of the Porsche then shook his head. “Hey, listen, I appreciate you offering to tell Melanie for me, but I can’t let you do that. It’s my story to tell and if I’m ever going to be myself, I might as well start with friends. At least they like me.”

Billy watched the lights disappear over the rise, shook his head and hauled himself back to the veranda. *It’s definitely going to be a terrible summer.*

Larry drove home in a fog, his mind whirling. What a revelation tonight had been, meeting Tracy, seeing her obvious interest in his work. Nothing beat knowing the right people. It could help your career as much as an education. With his portfolio current, he wished he’d made a firm date to come back instead of leaving it so vague. He’d call Billy about that first thing in the morning.

Meeting Eric and Scott, though, made the most profound impression on him. Larry had never explored his sexuality farther than to know he would never be able to fall in love with a girl and get married. To see a long-time gay couple so happy, so accepted, gave him hope.

He’d dated a couple of girls in the past, but all those relationships ended with him running away as fast as he could with the girl in hot pursuit. The worst part of it was he really liked girls. He enjoyed their

company, just hanging around with them. But not *that* way, not romantically.

Larry's thoughts turned back to Melanie. *Maybe I'm making a mountain out of a mole hill. Heck, we've never even had a date. We're just friends. Maybe we can stay that way.* He pulled into his driveway, wondering what his parents and sisters would think. There was no doubt he'd have to tell them now. He'd already taken the first step with Billy.

* * *

"Hey, Melly, what are you doing?" Blair adjusted the cell phone to her ear as she refilled her coffee cup. "I feel like going to the mall, do a little shopping, maybe lunch. You up for that?"

Melanie stretched her arms over her head and fluffed her pillows. "Sounds like a plan to me. I'm still lookin' for things for my bedroom. When do you want to go?"

"Well, I'm just starting my second cup of coffee, but it sounds like I woke you. How about an hour or so? I'll pick you up in the truck. It'll give us plenty of room for our stuff."

"We'll have to park out in the back forty. You'll never find a good spot with—oh, never mind. It's such a beautiful day, who cares if we have to walk. See ya in an hour."

* * *

Melanie heard Blair's truck in the driveway. Glancing in the mirror, she applied another coat of lipstick the exact color of her pink tee. White shorts showed off long tan legs. She grabbed her sunglasses and purse and walked down the hall to the kitchen.

“Mornin’, Mama,” she said, giving Julia a hug. “Blair and I are headed to the mall. Probably gonna be a long day what with graduation shopping and all.”

Blair came in the door just then, getting a hello from Julia.

Kenny stood up and gave her a hug. “Now don’t you girls be too late. Remember, Blair, we’ve got tickets to the Garth Brooks concert. Starts at eight, so we should get goin’ by six-thirty or so.”

“Like I could possibly forget that. What are you guys doing today?” Blair asked him.

“Jeff and I have a tennis lesson. After that, it’s pool time for me.”

They chatted a bit longer, and then Blair nodded at Melly. “Let’s go. See you later.”

* * *

The deep blue sky stretched before them, cloudless. The warm sun was so inviting they wished they had Melanie’s convertible.

“What a great day for the beach.” Blair glanced at the glimmers of surf that peeked through the trees, then brought her attention back to her friend.

“I hate that you’re missing out on tonight. I wish you’d bought tickets too. Should be a great concert; they’re sold out.” Blair backed out of the driveway, glancing at her friend.

“I didn’t want to go without a date and Larry, well, I don’t know about him.” She paused as they passed his house. His Porsche sat under the carport. “What do you make of him?”

Blair stopped at the bottom of the street and glanced over at Melanie. They’d been best friends since childhood with no subjects off base, always able

to talk about anything. She wasn't sure what to say when it came to Larry.

"How does he act when you're alone? Does he seem interested in going out, you know, dating?"

"Well, except for drivin' to Tafts and an hour or so at the pool, we've never been alone. I've invited him over a couple of other times, but he said he was busy. Doesn't take a rocket scientist to see he's not interested." Melanie looked over at Blair, a frown clouding her face. "I don't know what to do to get him to like me, Blair, and I want him to so bad."

Blair hesitated and then plunged in. "He doesn't seem interested in anyone that way, from what I can see. I mean maybe it's a leap, but Kenny thinks he's gay."

Melanie's eyes popped open at that, and she glared at Blair. "Gay? *Gay*? That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. I'm sayin'. Just because he isn't interested in me doesn't mean he's gay. Y'all're crazy."

"Billy thinks so, too. Actually, Larry reminds me a whole lot of Bobby Simms, remember him? He's gay, you know. We took Home Ec with him last year. The best cook in the whole class. Remember those sauces? Umm."

They sat silent for a moment and then Melanie turned in her seat.

"Blair, I don't believe he is, but do you think being gay is a choice? Y'know? Or do you think they're born that way? Maybe he's just not met the right girl yet. Maybe I could ... well; maybe I could help change him or somethin'. Do you think that's possible?"

“I don’t know, Melly. I can’t imagine it could be a choice the way you mean it. Shoot, who would *choose* a lifestyle like that? You could end up alienating your friends and family, jeopardizing your career. Choose it? I don’t think so. That’s why some stay in the closet.”

“Man, I hate that phrase.” Melanie threw an indignant glare at Blair then slumped in her seat. “But ya have a point, I guess. Even so, I still don’t believe it.”

“Well, you may be right, we’ll see.”

They pulled into the parking lot of the mall and took a back spot. No point in driving up and down the aisles. Blair’s truck was just too big. The girls walked toward the mall entrance, silent. Some of the brightness had gone out of their day, as though invisible clouds gathered overhead.

Melanie remained in denial. *I don’t believe it for a minute. They can change if they want to.*

Blair shook her head, lips pursed. *That’s the last I have to say on that subject.* Melanie refused to listen. Nothing she had to say would change that.

They walked into the Sophisticated Lady in pursuit of graduation dresses.

“I need somethin’ special for Baccalaureate.”

“Oh, that’s right. You’re the Salutatorian this year. I’m not surprised. Are you nervous about the speech?”

“No problem for me, I love public speakin’. Papa says I should go into law or politics.”

She chuckled at the thought as she searched the racks of dresses. Melanie always knew she would grow up to be a doctor, even as a little girl. At first she

wanted to be a vet, but gave that up for plastic surgery. In September, she would start her pre-med at the University of California, San Diego.

“Hey, Blair, that reminds me, we need to start lookin’ for an apartment. Jeff told me there’s one comin’ up in their complex. That’d be neat, huh, livin’ near the twins?”

“It sure would. Plus, they can show us the ropes. I have to admit I’m nervous about starting,” Blair said, holding up a long, white silk sheath. “Let’s go down and see it after the show next week.”

“Great idea. I’ll get Mama to put a deposit down to save it for us. They go pretty fast and I’ve heard enough about some of the off-campus housin’ to give me the willies. Half makes me want to pledge a sorority.”

* * *

Larry pulled into Melanie’s driveway and turned off the engine. He heard music coming from the pool area, so he followed the path around to the patio.

“Melanie?” he called, as he came abreast of the deck chairs.

“Hi, Larry. She’s not here.” Jessi waved him over, a welcoming smile on her face. “She and Blair are at the mall, shopping. Come on, have a seat.” She patted the chaise next to her.

Two identical faces peered at him from the edge of the pool.

“Hey, Larry. Bring your suit? The water’s great,” Jeff said.

“Well, actually, I’m wearing it.” He grinned and sat down on the chaise. He slipped his jeans off along with his socks and tossed them on a chair.

“What are you guys up to? Just hanging out?”
He glanced at Jessi, eyes wide.

“The twins just finished their tennis lesson. It was really a hard one. They’re snoozing in the pool.”
She stared at Jeff, now face down on his raft.

Jessi changed the subject with her usual candor.
“You came over to see Melly. Are you taking her to the concert tonight?”

Larry squirmed, uncomfortable. “Concert? I didn’t know about a concert. Who’s...?” He glanced at the pool and then back to Jessi. “Well, that’s not why I came over to see her. I really like Melly. I enjoy her company and all, but I just want to be her friend.” He peered at Jessi, hoping for some understanding.

Voice sage, she nodded. “Ah, now I see. You have a girlfriend back in San Jose that you still care about.”

“No, Jessi. I don’t have any girlfriends, anywhere. I don’t have ... I’m gay.”

Jessi digested this latest bit of information in silence. Jeff had already told her about Kenny and Billy’s suspicions, so it wasn’t a total shock. She just didn’t know what to say and glanced uneasily at Kenny.

“Can we still be friends?” Larry’s forehead creased in anxiety. “Does my being gay stop us from being friends, Jessi?”

“No, of course not. It doesn’t make a bit of difference to me. Actually, I’m thinking about Melly and how she’s going to feel.” Large brown eyes gazed at him in sympathy.

Larry shrugged at Jessi and then shook his head. “I think it’s going to make a big difference to her. I don’t know how to tell her. I already talked to

Billy about it.” Larry glanced at the pool again, wary of the twins.

“Actually, I had dinner there last night. His mother came down from Hollywood for the weekend. She said she wanted to see my portfolio and offered to open some doors for me when I finish college. That’s a long time from now, of course, but man, I’m raving, sorry about that,” he said. “This whole thing is making me a nervous wreck. When I get nervous, I jabber like a monkey.”

Jessi flashed her beautiful smile and changed the subject. “Isn’t Tracy gorgeous? I’ve talked with her bunches of times and we spent a week with her on the yacht when we cruised to Hawaii. It was quite something, let me tell you. Got hijacked by pirates ... ah, but that’s another story.” She chuckled at the memory and shot an impish grin at Larry. “Tracy will be a big help to you. She’s always such fun to talk to, and man, does she have the clothes. Makes my mouth water.”

The twins joined them on the deck, their fingers and toes well pickled.

“She tellin’ ya about the hijackin’? Shoot, that was somethin’ else.” Kenny chuckled at the memory of the beating he’d given one of the thugs.

“Well, no, actually, we’re talking about Melanie.”

Larry looked from Jeff to Kenny and then back at Jessi. She gave him the lightest of nods. He took another deep breath.

“I have something to tell you; all of you.” He hesitated, looking down into his lap. “I’m gay.”

For what seemed like forever, no one spoke. Jeff glanced at Jessi, a question in his eyes.

“Well.” Kenny cleared his throat. “I admire the guts it took to say that. Not an easy thing, I’m sure; hard to just say outright and all. Gutsy. And for the record, Larry, it doesn’t make any difference to me. It’s your choice, or whatever.” Kenny stared at him, eyes cold.

“But what about Melly? I think she’s gonna get pretty upset. How’d ya let this happen, anyway?”

Jeff shrugged. “That was my question, too. Why would a gay guy hang out with our sister?”

“Being gay doesn’t mean I don’t like girls for friends, y’know, to hang out with and stuff. You’ve probably noticed I like lots of girl stuff.” He looked in appeal from Kenny to Jeff, handsome features somber.

“It’s not my fault, I swear. Girls—they just ... well, it sounds like guy-talk, but they chase me. I never had the courage to tell anyone before. Maybe once everyone knows I’m gay I can meet girls that want to stay just friends.”

“I have to agree with that, at least as far as Melanie is concerned.” Jeff shot a quick look at Kenny. “I saw it the night you took her out to Steve’s. She was in full pursuit.”

Jessi added, “It happened the day she met Larry. We all noticed it. But we don’t have to play the blame game here.” Jessi turned to Larry.

“She was attracted to you from the first. If she’d known you were gay before she met you, or right after, it never would have happened. But it did and now we have to figure out the best way to tell her. Any ideas?”

“Have any of you talked with her about it?” Larry asked.

The twins looked at each other and blinked. “Well, we suggested the possibility and she blew a fuse, to synopsise. Didn’t seem much point in pursuin’ it.” Kenny grimaced at the memory.

“Melly didn’t seem receptive to the idea at all, didn’t want to hear it.”

Their conversation was so intense they didn’t hear Blair’s truck pull up in the driveway or footsteps on the walkway.

“What didn’t I want to hear?” Melanie asked, a broad smile on her face at the sight of Larry talking cordially with her brothers.

“Oh, nothin’ much, Melanie,” Kenny said. “Larry just told us he’s gay.”

Chapter 7

The blood drained from Melanie's face as she walked toward the pool.

"He's, you're ... gay?"

She stared from Kenny to Larry. Two bright spots of color rode high on her cheekbones. She swallowed twice and said, "I guess that explains lots of stuff."

Larry rose, his face flaming with distress and concern. "We can still be friends, can't we, Melly? I really would like that." He stared at her, eyes imploring her to understand. "I never meant to hurt your feelings or embarrass you or anything."

"It's ... it's all right. Listen, let me get rid of these bags and I'll be right back. Come on, Blair."

As they walked down the hall, single file, Blair could see Melanie's shoulders shaking and she wanted to strangle Kenny. She followed Melanie into her room.

"Can you believe it? The first guy I fall for is gay." There was no mirth in her short burst of laughter. "A gay guy, dear me, and y'all knew it. Why didn't I?"

"I don't think you wanted to, Melly. Even this afternoon, you talked about being gay like something you could get over, like a cold."

Blair stared at her friend in sympathy. "And you have nothing to be embarrassed about. Larry's a hottie. I mean it, we all thought so. If I wasn't in love with Kenny, I'd go for him. He's darling. Needs a warning sign."

Melanie drew a deep breath, mind in overdrive as she formed the beginnings of a plan. *Well, we can*

be friends. She still wasn't convinced that she couldn't change him.

"Hey, Blair, you have a swimsuit in the closet, don't ya? I think I'd like a swim."

Blair heaved a sigh and walked into the closet. She knew Melanie and how she reacted to things and that was just too easy. She wasn't done yet, not by a long shot.

They changed and went back to the patio.

The conversation had turned to tennis as Jeff and Kenny relived parts of their blistering lesson with a rapt Jessi. She loved tennis and got better with each game. Jeff played with her every day, determined to make her a champion.

Larry appeared to listen, but he was miles away. He couldn't believe how easy it was. Of course, not everyone would react that way, but with support ... well, maybe support was a strong word. How about acceptance? With that, he could do anything. Having his friends behind him made all the difference in the world.

Around five, Jeff pointed to his watch and said to Blair and Jessi, "How much time do y'all need to get ready? We should leave in an hour or so."

Jessi grinned at him and gathered her things. She slipped a cover-up over her shoulders, belting it at the waist.

"I'll be ready, Jeff. See you later." She disappeared around the corner. They heard the engine start, followed by a slight squeal of tires.

Jeff shook his head. "She's havin' a hard time gettin' the hang of startin' off. Tad too much gas.

Kinda' excitin' drivin' with her, though, and let me tell ya, she gets a lot of attention, 'specially when she puts the top down."

Blair followed Jessi sedately down the hill, grinning as Jessi zoomed up the driveway, tires squealing again as she slammed on the brakes. Blair shook her head, determined to have a talk with Jessi later. *She needs to go back to drivers ed.*

Kenny and Jeff stayed with Larry and Melanie on the patio for another half hour or so, talking about the upcoming graduation as well as the dance. They took one more quick dip and it was time for them to dress for the concert.

"See ya later," Jeff said. "Let's go, bro." They walked into the house together, leaving Melanie and Larry alone.

They sat in companionable silence, watching the ripples forming in the pool. Night had settled in when they heard the slider open and Julia call, "Melanie, would ya like to invite Larry for supper? We're gettin' ready to sit down. Southern fried chicken, y'all, and mashed potatoes and gravy."

Larry looked at Melanie and grinned. "I'm starved. Would it be okay with you if I stay? I don't want to make you uncomfortable."

"Hey, it's fine with me. Mama's the best cook in the world and fried chicken is one of her specialties. Come on, let's wash up and change." She stood and smiled, beautiful blue eyes crinkling at the corners.

They walked into the house together and Melanie smiled again. She couldn't have planned it better.

"Hi, Larry, so nice ya could join us," Julia said, pulling a pan of hot rolls from the oven.

Melanie made the introductions all round, grinning as her dad dipped a spoon into the gravy bowl.

“Papa, I don’t believe ya’ve met Larry Klein. Larry, this is my father, Lonnie Young.”

Lonnie put the spoon down on the counter and extended his hand. “Hi, Larry, nice to meet ya,” he said with a grin. “Good night for visitin’ too. We’re about to have my favorite supper. Come on in and have a seat.”

Larry held Melanie’s chair, taking the seat beside her.

Sally bustled in the background, serving their plates and filling tall glasses with home made raspberry tea.

Conversation dragged as they began their meal. The mashed potatoes were as smooth as silk, the gravy nectar, but it was the chicken that got to Larry. He considered himself a gourmet cook and while this certainly was not gourmet fare, it was out of this world. His mother believed in take-out like a religion and he usually did whatever real cooking went on in his house.

“Do you guys eat like this all the time?” he asked. “That is the best chicken I’ve ever tasted. I need the recipe. Seriously.”

Julia smiled at Larry and winked. “A culinary spy. I love it. The recipe is as old as the hills, actually. My Gramma made ‘em all up. I’ll have to show ya my book.”

“So, how’s the plans goin’ for graduation, Melly?” Lonnie asked between bites. “Is your speech done?”

“Almost, Papa, it’s comin’ along really well. I’d like ya to check it out when I’m finished.”

“What speech, Melly?”

“Oh,” she said with a deprecating wave of her hand, cheeks pink, “It’s for Baccalaureate. I’m the, um, key speaker.”

“Are you the class Valedictorian?”

Melanie blushed and nodded.

“Wow, how cool is that! You know, being so new in school, I hadn’t planned to attend any of the festivities. Figured I’d just pick up my diploma later. But if you’re the keynote speaker I want to come and hear you.”

Grinning with pride, Lonnie said, “Melanie’s been at the top of her class since first grade. We’re so proud of her, I’m sayin’.”

Julia smiled at her daughter. “Imagine, exceeding a 4.0 every time.”

“Mama, please. Y’all’re embarrassin’ me.”

Melanie ducked her head, cheeks now a dusky rose.

Julia never missed a beat. “Same with Jeff and Kenny. I’m blessed with smart, hard-workin’ kids. Hard to believe that come September, she’ll be down at UCSD. How about college, Larry, where are ya goin’?”

“I’m going up to Sinclair, in Beverly Hills. It’s a small liberal arts college, specializes in design, stuff like that. I’m going into interior design, maybe architecture.”

“I know of it, and from what I hear that’s a great school,” Julia said. “I’m in real estate, y’know, and we see lots of talented designers come out of Sinclair.”

Dinner finished, Larry thanked Julia and Lonnie for the excellent meal, promising Julia he'd be back again for those recipes.

The night bugs chirped in the shrubbery as the warm air washed over their bodies. They sat by the pool again, looking at the starry display. Larry's heart soared. Everything would be all right, he just knew it. Emboldened by his new confidence, he asked, "What sort of festivities are going on around graduation?"

"Well, after Baccalaureate, there's the actual graduation ceremony. Then there's the dance. It's being held at the country club this year. Should be nice." Her voice trailed off and she glanced up at him.

"Are you going to the dance, Melly?"

"So far, I'm going stag. I used to date a guy, Dave Hastings, but we broke up a bit ago so I don't have a date."

"Well, shoot, neither do I. How about if we go together? I think that'd be great fun, don't you?"

Melanie's cheeks flushed and she was glad he couldn't see her face in the dark. "I think that would be wonderful, Larry. We'll have lots of fun," she said, voice demure. "Do you want to go with the gang like we generally do or go alone? We usually take Billy's limo. What do you think?"

"Oh, that sounds like fun. Yeah, lets all go together. I've never been to a dance in my life. This is probably my last chance."

* * *

Melanie smoothed her bed covers and grinned as she recalled the conversation. She and Larry had plans to go the dance together. Step one accomplished. Now all she had to do was figure out how to change

him, how to make him see that being gay was not his best choice.

Blair's words came back to her and she shivered. Maybe being gay *wasn't* a choice. Maybe Blair was right and nothing she could do would make him change. *No, that can't be true. I know I can do it.*

There had never been anything she couldn't accomplish with determination, and she was very determined when it came to Larry.

Melanie fluffed up her pillows and leaned back in bed. *What I need is information.*

She walked over to her computer, flipped the mouse around and the familiar logo appeared. She typed in gay lifestyles and hit search.

Her eyes widened as she saw several adult sites that dealt with AIDS and HIV and a variety of other things. Shuddering, she scrolled down the list. *Gay Youth.*

She hit the button and the site popped up. It was not what she wanted at all. It was like a dating service. She flipped back to the search engine and typed in Origins of Homosexuality. Her heart sank when she read the posts.

Well, at least this is done from an intellectual and scientific point of view. The more she read, the worse it got. The consensus was that homosexuality occurred through a combination of genetics and family orientation, not choice. With the exception of one post, they all concluded that it was generally a lifetime condition that could not be altered through psychological counseling, religious convictions or even the desire of the person in question.

Melanie leaned back in her chair, deep in thought. Always the pragmatist before, she railed at the

information in front of her. She tried to argue the facts as she read study after study, but finally conceded that it was hopeless. According to the information presented no amount of hoping or wishing could make him change. If it was out of his control it was certainly out of hers.

She hit the big red X and signed off. Heartsick, she crawled back into bed. Pulling the covers to her chin, she felt tears of sorrow and frustration slide down her cheeks. She punched her pillow twice and plopped it over her face. Sleep took a long time in coming.

* * *

“Mom,” Larry said, knocking on her study door. “Can I talk with you a minute? I’ve got something on my mind and I need to talk to you right now.”

Tricia looked up from the computer, eyes vague as she came back to the real world. *Gosh, what a time to interrupt, just as the story started flowing.* She looked at him, actually seeing him for the first time. The expression on his face took her aback.

“Sure honey, it’s time for a break anyway,” she lied. “How about a glass of milk or something. I don’t think I ate dinner tonight.”

They walked out of her study and down the hall to the kitchen.

“You want one too?” she asked, shaking the carton of milk at him.

He nodded with a grin. “Why didn’t you eat tonight?”

“Oh,” she said, voice vague, “the girls went out for pizza with some friends and dad still isn’t home from work. I got busy ... the book is going great. I’m under such a deadline, I’ll be up half the night. Is there

anything to eat?" She peered into the fridge, removing a package of ham and some Swiss cheese. No bread.

Tricia pulled a box of crackers off the shelf and sat at the table with him. She placed a small slice of cheese on the cracker and popped it into her mouth.

"What's up, honey?"

"Well, for starters, Melanie and I are going to the graduation dance together."

A wide smile lit up Tricia's features, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "That's super, Larry. She sure is striking. And that accent. It's just fun listening to her talk, isn't it? What are you going to wear?"

"Oh," he waved his hand, "I don't know. Probably rent a tux, I guess. Listen, that's not what I wanted to talk to you about." He looked down at his hands, unsure of how to begin.

"Mom, do you think I'm different from most boys my age?"

"You sure are." She nodded between chews. "You're sensitive, creative and sweet to boot. Cute too." She took another bite. "Why?"

"Does it seem to you, I mean, did it ever occur to you that I might be different in other ways?" His throat was so dry his last words came out in a croak. He took a sip of milk. "Cause I am, Mom. Way different. I'm gay."

Milk laced with bits of cracker spewed out of her mouth as she choked. "Gay? What do you mean?" Her eyes, the size of silver dollars, bored into his.

"Come on, Mom, you know what gay means."

"Yes, of course I know what it *means*," she snapped. "What does it mean as far as you're concerned?" Her hands gripped the table edges and grew white at the knuckles.

“You just said you and Melanie had a date for the dance.”

“We’re just friends, Mom. That’s all we could ever be. Melly’s okay with it. I just told her and the rest of the team tonight. I figured it was only right to tell you, too.”

Tricia stumbled to the sink. Running the sponge under the tap, she squeezed out the excess and returned to the table. She cast sidelong glances at Larry as she cleaned up her mess. Fear churned in her stomach. *Gay? HIV, oh God, no, please.*

She threw the sponge into the sink and then sat again, taking his hand.

“Larry, where is this all coming from? What in the world makes you think you’re gay?” Her hand started to shake and she withdrew it, pretending to need it for something else.

Larry felt the withdrawal. Misinterpreting the reason, his heart filled with fear.

“Mom, please don’t be mad.” His eyes glazed with tears. “I couldn’t stand it if you didn’t love me anymore.”

“Oh, Larry, not *love* you? That could *never* happen, you’re my child. It’s just ... well, this comes as a shock. I never realized...” Her voice trailed off as she looked at Larry in anguish.

“Now listen, we have to check into this. Maybe have a talk with a psychiatrist, see what we can do about it.”

“I don’t think there’s *anything* to do about it, Mom, it’s just the way I am.”

“No, no, that can’t be true.” Anguish filled her voice. “Don’t you want to get married, have children?”

All the normal stuff kids dream of? God, Larry, *please*. Think of your future.”

As comprehension settled in, Tricia’s heart beat triple time and her stomach turned over. While she was no expert on homosexuality the thought of her son engaged in that sort of lifestyle made her physically sick. Her mind rambled as dozens of thoughts and scenes flashed through it, unbidden. Her face mirrored her thoughts; her expression filled with revulsion.

To Larry it was like a punch in the gut.

Voice barely a whisper, she asked, “Have you ever ... you know, had a, ah, you know, partner or anything?” She cringed at the look on his face, unable to stop. “Please, honey, tell me you haven’t been....”

“No, Mom, I haven’t, ever. I doubt I ever will. I don’t intend to engage in what they call the *lifestyle*, that’s for sure. It’s way too dangerous, for one thing. I don’t want to get some horrible disease. There’s a lot I want to do with my life. I have big plans.”

They sat in silence for a while and then Tricia said, “I guess this is what’s referred to as coming out, huh?”

Her hand shook as she raised the glass to her lips. For some reason, the milk she normally loved soured her stomach. Getting up from the table she filled a fresh glass with ice and poured herself a gin and tonic.

“Mom, what do you think Dad will say?”

“Oh, God,” she said as her eyes flew open. She staggered backwards against the counter and took several long swallows from her glass. The alcohol hit her stomach like a fireball, thawing some of the ice that seemed to encase her.

“Son, you absolutely cannot ... oh, and the girls ... absolutely not, oh, *God*. This has to remain our secret, at least for a while. I have to make a plan, honey, we have to fix this.”

“Mom, it’s not a secret any more. My friends know and they accept me the way I am. I don’t think they approve, not all of them anyway, but they understand. We’re all still friends.” He extended his hands to her in supplication.

“You have to understand, Mom. I can’t help the way I am. I sure don’t *want* to be this way.” He drew a deep breath. “Anyway, what plans?”

“I don’t know, yet. I haven’t had time to process this, but I’ll come up with something. The first thing I think you need to do is get counseling and find out what we can do about this, because there has to be *something*.”

Tricia stood abruptly, glass in hand. She refreshed the drink and turned to him, face pale and drawn.

“I have to get back to work, honey. Give me some time to think. We’ll talk more about this in the morning, okay? For now, please don’t tell anyone else. Please.” She bent down and stroked his dark hair. “I love you, Larry. We’ll figure something out.”

Tricia walked down the hall, blind fear sweeping her in waves like an angry sea. She sat at the computer and hit the Save button. Closing her work, she signed on. Quick fingers typed her search request. *Everything you’ve always wanted to know about homosexuality.*

She began to read. Each word was a knife in her heart as the no-nonsense presentation sunk in. ‘Genetic predisposition, hypothalamic differences

between homosexual and heterosexual men, family dynamics.’

Tears formed in the corners of her eyes, sliding down her cheek in silence. The more she read, the deeper she sank into depression. She closed the site, signed off and buried her head in her hands.

Larry stood in the dark hall, watching as his mother cried. Soft sobs shook her shoulders and his heart broke. This was how it would be for him for the rest of his life.

Why me? Why did this happen to me? I hate myself; I'm nothing but a freak. I can't stand it. He turned away, walked down the hall to his room and collapsed on his bed.

“My life is such a screwed-up mess and this is just the beginning. It’ll never change. I’ll be alone for the rest of my life, me and my secret.” He sank onto the bed in despair.

* * *

Tricia sat in the darkened bedroom waiting for her husband to get home. Her motionless body belied the frenzy in her mind. She heard the whispered opening of the garage door and her heart raced. The erratic beating made her throat hurt. She swallowed and rose.

Harvey Klein entered the kitchen through the garage, dropping his briefcase on the counter with a thud. Tricia entered the room as he poured himself a drink.

“Hi, Harvey, gee you’re home late. Have a hard day?” As she lifted her cheek for his kiss, her eyes searched his face.

He smiled down at her and nodded. “Can I fix you a drink, Trish? Gin and tonic?”

“I’ve probably had enough, but that’d be great, honey, thanks.” Tricia watched him perform the simple task and decided to let him unwind before she blew up his world.

Harvey was so proud of Larry, so hopeful for his future. The news would be devastating, but she couldn’t keep it from him. He needed to know, had a right to know, and tomorrow wouldn’t be any better than tonight. The longer she waited the harder it would be.

“Did you get the account at Scripps?” she asked, making small talk.

“Boy, did I ever.” He grinned and raised his glass. “Sales on the new line of sedatives took off, especially after that great article in the AMA journal. Dacvan will revolutionize the whole industry, not to mention my commissions will put all three kids through any college they want with ease.”

He took a long swallow and added, “The dinner dragged on much longer than I expected. Slipping away to make a call is harder than you’d think. I’m sorry I’m late.” He gave her another hug and kissed her neck.

“Did you get your spy out of jail yet?” he asked, referring to her book.

“Not yet. He may languish there forever. Writer’s block, I guess.” She drew in a deep breath. “Harvey, I have to talk with you about something very serious.”

The tone of her voice brought him up short. “What’s the matter, Trish? Something happen with the kids?” He frowned with concern and waited for her to continue.

“Larry told me something tonight that I still can’t get my mind around. I want you to take a couple of deep breaths and....” She looked at him, eyes clouded with misery.

“I can tell I’m going to need another,” he said, indicating his glass.

“Yes, you are. Me too.”

“Tricia, what’s wrong? You’re scaring me to death.”

“Well,” she said, as he returned to the table with their drinks.

She didn’t know how to begin. She took his hand and cradled it to her cheek.

“Tricia, you’re giving me fits. *Please*. What the hell’s wrong?”

“Larry just told me he’s gay.”

The air went out of Harvey with a whoosh and his face turned bright red, then a peculiar shade of gray.

“That’s impossible. You must have misunderstood him.”

“No, no, I didn’t. There was nothing for me to misunderstand.”

“It’s impossible. This can’t be true. I won’t have it.” He threw her hand off, his face now the color of old cheese. “No son of mine could turn out to be a homosexual.”

She winced at the word. “He’s still our son, Harvey, and calm down, you’ll wake the kids.”

Harvey paced the kitchen like a caged animal, foaming. “Where the hell is he? I want to talk to him right now.”

Larry entered the kitchen then. He’d been waiting in the hall since his father got home. “I’m right

here, Dad. I'm sorry. I wanted to be the one to tell you, but I guess it doesn't matter now."

"Larry, what's this crap all about? You're not gay. What ever put such a disgusting notion into your head?" He paced around the room, unable to control the physical need to move, to do something.

"Dad, it's true. I've known it for a while now. I-."

Harvey interrupted him. "Don't tell me you've ever ... that you ... *GOD!*" he roared, his face twisted with disgust.

"No, Dad, I've never had a relationship with anyone if that's what you're asking. I know you're mad right now, but I can't help it. I didn't choose this—who would? It's just the way it is."

"Not in this house, it isn't. I won't stand for it." He turned to Tricia, eyes narrowed, lips white with tension. "This is all your fault, you know. Always tied up to the damned computer with those stupid books. Some mother you are. You should have seen this coming and done something about it." He slammed his fist on the table so hard the glasses jumped with the blow.

Tricia jumped with the glasses, eyes wide. She couldn't remember the last time Harvey lost his temper.

"That's ridiculous and you know it," she spat back at him. "And where were you, for that matter? You're his father. You didn't get home 'til almost midnight, as usual. How about taking on some of the blame, Harvey? Where are you in all this?"

"Shut your mouth, Trish. Just shut up."

He looked at Larry in fury. "You take it back right now. You are *not* gay and I don't ever want to hear you say it again."

"So, you want me to lie, is that it?"

Harvey glared at his son. "If that's what it takes, yes. Lie. Tomorrow you are going to see a psychiatrist and we'll get this notion out of your head once and for all. I've never heard ... do you know what you're saying? Do you know what it *means* to be gay? The things ... and what about AIDS? Has that thought ever crossed your pea brain? Has it? Do you know what being *gay* is all about?" He put his hands to his face and shuddered.

"This can't be happening." Voice a strangled moan, he pounded on the counter in impotent fury.

Terrified, Larry glanced from his mother, stricken and mute, to his out-of-control, infuriated father.

"Dad, please try to understand. There's no point going to a shrink and I can't lie about it any more. In the first place, I've already told my friends I'm gay. They understand and they accepted the...."

"Stop saying that," Harvey shrieked. "I don't give a *damn* about your friends or what they think. You'll tell them tomorrow it was all a mistake. Take the whole thing back. If we have to, we'll move again."

Tricia sat in stunned silence while Harvey tore into Larry. Finally, she said, "Harvey, please try to control yourself. You're going to have a stroke. Screaming won't change anything. I think you"

"*You?* I don't give a damn what you think, Tricia." He swung back to Larry, eyes glittering.

“You will either take it all back right now or you can just get the hell out of here. You’re choice.” Voice bitter, he stared at his son. “What’ll it be?”

“Dad, you can’t mean that,” Larry said, frantic as he looked at Tricia for support. “I love you both and I don’t want to leave home. Where would I go?”

“That’s something you’ll have to figure out for yourself. What’s your decision, Larry? Are you gay or not?”

Larry paused a moment and drew a deep, sad sigh. “I’m still gay, Dad. There’s nothing I can do about it.”

“Then, by God, get out. Right now. I never want to see your face again, you pervert.”

“Now just a damn minute!” Tricia jumped out of her chair and covered the distance between them in three steps.

“How dare you say that?” Her voice was a low hiss. “How dare you talk to my son that way?”

“That’s right, Trish,” he snapped right back. “Your son. He’s no son of mine. Get out, Larry. I don’t want you here when I get back.” He stormed out of the kitchen and down the hall to his bedroom. The door slammed with such force that two pictures fell off the wall, their glass shattering on the slate tiles.

“Larry,” Tricia said, her eyes glazed with tears, “Dad didn’t mean that, really he didn’t. He’s just shocked, you know. I probably should have waited for a better time. It’s just that I ... well.” She drew him to her, hugging him as the tears poured down both their faces.

“He really wants me to go, Mom. To leave home. What’ll I do?”

She hesitated a moment. “What about Billy? Do you think you could stay with him for a couple of days? Just until your dad calms down? How about that?”

“I guess it’d be okay with him. I guess I could go over there. He understands.” His voice trailed off as he looked at his mother. “I’ll give him a call right now.”

Larry walked down the hall, stepping around the broken frames. He tossed some clothes into an overnight case and glanced around his room for a moment, tears welling up in his eyes as a fresh wave of torment washed over him.

“Bleak,” he said, as though savoring the word. “This is how my life will always be, bleak. I wish I was dead.”

Chapter 8

Billy stood at the edge of the veranda, waiting for Larry. He'd already alerted the guard of their impending guest and the gates stood open. He saw the lights of the Porsche come up over the rise and walked down the steps to meet his friend.

Larry got out of the car and reached in back for his suitcase. "I really appreciate this, Billy. Thank you so much. It's been a rough night."

Billy looked at him in compassion, eyes filled with pity. "Hey, dude, it's no problem. You're more than welcome. It's a big house, my friend. I'll enjoy your company."

They walked back up the steps, oblivious to the beauty surrounding them. A soft wind cried in the palm fronds and the night bugs chirped to each other, creating their own kind of symphony. The full moon rode high in the inky sky while lacy clouds drifted across its face. Waves crashed on the beach.

Billy opened the door to one of the guest rooms and smiled at Larry. "Put your suitcase anywhere and make yourself at home."

He flipped the light switch and two sconces on the far wall came on, their soft diffused glow soothing to the mind. White plantation shutters graced the large windows and French doors led out onto the veranda. Warm, golden oak furniture complimented the pale, sea-green walls. The large armoire contained a TV, DVD player and a built-in desk, complete with a laptop.

“Oh, my, Billy, it’s so beautiful.” Larry cast a critical eye around the room, personal problems put aside for the moment.

“Who designed it?”

“A friend of Scott’s named Henri DuBois. He’s the guy mom wants to show your portfolio to. She’s very impressed with your style and thinks Henri will be, too. He came here from France about ten years ago. Very talented, don’t you think?”

Nodding, Larry glanced around the room again, and then turned to Billy. “Are you tired? I’m so wound up, I’ll never get to sleep.”

“I’m kind of jazzed up myself. I just got home from the concert when you called. Let’s go on out to the patio and talk. You look pretty shaken up.”

They settled into chairs, listening to the muted pounding of the surf.

“It was pretty awful, huh?” Billy gave Larry the opening he needed.

“Absolutely horrendous. Dad told me if I didn’t take it back about being gay, he wanted me out of the house.” Larry paused a moment, his face scrunched up in a painful effort not to cry.

“He called me a pervert.” His voice quivered at the memory.

“You can’t be serious,” Billy said. Voice barely above a whisper, he said, “Man, I’m sorry ... that’s awful.”

Digesting the word in silence, his eyes darted to Larry, then away. He wished for Shievon with all his heart. She’d know just what to say; she always did. At a loss for words, he extended his hands, palms up, in the timeless gesture of sympathy.

“I’m so sorry he said that. I’m sure he didn’t mean it.”

Larry nodded. “Then he and Mom started yelling at each other. It was terrible. I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“Well, you can stay here as long as it takes,” Billy said. “I called Mom after I spoke to you and she agreed. They’ll be here again next weekend and she wants to talk to you.” Billy hesitated.

“Being gay, even talking about it to some folks, just waves a red flag. I’m afraid you’re going to meet lots of people in your life that will look at you that way. Ignorant pigs.” He glanced at his friend and shrugged.

“At least the field you picked will bring you into contact with lots of other gays so it won’t be held against you, which is a good thing, ‘cause....”

They were silent for some time, sad, introspective and fearful for Larry’s future.

“Oh, let’s talk about something else, Billy. Are you going to the dance?”

“No, it’s just for the seniors. I sure wish I could hear Melly’s speech, though. She’s class Valedictorian, you know. Quite a gal. Beautiful.” Billy blushed.

“Don’t I know it? We’re going to the dance together.”

Billy looked at him, eyes wide. “Together? As a couple?”

“Together, as friends. She doesn’t have a date, which I find hard to believe. Obviously, I don’t have a date either, so we decided to go together. You know it’s strange,” he said, his forehead creased in a frown. “She said we’d all go in your limo.”

Billy laughed softly. "She must be slipping. That's what we usually do when we're all going somewhere together. She must have forgotten." He chuckled again.

"Melly never forgets anything, you know." He looked down at his watch and yawned. "Man, it's getting late. I'm ready to drop, how about you? Feeling any better?"

"Yeah, I'm tired too."

They walked into the house together and down the long, dim-lit hall. Larry paused at his door.

"Thanks a bunch, Billy, I really appreciate this."

"Hey, what are friends for? See you tomorrow."

* * *

Jessi watched Blair check out her makeup one more time. "You look wonderful," she said, voice wistful. "I can't wait to graduate. Two more years."

"Have you decided about college or anything?" Blair asked as Jessi plopped into the chair next to her.

"I think Jeff and I will probably get married the summer he graduates. Everything's two years away. I can't wait." Jessi glanced at her sister, knowing what she'd see and Blair didn't disappoint her; disapproval clouded her eyes.

"Jessi, you know I still think you're too young. I mean, don't you want to do something with your life before you settle down?"

"We've been over this a dozen times, Blair. I want to marry Jeff and give him the most wonderful babies in the world. I'll be a great mother and a great wife, too. You'll see."

A knock on the door interrupted their conversation. Karen popped her head in the room, a wide smile on her face.

“You almost ready, honey? We’ve got about ten minutes before we have to leave.” Karen put an arm around Blair and hugged her. “You look so beautiful in white. I love your dress.”

Blair grinned at Karen as she stroked the silken folds of the a-line skirt. “Thanks, Mom. I feel like a princess.”

Instead of the usual caps and gowns, the girls wore floor-length white dresses and carried a bouquet of red roses; the boys wore white tuxes. It was a school tradition begun in the early fifties and each year the graduating class voted on whether they would uphold the custom or go to caps and gowns.

As usual, the seniors voted across the board to maintain the ritual. The graduation presentation, so beautiful and unique, made the papers every year.

“I can’t believe I’m graduating. I thought this day would never get here.” Blair applied another coat of lipstick, flipped the ends of her strawberry-blonde hair and then turned to Karen.

“I can’t wait to hear Melly’s speech, Mom. I know it’ll be great.” She looked in the mirror one more time. “I’m ready. Let’s go.”

* * *

While the graduation ceremony was performed on the football field, they held Baccalaureate in the auditorium. Blair took her place with the other graduates while Karen, Joe and Jessi joined Jeff and his family.

Julia's face shone with pride as she greeted them. She patted the seat next to her.

"Sit here, Karen, it's a great spot." Joe sat next to Lonnie with Jessi between the twins.

Karen looked at the podium, flanked with fresh flowers and shivered. "Is Melanie nervous, Julia?"

"No, not her. Cool as a cucumber. I have to admit public speakin' gives me the chills. I never was good at it."

The lights dimmed and the school principal, Dr. Craven, turned on the microphone.

"Good afternoon graduates, parents, and guests. I want to welcome you to this service and to congratulate you on a job well done. Education is our most important asset in the world today and I would like to honor those students who excelled scholastically during their time here. First, please welcome our class Valedictorian, who maintained a 4.0 average throughout her tenure, Miss Melanie Mabel Young."

Julia glanced quickly at her twins and shook her head. They were about to give out with a Rebel yell. She'd warned them earlier, but they needed reinforcement.

Melanie rose to the cheers and applause and approached the podium. She shook hands with Dr. Craven and then looked out at the audience.

"Thank you," she said, her lilting voice carrying above the applause. They took their seats as she began to speak.

"It is an honor and a privilege to stand before y'all today and speak on behalf of my fellow students. This day marks a milestone in our continued quest for knowledge. We are the hope of the world and it is our

obligation to make it a better place.” She paused, smiling at Larry, who sat next to Blair.

“It is in that vein that I would like to speak today. In a world that grows smaller by the minute, I feel it is incumbent upon us all to spread the cause of peace. Peace is what we all yearn for, sweet, blessed peace. Peace leads to understandin’ and we all want that. Understandin’ leads to tolerance and acceptance of those different from us. Celebratin’ our differences, embracin’ each other with love and compassion will bring us peace in this world, both as a nation and as individuals.”

Julia dabbed her eyes, so proud she could hardly stand it. Lonnie beamed with pride and nudged Joe, who also had tears in his eyes. Joe loved Melanie and had watched her grow from a precocious five-year-old to this poised, beautiful young woman before them.

He sought Blair, smiling at the back of her golden head. He held Karen’s hand as she sniffed back tears.

“Everyone is not the same,” Melanie continued, “and we should be thankful for that. Different religious beliefs, diversity in culture or language should not divide us. Knowledge and understandin’, those are the keys to the peace we all seek.”

The ovation was thunderous when she finished. Smiling, she took Dr. Craven’s arm as he escorted her off the stage.

* * *

“I can’t imagine how I got so mixed up,” Melanie said, as Larry helped her into his car. She gathered the folds of her gown around her and smiled

up at him. He closed the door and hopped behind the wheel.

“I forgot the rest of the kids couldn’t go to this dance. It’s just become such a habit with us. So much is goin’ to change when Blair and I go to college.”

They drove toward the country club in easy silence, humming along with a tune on the radio. The graduation ceremony had been beautiful and they chatted about the events of the day.

“Your speech was brilliant, Melly. Were you nervous?” Larry pulled into the line of cars entering the club.

“No, not really. Public speakin’ comes easy to me. Not nearly as hard as jumping my first big fence.” She chuckled. “Just a couple of more days now and you’ll get your first taste of ridin’ the Grand Prix course at Showpark. Now that’s cause for some major nerves.”

Melanie laughed, sharing her first experience on the grass field, recounting her old dream.

“Gee, that’s creepy. How do you think that happened?”

“I have no idea. Gettin’ the same entry number, y’know, that was bad enough, but when the first four jumps on the course were the same ... that really got to me.” She rolled her eyes at him and giggled. “Had me psyched out, for sure. Didn’t ride up to my potential, let me tell ya. Karen ‘bout had a fit.”

They followed the directions of the parking lot attendants and pulled into an empty slot. The sounds of music poured out the open doors and they saw kids on the dance floor as they entered the room. Many of them waved, calling hello to Melanie.

They joined Blair and Kenny and took their seats, admiring the lovely decorations that adorned the ballroom. Larry went to the refreshment stand for drinks and snacks, leaving Melanie with Blair and Kenny.

“Melly, I want ya to stay as far away from Dave as ya can get tonight. He’s actin’ weird and he’s lookin’ for a fight.” Kenny shook his head in disgust. “I swear, I think he’s been drinkin’.”

“What? That’s not funny one little bit, Kenny. Dave doesn’t drink.” She glanced around the room searching for her old friend.

“He is tonight, Melly.” Blair narrowed her eyes in concern. “He was well on the way at graduation. He stumbled when he picked up his diploma. Dave’s having a full blown pity-party and someone needs to tell him to get over it.”

Blair looked at Kenny. “Has he said any more to you?”

“Nah, kinda’ keepin’ his distance from all of us. Makes me mad, too. We’ve been best friends for more than ten years and then this happens.” He glanced at Melanie, morose.

“All of a sudden, I don’t have my friend anymore. Just not fair.” He stared up at Larry as he put sodas and a plate of goodies on the table. “Not fair.”

“What’s not fair?” Larry asked as he sat next to Melanie.

“Ah, nothin’,” Kenny said, “just hurt feelins’, I guess.”

“Ha,” he agreed, still out of the loop. “There’s a lot of that going around.”

“Whatever. Come on, Blair.” Kenny held his hand out, face tight. “Let’s dance.”

“Did I say something wrong?” Larry watched them head for the dance floor. “Kenny seems uptight.”

“It’s a long story.”

“I’m all ears.”

“Well, I told ya about Dave, remember?”

Melanie took a sip of her soda, swirling the ice in her glass as she remembered every word of their conversation.

“He and Kenny were best friends forever, but now they hardly speak. For some reason, Dave blames Kenny for the breakup and that’s just plain dumb. I can’t understand him. I guess I should’ve broken it off long ago.”

She paused, staring down into her glass. “It was so comfortable, y’know. We enjoyed the same stuff, had friends in common. At least, that’s how I felt. Seems like he’s lookin’ for trouble tonight and Kenny wants me to keep away from him.”

“It’s probably a good idea. No sense in setting him off. Alcohol always makes things worse.” He looked around the room, hoping to see Dave. Although they’d never met, Larry knew who he was.

The band took a break and Blair and Kenny returned to the table.

Several kids came up to them, making a point of telling Melanie how much they’d enjoyed her speech. The band started up again and the kids returned to the dance floor.

“Hey, Melanie,” said a familiar voice, “did you save a dance for me?” Dave stared down at her, a blank expression on his face.

“Hey, Dave, good to see ya.” Kenny smiled up at his old friend. “Have a seat, let’s catch up.”

Dave never took his eyes off Melanie. “I said I want a dance. Come on.” He took hold of her arm, jerking her to her feet.

“Dave, I don’t think that’s a good idea. I don’t want to dance with ya.” Melanie wrenched her arm free and took her seat.

He grabbed her arm again and this time he didn’t let go. “Melanie, please.” Dave’s voice was harsh, strained. “Please.”

Kenny stood then, his face creased with concern. “Hey, Dave. Leave her alone, huh, buddy? If she doesn’t want to dance, then just leave it be.” He laid a gentle hand on his old friend’s arm, trying to loosen his grip on Melanie.

Dave glared at him. “Get lost, Kenny, it’s none of your business. I want to dance with Melly.”

“Let go of my arm, Dave,” Melanie said, voice ice cold as she tried to pry his fingers away. “I don’t have anythin’ more to say to ya. Go away an’ leave us alone.”

Larry stood as well, hand extended toward Dave. “Melanie said she didn’t want to dance with you. Please don’t cause a scene.”

Dave looked at him, a sneer of contempt on his face. “Who do you think you are, pretty boy? I’m so sick of you interfering in my life. Back off and mind your business, you miserable freak. This is all your fault anyway.” He turned back to Melanie, red-faced and angry.

“How could you want that pervert ... that, that *queer* more than me?” Dave swayed, the smell of alcohol heavy on his breath.

His voice low, Larry said, "I brought Melly to the dance so I guess that makes it my business. Please leave us alone."

He barely got the words out of his mouth when Dave swung, punching Larry full in the face. "You disgusting faggot, get away from me before I tear you up." His voice rose with anger.

Larry fell over backwards, toppling Blair, who had been seated behind him. They crashed to the floor in a heap.

Dave turned to Melanie, who stared at him frozen with horror, and grabbed her arm again. "Come with me."

With a cry, Kenny put Dave in a headlock, dragging him away from the table and away from Melanie. "Don't make me do it, buddy, please don't...."

Dave elbowed Kenny hard in the ribs, knocking the wind out of him. Kenny bent over double, trying to catch his breath.

By that time the security guards arrived. They grabbed Dave and escorted him to the door. The band played louder, but news of the fight hit the grapevine. Most of the kids hadn't seen what happened, but the story ran through the party like wildfire.

Blair looked down at her dress which now sported a large, wet stain and then at Melanie and the boys. Kenny had sore ribs and Larry a puffed lip, but other than that the boys were fine.

Melanie sat in stunned silence, her mind refusing to acknowledge what had just happened. It was unbelievable. *How could Dave do something like that? Say those ugly, hateful things?* She thought she knew him so well, but he was a total stranger to her.

“Hey, Larry,” she said with a quiver in her voice. “I, ah, I think I’d like to leave.” Her hands shook and tears filled her eyes.

“Ya okay, Mel’nie?” Kenny stared at her, his face puckered with concern. “Dave didn’t hurt ya, did he?” He shook his head and turned to Blair.

“I can’t believe he did that. Are ya okay, honey? Do ya want to leave, Blair? Oh, look at your poor dress.”

“I guess so.” Blair nodded, looking down at her dress. “Let me go to the restroom. It’s just ginger ale. I’m sure I can clean it up. I still want to go to dinner.”

Kenny looked down at his watch. “Well, our reservation is in about an hour so you have plenty of time. Go on ahead and I’ll wait here for ya.”

Blair turned to Melanie. “You okay? Would you guys like to go to dinner with us?” She slipped her arm around her and gave her a hug. “What do you say, it’ll be fun.”

“We don’t have reservations,” Melanie whispered.

Blair grinned, green eyes alight. “I had Kenny make them for four once I knew you were going with Larry. I hoped you’d join us. Come on, please come with us. It’s such an important night for us.”

Melanie hesitated, glancing at Larry in question. “What do you think, Larry? Would you like to do that?”

“I’d love to if you would. Mostly I’d like to get out of here. I’ve had enough drama to last a lifetime.” He turned to Kenny. “Is it okay with you if we tag along or would you rather be alone? I know that must have upset you.”

“I’m okay, really. And I’d like it if y’all join us.” He glanced at Blair and then turned back to Larry, shamefaced.

“I’m sorry for what Dave said. He had no right ... makes me sick. I’ll wait here for Blair. Y’all go on ahead. Oh,” he said with a grin, “the reservations are at the Beach House. We’ll be right behind ya.”

Larry helped Melanie into the car and winced as he heard the wild shriek of tires tear through the parking lot. He looked at the driveway just in time to see a black sports car speed away.

Melanie saw it too. “That was Dave. He has no business drivin’ a car in that condition. I can’t believe it,” she said, shaking her head. “I used to think he was the most responsible person I knew. Just goes to show ya, I guess.”

They drove down the driveway and headed for the coast.

“I’ve never been to the Beach House before. What’s it like?” Larry stopped for the light. “First restaurant I’ve been to since we moved here.”

“It’s really nice, one of my favorites,” Melanie said, her voice pitched low. “Knowing Kenny, he’s reserved us a table near the windows with a fab view of the ocean.”

She lapsed into silence and then glanced at Larry. “I really do appreciate ya standin’ up for me back there. I’m so sorry about ... everythin’, y’know, what he said an’ all. Creep.”

The light changed and Larry drove on. “I think a lot of people agree with him.”

He made a lane change, getting ready to take the next right turn. They headed toward downtown Del Mar and the Pacific Coast highway.

“You should have heard what my father ... good God, look over there,” he cried out.

Melanie gasped and grabbed his arm. “Dear Lord, that’s Dave’s car. Oh, my God, look!”

Chapter 9

They screeched to a stop at the side of the road, staring in horror at what once had been a shiny black Fiat. It was unrecognizable, tumbled over on its side, roof resting against a giant palm tree. Smoke billowed from the back and small darts of fire licked the belly of the car.

“Oh, my God, oh, Lord, what’ll we do?”
Melanie cried. “I smell gas.”

“Call the cops, Melly.” Larry wrenched open his door and ran around to the trunk. “Call ‘em now. I’ll see if I can get him out.” He grabbed a blanket and ran to Dave.

Melanie dialed, frantic, soon hearing the 9-1-1 operator. She jumped out of the car as she spoke, giving them their location in high, frantic tones.

“Hurry, please hurry ... the car is gonna catch on fire. Oh, no, it is! It’s on fire!”

Larry went down on one knee as he skidded to the car. He jumped to his feet, reached up and tried to open the door, but it was locked. He shimmied up onto the door and peered through the closed window, which was intact. Dave hung from his seatbelt, unconscious. Larry pounded on the window in panic trying to rouse him, but he was motionless.

The windshield had shattered on impact, leaving great, jagged pieces of glass sticking up from the frame. Larry climbed onto the fender of the little car and using the blanket, pried off the largest pieces. Laying the blanket over the window, he inched his body inside the car.

The iron smell of blood combined with smoke was sickening.

“Dave! Dave, wake up.” Larry reached down for the seatbelt, frantic to free Dave. He could not find the release button.

“Melly,” he screamed. “In my glove box—get the knife! Hurry!”

Melanie almost tore the door off in her haste, grabbed the knife and ran over to the car, her long skirt wadded up in one fist, the knife clenched in the other. Her legs were so wobbly she almost fell.

“Here,” she said, thrusting the knife at him.

Larry sawed on the seatbelt, so relieved when it split apart he cried out. Dave slumped against the passenger door, even farther down into the car head lolling back, arms akimbo. Larry reached inside, every muscle straining to get a purchase on Dave. He grabbed his left arm and pulled with all his might, but Dave didn’t budge. He was dead weight.

“Push it over, Larry; we’ve got to push the car back over. We’ll never get him out like that.” She looked from Larry to the flames under the car.

“Ooh, hurry, Larry, we don’t have much time.”

They ran to the other side of the little car just as Kenny and Blair rounded the turn in the road. The next thing they heard were doors slamming and loud cries as Kenny raced toward them. The odds were better now, with four of them pushing, and the little car flipped back over on what was left of its tires.

Before anyone else could react Larry jumped back on the hood and slithered through the windshield. He snapped the door lock and screamed at Kenny, “Open the door, see if you can pull him out. I’ll push from in here.”

Kenny jerked on the door, finally getting it open. He leaned inside and grabbed his friend by the shoulders. He gave a strong tug as Larry pulled Dave's legs from under the dashboard. Another huge effort had Dave half out of the car.

Just then there was a loud crackling sound as the leaking gas tank caught fire. Smoke filled the car and flames licked its belly as Kenny and Blair pulled Dave to the side of the road.

"Kenny, Larry's passed out or somethin'," Melanie shouted as she tried to pull Larry away from the fiery car. "Help me!"

Larry had collapsed as he crawled out, one leg still inside the car.

Kenny raced back to the car, grabbing Larry's arms. With a grunt, he pulled Larry to his feet and clear of the car. Larry staggered a couple of steps and fell again. Kenny took hold of his shoulders, dragging him to the road next to Dave.

With a sickening whoosh the gas tank exploded, sending a ball of fire into the air. The kids screamed as the heat seared their faces.

The cops, followed by the paramedics and the Del Mar fire department, screeched to a stop right next to them, emergency lights turning night into day in a blink. The firemen dragged a hose from the truck and extinguished the flames in no time, plumes of white smoke filling the air as foam smothered the flames.

The paramedics got to work on Dave, securing his neck with a brace and strapping him onto the gurney. The speed at which they worked indicated the seriousness of Dave's condition and the kids felt cold

with fear as they watched. He hadn't moved or made a sound since they'd freed him from the car.

They put him in the ambulance and screamed off to the hospital, lights flashing and sirens wailing in the night.

"Are you kids okay?" asked one of the policemen. "Is anyone else hurt?"

"No," Larry croaked, his throat hoarse from the smoke. "We're fine."

The rest of the kids nodded, minor cuts their only injuries.

"Did you see the accident happen?" asked the officer, shining his flashlight at the tire marks. "Looks like he was really moving."

They told him what little they knew, making slow, weary responses to his questions.

"You'll probably be hearing from the investigative unit tomorrow. Can I please have your names, addresses and a number where you can be reached?"

They complied and the interrogation ended.

The kids looked at each other, taking in black-smearred hands and faces, clothing stained beyond repair in their efforts to push the car back over.

Melanie looked down at her torn gown and then over at Kenny.

Her voice was a whisper. "I think I want to go home. I ... I don't feel so good." With that she fainted.

Kenny caught her by the shoulders, eased her down on the ground and put her head between her knees. When her breathing returned to normal, she looked up at him, wan and exhausted.

“I’m okay, now. Please take me home.” She began to cry, tears leaving clean tracks down her grimy cheeks. “I want Mama.”

* * *

The Mustang pulled into the darkened driveway. Kenny helped Melanie out of the car, supporting her while Blair opened the back door. The light over the kitchen sink showed them they were alone.

“Melly,” Blair asked, her voice just above a whisper. “Do you want to sit out here a minute or do you just want to go to bed?”

Melanie sank into a chair, leaned back and closed her eyes. Tears oozed from the corners.

“I think I’d like a cup of tea, actually.” She drew a hand across her eyes and glanced at Blair. “This is the worst night of my life. I still can’t believe it.”

Her hands shook as she looked at them. They were filthy. She walked over to the sink in slow measured steps and turned on the water. It seemed like she stood there forever, scrubbing her hands.

Kenny joined her at the sink, putting his arms around her shoulders as he turned off the water.

“Come on, Melly, they’re clean. Sit down an’ drink that tea, honey. It’ll make ya feel better.”

They sat in silence, sipping their tea, lost in thought when they heard light footsteps coming down the circular staircase toward the kitchen. The kids looked up as Julia entered the room.

“Hey, y’all, did ... my God, Melanie? Blair? What...?” Julia stared in horror at the girls, taking in the torn, grime-covered clothes and dirty faces. The smell of smoke clung to them. She turned to her son, eyes wide.

“What happened to y’all?”

Kenny looked at his mother, sad eyes wise beyond their years. “Dave wrecked his car, Mama. He showed up at the dance drunk and made a scene with Melly. We had a fight.”

As he recounted the story, his fear-filled words came quicker and he panted with the memories.

“The car was on its side an’ we had to push it over before Larry an’ I could get him out.” His voice rose an octave. “Mama, we got him out just before the car exploded. If we’d been a minute later, he ... we....” Kenny’s voice trailed off, unable to complete the sentence.

“Is ... are you girls hurt? My Lord, Dave was drunk? I can’t believe this.” Julia looked closer at the girls, inspecting them.

“Blair, honey, look at your leg. It’s bleedin’. And ya have cuts on”

She went into the garage and brought back the first aid kit. “I think we need to get y’all into a nice warm shower and then bed. Come on, I’ll help ya get ready.”

She turned to Kenny then, and reaching out, she took him in her arms. “I’m so thankful ya were there, Kenny. Sounds like ya saved Dave’s life tonight.” She drew back, huge gray eyes luminous in the dim light.

“I’m so proud of ya, Kenny. I’m sure ya did everythin’ possible for Dave. We have to keep him in our prayers.” She hugged him again, patting his back several times. Julia turned to the girls. “Let’s go.”

They snuggled down between their sheets, looking at each other. Julia had been right. A shower

was just what they needed. After they settled in, she kissed them good night just like when they were little kids and left, closing the door behind her.

Green eyes fixed on blue. “This was not your fault, Melly. You’re not responsible for Dave’s choices. Don’t blame yourself.”

Melanie heaved a deep sigh and sniffed. “If I hadn’t broken up with him, none of this would have happened, Blair. Ya know that as well as I do. If only I’d just let things be. I’m leavin’ for college in a few months and then the split wouldn’t have meant so much. But no, I had to have my way.”

“But Melly, what do you mean? Staying with him out of habit or pity would be a terrible thing to do. You did the only thing you could do, and for him to react like that, well, that’s his problem, not yours. He’s just darned lucky Larry got there in time.” She was quiet a moment.

“Kind of ironic, wasn’t it? Dave said such awful things to him and yet now he owes Larry his life. Kenny, too, of course. Double irony.”

They looked at each other for a long time, minds so attuned that words weren’t necessary.

“Thank ya for being such a wonderful friend, Blair. I’m truly blessed.”

“Me too, Melly. We’ll always be there for each other.”

They closed their eyes, allowing sleep to come to them.

* * *

“Hey, buddy.” Kenny forced a smile to his lips. “Looks like ya won’t be makin’ the summer tennis team.”

Dave looked up at him and then away, ashamed to meet his old friend's eyes. "I've been such an ass. How could I act like that? The whole night was a disaster and it was all my fault. I've never been so ashamed in my life."

One eye had swollen shut, already turning several shades of green-tinged blue and there were stitches in his lower lip. His broken right leg hung suspended on a pulley, and two fractured ribs made talking difficult.

"I don't remember anything after I started to slide and no one else seems to know what happened, either. Were you there?" Anguished eyes sought Kenny's. "Do you know what happened?"

"From the skid marks on the ground, looks like ya were goin' pretty fast and missed the turn. Actually, it was Larry and Melly that found ya first. Your car was on its side up against a palm tree." Kenny's mind flew back to the scene and he shivered.

"By the time Blair and I got there, Larry'd already cut ya outa the seatbelt and they were tryin' to push the car back onto its wheels. Once we got that done, Larry climbed through the windshield into the front seat with ya and he pushed while I pulled."

Dave's eyes dilated as he looked at Kenny. "Larry? Larry pulled me out of the car? My God." He digested that bit of news in stunned silence. "Tell me the rest," he mumbled.

"Well, we pulled ya over to the side of the road just before the gas tank exploded. Another couple of seconds there and we'd probably all be dead. Ya got lucky, that's for sure."

Dave stared at Kenny, mouth slack as the reality of what he heard sank in. "What ever made me

do that? I'll never take another drink again. Such a stupid thing to do. Thank you so much, Kenny."

His lower lip began to quiver and tears gathered at the corners of his eyes. "Will you guys ever be able to forgive me? I know I'll never be able to forgive myself or to thank you enough. I owe you my life, Kenny."

"Larry, too. But shoot, that's what friends do, Dave. I never gave it a thought none of us did. We just did what it took to get ya out. I'm glad ya made it. Ya had me scared to death. Melly, too."

"Melly." Dave closed his eyes, silent, thinking. "She'll never forgive me and I don't blame her. I know she won't come here, but will you tell her—and Larry, too, how sorry I am and that I'll never forget what they did for me."

"Sure I will, Dave. And don't be surprised if she comes for a visit. Ya go way back and even though ya aren't datin' anymore I know Melly wants to be your friend."

The nurse walked in just then. "Visiting hours are over for now. I need to see the patient alone." She picked up his chart from the end of the bed and started writing.

"I'll be back tomorrow, Dave. Rest up."

* * *

The early morning sun poured through the kitchen windows as Blair came in the back door. Jessi and Karen sat at the table, eating breakfast. Happy expressions turned somber as Blair told them about Dave's accident.

"How did you guys ever push the car back over?" Jessi shook her head, brown eyes wide as she

battered a slice of toast and made a bacon sandwich.

“Weren’t you scared to death?”

Blair nodded as the memories of the night before flooded back. “It was scary, all right. The boys did most of the work, but I’m sure Melly and I helped a bit. Once we got it going the car flipped over easy.” She took another sip from her cup and looked at Karen.

“Not that I’d ever need a reminder, but the accident sure made me see what happens when you drink and drive.” Her thoughts flew back to her mother’s death so many years ago at the hands of a drunk driver. She shuddered.

“Were Larry or Kenny hurt?” Karen asked as she cleared the breakfast plates.

“No, just a few cuts from all the broken glass, but nothing much. I got a cut on my leg, but Julia put stuff on it. No big deal.” She slid her leg out from under the table, pointing at a small Band-Aid. “Just a scrape.”

“What a shame, honey. Does it hurt?”

“Nah, I’m fine.”

They talked a bit more about the accident and the repercussions of drinking and driving. Then the talk turned to the upcoming show.

“Mom, did you get the brochure yet for Showpark? I’m really looking forward to that show.” Blair smiled at her as she refilled her coffee cup. “Can I move up to the Lows or do you want me to stay in the Children’s division?”

“I’m not sure Angel will be able to handle the higher fences, Blair. What do you think?”

Although Angel was very competitive at the three-foot level and had won more than her share of championships, Karen often said she doubted the little

mare would be able to do as well in the higher divisions. It was a sore subject for Blair, whose intense loyalty to her old friend never wavered.

“Well,” Blair said, color flooding her cheeks. “We’ll never know till we try.” She stood, her face clouded with doubt. “How about if we do one class at the higher level? If it’s too much for her, we can stay in Children’s. Is that okay with you?”

“That’s a good idea, Blair. The entries are down at the barn. After today’s lesson, we’ll get them filled out and I’ll fax them over to the show office. You girls just about ready?”

Chapter 10

It was a glorious morning without a cloud in the deep blue sky. The warm June weather encouraged the birds that nested in the bougainvillea surrounding the Doubletree arena. The blue jays organized into street gangs, conducting warfare against the smaller birds, attacking their nests in noisy formations.

Little puffs of dried leaves erupted from the shrubbery as the smaller birds exploded from the bushes to ward off the vandals, screaming in high-pitched squawks.

Pounce hid under the bushes, blue eyes wide, body motionless except for the tip of his tail which twitched with a life of its own. Over head and just out of reach floated a hummingbird, suspended in mid-air as it drank nectar from the sweet blossoms. Hummers provided a never-ending source of entertainment for the huge cat. His triangular Siamese face pinched to a point, whiskers trembling with anticipation, he licked his lips.

From his prone position Pounce leaped in the air, already tasting his little birdie. He missed by a mile as the hummer rose above his reach and began to drink from a higher flower. It was all too frustrating.

Wow! Pounce clenched his jaws as his tail lashed back and forth. *Wow meow.*

He settled back under the bushes and turned his attention to the noisy blue jays. They were nice and plump and probably juicy. He kneaded long, sharp claws into the soft dirt and bided his time, purring.

“Okay,” Karen said, as the kids trooped up the arena rail. “Let’s trot.”

They practiced their moves, lengthening and shortening strides, preparing the horses for the fences ahead. The course was very tricky, combining quick, tight turns and a long gallop to one of the combinations.

“Show me your best ride, kids, just like in the show ring.” She waved her hand at them and grinned. “I’ve got a stop-watch here, let’s see who wins.”

Billy opted to go first, asking Bitsy to lengthen her stride from the beginning. Karen hit the button as he cleared the first fence and galloped on to the oxer. They handled it easily and Billy made the left turn hard, urging Bitsy on to the first combination. They got the perfect spots, tearing back to the first fence.

At the top, Billy counted four strides and lifting his inside rein, brought Bitsy’s nose around in a tight turn. He gunned her on and they flew through the remaining fences, clean and fast. Karen hit the button on the watch, stopping the clock.

“Excellent ride, Billy. 39.211. Great time. Melly?”

Melanie put the big gelding into a canter, going to the first fence in a more collected frame than Billy had done. Over the top of the fence, she closed her legs, extending the stride for the second fence. At the top of the oxer she looked over her shoulder, turning in mid-air and landing going away.

Shaving precious seconds off the ride, they approached the combination in a full gallop and Benny tore through it. They made an excellent turn back to the first fence and like Billy, she counted four strides before she made the sharp right turn to the remaining

combination, an easy two-stride to the long three. Benny got a bit flat over the last fence, but left the rails up, bringing a sprinkling of cheers from the rest of the kids.

“Whew, Melly, that was excellent. 39.003. Great job.” Karen’s face split into a wide grin. “You should have half-halted there at the combination and not gone flat, other than that, flawless.”

Larry went next, putting in an excellent round, tying with Billy. Melanie held the lead as Blair started on course. This would be their test run. The fences, set at 3’6”, were the same height as the division she hoped to move up to. The only problem she could see was the long three-stride in the final combination.

They approached the first fence at a controlled canter and like Melanie she extended the stride on landing, quickly closing the distance to the second fence. They made an excellent turn and powered down to the first combination, clearing all three fences with ease.

Back to the first fence now and her count was five strides. As they made the turn down the final line, Blair closed her legs even more and clicked to Angel, who accelerated in response to the pressure. Over the first two fences clean and now the long three stride. Blair half-halted twice, added a short stride, and cleared the final fence, grinning from ear to ear.

“Very good choice, Blair. Angel’s strides are too short to make a long three like that. Very nice ride.”

“What was the time, Mom?” Blair asked as she stroked Angel’s silky neck.

“41.220.”

“Oh,” Blair said, disappointed. “It felt faster to me. We’ll have to shave time on the turns. Nobody turns better than Angel.” Blair reached into her pocket, bringing out two lumps of sugar. She fed them to the mare, who chuckled in thanks.

The lesson finally ended and the kids trooped off to the wash racks to bathe their hot, sweaty horses.

“How’re ya’ feelin’, Larry?” Melanie asked as she led Benny into the slot next him.

Connie nickered at her friend, reaching over toward Benny, golden neck extended. He chuckled at her in response as their muzzles touched.

Melanie pulled Benny’s head back and attached the crossties.

“I’m doing okay, Melly. Didn’t sleep much after last night. How’s Dave? You heard from him?” Larry leaned into the huge mare, pushing her over so he could hose down her belly.

Melanie picked up her hose and turned on the faucet, adjusting the water temperature. She twisted the nozzle to spray a fine mist and looked at Larry. “Kenny talked with him, say’s he’s doin’ as well as can be expected. Broke his leg, so he’ll be on crutches for a while.”

She turned the hose on Benny’s head, smiling as he tried to get a drink from the nozzle. “Banged his head real good and got stitches in his lip, but other than that, he’s fine. He’s darned lucky we happened along. Another couple of minutes and we’d be goin’ to his funeral.”

Jessi led Foxy into the slot next to Benny. “I heard all about you, Larry. What a hero. Jeff told me how brave you were, climbing into the car to get Dave

out even though it was on fire. Oh,” she said, gushing on, “I’d have been scared to death.” Admiring brown eyes met his and a smile spread over Larry’s face.

“I doubt that, Jessi. I’ve heard all about you, too. A regular little dragon-slayer, aren’t you? After pirates, what’s a little fire, huh?”

Jessi blushed, pink flooding her cheeks. “Oh, well, that was something else again. We’ll have to share stories some time. I hear you’re staying with Billy for a while. We’re all going over there this afternoon to get a little boogey boarding in.” She swung around to Melanie. “Can you come too?”

“Well, maybe later Jessi. I have somethin’ to take care of first. But I’ll try. A day at the beach sounds like a great idea.”

* * *

“I’d like to visit Dave Hastings, ma’am. Can ya please give me his room number?” Melanie smiled at the receptionist, waiting as she scanned the patient’s files.

“That’s room 347, third floor.” She glanced at Melanie, a pleasant expression on her face. “Take that elevator to the third floor and then turn left. It’s about half-way down the hall.”

As Melanie emerged from the elevators, her stomach turned over. She dreaded this visit with Dave and drew a deep breath as she came abreast of his room. Knocking on the open door, she peered inside. Dave had a game show on the TV. The bored expression on his face showed his lack of interest in the program.

“Hey, Dave. How’re ya feelin’?” Melanie walked to the chair next to his bed. “Okay if I sit?”

“Sure, Melly. Gee, I’m surprised you came over. I didn’t think you’d ever want to see my face again. Thanks for coming.”

“Does it hurt?” She looked down at his leg, suspended in the pulley and then at his stitched lip and blackened eye. “You look pretty good, actually. I was prepared for much worse.”

“Nah, not too bad. The doctor says I’ll be out of here by the end of the week. It’s just a simple fracture.” He looked up at her then, shame flooding his face.

“Melly, I know saying I’m sorry isn’t enough, but ... can you ever forgive me? I...” His voice trailed off and he stared down at the blankets.

“Dave, I forgive you, of course I do. I just don’t understand what happened. Why were ya drinkin’?”

His cheeks drained, making the black eye livid. He turned his face away. “Because I’m an idiot, why else? I just ... well, I miss you so much and I wanted us to get back to where we were. I guess I thought that maybe God, I don’t know what I was thinking. I’m really sorry.” Anguished eyes searched hers, looking for something, anything to give him some hope. His voice was pitched low.

“Kenny told me what happened, that Larry-- that you and Larry saved my life. When I think of the things I said to him, the names....”

His voice drifted off, and when he resumed, she could barely hear him.

“I’m so ashamed, Melly. Saying I’m sorry or thank you just isn’t enough. I owe you my life. You and Larry.”

“Dave, there’s no sense in beatin’ a dead horse. We all know ya didn’t mean what ya said; ya just took

it out on him. I think the best thing we can do is thank God ya weren't killed. If we hadn't come along when we did, y'know, well...."

They lapsed into momentary silence and then Melanie said, "What did ya tell your folks, Dave? The car was totaled."

"They're both upset, as you can imagine. I'm sure Dad will have a lot more to say when I get out of here. Mom, too. Right now they're still scared. I guess this isn't over yet. I got cited for DUI, you know. I'll have to go to court about it. Probably be walking for a while. Great way to start college."

They talked for another couple of minutes and then Melanie rose to leave. "I guess I'd better get goin', Dave. I can hear the lunch carts comin' up the hall. Hey, how's the food here? Bad as they say?"

The nurse wheeled the cart to the foot of his bed and smiled at Dave. "I hope you're hungry? Seems the kitchen doubled up on you today." She placed the tray on his table and slid it in front of him.

A suspiciously thick slice of meatloaf and a round glob of what had to be mashed potatoes and gravy greeted his eyes. A pat of butter refused to melt on his serving of green beans. The salad looked good, as did the two containers of milk.

Dave looked up at Melanie and tried to smile. "Yum. Looks good. Oh, and a brownie for dessert. Want a bite?"

She chuckled at him as she fluffed up his pillows. "No, thanks, I think I'll pass. Hey, I'll see ya later, Dave." She grinned and gave his arm a pat. "Take care, ya hear? No racin' up and down the halls in the wheelchair." Another wave of her hand and she was gone.

Dave leaned back in the bed. What little appetite he had disappeared with Melanie. He opened the first container of milk and downed it in a series of long swallows. He turned off the TV, put the brownie on his side table with the other container of milk and pushed the tray to the bottom of the bed.

The discarded meatloaf cooled, gravy congealing on the mashed potatoes. The butter never did melt on the beans, but the salad wilted before his eyes.

Well, that wasn't so bad. Melanie slid behind the wheel of the BMW. She reached up and unlocked the handles that secured the top, pushed the button on the console and the convertible top slid back, nestling into its place on the trunk.

The sun streamed down on her as she turned onto the highway, shining on her light blonde hair. The great stretch of ocean dotted with boats and surfers, spread before her. Her cell went off just then and she pulled it from her bag. "Hello?"

"Hey, Melly," Blair said. "Where are you?"

"I just left the hospital. Y'all at Billy's?"

"Yes, are you coming over?"

"See ya in about ten minutes."

Melanie put the cell back and turned on her right blinker, easing over into the slow lane. The heavy traffic crawled down the highway as tourists clogged the roadway, taking in the sights. She stopped for the light and the smell of hamburgers from a nearby restaurant wafted in the air, making her salivate. She pulled into the drive-up window and ordered eight deluxe burger and fries. There would be plenty to drink at Billy's.

The kids came out of the house as she arrived, waving. With a big grin, she shook the bags at them. “Anyone got a Coke?”

They hi-fived at her and Billy held up a large cooler. “On ice, ready to go.”

“I just need to change,” Melanie said as she handed the bags to Blair. “Y’all go on down, I’ll be there directly.”

Melanie hurried to the cabana to change while the kids headed for the beach, toting blankets. Bob pulled up the rear, loaded with boogie boards, an umbrella and the two bags full of food.

Burgers and fries disappeared in record time as the salty sea air whipped their appetites.

“How was Dave?” Jessi asked between bites.

“Oh, he’s fine, I guess. Broke his leg, y’know and he has a couple of stitches in his lip, but other than that he’ll be okay.” Melanie glanced at Blair and made an abrupt change of subjects. “Where are Becky and Steve? I thought for sure they’d be here, too.”

Blair popped her remaining French fry into her mouth and crumpled the bag into a little ball. “Becky had three horses to massage, but she’ll be here soon. Steve stayed at the barn with her. They should be here any time.” She raised a bag at Melanie and shook it.

“They’ll appreciate your gesture. I saved them back some lunch.”

The sun was warm overhead as they applied lotion to already tanned bodies. The aromas of coconut and pineapple mixed with the salt air. Summer smells wafted through the air.

Billy glanced over at the *Sea Nymph*, rocking lightly at her moorings and had a light-bulb moment.

“Hey, guys, how about if we take the yacht over to Catalina tonight? Doesn’t that sound like fun?” He glanced at his friends with a grin.

“We could leave around sundown and have dinner on the way over, do some sight-seeing. What do you say?”

“Sounds great to me,” Jessi said. “Jeff and I don’t have plans except to hang out tonight. Count us in.”

“Me too,” echoed Blair.

Melanie glanced over at Larry. “Sound good to you?”

He smiled back at her and nodded. “Super. I’ve never been aboard. Sounds like a blast.”

Melanie chuckled at him, bright blue eyes crinkled at the corners.

“Ya heard about what happened on our last trip, didn’t ya?” She bent forward, grinning at Billy and the rest of the boys.

“Y’all’re gonna check her out real good, right? I don’t think I’m up for another bout with pirates.”

They all giggled as vivid memories washed over them in waves.

Shievon leaned into Billy, beautiful teeth gleaming in the bright sun. “It’s going to be a full moon tonight. No telling what’ll happen.” She giggled and then gave him a nudge. “I’m roasting. Anyone up for a swim?”

Like a happy group of lemmings, they ran to the water, splashing each other and laughing as the cold water washed over them.

* * *

“Have you ever been to Catalina?” Billy asked Larry as they walked out to the veranda.

“No, this’ll be a first for me. I’ve heard a lot about it, though.”

The full moon had just begun its ascent over the horizon, casting silvery shadows on the crests of the waves. They watched them crash on the beach below, leaving thin white water lines on the sand. The gulls, screaming at each other as they dove for their dinner, competed with the sounds of the restless sea.

The *Sea Nymph* rocked steadily at her moorings, her running lights on, engine rumbling softly as she waited for her guests. Bob and the rest of the crew worked on deck, preparing the yacht for her voyage.

The sounds of voices and slamming car doors jerked Billy and Larry from their reverie.

“Hey, Billy,” Shievon called as she walked up the steps. “Are we ready for a party?” She danced across the veranda and into his arms, a wide smile on her face. Cocking an eyebrow at him, she sang just a little off key. “Twenty-six miles across the sea, Santa Catalina is a-waiting for me...” Her song stopped abruptly as Billy gave her a resounding kiss.

“You’re in a good mood, I see.” He grinned at her, slipping his arm across her shoulders.

Jeff and Jessi, hands linked, followed Shievon across the veranda.

“Hey guys, beautiful night for a sea cruise, isn’t it?” Jessi stared into the heavens. The stars, at least the bravest of them, twinkled in a vain attempt to outshine the moon. It was heavy going and the plump, full moon would not take second stage tonight. Lacy clouds drifted across its face and then disappeared into the darkness.

More cars and calls of hello announced the arrival of the rest of the kids. Becky bounced up the steps, a wide grin on her face. Steve, Melanie, Blair and Kenny followed close behind. All present and accounted for.

Laughing and joking around they crossed the veranda to the dock. Music floated to them as they approached the huge yacht.

“Gosh,” Larry said in awe. “It looks even bigger at night, all lit up like that. What a beauty she is. Have you had her long?” He looked over at Billy in question.

“Five years, actually. She belongs to my mom. When she won her first Emmy, Dad bought the yacht as a gift. I get to use her whenever I want, but Mom picked her out, named her, too. I can’t wait to get your take on the decorating. Most of the ideas were hers.”

Melanie nodded in agreement, adding, “All the comforts of home and then some.”

They walked up the gang-plank and Blair chortled in memory. “Hey, Melly, you need to use the head?” They broke into peals of laughter, remembering their last, slightly ill-fated cruise.

“No repeat of the last time, I hope,” Jeff said as he winked at Billy.

Bob worked with the ropes as the crew prepared to cast off. He glanced at the kids and shook his head. Unconsciously, he touched his eye and grimaced, remembering their last voyage. From the look on his face, he wasn’t amused.

The kids climbed the stairs to the observation deck and watched the crew get ready to cast off. The engines increased their rumble as the captain engaged the reversing gears and backed the *Sea Nymph* slowly

out of the slip. There was a momentary lull and then the forward gears engaged. She swung to the left, accelerating through the crashing surf.

Her bow gave a sickening roll as the waves hit the hull and the kids reached for each other in support. The captain throttled forward and the yacht surged toward deeper waters. The lurching ceased as the waves became swells.

“Whew,” Becky said with a tremor.

Steve tightened his hold on her shoulder as the deck rocked beneath them. “I wish we were on the way to Hawaii again,” he whispered, dark eyes fixed on Becky. “Pirates and all, it was the most wonderful time of my life.”

He reached down, flipping a curl off her forehead.

Bright, aqua eyes smiled up at him, full of love. “It was the best, yep. Who knows, maybe we can do it again, sans pirates.” She reached up and kissed him on the lips. “It was the best time of my life, too.”

The sea calmed as they sliced through the swells. Music played on the stereo as the kids danced their way to Catalina. Tiny dots of light appeared on the horizon as the dinner bell clanged. Hungry, they surged down the stairs and onto the main deck, salivating as the smell of chowder hit their nostrils. The temperature had dropped substantially and the crew erected the Plexiglas walls that protected the deck from the chilly sea breeze.

They gathered at the table, making appreciative sounds as the hot soup hit chilled stomachs. The steaming kettle disappeared in an instant, along with slices of crispy French bread.

“Four more days and we’ll be at Showpark,” Blair said, glancing over at Larry. “Are you excited about your first show? You’re going out on the Grand Prix field this time, right?”

He nodded at her, chewing on a piece of shrimp. “It’s really exciting. Connie’s been doing so well lately, I have high hopes.”

Jessi grinned at him, a twinkle in her eye. “Looks like you were right about the baby calming her down. She’s acting like a regular lady now ... well, almost.”

They chuckled, remembering Connie’s noisy arrival and exhibitions of bad temper.

“She never snaps at you any more,” added Becky, a grin splitting her feline features. “Doesn’t strike much, either. She sure was a pistol when she first got to the barn, though, that’s for sure. Yep, scared Karen on more than one occasion.”

Melanie glanced over at Blair. “How about Angel? Are ya gonna stay in the Children’s division or is Karen bumpin’ ya up a notch? I thought ya handled the higher jumps just fine, especially in the last lesson.”

Blair glanced at Melly, a look of concern on her face. “I’m not sure. It’s not just the height of the fences; it’s the longer distances in the lines and wider oxers, too.” She put her spoon on her plate and heaved a deep sigh.

“Mom wants me to start showing Lance. She doesn’t think Angel can move up, and I, well, I’m not so sure, either. Angel is so competitive I know she’ll try her heart out for me, but I’m not sure it’s fair, y’know, to stress her like that.” She shrugged. “I don’t know what I’ll do yet. Sort of a wait and see thing.”

“Why don’t you just stay in the Children’s?” Jessi asked. “You do so well in that division I don’t see why you need to change.”

Melanie’s eyebrows shot up in disbelief. “Ya can’t be serious, Jessi, that wouldn’t be progressin’ at all. Blair’s far too talented to just sit in a low division like that.” She looked hard at Jessi. “Do ya want to advance or are ya satisfied jumpin’ a three foot course and bein’ the competition for the little kids workin’ their way up?”

She snorted then shrugged. “We gotta keep stretchin’ ourselves, movin’ up. That’s the name of the game, right?” She stared at Shievon and Becky for agreement and they nodded, eyes solemn.

Becky leaned toward Blair, echoing Karen’s sentiments. “I know you’re close to Angel and she’s just the best, for sure, but what would be the harm in showing Lance, too?” She glanced from Shievon to Jessi, and then back at Blair.

“I mean, you could do both, couldn’t you?” Karen said just the other day that Lance is handling four feet like it’s not there. He could take you out on the Grand Prix field next year, yep. Angel won’t.”

Kenny sensed Blair’s discomfort with the subject matter. He reached for her hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. With a wave of his other hand, he exclaimed, “Look y’all, we’re comin’ into port. Let’s go upstairs and watch.” He pulled Blair to her feet and gave her a hug. The uncomfortable conversation ended as the kids trooped up the stairs again.

“Thank you,” she whispered in his ear.

Luminous eyes, so like his mother’s, stared down into hers. “I know how ya feel about Angel. And

Melanie? Take that talk with a grain of salt, Blair.” He shrugged in his sister’s direction.

“When y’all’re ready to make the change, then do it. I don’t mind if ya never move up. Far as I’m concerned, the fences are high enough already.” He grinned at her and shook his head. “Melly’s obsessed, but ya don’t have to join in. Besides, it’s all for fun, right? So just have a good time with Angel if that’s what ya want to do.”

They heard faint music and the smells of flowers and green lawns reached them as the *Sea Nymph* slid into the public docks.

Little kids ran helter-skelter, laughing, occasionally crying as they bounced along the winding pathways that skirted the harbor, peering into shop windows and begging their parents for treats from the sidewalk vendors. Aged couples, steps slow and measured, walked among them, casting amused and sympathetic looks as harassed parents tried unsuccessfully to rein in their vigorous offspring.

Plaintive cries of *Daddy, I want* and *Mommy, please*, reached their ears as they walked down the gang plank.

“I want a frosty, Billy,” Shievon cried in a high, childish voice. “Please get me a frosty.” Musical laughter poured from her throat as she mimicked the little kids. “I want a big one. Pretty please, Billy.”

He chuckled, reaching into his pocket for his wallet. “Okay, little girl, but you have to be good. And you have to share. You will share, right?”

Chapter 11

The huge van lumbered down the driveway, greeted by shrill excited calls from the Doubletree horses. Whenever their van pulled up to the barn, they knew something was about to happen.

Angel nickered to Megan, who had her head stuck as far over her stall door as she could get it, slender muzzle flaring as she drank in the smells of former occupants. Megan chuckled then shook her head up and down, clapping her lips together real fast.

Blair opened the stall and slipped the leather shipping halter on Angel's head, adjusting the brass buckle. She fed the mare a sugar cube and led her out to the empty crossties. Sunlight turned her coat to burnished gold, highlighting the dapples on her ample butt. Blair bent over and began the arduous task of wrapping the mare's legs in shipping boots.

The grooms buzzed around, loading tack trunks, grain buckets and bale after bale of hay. Stacked bags of shavings lined the far wall of the storage compartment. They took the setup next and groaned under the weight of the heavy wooden table and chairs. The van, capable of hauling twelve horses, would carry the usual show team and every bit of equipment they'd need at the show.

Becky tied Lance next to Angel and went to work on his long, luxurious tail. Chocolate brown eyes, the exact color of his coat, glanced around in anticipation. He nickered and then smacked his lips at Becky. Out came the treat. Sugar.

Becky worked fast, making a long, single braid and then folding the lengths into his tail-bag. She

stuffed the tab through the top of his tail hairs and secured it with a snap. His tail was almost long enough to step on and Becky didn't want to have to shampoo it again before they schooled.

She'd already prepared Lark for the trip and the mare stood in her stall, enjoying the remnants of her hay net. Her beautiful gray head poked over the door, watching Becky's every move.

Champ stared from the van to Becky and back again. He struck the door of his stall with his hoof and whinnied; sharp, pitiful cries rang across the yard.

"Not this time, buddy," Becky called back to him. "I'm still stuck in hunters, but maybe next time."

He hollered to her again, anxious to get out with the rest of the horses.

She turned to one of the grooms and said, "Jose, after we leave, could you boot him up and turn him out for a while. Poor guy, he's mad at me. It'll get worse when he sees us load up."

The horses, wrapped from fetlock to knee in thick, puffy shipping boots, lined up to board the ramp. Angel went first, backed into her usual end stall and called to Connie. The stubborn mare planted both front feet at the bottom of the ramp and refused to board.

Come on, Connie, we don't want to be late for the show. Angel neighed at the huge mare in encouragement.

Connie snorted at her friend and put a tentative hoof on the ramp. She looked at Angel in resignation and walked up the ramp. Carlos backed her into the stall across from Angel.

Angel nickered, shaking her mane back and forth in impatience as Carlos backed Benny into the

stall next to her. She let out a shrill squeal that seemed to say, *Move over, Benny, you're crowding my space.*

She swung her muzzle at him as far as the tie down would permit and laced her ears to her head. *Move over.* She flashed her tail several times in menace and stomped her hoof.

Benny gave her a curious look, ears almost touching at the tips and moved over an inch or two. *Better now, Princess?* The gelding curled his white lip at her in amusement.

Huh. Angel stared out the window, refusing to meet his eye. *Geldings.*

The Doubletree van pulled into line at the entrance to Showpark with at least a dozen rigs ahead of them. This was always the hardest part on the horses. They watched busy grooms scurrying to and fro, unloading horses, settling them in their stalls.

Angel stamped her foot hard and stared out the window, anxious to get out of the van. She glanced from side to side at the activity and whinnied. Surrounding horses whinnied back.

The van stopped in the aisle and the grooms had the horses out and in their stalls in rapid order.

They stood up to their knees in aromatic pine shavings, leaning over the stall guards and watching the commotion. Hay nets stuffed with fragrant alfalfa hung from hooks fastened above the stall doors. Halters, lead shanks and the horses nameplates hung on the stall fronts with each rider's show trunk placed just so. They did it the same at every show.

Even the setup, sporting the barn sign and decorated with plants, colorful flowers and photos of the DT team, stayed the same each time. Karen had

developed the pattern and it never varied. The grooms attached the show drapes to the walls of the stall, transforming it into a comfortable place to eat, rest and relax between classes.

A couple of benches, two chairs and a reading lamp made it their home away from home for four days.

The kids set up the tack room in the same pattern they always followed. They could find anything they needed in the pitch dark, if necessary, as long as they kept things put away. By the end of the day there were piles of gloves, numbers, crops and the odd bag of chips tossed on the floor. The room had to be cleaned each night before they could leave; Karen ran a tight ship.

Dogs roamed the area for unguarded food and nothing was sacred. They were equal opportunity scavengers and never hesitated to visit a likely target. Cries of *Spots, come 're* or *Git! Go home!* rang in the aisles as indignant humans tried to protect their goodies from the insatiable little critters.

For the most part, they were either Jack Russell's or Welch Corgis, too cute and way too little to worry anyone. They would go through their repertoire of tricks, dancing on their hind legs, sitting up, offering to shake, anything that might pry a treat out of someone. Every once in a while, sheepdogs, big grins pasted across their silly party-faces, joined the troops, drooling in anticipation, ears going like ninety.

The rules about loose dogs at horseshows were well known and usually ignored in the barn area. Management called them *hundred dollar dogs*, referring to the fine that could be imposed on the owner if management caught the dog running free.

“Look at that one,” Melanie cried in astonishment.

A small cocker spaniel puppy dragged a heavy knapsack down the aisle, growling mighty threats at another dog of indiscriminate breed that had offered his assistance.

The kids burst out laughing as a little girl ran up behind him, long pig-tails flying.

“Dinty, drop that. Where did you get that?” She struggled with the puppy a bit longer, and then hollered for reinforcements. “Mommy, Dinty stole a knapsack and he won’t let go.”

“Dinty?” Shievon said, her voice a strangled squeak. “*Dinty?*”

The small girl bent down and scooped up the puppy. She pried the sack out of his mouth, scolding him every step of the way. The knapsack lay forlorn and abandoned in the aisle.

“I think we should ask Jim if we can bring Toby. He’d just love it here.” Blair pulled her saddle from her tack trunk and grinned.

“Oh, man, that’s just what we need,” Becky said. “One more thing to keep an eye on. Nope, not a good idea.”

“Let’s go check out the Grand Prix field,” Larry said, glancing over at Melanie. “I want to see if it’s as cool as it looks on TV.”

“Oh, it’s better. Let’s go.”

The Grand Prix field spread before them, acres of green, manicured grass undulating with gentle slopes. Perched atop the berm stood a fearsome combination, painted red, white and blue and sporting American flags for wings. A gentle breeze tickled the

edges, but this afternoon when the wind came up, they'd be flapping.

Unlike the sedate hunter jumps that worked hard at looking natural, these fences were anything but.

Larry shook his head as he took them all in. They were crazy. He'd never seen wings with such wild shapes. What looked like huge brown grocery bags bore the name of a class sponsor, *Ralph's*, emblazoned in red across the front.

Two matching black and white dolphins, mouths opened in a wide grin, formed another. Wishing wells complete with buckets, sail boats with real canvas sails and dog houses nestled among the usual fan-shaped wings.

Plants, potted ficus trees and colorful flowers decorated every inch of the arena. It was truly an amazing work of art.

"Wow," he said, "You can see why course designers get paid big bucks. That's beautiful. Do you think we can go down on the field?"

They joined the group of riders and trainers who walked the course, planning their trips. Famous faces passed them. Susan Hutchinson, Hap Hansen, Nicki Simpson, Francie Carven and just about every Grands Prix rider on the West Coast circuit was there.

The kids gaped from hero to hero, nodding hello if they could make eye contact, which wasn't easy ... the riders focused on the course. Big money and professional standings ranked higher than fans right now.

Just ahead of them walked The Master of Faster, Richard Spooner, and his groom.

Jessi's eyes popped and she whispered to Blair, "Do you think he'd remember us from Indio? He was

so nice to us. I'd love to say hello." A rosy blush colored her tanned cheeks. Bright eyes looked from Richard to Blair. "What do you think? Should we say hello?"

"Gosh, Jessi, I don't know. I don't want to bug him." Blair glanced at Becky. "You want to say hello to Richard?"

Becky had joined the DT team after their trip to Indio, so she'd missed meeting him there. Never shy, she nodded. "Heck yeah, I'll go over and say hello."

With that, Becky walked over to him, the sun turning her hair to flame. Standing just behind him, she said, "Hello, Richard."

He turned around and smiled down at her. "Hi," he said, "do I know you?"

She stuck out her hand, aqua eyes fixed on his. "I'm Becky Edwards, long-time fan, yep. I ride at the Doubletree. Nice to meet you."

"Do you show Grands Prix?" he asked, voice polite as he began to walk toward the next fence, a huge oxer decorated with Canadian flags.

Becky chuckled. "No, I show hunters."

By that time, the rest of the kids had joined Becky. Jessi popped in front of her and said, "Hey, Richard. Remember me? Indio? Devane's?"

At this point, they were the only ones left on the field.

"Oh, yes, I do, hi. Well, listen kids, Robbie is waiting for me and I have to walk the rest of the course. Maybe we can talk more after I ride." He smiled at them, waved, and strode resolutely toward the combination.

Melanie grabbed Jessi's arm as she started to follow him. "I think we've been asked to leave." She

chuckled, pointing up at the starter. He and the announcer stared down at them, grim-faced and intense, about ready to ask them to clear the field. He nodded at Melanie as she led the way back to the bleachers.

They settled into the first row of seats as the announcer called a large bay gelding on course. This was a speed round and from the opening stride, they galloped. They were clean coming into the dog house jump and the rider checked lightly, setting the horse up for the perfect spot.

First round clean and fast with a strong challenge laid down for the other riders. This was going to be good. The next three riders weren't as lucky; rails and time faults put them out of the ribbons.

“Next on course, 831, this is Nicole Simpson and El Campeon's So Long. 831.”

Melanie nudged Larry. “Watch this gal. Makes it look like an equitation ride. She never makes a mistake.”

The dark brown gelding surged toward the first fence, clearing the huge vertical with ease. He landed going away, sprinting on for the Shamu oxer, over easy. They flew around the course, long, ground-covering strides eating up the distance. As they sailed over the dog house, the kids all looked to the timer. 52.982. Yes, she took over the lead.

Nicole slapped the silky brown neck as they came down to a walk. She fished in her pocket and handed the gelding a treat. Her face split in a *catch me if you can* grin as they walked out of the holding tunnel.

Chapter 12

Angel nickered at Blair as she and Jessi climbed out of the truck. They carried the cooler into the tack room, placed it on the table and collapsed on the bench. Yesterday was just warm-ups. Today was the real thing.

“Whew, I worked up an appetite just getting the cooler in here. What did Lena made for us?” Jessi opened the lid and felt the containers, pulling out the warm ones. Individual little egg McLena’s came out first. She unwrapped the foil, gave an appreciative sniff and took a bite.

“Yum. That’s great.” She opened a can of juice and took a swig. “You want one?”

Blair had already pried the lid off the hot-crossed buns and placed two fat raisins into her mouth. She grinned at Jessi as she opened her soda.

“How many calories do ya figure that has?” Melanie walked into the tack room, chuckling at Blair. “Apply directly to each hip.” She pulled out a container of yogurt and waved the bowl of fresh fruit in their direction.

“Rides much better on the thighs, too.” Bright blue eyes smiled at them as she popped a ripe strawberry into her mouth.

Blair and Jessi wrinkled their noses in reply, making yummy noises.

Car doors in the aisles slammed loud enough to make the girls in the peaceful tack room jump. Shievon, Billy, Becky and Steve burst in the door. Larry pulled up the rear.

They pounced on the cooler, grins on their faces. Lena was famous with the kids and they always looked forward to her treats.

The announcer's mike came on. "Barn alert. Exhibitors, we are about to open our rings. Ten-minute call."

Becky and Steve looked at each other.

"That's us," she said, snagging two hot crossed buns and a couple of napkins. "Let's go get the horses."

Carlos had Lark and Magic in the crossties, going over their glowing coats with a soft rag. Their hooves bore fresh coats of lacquer and their beautiful braided manes emphasized the muscles in their necks.

Becky stroked Lark's delicate muzzle, admiring her turnout. Carlos gave her a leg up and she settled in the saddle, soft as a whisper. Her new dark blue jacket looked wonderful beside the mare's dappled gray coat. Tall black boots, polished to perfection, reflected against Lark's sides.

As Steve and Magic walked up to them, Becky caught her breath and her heart fluttered. They were so handsome. Steve had always admired the light gray jacket, pale blue shirt and navy tie Billy wore when he showed Magic. He adopted the color combinations as a good luck charm.

"How're you feeling, Becky? Ready to go up there and show 'em a thing or two?" He smiled down at her, black eyes dancing. "I don't have a prayer against you, y'know."

She chuckled. "Yeah, right. You can ride circles around me and you know it. But I'd be happy to be second to you for the rest of my life." A stray red curl escaped from its net, fluttering in the middle of her

forehead. She brushed it back and smiled, bright eyes shining. "Lead the way."

Karen walked with them, pointing out the best lines. "This is a great course, kids, flows real nice. After one, you have to watch for your focal point so the turn to the diagonal line stays smooth. Keep your outside leg on and control the drift. You get a nice long ride around to four and five." She pointed with her hand, emphasizing the sweeping turn coming up next. "Stay on your line and keep your eye on six or you can overshoot and come in crooked. Don't get anxious. The turn to the final combination is simple. Again, just ride your eye."

She looked over at Becky. "If you don't see anything, just settle, stretch up and keep your legs on. Lark will get the spot and you'll be fine."

Becky's riding skills had improved so much over the last year that Karen had moved her up from the Long Stirrup to Green Rider when she made division champion. She'd done so well in the Green Riders that Karen bumped her up again to the Children's division. The three foot course would stretch Becky's abilities to their present limit. Next year she would be ready for jumpers.

Karen smiled at the memory. To think that in less than a year of riding Becky could show competitively at that level was quite impressive.

They left the ring and remounted their horses. Their order of go was ninth for Steve and twelfth for Becky. Karen would school them together.

As they watched the first couple of riders on course, Karen pointed out the good approach or the bad spot, commenting on the drift at six, cautioning

them again to keep their eye steady. “Okay, kids, let’s jump.”

They walked over to the busy warm-up ring and trotted on the rail, loosening up their horses until they were ready to jump. They popped back and forth over the fences for a while, and then the announcer called out, “313, you are on deck. Where are you, Steve?”

Karen waved at him as they walked back to the arena. “We’re ready,” she called. As the rider in the ring made her exit circle, Karen looked up at Steve. “Maintain a steady pace and you’ll have this knocked. Keep your outside leg on in the turn and just let him do his job. Okay, relax and have a good trip.”

“Joining us now in the Children’s Hunter ring is 313, Black Magic, owned and ridden by Steve Bianchi. 313 on course.”

They trotted into the ring, made a nice wide opening circle and establishing a soft steady canter, Steve rode to the first fence. The sharp morning sun blazed on Magic’s coal black coat, glowing with bluish highlights. They got the sweet spot over the vertical and continued straight down the arena.

As Steve passed the wall he looked at two. Never taking his eye off, he made a soft, controlled turn to the right, raising his inside rein slightly, outside leg pressed on. They were straight from four strides out and got another perfect spot in. Four more strides and they cleared the oxer at three.

He rode to the rail, stayed on track and using the whole arena, cantered to four. Over easy, six more strides and out over the oxer at five. Now came the turn to the wall. Six was positioned to test the rider’s

eye. It was easy to over-shoot the mark and bulge to the outside.

Steve and Magic did a perfect turn, another easy jump and he proceeded down the rail, again using the full track. The three-stride combination came up like a dream and they were done. They made a large closing circle and exited the arena amid cheers from the crowd and rebel yells. Melanie, Kenny and Jeff were in rare form and Jessi was working on it.

The judges sent their scores to the announcer, who turned on his mike.

“313, Black Magic and Steve Bianchi score a total of 88, moving him into first place. 88 is the score to beat.”

He called the next rider on course as Karen congratulated Steve on his great ride. “That was positively sweet. You never made a wrong move. I especially liked the way you used the whole arena. That course is set up to pull you off the line, but you rode it great.” Golden hazel eyes smiled up at him. “Super ride.”

Becky’s throat was dry as toast. She tried to swallow twice and gave up. *Deep cleansing breaths, Becky, breathe deep.*

“Next to see, 310, Becky Edwards and Meadowlark. 310 on course.”

Like so many mares, Lark was a born show-off. She minced into the ring, flicking her toes as she trotted. Becky picked up a smooth canter and made her opening circle. Her track to the first fence was straight on and they met the vertical in perfect rhythm.

Down the arena they cantered, her rocking-horse gate as smooth as silk. She rode the turn well, getting a nice straight approach to the diagonal line.

They cleared three and Becky lifted her left rein as she began the turn for the outside line. They dropped in and cut the corner a bit coming to the line right of center. They made the strides with no trouble and this time Becky kept her inside leg on, holding Lark to the track.

Their approach to the wall was perfect, over easy, and now the long canter to the three-stride combination. As they cleared the last fence, a roar went up from the stands as the DT's, some twenty strong, howled their approval. Becky's face split into a wide grin as she exited the arena, patting Lark's neck.

The announcer turned on his mike. "310, Becky Edwards scores a 78 from the judges."

Karen's eyes popped open at the score and she glanced up at Becky. "Boy, they really hit you for that drift. I thought you'd score in the low 80's. That's hunters, I guess. I thought your ride was very nice, honey. Good job." She patted Becky's leg in consolation.

Steve frowned at Becky, dark eyebrows furrowed. "Shoot, Becky, you got robbed. That little drift shouldn't have cost so much. It was a great ride."

Becky nodded, disappointed. She took a deep breath and looked at Steve, blue eyes troubled. "Well, I did drift in the turn. I felt it, yep. Should have corrected right away. Oh, well, I won't let it happen again."

Karen glanced over at the in-gate where the riders waited in line for their turn on course. "There's got to be another twenty rides, kids, and I have to get over to the other ring. You both did great. I'll see you in a little bit." She turned away, striding toward the

jumper ring where Billy, Blair and Jessi stood at the gate, memorizing their course.

“So, what have we got here?” Karen asked, glancing at the board and then out into their ring.

“Not too bad, Mom,” Blair said, pointing at the course. “Only two tricky turns, from three to the combination and then the turn back to the single at the end.”

They trooped into the arena with the rest of the riders and trainers, walking the course and making their plan.

“That turn from three to the combination is a bear,” Billy said. “Man, you get going too fast and you’ll fly right by it.”

Jessi gnawed on her thumb, her heart pounding. Foxie’s strides were so long, she just knew if she didn’t have a soft ride over three, they’d never make the turn. *And this is a speed round, for Pete’s sakes. I’m never gonna make it.*

“Mom,” she squeaked, “do you think we’ll be okay? How should I ride that turn?” Her voice rose as her concern turned to panic. “I’m set to ride fourth. Can you move me down in the lineup? I’m not ready.” Her voice rose another octave.

“You know they won’t let you do that. You’ll be fine. Just don’t run at three. Keep a controlled steady pace.” Karen looked at Jessi, smiling in encouragement.

Blair slipped an arm around her waist and gave Jessi a hug. “We’ve done turns like that at home a dozen times,” she said. “Just keep a soft feel and do a couple of half-halts coming into three. You’ll be fine.”

Jessi felt her stomach curl into a little ball. Sweat trickled down the sides of her cheeks, her breath shallow. *I need a drink of water.*

They mounted up and headed for the warm-up ring.

“Gate call for my Children’s Jumpers. I need the first five riders at the gate. Come on down.”

The first horse entered the arena and charged down the rail. The whistle blew and they tore toward the first fence. Over easy and they made the curving line to two. The rider urged the horse on over the oxer and their approach to three was deep on the inside. They turned over the top of three, but with all that build, the rider couldn’t get straight to the combination and the horse stopped dead at the first element, flinging his rider to the ground.

The girl landed with a thud, the breath knocked out of her. She sat up slowly as the EMT ran onto the field. She got to her feet, staggering a bit as she recovered her equilibrium. The crowd clapped for her in consolation as she walked out of the ring.

Eyes as big as plums, pupils dilated, Jessi looked at Karen. “Oh, Mom, we’re gonna get killed.”

“Jessi,” she snapped, “don’t be ridiculous. That was totally rider error, coming into the combination like that. Keep the rhythm steady and half-halt into three. You’ll be fine, honey.” She looked up at Jessi, a smile softening her words.

“You don’t think I’d let you do this if you weren’t able, do you? Of course not. Now just relax and go for the clean round.”

The next two riders each had rails, and Jessi’s heart leaped into her throat as she stood at the gate.

“Next to see, 317, Foxie Lady, Jessi Allen-Evans in the irons. 317 on course.”

Jessi entered the arena at a trot, glancing into the stands where Joe, Jeff and the rest of the DT’s watched her. She reached down to Foxie’s neck, stroking the silky mane. “Okay, girl, let’s roll.”

The whistle blew and Jessi galloped to one and got the perfect spot, over easy. She kept her eye on two, meeting the oxer just right and jumping out of stride. Jessi kept both legs on, raised her reins and rocked Foxie onto her hind quarters with a series of quick half-halts.

The mare obligingly put in two short steps, and rolled over three, her nose pointed toward the combination. Jessi pushed with her outside leg, presenting the mare to the first element dead straight and in stride. They were through it and Jessi clamped both legs on the Foxie’s sides, driving her on.

Huge, ground-covering strides took her around to five, big jump. She immediately pushed with her inside leg, lifting her inside rein and supporting the mare as they galloped for the five-stride combination. They came in at an angle, forged through the combination and skirted 4c, just missing the wing. Two sharp nudges from her inside leg set Foxie up for a diagonal jump over seven and they were through clean ... clean and fast.

Thunderous applause rose from the crowd and it sounded like the DT’s were being scalped. Tears of relief filled Jessi’s eyes and she smiled wide as she bent over Foxie’s neck, slapping her in praise. They came back to a walk and Foxie turned her head to Jessi, waiting for her treat. Sugar incoming.

“See, see, I told you,” Karen said, “What a great trip you laid down.” She turned to the rest of her team and grinned. “That’s how it’s done, kids.”

“317, Jessi Evans, gives us our first clear round of the class, in a time of 40.872

The kids all clapped again, congratulating her on her excellent round.

“That was super,” Blair said. “Showed us who to beat.” She smiled at her little sister, pride lighting her face.

Shievon waited on deck, nervously plucking Megan’s mane. This course was made for them with all the tight turns and tricky approaches.

“Next to see, 316, Sign The Card, Shievon Mahoney rides. 316.”

They cantered sedately down to the bottom of the arena, waiting for the whistle. As Shievon heard the buzzer, she clapped both legs onto Megan’s sides and they took off. They whizzed over one, galloping hard for two, over. She rode right on the rail, opting to jump three on an angle. She set the mare up and they cleared the vertical, turning toward the combination straight on. As they cleared the third element of the combination, she looked left. Lifting her inside rein she called to the mare to whoa.

They got in so close Megan jerked her knees to her ears, just skimming over five. The top rail rattled in its cup as a hind hoof tapped it, but stayed up. They tore across the arena toward the five-stride outside line. Shievon accelerated even more and they made a brilliant ride through. By this time, Megan was flat out. Shievon called whoa, half-halting hard, but the mare had other ideas. She bore down on the bit, pulling

Shievon forward. The turn to the final fence was so tight there was no doubt they'd hit it.

Sure enough, Megan twisted to the right and hooked the top pole with her front hoof. The rail popped up out of the cups and crashed to the ground. *Four faults. Rats.* Shievon stared at the timer. *Holy cow 37.993! Whew. If only we'd been able to leave up that last rail. Rats.*

"We're off to the races with that one," chuckled the announcer. "316, Shievon Mahoney, put down a blazing time and moves into second place with four faults."

"Shievy," Billy said, out of breath just watching her ride. "What a shame. That ride was outstanding. What happened at the last fence?"

"I'd like to know the answer to that, too." Karen stared at her, shaking her head. "Forget about the no running rule?"

Shievon shrugged her shoulders, still panting, and pointed at Megan. "She did it. I guess she had a plan of her own. She just grabbed the bit and I couldn't get her back in the turn. Gee, it was a great ride, except for the rail, huh?" She reached down, stroking Megan's sweaty neck.

"No running, Billy," Karen said, her face set. "I mean it. Do not run at the fences. Just stick to your plan, okay?" She looked up at him, demanding an answer.

"I won't run, I promise."

"Next on course, 311, Billy Martin and Valley Girl. 311 rides."

Billy and Bitsy cantered into the ring, taking the scenic route down to the bottom of the arena. They circled quietly, waiting for the whistle. Like always,

when it blew, so did Bitsy. She curled her tail over her rump, rocked back on her haunches and charged for the first fence. Over clean, the mare's huge strides carried them down to two. Billy opted for the diagonal jump over three and they were already straight to the combination when they landed.

He closed his legs, and the big mare made quick work of the combination. Great clods of dirt shot up from her hooves as she dug in for the turn to five. They sailed over it and galloped toward the far line. Billy spotted six-a and did several sharp half-halts, successfully elevating Bitsy's forehand, collecting her nicely.

Straight on, they tore through the combination, easily leaving out a stride. Their turn to seven was fast but controlled and they cleared it by a mile, flying through the timers.

Once again the crowd erupted in pandemonium, stomping their feet and cheering wildly. There was added commotion as the DT's decamped in a body, surging down the stairs, jostling each other in their haste to get to the in-gate.

"We have a new leader, ladies and gentlemen. 311, Billy Martin, takes the lead with a time of 37.000. Smokin'."

Karen had firm rules about team control ... no unmounted DT's by the in-gate. She frowned in dismay as the rules shattered and the kids swamped Billy in a screaming wave.

"Wow," Melanie said, blue eyes dancing, lips turned up at the corners. "That was fantastic." She pounded on his leg in glee, barely controlling her urge to yell again.

Larry grinned from ear to ear, reveling in his friend's success. "Nailed that one, my friend. What a super mare." He glanced at Bitsy with approval, a glint in his eye. "She reminds me so much of Connie. What a competitor."

Kenny stood next to Blair, patting her foot. "Ya okay?" he asked, staring up at her.

"She's on deck, Kenny. You guys need to get back up in the stands. Blair needs quiet time to think." Karen nodded at Melanie and Larry as well. "Go on, we'll be just fine."

The kids gave Blair the thumbs up and walked back to the stands.

"How're you doing Blair? Got your plan down pat?"

"I'm doing fine, Mom. I've got a good plan." She grinned down at Karen. "I know, no running."

"312 is next on course. Blair Evans and Windsom Angel, 312."

Angel and Blair cantered into the ring. Unlike the other riders, she opted to approach the first fence off her right lead, so she stayed in the middle of the arena. The whistle blew and Blair opened Angel's stride. They came at the first fence angled to the right, and two followed the natural flow of the ride. At the top of three, Blair looked right and so did Angel, getting a perfect, straight-on placement to the combination.

Slicing left at the top of four-c, they made a splendid turn to five. Angel cleared it easily, quick little feet scampering across the arena, eating up the distance to the five-stride combination.

The spot was close, but Angel made a super effort and jerked her knees tight, avoiding contact with

the poles. They rode the edge of four-c, just missing the wing as they turned. Seven came up fast, a bit too fast, and Angel backed herself off slightly, just clearing the top pole. They charged through the timers and the audience went ballistic.

“A clear ride with a time of 37.211 puts 312, Blair Evans and Windsom Angel, in second place.”

This time there was no holding them back. The DT’s tore down the steps of the bleachers, screaming in delight.

By now, the remaining riders started coming unglued. Either they rode a clean, conservative round and hoped for good middle placement, or caved in to the need for speed, tearing around the course virtually out of control. Rails fell like rain and the jump crew had their hands full. Two more riders parted company with their horses in the combination and a kid on a large pony blew it completely by going off course.

Karen grinned at her team. *Thirty-seven rounds, only a dozen or so clean and most of them are mine.* She smiled in delight, proud of her kids, thrilled with their performances and anxious to hear the placements.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we’re ready to pin our Modified Children’s Jumpers Speed Class, sponsored by Winners Circle Equine. Let’s put our hands together for our winner, 311, Billy Martin and Valley Girl, Del Mar, CA.”

Billy and Bitsy entered the ring and approached the judges. The sun set fire to Bitsy’s deep auburn coat as she skipped across the arena, four little socks glistening white as snow. They handed Billy the long blue ribbon and silver trophy. Flashbulbs went off as the crowd cheered for them.

“In second place, please congratulate 312, Blair Evans and Windsom Angel, another team representing Del Mar. In third place, 498, Barbara Waldman and Flyby, joining us from Sacramento, CA.” The announcer named the next three winners. “Seventh place goes to Jessi Allen-Evans and Foxie Lady and eighth to”

A grin split Karen’s face. She threw her arm around Joe as he filmed the presentation and victory gallop.

“Quite a day you’ve had here, honey,” he said from behind the camera. “The kids did a great job.”

“I know. It’s incredible. Steve won his class, too, Becky got sixth and Melly and Larry haven’t even shown yet. What a day.”

Chapter 13

Once again, Melanie and Benny stood in the shadows of the holding area at the Grand Prix field. She had the course memorized and stared out at the field, watching the rider and critiquing the round. She had a plan, down to the last stride. Judging from the intensity on his face as he watched the horse jump, Benny had a plan, too.

As she entered the holding tunnel, Melanie looked above the field to a cluster of houses above Via de la Valle. She'd nicknamed them *the cliff dwellers* the first time she rode at Showpark and they'd fascinated her ever since. Perched precariously on the sides of the hills, they had a birds-eye view of the field. *Best seats in the house.*

Reaching down, she stroked the bright gold neck, smiling as Benny chuckled at her. Their warm-up had been great and they were both ready. Melanie watched the rider complete the course and head for the exit.

Getting the nod from the starter, Melanie drew a deep breath and trotted out into the arena, squinting as her eyes adjusted to the strong afternoon sun.

"Next to see, 314, Inherit The Wind, Melanie Young in the irons. 314 on course."

She picked up a strong canter and headed for the far end of the field and the first fence on the course. The whistle blew and she closed her legs, sending Benny down to the vertical.

The grass was chunked up a bit on one side of the panel and Melanie held Benny slightly right of center. The count was there and she looked right over

the top of the fence, opening her rein, guiding his nose around her leg. Keeping her legs on, she did two quick half-halts, collected the huge gelding and then sent him charging down through the triple combination.

As they landed, she sat back and lifted her left rein. Maintaining her leg pressure, she jumped the vertical at the base and the left turn to the wall was fantastic.

Melanie got straight to the combination, half-halting again as they landed and made the tight turn to the seven combination. Already several seconds ahead of her estimated time, they galloped across the arena. She saw her spot a mile out and grinned. At the top of eight she looked over her right shoulder, turning Benny in mid-air.

Back they went over the vertical, clearing it easily. Now she focused on fence one and extended the gallop, confident in her skills and the ability of her horse. She skirted the wing of two-c, extended even more and cleared the vertical with inches to spare.

Melanie leaned down on Benny's neck, urging him on as they galloped through the timers, stopping the clock. The previous time to beat crashed as the announcer said, "We have a new leader. With a time of 58.211, 314, Melanie Young and Inherit The Wind move into first place."

The crowd cheered as they headed for the tunnel. Karen and the DTs converged on them, laughing, slapping her leg, petting Benny, and feeding him sugar lumps. Melanie always put down a blazing trip and that one was super. The remaining riders chased her hard, but her time stood.

The DT's went ballistic when she and Benny walked out onto the field to receive their ribbon,

collecting another blue to add to the growing display back at the setup.

As she came out of the arena, Billy strode up to her, a grin splitting his face. “Melanie, you are absolutely awesome. What a ride.”

His cheeks turned pink as she looked down at him. Blue eyes dancing, handsome face wreathed in smiles, his lips curled up at the corners as he gazed at her in obvious awe. “Girl, when you accelerated coming across the arena for the last fence, I knew you’d win. I watched the timer with one eye and you with the other.” He winked at her as his blush grew. “So way cool.”

She slapped his offered hi-five. “That’s a high compliment, Billy, thanks. Before long, I’ll be chasin’ your time out here.”

Blair and Jessi stood at her other leg, slapping it to get her attention. “Melly, that was fantastic. My heart was in my throat when you ran at the last fence. How come Mom lets you run at the fences?” Jessi’s dark eyes glowed with admiration.

“Yeah,” added Blair. “When do we get to run? You make it look easy.”

Karen popped her head in. “I heard that,” she said, slipping her arm across Jessi’s shoulder. “Tell you what. By the time you’re ready to ride this course, you’ll be ready to run at the fences, too.”

“Ah, Mom, you know I’ll never get to the Grand Prix. I’m just too chicken.”

“Chickens can’t run.” Karen chortled.

Shievon slipped her arm around Billy as continued to stare at Melanie.

“Hey, Billy,” she said, her voice soft. “Why do you always blush when you talk to Melly?”

* * *

Larry walked around the warm-up ring, letting Connie stretch her legs before he started his flat work. Two other riders, a young girl on an energetic pony and a guy of about twenty walked ahead of him.

As Larry pulled along side him, he turned with a smile and said, "Hi, I'm John Gonzalez."

"Hey, Larry Klein, nice to meet you."

Judging from the horse, decked out in belly-guard and leather boots, John would compete on the Grand Prix field, too.

"What division do you show in?" Larry asked.

"We're going in the level ten. It's a warm-up for the Grand Prix tomorrow. And you?" His English was perfectly accented, melodic in its cadence.

"Level ten, too. Do you ride for the Mexican team?" he asked, noting the small flag on his saddle pad.

"No," John said, looking at the flag as well. "It's just a good-luck thing, I guess."

"Do you live in the United States or Mexico?"

"We have two barns. One in here Rancho Santa Fe and one outside of Tijuana. Far outside." He grinned. "How about you? Local?"

"Very local," Larry said with a grin. "I ride with the Doubletree barn, ever heard of them?"

"Ah, yes. The exquisite Melanie. Great rider, too." They laughed together and picked up a trot. "You know her well?"

Larry chuckled. "Yes, we're neighbors as well as team members, actually. You like her, huh?"

"She's a super rider and great to look at, but she's not my type. I've never met her. I just admire from afar." He laughed.

They picked up a canter, matching each other's strides, chatting away.

John waved as a man approached them. They spoke a moment in Spanish and then John turned to Larry. "Time for me to jump. Good luck, Larry."

"Same to you, John."

Larry ran a practiced eye over the course board, looking out to the arena from time to time, talking with Karen and planning his ride. They'd already walked the course, establishing focal points for different turns, checking the footing. It was a very tricky course, full of rollback turns, abrupt direction changes, collecting, extending ... strides to leave in and strides to leave out.

The flags on the combination atop the berm snapped in the crisp breeze. He glanced at Connie, glad to see Carlos had inserted the cotton ear muffs before he put on her black crocheted ear mask. It was the latest thing in jumpers. With her ears stuffed, she wouldn't hear much of anything. The sounds of the snapping flags were too similar to the sound of whip-cracks; all the horses sported concealing ear nets in a variety of colors.

The competition at this level was fierce. These were aspiring Grand Prix riders and Olympic hopefuls, eyes fixed to their goals.

It was Larry's turn in the tunnel. Karen stood next to him, listening to him repeat his trip.

"Nervous?" she asked, when he had finished.

"No, not really. I love this course, the whole field. I can't wait to get started." The rider ahead of him cleared the last fence and headed for the tunnel.

"Good luck, Larry."

“Next to see in Open Jumpers, 315, Constant Battle, owned and ridden by Larry Klein. 315 on course.”

Onto the field they trotted, looking like they owned the world. The buckskin mare glowed in the late afternoon sun, blending in with the shadows the jumps cast before them. Larry stretched her into a canter, increasing her pace as the whistle blew. He spotted his focal point as they headed to the berm. Clearing the vertical with ease, they galloped to the two-stride combination at the top. In, out.

He sat up tall for the downward flow to three, keeping the mare in front of his legs. Seeing his spot about five strides out, he eased his hold slightly, letting Connie move up. She nailed the vertical, flowing through the triple combination with ease.

Fixing his eye on five as they landed he closed his inside leg for the bending turn. At the top of five he extended his arm straight out from his side, executing a text-book example of an opening rein. Connie followed her nose, three more strides and over the wall. They covered the distance with huge, ground-eating strides, through the seven combination and back around to eight.

Larry checked once as they headed to the triple. Connie saw the spot and put in a huge effort. She galloped through the turn and there was ten. Over, clean and fast.

The crowd roared as the announcer came on. “315 moves into fourth place with a time of 61.775.”

“Wow,” he said, panting with exertion, slapping Connie’s neck. “Not bad for our first trip around the field. Good girl, Connie.”

The DT's cheered as they hurried to Larry. Shouts of congratulations and admiration reached him as they talked at once, giving him hi-fives and huge smiles.

Connie got her fair share of praise as their pride flowed in her direction. They stroked her long pale neck as she basked in the attention. No more snapping for her and no striking, even if it was a game. It seemed a girl got more treats this way. Dainty lips accepted a cookie from Becky, eyes closing in delight.

The kids drifted back to the barn, exhausted after their hard day. Larry followed behind, white ribbon fluttering from the bridle.

John rode across the ring, waving. "Very nice job, Larry. I got to watch your whole round from the sidelines. I thought I'd wait until your fans left." He grinned at the retreating team. "That mare sure does have a lot of scope. How high has she jumped?"

"This is the highest we've shown so far, four-six. But I've had her to five feet and she has no trouble. Why?"

"We're always looking for talent. How old is she? Is she for sale?"

Larry stroked the glossy neck. "Nah, I don't think so." He hesitated then, thinking back to the last bitter conversation he'd had with his father and his dwindling supply of funds. Cut off with no money for board, shows or daily needs, even college was out of the question unless his mother stepped in.

Her books earned her oodles of money and he knew she would always be glad to help, but at eighteen, he felt it was time to make some decisions of his own. Borrowing money from her for college was

one thing, but keeping his horse and paying for shows and lessons was another. He looked over at John.

“Well, actually, I might be interested after all. What plans would you have for her?”

“We do the A Circuit and have several Grand Prix riders. We’re headed to Las Vegas for the Olympic Trials a couple of weeks from now. In addition, we have three very good amateur riders that train with our barn, so we’re always shopping. How old is she?”

“She’s just seven. I’ve had her a little over four years. Connie’s never been sick or unsound a day in her life, no colic episodes, no leg problems. She gave us a gorgeous foal last year. Actually, this is her first show in two years.”

“What’s her breeding? Ah, Swedish Warmblood.” John noted the familiar brand on her hip. “You have the papers?”

“I’ve got them at home, but I don’t know much about her blood lines,” Larry said. “Her breeder sure was impressed. He gave me a recital of winning relatives a mile long.”

John laughed. “My trainer is like that, knows every dam and sire for three generations back. Me, I just care about how they jump and if they’re brave and honest. That’s what matters when you’re on their back.”

“What barn are you in?” Larry asked. “Maybe I could come around after I take Connie back and we can talk some more.”

“We’re right over there.” He pointed at the middle of the rows of barns. “N. Come on over when you’re done. I’ll be there.” He waved good-bye.

“See you later.” Larry watched them walk away, his mind in a whirl.

* * *

Karen sat alone in the tack room, rolling bandages and savoring the day.

“Hey, Karen, you have a minute?” Larry plopped onto the chair next to hers. “I have a couple of questions to ask you.”

“Sure, Larry, what’s up?”

“Well, ah, you know about me, right? The kids told you I’m gay, right?” Larry fidgeted with his hands, unable to meet her eye.

Karen nodded at him as she rolled a leg bandage, mildly embarrassed. She had hoped to avoid this conversation. It made her uncomfortable, and shifting in her chair, she kept rolling.

“Well, my dad hit the roof when I told him. Threw me out of the house and disowned me. I don’t have money to live on let alone all this.” His hand swept the tack room and everything it implied. “Anyway, I just met this guy that might be interested in buying Connie. I have no idea what she’s worth. What should I ask?”

His question and its implication stopped Karen cold, her hands now quiet on the leg wrap. “You can’t be serious. Sell Connie? Why?”

The look on his face told her why and her stomach lurched in anger. “They really cut you off? As in food, living expenses, stuff like that? I knew you’d moved into Billy’s, but have you seen your parents since then?” Her jaw tightened with anger and compassion filled her heart as she saw his bottom lip begin to quiver.

“No. Well, Mom a couple of times, but not Dad. He meant what he said. He never wants to see me again.”

“On, Larry, that can’t be true,” she whispered. The bandage fell from her fingers, rolling across the floor. Karen bent down to retrieve it.

“Well,” she continued, noting his expression and the hot tears behind his eyes. She did not want to make him cry. Helpless, she shrugged, trying to lighten the moment.

“You know what they say. Horses are worth exactly what you can get someone to pay for them. Actually, I think she’s worth a bundle. She’ll vet, right?”

“I can’t imagine why not. She’s never been unsound a day in her life. And her attitude has improved so much; she’s a pleasure to deal with. That snapping stuff got old.”

“That’s for sure. She gave me a couple of gray hairs before I realized it was only a game. So, how high have you jumped her?”

“She does a five foot course easy, never seems to stress over the fence unless she gets a bad spot, which rarely happens. What do you figure, eighty-five?”

“Easily. Start at ninety-five to give yourself some wiggle room.” Karen looked over at Larry, then away. “Whose name is she registered in? Yours?”

He laughed, bitter as he caught her drift. “She was a birthday present. I got her when she was a late two-year-old. She’s registered to me, luckily.”

“Well, if you and your dad are at odds, that could be important. At least you don’t have to worry

about proving ownership. What's the name of the guy that's interested in her?"

"John Gonzalez. Met him in the warm-up ring. Seems like a nice guy. I forgot to ask him the name of his barn." Larry heaved a weary sigh and got to his feet. "I guess I'd better go. He's waiting for me. Thanks for talking, Karen."

* * *

Larry rounded the corner of barn N, looking for signs of life. He heard a radio playing down the darkened aisle and called out, "John?"

A head popped out of the doorway. "Down here, Larry."

He entered the tack room, sinking down in a wicker chair.

"Cerveza?" John asked, holding up a can of beer.

"No, thanks. I don't drink. Hey, I talked to my trainer and we've agreed on a price. Are you still interested in the mare?"

"Sure I am. My trainer wants to see her tomorrow and try her out. We have two clients that are shopping, so it looks promising. When do you get back here? Early?"

"I can be back whenever it's convenient. We don't show tomorrow till around three, so there's all the time in the world to try her out. Will you ride her?" Larry glanced at John as he cracked another beer.

He shrugged. "Depends. Hernando might want to ride her first, get a feel for her. Maybe one of the buyers. So, what's the price?"

Larry swallowed. "Ninety-five thousand."

John raised his eyebrows. "Got her right up there, don't you? But that's a fair price, I think."

Certainly in the ball park. If she vets, I'm sure we can work something out." He twirled the can in his hands, and looked up at Larry. "Will you have to pay commission to your trainer?"

"I'm not sure. I suppose so, why?"

"Well, I should get a finder's fee, you know. The custom is usually five percent."

"Whew, that's a pretty nice chunk of change, isn't it?" Larry made quick calculations and grinned. "Almost five grand. Not a bad day's work."

"I don't come from money, Larry. I work for everything I get." He shrugged again and extended his hand. "Deal?"

"Deal," Larry said as they shook hands. "So, what time do you want to try her tomorrow?"

"Nine good for you?"

"Nine it is."

Chapter 14

Billy sat with Shievon in the back of the limo, silent. He slid a glance over at her and reached for her hand. It lay limp in his, no reassuring squeeze this time.

“Shievy, please talk to me. Why are you acting like this? It makes me crazy when you won’t talk.”

She looked at him then, large hazel eyes clouded with pain. No beautiful smile now. He strained to hear her low pitched voice. “I’m still waiting for your answer, Billy. Why do you blush when you talk with Melly? I’ve noticed it all along, but today, well ... it made me feel awful.”

“Oh, Shievy, I’m so sorry.” He shrugged, extending his hands, eyes wide. “It doesn’t mean anything, really. I can’t help it if I blush around her. Why are you making such a big deal of this?” His voice rose with the strain of the conversation and he felt trickles of perspiration roll down his ribs.

Shievon sat quiet for a moment. “Look, Billy, we’re almost home. I don’t want to leave things like this. Do you have a crush on Melanie? I need to know.” She looked down at her left hand, his class ring dwarfing her slender finger.

“Do you want your ring back?” she asked, a tearful quiver in her voice.

“*What?* No! No, I don’t. God, Shievy, what’s happening to us? Nothing’s changed. I love you.”

Shievon drew a ragged breath. “Then explain it to me, Billy. You don’t do it with Jessi or Blair or Becky, for Pete’s sake. It’s embarrassing. I mean, here

we are, going steady and you do that. You have a crush on her. I just know it.”

“It’s not a crush. It’s ... I don’t know what to call it. I just, well, I admire her so much. But it’s you I love, Shievon. You have to know that. Talking with Melly’s like, you know, talking to Brittany Spears or something.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” she asked, her voice an indignant squeak.

Billy leaned back in the seat and sighed. “Look, Shievy, Melanie is very attractive. Beautiful, I guess. I think my reaction to her is typical. I mean....” He laughed in a strange way and shook his head. “I guess the only guys I know that don’t react to her like I do are Larry and the twins. But it doesn’t mean anything. It’s, I don’t know, like the way people react to my mother.”

“So, like I said, you have a crush on her,” Shievon withdrew her hand and turned her head away.

Billy turned in the seat, facing her. He cupped her chin, tipping her face toward him so he could see her eyes. “How can I make you understand? It’s not a crush like you mean.” He cast around in his mind for a similarity.

“It’s like how Jessi feels about Richard Spooner or something. It’s not real.” He tried in vain to make eye contact. “I promise you, Shievy, I swear. It’s nothing. Please tell me you believe me. I love you.” He paused a moment, then leaned forward and kissed her.

Tears slid down Shievon’s cheeks as she wrapped both arms around him. She murmured into his neck, “I love you too, Billy. I couldn’t stand it if something happened to break us up. I guess I’m just jealous.”

“Oh, Shievy, you have no reason to be.” He looked into her tear-filled eyes and his heart skipped a beat. “You don’t have to be home this early, do you? Let’s go get something to eat or something. I don’t want you to leave yet.”

She nodded, and Billy leaned forward and flipped on the intercom.

“Hey, Bob, please take us to the Driftwood. We’re hungry.”

Billy leaned back in the seat, pulling her to him. He ran his fingers through her dark, glossy hair, heart beating like a trip-hammer. She’d scared him bad and the idea of losing her made his heart squeeze painfully in his chest. He swallowed the lump in his throat.

“Are we okay, Shievon? Please tell me we’re okay.”

She nodded and snuggled into his arms. “We’re fine, Billy. There’ll never be anyone else but you for me. It just scared me when you looked at her like that. It’s the same way you look at me, y’know, when your lips turn up at the ends.” She gave him a wry smile and shrugged again.

“I’ve never seen you smile like that at anyone else. I’m just jealous.”

“I swear I don’t look at *anybody* the way I do you. I’ll never look at her again if it makes you feel better.” He nodded at her in earnest, his heart in his eyes. “I love you, Shievon, only you for always.”

Bob pulled to a stop at the restaurant’s valet station and opened the limo door.

A cool evening breeze washed over them, heavy with the salty smell of the ocean. The sun had

just set and the spectacular sky glowed, painted red, purple and gold.

“Let’s go in and watch the rest of the show,” Billy said, pointing at the livid sky. Arm in arm, they entered the lobby.

“Hey, Chet.” Billy grinned as they approached the host station. “We don’t have a reservation. Any chance we can get a table?”

Chet grinned at his friends, taking in the tall boots, breeches and show jackets. Nodding hello to Shievon, he said, “We always have a place for you, Billy. You have a good day?” He picked up two menus and nodded. “Follow me.”

Chet led the way up the stairs to a secluded little table by the railing.

“How’s this?” he asked with a grin as he handed them menus.

“Excellent,” Billy said. “Thanks.”

The waitress took their orders for sodas and two bowls of seafood chowder.

Shievon glanced at Billy from under her eyelashes, speculating. *Why can’t I just leave it alone? Why do I have to keep it up?* She didn’t know why, she just had to.

“Melanie’s really beautiful, isn’t she?”

Billy’s heart sank. *Here we go again.* “Yes, she is. My mom’s always teasing her about taking a screen test. She looks like a movie star. Mom says with her accent, the soaps would scarf her up. They love that. Have you noticed how many Australian actors are on the daytime shows? Interesting, isn’t it?”

He smiled at Shievon, his face bland.

Well, I fielded that one well. Jumped her right off the track. Maybe we can talk about something else.

“She has the best personality, too, don’t you think? So much fun to be around.”

He felt his heartbeat accelerate again. “She sure does. I mean, look at today. After winning that class, she had every right to brag, but she didn’t. As far as she was concerned it was all Benny. Quite unpretentious. I think it’s the way they’re raised. Jeff and Kenny are the same way. What you see is what you get, no subterfuge. You always know where you stand.”

Billy looked gratefully at the waitress as she interrupted him by placing the steaming, fragrant bowls of chowder before them. He grinned at Shievon.

“Looks great, doesn’t it? I’m starved.” Big chunks of lobster floated on top and he scooped up a creamy spoonful.

Maybe she’s just hungry. Girls get out of sorts when they’re hungry.

Shievon toyed with her spoon, pretending indifference. Finally giving in to her growling stomach, she began to eat.

“Oh, can you believe Larry’s selling Connie?” Billy asked, blowing on his steaming spoon and congratulating himself on a new and very interesting subject.

“It just knocked me over. He never mentioned it. But after his father disowned him, well, he doesn’t have much choice. Poor guy, it’s really sad.” He ate some more chowder and studied her face.

“I think it stinks,” she said, her cheeks pink with emotion. “I can’t understand how a family could

do that. It's beyond me. How's he doing, living with you? Do you talk much?"

All right! Success and a new subject on the table.

A jubilant Billy smiled at Shievon and took another bite. "He's a lot more upset than he lets on, of course. Larry's learned to be private. I know how that feels." He chuckled at her, inviting a smile. No smile.

"As far as Connie goes, with college in front of him, he would probably have sold her in September anyway unless he planned to take her up to LA. What his father is going to do is another story. I don't know. Time may be the answer to that." He shrugged.

"What a shame," Shievon said, "he's such a great rider."

"Well, you know, he can get another horse when he gets out of college. Riding a horse is like riding a bike. You never really forget."

They finished their chowder in companionable silence. Their day had started early and the heavy meal after such a strenuous day made them sleepy.

"Do you want anything else to eat, Shievy?" he asked, stifling a yawn.

"No thanks. I'm stuffed. That was fantastic as always." She glanced down at her watch, amazed to see the time. "No wonder I'm sleepy," she said. "You ready?"

Billy nodded and pulled the beeper out of his pocket, punching in three numbers.

"Big day tomorrow. Let's go."

They walked close together holding hands, their relationship just about back to normal. Now if only he could get her to smile.

* * *

Catalina Eddy had the coast socked in good as Larry drove into the barn area. He looked up at the leaden sky, thick with condensation. Huge drops of water dripped off the edges of the roof, splattering in the dust as they hit the ground.

June gloom. He breathed in the damp air. *How fitting.*

It was a little before six and the grooms buzzed around the barns, feeding, watering and lunging the horses.

Larry dropped his knapsack in the tack room and headed for Connie's stall.

"Connie?" he called.

She popped her head over the stall door and nickered at him. He handed her a lump of sugar, stroking her long black forelock.

"Pretty girl," he said, as quick tears stung his eyes. He slipped on her halter and led the huge mare into the crossties, snapping the shanks onto her halter. She reached down to his shoulder, nudging him for another treat.

Connie crunched away as he ran the curry comb over her soft, golden coat. He settled the saddle pad on her back, then the saddle. Rocking it into place, Larry did up the girth. He slapped the front splint boots together, knocking off the dust.

As the reality of what was about to happen hit him, he became more and more depressed. He'd tossed and turned all night while sleep eluded him. He could not imagine life without Connie. Twice he'd walked onto his patio to watch the surf crash onto the beach.

"Should have cleaned them last night," he said to the mare as he bent down. "Oh, well, they're not buying the boots."

He was just about ready to put on her bridle when he heard people talking in the aisle. He called out, "Hi, John. We're over here."

John, accompanied by his trainer and two other people, approached the crossties.

"Larry, this is my trainer, Hernando Ramirez." The little man stepped forward, hand extended, a broad smile on his face.

Larry shook his hand, returning the smile. "Nice to meet you, Senor Ramirez."

Hernando smiled back at him, nodding pleasantly. He turned, waving a young woman to his side. "Is good meeting you. May I please to introducing Senorita Yoli Navarro y Senor Eduardo Aguilar. Es interest in horse." He struggled with the language a minute longer, shrugged and grinned at Larry. "She saying it more better." With a grin, he nodded. "You talk."

Yoli stepped forward, smiled at Larry and shrugged. "My English is much better. I talk." She bent down, pulled off the boots and ran a practiced hand over Connie's front legs, checking for splints, heat, anything that would suggest a leg problem. Yoli replaced the boots. "She's seven, no? Jumping for how long?"

Larry stared at her and nodded. "She's been back in training for about six weeks. We laid her off for almost two years, bred a really nice foal from her."

"Baby? She has baby? It is here, yes? I can see it?"

"No, we sold him a couple of months back, but I have pictures if you're interested."

"Es big, like the mama?" she asked, sliding her fingers across Connie's back, looking for soreness.

“We think he’ll be as big, maybe bigger.”

“Bigger?” She chuckled and ran her fingers over Connie’s hocks, palpating the soft tissue, looking for heat or thickening in the tendon sheath. Finishing her inspection of the mare, she straightened up, piercing black eyes studying Larry’s. “She is brave, no?” She made a quick movement toward Connie’s head, smiling as the mare stood her ground, unflinching.

“Oh yes, very brave. She never stops and rarely pulls a rail. When she does, it’s my fault. Are you going to ride her?”

Yoli nodded. “Si, me first, I think.” She turned to Hernando speaking in rapid-fire Spanish. He nodded, returning almost immediately with her saddle. “We can change it, no? I like my own tack. Con su permiso?” She undid the girth and handed Larry his saddle. Hernando placed her saddle on the mare’s back, followed by a breast collar. Before long, Connie was ready. “We go to arena now. See how she jumps.”

Larry had never seen anyone else ride Connie before and he stood at the side of the ring, fists clenched in the pockets of his breeches, jaw clamped tight. He remembered when he’d first seen her playing in a pasture with the other youngsters, her unusual coloring making her stand out from the crowd.

His father’s voice rang clear in his memory. “Gee, she’s cute, son, but it’ll be a while before you can show her. I guess by the time you’re ready to give up Puffy she’ll be ready to go. Happy birthday, Larry.”

He snapped back to the present, blinked several times and took a deep breath. *I hate you for making me do this, Dad. I’ll never forgive you, not ever.*

Yoli worked Connie on the flat for about half an hour and then she nodded to Hernando.

They jumped back and forth over the schooling fences as Hernando continued to raise the bar. As the fences got higher, Connie got better, tucking her hind legs, knees to her muzzle. She was having a ball, obviously confident in her rider.

Just like that, the deed was done.

Yoli leaned forward over the mare's neck, feeling the steady pulse at her throat. She smiled again and nodded at Hernando. "I have our vet coming in one hour," she said, stroking Connie's neck. "I really like her, Larry. If the vet smiles, we have a deal."

Larry nodded as he followed them back to the barn. Heartsick, he watched Yoli remove her saddle. It was just about over. He knew Connie would pass the vet.

Carlos stood by the tack room, watching Larry. He approached, voice tentative, fully aware of what had just transpired.

"You want I give Connie bath?" he asked, sorrow and understanding in his dark eyes.

"No, that's all right, Carlos," he mumbled. "I'll do it. Thanks anyway."

Carlos watched them walk to the wash rack. He shook his head, eyes filled with pity and compassion.

Melanie retreated into the back of the tack room as Larry came in. "What're ya doin', Larry? Why are ya sellin' Connie?" She turned around then, blue eyes scrunched up at the corners. "Why?"

He plopped on the bench like a deflated balloon, glancing up at her and then back down at the

floor. “I have no choice, Melly. My dad’s cut me off completely. I have less than a hundred dollars in my checking account right now and you know how far that’ll go. I don’t have a choice.”

“But, well.” She paused, looking at Larry. Her heart twisted, taking her breath away. “Well, how about Tricia? Have ya talked with her about this?”

“I can’t, Melanie.” He looked up at her then, sad eyes cloudy, lips pinched in at the corners. “I can’t expect my mother to take care of me. I’m not a baby any more.”

“But....”

Becky bounced into the tack room just then, toting a garment bag and her tall boots. “Hey guys, I’m ... ah, interrupting something, yep. Just let me drop these off and I’ll be outa here.”

She hung up her jacket, dropped the boots next to her saddle and turned to leave, deftly steering Steve and Jessi back out of the tack room. She glanced over her shoulder and nodded at Melanie. “I won’t be able to keep ‘em out for long.”

Melanie shot a grateful look at Becky and nodded. “Look, Larry, y’all’re gonna have to sit down an’ talk about this. I just know they wouldn’t want ya to do this.”

Too depressed even to speak, he just sat there slowly shaking his head from side to side.

“Desperate times, desperate measures.” The words repeated like a drumbeat as Melanie slid behind the wheel of her car. She backed out of her spot, barely missing a huge black Hummer that hovered behind her, anxious for her space. She turned onto Via de la Valle and headed toward home.

Her right leg tapped uncontrollably on the gas pedal, making the little car's movements erratic. She knew most of it was anger, but some of it was fear. Melanie was not raised to contend with her elders.

The empty driveway made her heart sunk. "Rats. No one's home." She got out of the car anyway and walked to the front door. The bell trilled inside the house; she heard footsteps and then the door opened.

"Hello, Melly," Tricia said. "I ... ah, Larry's not here."

"I know that, Mrs. Klein, I just left him at the horse show. May I speak with you a moment?"

"Sure, come on in." The door opened wider. They went into the kitchen.

"I'm just about to have another cup of coffee, want some?"

Melanie nodded. "Thank ya'," was her terse reply.

Tricia looked at her in speculation. There was something very different about Melanie today. The clear, translucent skin, the slender, aquiline nose and full, bow-shaped lips were all the same. It was her voice, her tone that took Tricia back. Her voice and those steady, implacable eyes.

She placed the cup before Melanie, eyebrows raised. "So, Melanie, what brings you here this morning?"

"How long has it been since ya talked with Larry?" Steely blue eyes bore into hers, making Tricia run her fingers through her hair in agitation.

"Well, about a week or so, why?" She glanced at Melanie, uneasy. "What's wrong?"

"He's gettin' ready to sell Connie, that's what's wrong. I'm here to find out what y'all're gonna do

about it. Ya can't just stand by an' let him do that. She's all the family he's got left, after ... after ya threw him out of the house." There was real venom in her voice now. "How could ya let that happen?"

Tricia was so taken aback her jaw dropped. "Sell Connie? Why is he selling Connie? And I didn't kick him out," she said, indignant now, and defensive. "His father did that."

"That's a cop-out, y'know. Did ya forget about bein' his mother, for God's sake? Why didn't ya step in and defend him? It's not his fault he's gay. And to just send him over to Billy like an old shoe. Don't ya care what happens to him? I'm sayin'." She slapped the table for emphasis as color flooded her cheeks.

"Now listen here, young lady, I'm not going to stand by and let you talk to me that way. Why would he sell her?" Tricia was perplexed at the whole idea, out of touch with the things going on in her son's world.

"For the money, Tricia. Hello? He's broke. He can't afford her board let alone college expenses. These are things responsible parents should be takin' care of; that's y'all in case ya forgot. He needs the money from the sale to live on."

They leaned across the table, bare inches away. Dueling eyes stared each other down. Tricia looked away first.

"All flags flying, Melanie?" she asked, making eye contact again.

"Yes, ma'am. Somebody's gotta step up to the plate here and I guess I got the job. Sorry if ya don't like what I'm sayin', but ya need to hear it. If ya let Larry sell his horse, ya might as well kiss him goodbye

and forget ya even *have* a son ‘cause there’ll be no goin’ back, y’know. He’ll never forgive ya for it.”

There was silence for a moment and then Melanie said, “This is gonna be a done deed here in about half hour or so. If ya plan to do anythin’ about it, ya better get movin’.” Bone weary and emotionally wrung out, Melanie got to her feet.

“I’ve gotta go. Thanks for the coffee. Ah, we’re in barn D.”

Stunned, Tricia nodded at her, not even looking up. She heard the door close behind her.

“*Harvey!*”

* * *

Melanie drove slowly back to the show grounds, her heart heavy, legs weak from reaction. She’d never talked to anyone that way before in her life, let alone an adult. Her hands shook as she pulled into a vacant parking spot.

Wishing she could just go home and go to bed she got out of the car with a deep sigh. She felt sick to her stomach as the headache started behind her eyes.

She trudged up the aisle, unaware of the nickers that greeted her as she passed by. Benny looked at Melanie’s retreating back and shook his head as he glanced at Magic. He went back to his hay net.

“Where in the world have you been?” Becky asked. “We thought the gypsies got you or something. Where’d you go?”

Melanie shook and sighed. “A mission of mercy, ya might say. Where’s Larry?”

“I don’t know. They just took Connie over to the new barn. Vet’s there, I guess. Man, what a bummer. I feel so bad for Larry I can’t stand it.” Aqua eyes, usually so bright, clouded with sorrow.

“I can’t imagine what I would do if I had to sell Champ.” Becky swallowed and cleared her throat.

“Sad day, for sure. We’ve gotta think up some way to stop this, Melly.”

“I already did what I could, Becky. It’s up to his parents now.”

“Is that where you were? At his house? What did they say?”

“I didn’t see his father ... good thing, too. I lost my manners on the way over there. Kinda gave Tricia a piece of my mind, ya might say. Mama would not be proud of me today, I’m sure.” She sighed and glanced up the aisle. “Where’s Karen? I need to talk to her.”

“She’s at the food court with Jessi and Blair. Lena was sick this morning so they’re having breakfast up there. Let’s go get ‘em, see what Karen has to say about all this.”

Becky and Melanie sat with the kids at a large table on the lawn. The sun had finally made its appearance, shining on Shievon’s dark curls as she leaned toward Melanie.

“Where have you been? We’ve been looking all over for you.”

Becky said, “She just got back from giving Larry’s mother what-for. Told ‘em what Larry was up to, yep.”

“What did she say? What are they going to do?” Shievon asked, waving at Steve and Billy to join them as soon as they got their food.

Melanie shrugged and shook her head. “She didn’t know a thing about his plans. When I told her that he was gonna sell Connie she was blown away.” Her voice trailed off and she shrugged, staring into

space as she remembered their conversation word for word.

“Then what happened?” coaxed Blair.

“She asked me why he wanted to sell her, so I told her he needed the money.”

“Didn’t she know he’s just about broke?”

Karen asked, both hands wrapped around a container of coffee.

“I don’t think it crossed her mind. She’s not very ... well, plugged in, ya know?”

“Good grief, Melly, it’s like pulling teeth,”

Jessi said, voice rising. “*Then* what happened?” She set her jaw, staring at Melanie, urging her to continue.

“What are they gonna do? What did she say?”

Melanie shook her head, voice low. “I told her he had to sell Connie because his *parents* had abandoned him and that if she didn’t do somethin’ pretty fast she could just forget she even had a son.” She looked down at her hands and sighed.

“I pretty much told her I thought she was a disgrace of a mother and that she shoulda’ stood up for Larry from the beginnin’ instead of takin’ the easy way out an’ throwin’ him on the mercy of friends.”

“Good for you,” Steve said, admiration clear in his voice.

“You go, girl,” said Billy, who’d joined them while she was speaking. “Why didn’t I think of that? Man, you are so cool, Melly.”

Shievon shot a glance at him and shook her head, sighing in resignation.

Karen stared at Melanie in awe. *Just goes to show you how much you don’t know a person. Who’d have thought our well-bred and chronically polite*

Melanie would do something like that? Brave girl...great friend.

Chapter 15

Larry sat at the table in the setup filling out the transfer of ownership papers. He looked down at the registration, tears blurring his vision.

‘This is to certify that the buckskin filly named Constant Battle, by Battle Royal out of Contessa Rae is duly registered with the Swedish Warmblood Society.’

He peered down at the paper, felt his stomach sink and signed his name. Before long, Yoli would be here to give him the check and take possession of his horse. Larry slid the papers back in the folder that contained Connie’s medical history as well as a list of her winnings. His hands shook as he got up.

Larry heard sounds of the kids tacking up their horses. Steve and Becky’s class would go soon. He heaved a sigh and walked down the barn aisle looking for Karen. He found her in the tack room.

“Karen, I’d like to ask you a big favor,” he said, extending the folder with shaking hands. “I can’t ... this is all the transfer information on Connie. Could you....” His voice trailed off in a quiver as he met her eyes. He shook his head, his voice so low she could barely hear him. “I can’t”

Karen slipped her arm around his waist, hugging him as she blinked back tears of her own. “Isn’t there any other way, Larry?”

Stricken eyes swam in tears as he shook his head. Just then, he heard a familiar voice calling his name. He turned, his eyes wide as his mother and father charged up the barn aisle.

“Larry,” cried Tricia, throwing her arms around him. “Tell us it’s not too late. You didn’t sign the

papers yet, did you? Oh, honey,” she said and burst into tears. “It’s not too late, is it?”

Harvey put a tentative arm on Larry’s shoulders. “Son, we have to talk.”

Just then, Yoli and John came around the end of the barn aisle, waving two sheets of paper and a blue check.

“The vet smiled, Larry,” she said, a happy grin on her face. “Here’s the check. It’s in dollars, too. And a copy of the vet certificate. He said she has legs like iron....” She paused, aware that something was going on. “It is a deal, no?”

Harvey stepped away from Larry and introduced himself. “My name is Harvey Klein, I’m Larry’s father. There seems to be a misunderstanding here. The mare is not for sale.”

Yoli’s mouth dropped open and she looked from Larry to Harvey and back again.

“Que paso? What’s happening? Not for sale? I just spent money to have her vetted. We made deal!”

“I’m sorry. Look,” Harvey said as he reached into his pocket, withdrawing his check book. “How much was the vet bill? I’ll write you a check to cover it, but you can’t have my son’s horse. She’s not for sale.”

“I, I,” Yoli stuttered, unable to put the words together. “But! We want that mare. We made deal.” She glared at John then, lapsing into angry Spanish, gesturing wildly with her hands.

John looked at Larry in question. “Larry, is the horse for sale or not?”

“No,” was his strangled reply. “She’s not for sale.”

Melanie stood in the background, listening. Her legs turned to water and she slid onto the nearest tack box her heart pounding in her chest. Rivulets of perspiration rolled down her cheeks. She drew a hand across her eyes, straining to hear what they were saying.

“This check should more than cover your expenses and your trouble. Thank you for understanding.” He handed Yoli the check and then turned back to Larry.

“Where’s Connie?”

Larry waved his hand in the direction of the next barn. “She’s still over at their barn.”

“Let’s go get her.”

Father and son walked down the aisle. As they rounded the corner, Harvey slipped an arm across Larry’s shoulder. They reappeared quickly, Connie in tow.

Tricia saw Melanie sitting on the tack box. She approached her slowly, not sure what to do. “Melly, can we talk a minute?”

Melanie nodded, too spent even to reply.

“Thank you so much for coming over this morning. I had no idea what he was about to do. If you hadn’t come over and told me we’d have been too late. Thank you.” Tricia ducked her head, embarrassed and ashamed that it took a young girl she hardly knew to show her what needed to be done for her son.

“I’m glad ya got here when ya did, Mrs. Klein. Another couple of minutes and it’d been too late.” She looked up at Tricia then, eyes sorrowful.

“I’m sorry I was so rude to ya this mornin’. I just got scared. Please forgive my bad manners. I’m so ashamed.”

Tears spurted from Tricia’s eyes and she put a tentative hand on Melanie’s arm. “Don’t be silly. You did the right thing in standing up for Larry. You’re a very dear and loyal friend. I hope he appreciates you. Besides, I’m the one who’s sorry.”

She glanced at Harvey as he and Larry groomed the mare. She took a deep breath and sighed. “Looks like things are going to get better. Thanks to you.”

“How did you know about this, Dad?” Larry glanced at his father, still not sure what came next.

“Melanie came over this morning. Had quite a chat with your mother. It was a wake-up call, you might say, chewed her out good. Then your mother told me, and here we are.”

“She did that? Came over and talked to you? I can’t believe it. Dad, I’ll be right back.”

Larry walked over to Melanie. “Hey, can I talk with you a minute?” He led her into the tack room.

“I just heard what you did that you went over to my house and all. Melly, I...” his voice broke as his bottom lip quivered. “You saved me today. Not just my horse, but my family too. How can I ever thank you for being such a great friend.”

He put his arms around her and they rocked slowly back and forth, crying.

* * *

“I love flat classes, don’t you?” Becky said as they walked up to the arena.

“No flat classes in jumpers. Won’t you miss them?” Steve chuckled at her as they stopped in front of the arena, joining the group of riders about to enter the class.

He ran a finger around the edge of his tight collar, grimacing. “I sure won’t miss the outfits. I can’t wait till we can wear comfortable shirts like Melly. Hey, she’s something else, isn’t she, charging to the rescue like that.”

Steve glanced down at Becky, eyes wide. “Just think, another three minutes, in the time it takes to sit at a red light, the sale would have happened and they would have been too late. Talk about a close call. And it was all thanks to Melly. What a girl.”

“Yep, you can say that again. She’s tops.” Becky slid narrowed eyes in his direction. *Hmm. No doubt about it, Shievon was right. Melly was a hard act to follow.*

Steve and Becky entered the ring and tracked left up the rail. The DT’s packed the stands today, eager for more victories.

“Trot, please. All trot,” said the announcer as the judges stepped into the arena.

Becky knew better than to follow too close and she trotted across the ring, getting a quiet spot on the rail. Two more circuits and then came the call to walk.

“Canter, riders. Please canter.” Becky and Steve each got excellent departures, cantering smoothly by themselves on opposite sides of the rail.

The flags at the bottom of the arena snapped in the crisp breeze. A large bay mare, using them for an excuse, ducked her head and gave a mighty buck, launching her rider to the ground. She galloped around the ring, tail in the air, shaking her head. Twenty plus

horses watched with interest, most sorely tempted to join.

“All walk, riders. Halt please.” The call came, but not in time. Two other horses gave in to the urge and joined the fray, squealing in delight. It was a strange sight to see at this caliber show. Another rider bit the dirt. Now there were two horses loose in the ring.

Trainers ran in the gate, calling to their delinquent charges, red-faced. Before long, the bad guys had been caught and led away by their embarrassed trainers. Humiliated riders limped after them, muttering under their breath and brushing dirt off their jackets and breeches.

Lark and Magic, who happened to be standing side by side at that time looked at each other and sighed. They had watched, fascinated, as the recalcitrant horses frolicked around the arena.

The class resumed and in the end, Steve placed second to a lovely brown mare that had put in a faultless performance. Becky pulled fifth, thrilled with her pink ribbon.

The DT’s cheered for them, clapping and yelling.

“Karen,” Melanie said, “I’m goin’ up to the office and scratch my classes. I feel terrible. I’m gonna sit this one out. I can’t ride. In fact, I think I’m gonna go home.”

Karen’s jaw dropped. “You can’t ride? For Heaven’s sake, why not?”

“I have a splittin’ headache, my stomach is in knots, my legs are weak and I don’t feel good. I’ll just do a lousy job anyway so why waste the money.”

She left Karen standing there, a perfect ‘O’ forming her lips.

Blair touched Karen’s arm and shrugged. “She had a bad morning, Mom. She just isn’t up to this today. You understand, don’t you?”

“Well.” Karen said. “Well, no, actually, I don’t. You kids need to get a grip. I mean, why can’t she show? You need to leave the personal stuff at home. Is this about Larry?”

Unbeknownst to Karen, Larry had scratched his classes earlier that morning as well, never realizing that sale would not go through.

The rest of the show was a bust.

Billy and Blair pulled rails, Jessi went off course again and Shievon’s ride was so lackluster, the best she could pull was another sixth.

“What a complete waste of time and money,” Karen said as she walked over to the Jag. She threw her purse into the seat and collapsed behind the wheel. Thankfully, there was no party at Melanie’s tonight.

Larry and Melanie sat in her car, deep in conversation.

“Melly, I just want you to know, you’re the most wonderful person I’ve ever met. If only, you know, if only I was normal, it’d be so different.”

“Normal? Don’t be silly, Larry. Don’t talk like that.”

“You know what I mean,” he whispered. He reached for her then, taking her face in his hands, staring into her eyes. He drew a deep breath and kissed her lightly on the lips.

Nothing happened, no spark, no thrill, just profound gratitude to this beautiful girl that cared enough about him to race to his defense. Why couldn't he love her back like she wanted him to? He saw the sorrow in her eyes, felt her emotions.

Melanie pulled away staring back at him. "Ya didn't have to do that, Larry. I understand. We'll be the best friends ever, okay? Ya can't make yourself feel things that aren't there. Believe me, I know." She drew a deep, sad breath.

"Hey, don't ya think ya should go home and talk with the folks? I know they're waiting for ya."

"Yeah, I should. I'm just not looking forward to it. This isn't over by a long shot. I don't think my dad will ever accept that I'm gay. Guess I can't blame him, it's not his fault." He shrugged. "Besides, seeing a shrink, how bad could it be? I might learn a thing or two. I have no idea who I am."

"They love ya, Larry. It was just a big shock, I guess. It'll work out, wait and see." She patted his arm in encouragement.

He gave her another hug and got out of the car. "I'll never, ever, in a million years be able to thank you, Melly. I just want you to know that."

She nodded and smiled a sad little smile. "I'm glad I could help, Larry. Have a nice night. I'll see ya tomorrow. Maybe we can go on a trail ride. Karen probably won't speak to me for a week after copping out on the rest of my classes." She sighed again. "What a weekend."

Joe had just finished making a batch of martinis when Karen strode into the kitchen. She flopped onto a kitchen chair and swore.

“Damn it, I can’t believe this show. One thing after another, for Pete’s sake. What a colossal waste of time.”

Joe dropped two olives into her glass and handed it to her. She looked up at him, grateful, and sipped her cocktail.

“Man, the whole bunch of them just wiggled out. Jessi went off course again. I couldn’t believe it. I thought we were over all that. And *Billy* pulled a rail. I still can’t believe it. I *told* him not to run at the fences, but what did he do?” she asked rhetorically. “*Ran!* Blair, too. I specifically, God, Angel almost ... you *do* realize she almost fell again, coming around that turn so fast.” She ran both hands through her hair, distraught.

“I get the distinct feeling I’m talking to the wall any more. These kids are making me crazy.” She took another long swallow. “I’m gonna trade ‘em in on younger ones ... the kind that listen to their trainer, believe what she says.”

“Honey,” Joe said, voice low, treading on eggshells. “I think the business with Larry and Melanie upset them. They’re just kids, you know, and they’re all so close. They feel each other’s pain.” He reached out a tentative hand, hoping to defuse things. “There’s always a next time don’t you think? And they rode great yesterday.”

Karen nodded and sighed in resignation. “I’m just glad we don’t have to go over to Melly’s and pretend we had a good time. Damn.” She drained the contents of her glass and sighed again.

“Any more of those?” she asked, looking hopefully at the shaker. “I’d like a refill.”

Blair and Jessi sat at the bottom of their driveway, making owl eyes at each other and fidgeting.

“Ooh, I don’t want to go in there, Blair. Mom was really mad. How could I have gone off course again? I thought I had it down pat. Man, I hate that table. Sucks.”

Blair nodded. “I almost bit my tongue off when Angel slipped again. Scared me to death. I just blew the whole round, running like that. We’re gonna get read the riot act. I can just hear her now.”

She exaggerated her shudder. “Off with our heads. Oh, I can’t wait for our next lesson. We’re dead meat.”

Blair drove up the driveway and parked under the carport next to Jessi’s Mustang. They entered the garage, walking past the Escalade and Karen’s Jag.

“Where’s Dad’s car?” Jessi asked, glancing at the empty slot.

Blair paused, shifting her purse and jacket as she reached for the door knob.

“I don’t know,” she whispered, “it should be here. Well, are you ready?”

They looked at each other again, stiffened their spines and opened the door. The kitchen was empty. The martini shaker sat on the counter in a small puddle of condensation. Right next to it was a note. Jessi picked it up and read it out loud.

“Your mom was a little stressed out when she got home, so I’ve taken her out for dinner. We’ll see you later. Love, Dad.”

They heaved a sigh of relief and dove for the fridge. Sure enough, Lena had done it again. A large filet of poached salmon garnished with cilantro and lemon slices sat on the top shelf, ready to eat. A bowl

of potato salad and a dish of sliced cucumbers and tomatoes flanked it.

Jessi looked at Blair and grinned. “Out for dinner? What do they expect to find that’ll beat this? Man, I’m starved.” She pulled the platter out as well as a soda.

“I don’t think it had to do with food, Jessi.” Blair took out the salad bowl and a soda for herself. “I think she was furious and he wanted to avoid a fight when we got home.”

She scanned the fridge shelves. “Did you get the dill sauce? Oh, never mind, I see it.”

Blair put the food on the table, got silverware and napkins and collapsed into her chair. “Talk about *rode hard and put away wet*. I’m positively exhausted. Don’t smell real good either.” She attempted to reach for the salmon.

“Slide that down here, will you? I’m too tired to stretch. I’m not even sure I have the strength to chew.”

“Me too. I didn’t sleep well last night,” Jessi said as she pushed the platter across the table. She reached for the salt. “Had nightmares about Larry selling Connie.”

Glancing at Blair, she popped a bite of salmon in her mouth. It melted on her tongue, bringing out an involuntary sigh. “Oh, that is to die for. You won’t need to chew.”

She squeezed on more lemon and nodded at Blair. “But really, tossed and turned all night long. And then just like that, Melanie steps in to save the day. She’s something else.”

The food revived Blair, sparking her last reserves of energy. “She’s amazing, always has been.

It's like she's two people. Most of the time she's exactly the daughter Julia raised, y'know what I mean? Great manners, ladylike, stuff like that?" Blair paused as she enjoyed her bite of salmon.

Jessi grinned. "Oh, yes. The gracious southern belle thing. Funny too, 'cause on Melly, it works."

Blair nodded. "I know. That's just what I mean. But then there are times when she's just so strong. Man, remember the fire? That really took guts." She paused at the memory.

"And can you imagine going over to Larry's house and telling his mother off?" She glanced at Jessi, eyes wide.

"Yeah, right," Jessi said with a smirk. "Now, that's something I can see Shievon doing with the right kind of motivation. Becky, too, for that matter, but not me. I'm a devout coward. Can you imagine talking like that to Julia?" She threw her head back and laughed.

Blair chuckled at that. "Oh, I don't know," she said, grinning at Jessi. "Handled any guns lately, Captain?"

They both started to chuckle. The chuckles turned into laughter. Tears of mirth filled their eyes.

"When you ... when you whacked" Jessi put her head in her hands, unable to go on, shoulders shaking in hilarity. Finally she gasped, "Whacked that pirate, I" and dissolved into gales of laughter.

"And then Kenny," screeched Blair, completely caught up in the moment, "beating the tar ... runs in the family." She gagged slightly. "*And poor Bob!*"

Howls of glee filled the kitchen as they reminisced. They never heard the garage door or the throaty growl of the Jag. The kitchen door opened on their revelry.

“Hi, girls,” Karen said, bringing the laughter to an abrupt halt. “What’s so funny, pulling a rail or going off course?” She walked past them and down the hall to her bedroom.

Chapter 16

"I'm so tired, I can't believe it," Billy said, as the limo entered the driveway. They came to a halt at the bottom of the steps.

Bob opened their door and watched the weary kids trudge up to the house.

"You want to eat out there?" he asked, nodding at the table on the veranda.

"That would be great Bob. We'll just collapse out here." Billy grinned at him. "We'd love some lemonade. Anything else you can find would be super."

"Coming up."

They sat close together at the table, leaning back in their chairs and holding hands.

"We are so dead, Billy. Karen is going to eat us for lunch. I'm going to stock up on liniment."

He heaved a sigh and nodded. "Absolute toast," he agreed, stroking her soft little palm. "I guess we can't really blame her. Talk about the whole team dropping the ball."

Shievon closed her eyes and nodded. "Except for Becky and Steve. They both did very well." She paused, shaking her head as she remembered her round.

"I guess we really disappointed her, especially Melly and Larry. Whew, I wouldn't want to be Jessi and Blair tonight. At least we won't see Karen till Tuesday."

Billy looked up into the inky heavens, watching the nightly display. The sky filled with billions of starry lights. It looked empty without the moon and the

sea was barely visible. Leaning forward, he reached for his glass of lemonade.

“I’m sure going to miss having Larry live here. He went back home, you know. I’m glad things worked out for him. He’s really a nice guy, lots of fun, don’t you think?”

“He sure is, especially since he’s out of the closet. He’s just more open all around, you know.” Shievon twisted in her seat and faced Billy, her brow furrowed in concern.

“I’ve been wondering about something. What do we do if he gets a boyfriend and like, y’know, wants to date ... I mean, that’s bound to happen, isn’t it?”

Billy shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know, Shievy. At this point, I don’t think he’s interested in meeting anyone. He’ll be leaving in September anyway, so I wouldn’t worry about it. They’ll all be off to college before we know it. Half the team is gone.”

She settled back in her chair, snuggling under his shoulder as he twirled wisps of her hair between his fingers.

“Isn’t that Melly something else? She....”

“Don’t start,” Billy said, and kissed her, hard.

* * *

Becky and Steve strolled along the beach, bare foot, letting the cold water lap on their hot, tired legs.

“What a weekend you had, Steve. Reserve Champion Children’s Hunter,” she mimicked the announcers, deep, booming voice. “I was so proud of you, I couldn’t stand it.”

He grinned, pulling her against him. “That means more to me than all the applause. It’s just so easy on Magic. It’s like he knows what I want before I

ask. Really strange, almost like he understands English or something.”

Becky chuckled, slipping her arm around his waist. “Billy used to say the exact same thing about him. Karen thinks he’s just a super well-trained horse that knows his job and responds to the aids, but I don’t. He definitely knows the words.”

The moonless beach, so dark they could hardly see each other, held unexpected hills and valleys. Steps measured, they headed down the beach, arm in arm. Heavy incoming surf pounded as it surged across the sand. Invisible waves crashed onto the rocky jetty, sending spray up in the air as they hit the barrier.

Sand castles and sculptures rose in the eerie darkness, left over from afternoon guests. Every once in a while they’d step in a hole, causing Becky to shriek, her laughter rising above the sounds of the sea as she caught her balance.

“We’d better turn around now, Steve, or you’ll have to carry me.”

They retraced their steps.

“I’m so glad Larry didn’t have to sell that mare,” Becky said. “She’s so talented, it’d be a shame, yep. And our Melly sure takes the cake, doesn’t she? Billy kicked himself in the butt for not having thought of it first.”

“I can’t imagine having the nerve to get in anyone’s face like that, especially a parent,” Steve said. “I hate that kinda stuff.”

Becky shook her head, wondering if she’d have been able to do it.

“Oh,” she said, hugging his arm, “I think it all depends on who you’re sticking up for. Melly’s still,

well, Larry's very special to her. That's what made her able to do it, y'know, like mamas and their cubs."

"You think she's changed her feelings that quick?"

"Well, she still has the feelings, y'know, and they have to go somewhere. I think he's her *cause* and now she's his champion or something. Like she has to find a way to make the feelings acceptable or something, I don't know. What do you think?"

He shrugged. "I don't have a clue. I've never had a gay friend before and we haven't talked much about it. Poor Melly. It must be hard on her."

"That's what I mean, too. She's sublimating. In a way, I'm really glad they're going to opposite ends of the state for college."

Steve chuckled. "L.A. isn't that far away from San Diego, you know. What, three hours?"

"Well, at least they won't be dropping in on each other."

They walked up the stairs to the porch, flopping down on the chaise. Steve lit the hurricane lamp and reached into the cooler for sodas. He popped the tops and handed one to Becky.

"Don't you like Larry?" Steve leaned back in the chaise, brushing fiery curls off her cheeks.

"Sure I do. He's cool and a great rider, too. It's just, oh, I don't know. I don't want to see either one of them get hurt."

"What do you mean? Hurt how?" He turned toward her, dark eyes glittering.

"Well, sometimes gay guys, girls too, I guess, try to talk themselves into being straight. They even get married and have kids. Stuff like that, y'know?"

Usually ends bad. You are what you are whether you admit it or not.”

“And you’re afraid something like that might happen with Melly and Larry?”

“Well, not married, of course, but, I don’t know, something. You think that’s crazy? That I’m wrong?”

“I don’t know, Becky. I really don’t, but I sure hope so.”

“Well, Melanie will accept this in time, especially once she goes off to college. We just have to be here for her right now, help her out, stuff like that. They both need our friendship and support.”

Steve pulled her into his arms, stroking her soft hair. “One thing I’ve found out, Becky, as long as your friends stand by you, you can do anything.” He kissed the curve of her cheek and sighed.

“Yep,” she said, soft lips seeking his. “That’s what counts the most to me. Family and friends. And you. First you.”

THE END

Author's Note: If you've started at the beginning of the Doubletree Kids Series with *Follow Your Dreams* and continued on through *High Hurdles*, I know you will be thrilled with the next book in the series- *Riding High*.

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