



THE DOUBLETREE KIDS

Riding Blind



Gayle Farmer

*Gayle
Farmer*

***RIDING
BLIND***

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents
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This book is dedicated to
my daughter, Robyn Jones who inspired
many of the characters in this story.

Special thanks to my wonderful editors
and dear friends,
Virginia “Sissy” Sciarpelletti
and
Irene B. Gardner

And as always to my husband,
Jeff

Other Books
by
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The Doubletree Kids Young Adult Series

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Five Stars for **Riding Blind**

As a long-time fan, I was privileged to get an advanced copy of **Riding Blind** for review. What a treat and a full five stars for this exciting new book.

This latest effort in the Doubletree Series is stunning, both in the subject matter and delivery. Farmer's ability to bring us into the tale is well-known to her fans, but this time, she seems to make the reader a part of the story. In addition, we have a new character to fall in love with.

Lisa Freeman, blind from birth, comes to Mystic Ridge to fulfill her dream of riding a horse. Being blind hasn't stopped her from achieving all her other goals and she has no time for those who feel sorry for themselves or her. With grit and dogged determination, Lisa achieves her objectives and in doing so, proves to be an inspiration to those around her.

It's wonderful when a book gives us a satisfying ending; in **Riding Blind**, Farmer delivers *two* with the grace of a 10-rated dressage freestyle performance.

Great read for all ages, you won't be disappointed.

Karen Ackerman
Los Angeles, CA

RIDING

BLIND

Chapter 1

Becky Edwards leaned forward, staring in disbelief at the young man sitting across from her. “It is *not* crazy. We can do this. Lisa’s blind, not helpless and she’s not a little kid; she’s fourteen.”

Billy Martin, longtime friend and employer, fidgeted under her gaze.

“It’s not just Lisa. What about the other students? How will they feel? She’ll have special needs, won’t she?”

“No, I really don’t think so. Nothing that should impact the other girls. Lisa is quite self-sufficient, all things considered. She has a guide dog, so she gets around on her own and she reads Braille, so she’ll be able to keep up with the classes since everything is on the computer. She just wants to learn to ride a horse. Surely you can relate to that?”

The words hung in the air like a bad smell. Her throat closed and her mouth fell open, but nothing came out.

His crippled right hand, strapped into its brace, jerked.

“Oh, God, Billy. I’m sorry ... you know I – oh!” She rose from her chair and hurried to his side, expression full of regret. Bright aqua eyes sought his.

“You know I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.” She slipped her arms around him, hugging him close. “You know that, don’t you?”

“I know, Becky, no problem. And you’re right. I so relate.” He patted her back, suddenly awkward, and pulled away. “I’m fine. Now, let’s talk about Lisa. Make your best pitch.”

She returned to her chair and ran a hand through her short red hair, making the curls stand on end.

“Okay, positives first. She’s very bright, very well adjusted, with no issues to deal with. Quite independent as long as she’s with her dog. It’s a Lab, so enough said there. Lisa only applied to take the summer short course. It’ll be like riding camp for her. Final good thing and I think it’s important. All the other girls will benefit. Working and living with someone who needs a little bit more consideration with day-to-day things, especially a peer, will be very enlightening.”

Becky leaned back in her chair and drew a deep breath.

“Biggest negative after lack of sight is that she’s never been near a horse, so we’ll be starting from scratch ... no memories, no nothing. All she knows about them is what she’s read. She’s never even felt one.”

Wide eyed, she grinned. “Actually, I’m looking forward to it. Just imagine what it will be like for her that first time. Feeling their size, their mass, y’know, smelling their coats?”

Becky’s mind wandered to long ago memories. She brought herself back to the present with effort.

“The other is getting her acclimated to the farm boundaries, at least where she needs to be able to go. I figure if she comes in tomorrow, I can show her around while it’s quiet.

“Most of the girls, all except Amy, went home for the holiday. School’s out for another four days, so I’ll have a lot of free time. I hope Amy decides to make friends with Lisa and help me out. Besides, with the other kids gone,

she's probably bored out of her mind just hanging out alone."

Billy smiled, eyes half-closed, lips pursed in wry amusement.

"Sounds like you've already made up your mind. I give in, especially since most of the work is going to fall on you. I'll be gone for several days, but if you can deal with her alone, I don't object to Lisa coming for the summer term. She sounds like a nice kid and I agree, she deserves a chance at learning to ride."

"Thanks, Billy. I think you'll see it's a good thing for all of us. So, where are you going?"

He glanced down and shook his head.

"Los Angeles. I'm meeting with yet another specialist who thinks he can restore my hand. I don't know why I bother except to appease my mother. She never lets up."

"She loves you, Billy, so she probably never will. Neither should you. Your dream was hers. Besides, miracles do happen. Every time you turn around there are stories about cures that came along when all hope was gone. You just have to keep on believing in your dreams and doing your exercises."

"Yeah, I know you're right. I just get tired." He rose and headed for the door. "Hang in there, Becky. I'll be back on Monday for my classes." Face tense, he walked out to his car.

* * *

Billy's hopes of riding on the U. S. Olympic Team, a dream on the verge of coming true, shattered like his hand when a horse he was jumping miscalculated the distance to a wide oxer and left out a stride. Unable to clear the fence, the horse crashed through it and fell, landing on Billy's right hand, crushing bones and tearing ligaments.

Numerous surgeries and ongoing physical therapy brought back some feeling to his palm, and there were days when he could move his thumb, but he would never jump again. He wore a leather brace most of the time. Without it his fingers contracted, curling into a hard, tight fist as soon as the hand relaxed.

He made a surprising recovery, at least physically; everyone said so. Family and friends smothered him with love, encouraging him day and night to be brave and focus on getting his strength back. They discounted the doctor's negative prognosis across the board, touting the power of prayer, the power of positive thinking and just about anything miraculous they could come up with. They made Billy want to scream at the top of his lungs.

They refused to accept that he might be crippled for the rest of his life, and they wouldn't let him accept it either. He didn't at first, at least not outwardly. Secretive by nature and prone to keeping his feelings to himself, he hid his anger and resentment behind witty remarks and a blasé attitude. He fooled everyone but his mother.

Billy thought back to the day he decided to try for the Olympic Team. He'd left Doubletree stables, found another trainer that followed the A Circuit, and spent the next three years traveling the country competing at shows with classes designated as Olympic Trials qualifiers. He and his mare, Bitsy, quickly climbed the ranks and their many wins drew attention from top east-coast trainers and recognition from the Olympic Selection Committee.

It was his mother who decided he needed his own training facility. Tracy was right, of course, and the farm appealed to Billy from the moment he saw it.

Three well-groomed riding rings and a grass jumper field caught his eye when they came down the driveway the first time. Both shed row barns contained ten stalls each as

well as cross ties in the aisles and four large tack rooms. Down the row were wash racks, more cross ties and several spacious grass turnout paddocks.

"I bet this used to be a boarding stable," Billy said. "It's set up and ready to go." He nodded in approval at the huge house tucked into the back corner of the property. Tall shade trees promised protection from the summer sun.

The white picket fence made an obvious boundary and although the gate stood open, it clearly separated the residence from the barn area. Covered parking and a circular driveway enhanced the feeling of privacy. Well-tended flower beds filled with colorful fragrant flowers surrounded the house.

Billy hopped out of the limo before Bob could get the door, thrilled with everything he saw. He entered the house by a screened-in side porch and approached the French doors. They opened into a family room with a fireplace in one corner and a built-in seat in front of a large bay window. One short hall led to the kitchen and dining area, the other to a spacious bedroom with an attached bath.

"Oh, my," Tracy said, glancing around. "It's darling. A fully contained apartment; it's perfect for Becky."

Always businesslike, his dad, Tom, nodded. "Or a very nice guest house, depending upon the number of visiting buyers you might have. Love all the trees." He glanced around and nodded. "Very nice; it's an excellent investment."

Unable to find a way into the main house from the apartment, they walked back outside, climbed the steps to the porch and entered through the front door. A large living room welcomed them and an oak staircase on the left side invited an upstairs exploration.

They walked into the dining room and then followed the hall past a bathroom and several smaller rooms, to the huge, sunny country kitchen.

“What a delightful house,” Tracy said, glancing from Tom to Billy. “What do you think, son?”

“I love it. What a great place. I can’t believe how perfect this is. We’re going to have a big staff. Nice to know we won’t be bumping into each other.”

They sauntered back toward the living room, admiring the crown molding in the dining room and the beautiful hardwood floors. The second story beckoned as they reached the staircase.

Billy opened the first door, revealing another private suite, this one much larger than the others downstairs. The spacious accommodation included an oversized attached private bath. The suite next door mirrored it and included a small dressing room as well.

The final room was simply that, one huge room, perfect for large social gatherings or a variety of special events. Floor to ceiling windows lined one wall, facing out onto the performance rings.

“Oh, man, this is exactly what we’ve been looking for, Mom. Check it out.”

By the time Billy inspected the barns and other facilities, his mind was made up. “I love it. Can we get this one?”

Billy came back to the present with a bitter smile and stared at his hand.

This is just temporary, it has to be. I’ll find a doctor who can repair my hand and then I’ll ride again, just like I used to. It has to happen. I can’t go on if it doesn’t.

His life hinged on that one hope. He had to find a doctor who could restore his hand, at least to the point where he could ride in competition again.

After his fall and the poor prognosis for recovery, everything changed, and not just for Billy. The reason for having their brand new farm went up in smoke. Working

with horses required two good hands no matter what you did. He couldn't ride with one hand, couldn't even put on a bridle.

Becky had barely moved onto the farm when the accident happened. Billy decided to recover in Beverly Hills with his parents, devoting his efforts to additional surgeries, endless rehabilitation and trying to come to terms with his injury. The responsibility to get the farm up and running, hire barn staff and keep his show string in training fell squarely on her young shoulders.

Six operations and dozens of unsatisfactory consultations later, Billy moved back to the beach house in Del Mar. Earlier that week, he and Becky met with his parents to discuss the future of Mystic Ridge and develop an alternate plan.

Determined to state her case, Becky spoke first.

"Before we even start, I want you all to know that I can take care of myself. Please don't consider me in your decision. Karen's already told me I can train with her at Doubletree, so I'll be fine." She glanced from Billy to his parents and nodded. "If you guys want to get out of the horse business, I completely understand."

Billy shook his head, hands thrust before him for emphasis.

"No, I really don't want to do that. I'm only twenty-three, for Pete's sake. I have a long life to live, and I want to do it around horses. I've given it a lot of thought over the past several months. Teaching and training may be all I can do, but it really appeals to me. I like working with kids, helping them achieve their riding objectives, maybe being instrumental in fulfilling someone's goals. That would be very rewarding."

He glanced at Becky, gray-blue eyes wide, almost pleading.

“Do you think we could turn the farm into a private liberal arts prep school, emphasize riding and equine education? We could specialize, highlight the performing arts.” He turned toward Tracy. “Mom, maybe you could come down and give acting lessons around the holidays.” He watched her face, half-afraid she’d bomb his proposal.

Instead, she chuckled. “What a super idea. Tout it to the rich and snooty up in L.A. as the place to send their riding child for a private, well-rounded college-prep education. You have to admit, we’re in the perfect area. Bet you a dollar this time next year you’ll have a waiting list. What a great idea.”

“Oh, this sounds like lots of fun.” Becky shrugged, hesitating. Then she leaned forward.

“You know I don’t have a college degree, so I’ll have to stick to teaching them about horses and barn management, but it sounds great. Count me in. Let’s develop a team like Karen did with us at Doubletree, huh?”

Billy grinned at her. “You know it. I’d like to put as much admission importance on their riding ability as their school grades. We can shape them, especially if we accept seventh grade only to start. If we do our job right, they’ll stay with us for six years.” He turned to his dad then and smiled.

“I feel very positive about this, Dad. How about you?”

“Mall rats,” Tom said with a snort.

“Yep. It’s the perfect age,” Becky said. “They’re old enough that we shouldn’t have too many separation anxiety issues to deal with. We can talk to Karen and see how she’d feel about having little intramural schooling shows. Her students would enjoy that.”

Billy grinned at her, shaking his head with enthusiasm.

“We have to find out if there are any other private schools in the area that emphasize riding. It’d be cool if we could develop our own little circuit.”

Tracy smiled as she watched the excitement build on his face. It’d been a long time since he showed interest in anything.

“I’ll do whatever I can to help. Once the word gets around the studio, your phone will start ringing. If you’re going to offer a minor in Performing Arts, I can guarantee at least five clinics per season.”

“Oh, Tracy, that would be wonderful. Would you bring actors from the show?” Eyes wide, Becky stared at Tracy.

“Well, sure, of course, but not just the actors. Directors, camera operators, set designers, script writers. I mean, there’s so much more to a TV show than the actors.”

Billy grinned at his mother, expression avid.

“I’m beginning to get a clear picture of our school. We’ll be unique, that’s for sure, and exclusive. We’re going to find the best teachers money can buy, keep the classes small, and cater to girls who want to excel.”

Excitement built as ideas matched enthusiasm.

“You’ll offer a top-notch liberal arts program. It’ll be the best in everything fashionable and sought-after.” Tracy grinned at Becky. “Oh, my fingers are itching! I can’t wait to get started. I bet I have the school full by Friday.”

They all laughed at her confidence and knew she’d deliver. Tracy always did.

Tom nodded at Billy. “It’s good to hear you talking like this, making plans for the future. How many students do you think you can take at the beginning? We can add a dormer onto the back of the house when the time is right.”

Billy shrugged at Becky. “I think it would be best all around if we start small. Neither one of us has any experience in managing a school. If we go slow, and expand

when it's comfortable, we'll achieve our goals, even as lofty as they are. As Karen would say, *less is better*. Not to mention easier."

"Don't run at the fences," Becky said with a snicker. "And it's so true. So, how many kids to start?"

"We should go over there and physically check things out. I'm figuring we can accommodate ten kids as the house stands now." He rose and turned toward his parents.

"Thanks for lunch and for all your ideas. You guys are the best. We're going to head back to Del Mar. We have so much to do, I hardly know where to start. I'll get in touch with you tomorrow and we can set up a plan."

* * *

Billy drove Becky back to the farm that warm spring afternoon, determined to reach an agreement about their goals and the number of students they could accommodate.

They entered the main house with new, more critical eyes. On the other side of the living room, past the stairs, a long hall led to a suite similar in size to Becky's. The spacious rooms would easily accommodate two and the bathroom and dressing room had ample closets.

Next door was another almost identical suite. The door at the end of the hall opened into a huge sunroom. It was the ideal size for a classroom and would double as a multipurpose room.

"I can't believe how perfect this is," Billy said. "With the kids living here, there has to be space for them to spread out. As we grow, we'll need to think about additions, but we're in great shape to start out." He turned and walked back down the hall, pointing at the stairs. "Let's look around and see what we have to work with up there."

The first door he opened led to a suite like those on the lower floor, the one next door was much the same.

“I’d love to know what this place was before you bought it. Honest to Pete, it’s absolutely ideal for our needs.” Becky walked across the room and checked out the large bathroom.

“Yep, no doubt about it. It’s just perfect, but it’s been empty a long time, huh? Sure is dirty. It took me two days to get my little apartment clean.” She gazed around, eyes half closed, and ran a finger across a window, rubbing her hands together to shake off the dust.

“We’ll have to remodel the rooms a bit, give everything a fresh coat of paint, install built-in shelves and bookcases, furniture, but we’re going to have a ball decorating. Think of all the stuff we have to buy. Beds, desks, curtains. What fun.” She snuck a glance at Billy and giggled.

“Set up the way it is, we can house two kids in each suite. Honestly, the rooms are more than large enough to accommodate four and not crowd them.”

The suite next door was identical except it had more windows. They walked down the hall to the final room on the floor.

Billy nodded several times and walked over to the wall of windows that looked out over the jumper rings.

“It’s so strange, but the rooms mirror each other. Look at this, another perfect classroom. It’s just like the ones down stairs, only much bigger. It can double as a general purpose room for when the parents come for orientation, or a variety of special events. It’s like a small ballroom. I bet the girls will love it.”

Deep in thought, he absently rubbed his crippled hand.

“And y’know, we didn’t check it out yet, but off the kitchen is another suite with a private entrance. We’ll need to have live-in help, a cook at the minimum, and it would be nice to be able to offer her a room as well.”

Becky shrugged. "I'll check with the grooms. Wouldn't it be cool if one of them has a wife who could fill the bill? Mexican food every night ... we'll be eating good, that's for sure." She chuckled in anticipation and then turned to continue exploring.

"We'll have math, civics and the sciences down on the first floor, English, history and languages up here. What a great atmosphere to learn in." She crossed the room and glanced out the French doors in disbelief.

"Good grief, would you look at this?" She opened the doors and stepped out onto the flat roof.

The panoramic view was breathtaking. Below her spread the pastures, emerald green and fragrant from their recent mowing. Horses dozed in the pastures, head to tail, swishing flies. In the distance, muted treetops, gilded gold and mauve, struggled to outdo the intensely blue sky.

Billy walked onto the rooftop, shaking his head. "What a great place to set up an easel ... and the light, whoa, is that actually the ocean over there?" He pointed in the correct direction at a tiny glittering piece of the horizon.

"Easel, yes, and how about a camera? The angle during certain months of the year would catch the sunset perfectly. At least it looks like it to me. Blair would be the one to know. They're home this weekend so we can ask." Becky grinned. "How cool is that?"

To her left spread the swimming pool and wide deck area. To the right, the tennis courts and the hills behind provided an idyllic scene, edged with mauve and purple.

"It's a beautiful place, isn't it?"

"It sure is. I can't wait to get started with the remodeling." She nodded and followed him back into the house. They went down the back stairs, ending in a small alcove off the huge, commercial-sized kitchen. They finished their tour of the house and headed to her apartment, pausing on the porch steps.

She grinned at him, blue eyes shining as they scanned the property.

“You know, I feel it in my bones. The school is going to be a roaring success. When you think about who your mother is and the number of people she knows, we couldn’t possibly fail. She promised to do several seminars during the season, and at least once a year she’ll take the girls up to the L.A. studio to see how a soap opera works from the inside out. I mean, a girl with aspirations to work in Hollywood in any capacity would kill for a spot here.” She sighed a moment and nodded. “Yep, I think we’re going to be the hit of the year.”

Becky rubbed her hands together in anticipation. “I’m going to start on the brochure, see if I can put together a final product by the end of the week. Your mom has a list of potential students for me to contact ... must be a mile long. She said to expect an email. I could already have it.” Shivering, she pulled her sweater tighter.

“Think how exciting that would be for the kids, Billy. We take her for granted, but they’ll flip. Maybe she could send a makeup artist or two down, same with theatrical hair stylists, costume designers. They could put on skits or do some interpretive dancing. She knows everyone in Hollywood and this is the kind of thing that appeals to artsy folks.” She cocked her head at him and winked.

“In addition, your dad could give a couple of in-depth seminars on corporate raiding to the economics class. What do you say?”

Billy chortled. “Aren’t you a riot? Very funny. Hilarious. I ought to tell him you said that.” He reached for her hands, staring directly into her eyes. “It’s a big deal, Becky. Shall we give it a go?”

They both smiled.

“Let’s do it,” they said in unison.

And thus, Mystic Ridge Farm became Mystic Ridge Academy.

Chapter 2

A big black BMW rolled into the parking lot at exactly nine-thirty. Becky hurried down the steps and across the lot to greet her visitors.

A woman in her mid-thirties got out of the passenger side. She wore a white nurse's uniform, complete with starched cap, and an air of authority. She opened the back door and stepped aside as a yellow Lab crawled sedately out of the car and sat, waiting for her young friend.

The nurse reached into the car, offering support as two thin legs followed by an equally thin torso emerged from the dark recesses. Hand steady on the dog's harness, the girl turned to the nurse and nodded. Dark hair hung down her back in a single thick braid. Black, wrap-around glasses hid her eyes and her pale skin suggested she spent most of her time indoors.

Becky called hello before she got too close, not wanting to startle Lisa.

"I'm Becky Edwards and you must be Lisa Freeman."

"I am." She extended her hand in the direction of the voice. "Nice to meet you, Ms. Becky. This is my best friend and wonder dog, Sadie."

The dog glanced at Becky with disinterest. Her tail wagged in polite response to the outstretched hand, but her attention focused on the girl.

“Welcome to both of you. Did you have a nice trip down?” Becky shook her hand, smiling.

Lisa nodded several times and then withdrew her hand.

“We were so excited, we couldn’t stand it. Hardly slept a wink all night.” Thin fingers stroked the golden coat; the dog whined in reassurance. “We can’t wait to meet our horse.”

“Well, let’s get you settled in first.” Becky nodded to Miguel who followed her, Lisa’s luggage in hand.

“The other girls live in the main house, but I thought it’d be better if you stayed here with me. No stairs or things to get in the way.”

* * *

“Okay, Lisa, stand right there and I’ll bring Angel out.”

Becky led the mare out of her stall, fastened her to the cross ties and then walked back to the girl.

“Are you ready?” She chuckled at the expression on Lisa’s face.

“Before we do this, how about if we take Sadie to the edge of the aisle so you can move around better? Will she stay for you?”

“Oh yes, she’s a very good dog.” Lisa turned to Sadie, walked with her to the wall and said, “Sit. Now stay.” She ran a loving hand along the dog’s neck and lowered the harness onto her back.

Bending over she said, “Okay, now give me a kiss.” The dog obliged and a quick pink tongue swiped the girl’s cheek. She straightened up, a look of uncertainty on her face.

“Give me your hand, Lisa. Now here we go. This is Angel.”

Becky laid the girl's palm across the top of the horse's muzzle, slowly drawing it down between the large nostrils.

Gentle puffs of warm air scented with sweet alfalfa washed over Lisa, fluffing loose tendrils of her hair. She drew in a deep breath and sighed.

"Oh, that smells so nice. Is that horse breath?"

Continuing to draw Lisa's hands over the mare's face, Becky chuckled.

"Yes it is. Smells sweet, doesn't it? This is her muzzle and her nostrils. Feel her chin right here. It has a little pointy lump, so cute to feel. This is her face and here, very gently, are her eyes."

"She's so soft and I love the way she smells. Let me get closer and smell her fur some more." The girl sniffed again and then buried her nose in Angel's lowered neck, her arms reaching upward to embrace the horse. She pressed herself against Angel's shoulder, blissful.

"Oh, this is, oh, it's so wonderful. Please show me her tail. Can I just walk around her?"

Lisa edged her way around the mare, gentle hands traveling from neck to shoulder, across the ample stomach to the haunches. Her fingers sought and found the long strands and she buried both hands in the luxurious tail.

"Oh, I can't believe how soft it is. It's almost as soft as my hair. And so long. It feels like it could touch the floor."

"It just about does. Lots of that has to do with the care we give the horses. When they're in their natural state their manes and tails are usually full of burrs and their coats don't feel or smell like this. Kind of like people who don't take baths."

Ripples of delight poured from the girl's mouth. "I guess that's right. Can I brush her, or do you have carrots or apples, something to feed her? I have apples in my bag, but I didn't get to unpack it yet."

Becky reached into her pocket and withdrew three carrot bites. She took Lisa's hand and placed a slice in her palm.

"Always remember to keep your hand flat. That way she won't accidentally nip your fingers. Okay, here we go." Becky held her hand under Lisa's, slowly guiding the carrot to the horse.

Gentle lips snuffled her palm, removing the carrot with a silken caress.

Lisa giggled. "That feels so weird. Do you have another one?"

They fed Angel the remaining carrots and then Lisa made her way completely around the horse, running her hands all over the powerful animal, feeling her mane, her legs, even her hooves.

As her hands crossed the mare's back, she said, "She's huge, even bigger than I'd imagined. What color is she? Please tell me what she looks like."

"Well, she's called a chestnut which is kind of golden, or maybe like reddish blonde. She has a white blaze down the center of her face and her legs ... her back legs, are white to her hock. That's like an elbow or a knee."

"Oh, can you trace out her blaze with my finger? I want to see it."

Becky took Lisa's hand and began to trace the outline of Angel's blaze, which ended in her upper lip. They did it three times and then Lisa traced the outline alone. Her other hand rested on the horse's cheek, the thumb making gentle circular motions.

"The white part of her face, the blaze--did you know the fur is thicker there than on her cheeks? I can feel a distinct outline. How about the legs, Ms. Becky? Can you show me where the white stops?"

Becky took her hand and guided it down the haunch, over the hock to the cannon bone.

"Oh, see, it feels different from her neck."

Lisa ran her hand up and down Angel's leg. "Is there a variation between the coat of her neck and her legs? They don't feel the same."

"That's because her legs are clipped to keep the long hairs, called the fetlock, from retaining dirt or burrs or anything that would irritate the skin."

Lisa examined the mare from head to foot, feeling the texture of her coat, smiling as she felt the soft velvety muzzle snuffle her arm.

Angel loved attention and made soft chuckling sounds through her nose as though encouraging the girl's exploration.

They spent well over an hour with the mare, brushing her and picking out her hooves.

Finally, Lisa leaned against the barn and shook her head.

"I can't believe it, but I'm starved. I hardly slept last night, and I didn't eat a bite of breakfast."

"Well, it's almost lunch time so no wonder you're hungry. Let's put her away and go to the house and see what we can rustle up."

Becky helped Lisa get settled at the kitchen table. "What do you like to have for lunch?"

"Oh, a sandwich or a salad. Soup is good. I'm easy. I'll have whatever you're having."

Becky chuckled.

"Liverwurst on rye okay with you? Heavy on the onions?"

"Eeuw! You're kidding, right?"

"Yep. How about grilled ham and cheese?"

"Much better."

While Becky prepared their lunch, Lisa asked questions about Angel and her owner, Blair.

“We’ve known each other forever,” Becky said. “We used to ride on the Doubletree team together with Billy and a couple of other kids. They’re all in college now, their last year, actually. You’ll probably meet some of them when they get home.”

Becky placed the sandwich and a handful of carrot and celery sticks in front of Lisa. She positioned a glass of milk to the right of the plate, above the knife, following the example Lisa told her earlier.

“Did I get that pattern right?”

“Let me see.” Slowly Lisa’s hand touched her plate. She found the bottom of the knife and moved the tips of her fingers forward until they grazed the edge of the glass. She picked it up, brought it to her lips and took a long swallow.

“Yes, you did.” She drank some more then licked away her milk moustache and giggled.

“Excellent. I love cold milk.” She picked up the sandwich and took a bite, making appreciative sounds.

“Mmm, it’s warm and I taste butter. That’s different, really good.” She patted her lips several times with her napkin then wiped her hands.

“I try to get all the crumbs,” she said, turning toward Becky. “Still, sometimes I miss stuff on my face and that can be embarrassing. You’ll point them out, won’t you? It’s one of the downsides of being blind.”

Her casual way of talking about her blindness took Becky aback and she wondered how much of her attitude, her enjoyment in life, was real honest emotion and how much was put on. Figuring she might as well follow her lighthearted lead, Becky laughed.

“I will. I always grill the sandwiches in a frying pan with a little butter. Do you like it that way?”

Lisa nodded and took another larger bite. “This is my new favorite, too. Our cook puts them in the broiler, open faced. Gets so dry. Cheese sticks to the roof of your mouth. This is better.” She took another long swallow of milk and

turned toward Becky as the tips of her fingers identified the carrots and celery sticks. "Is there a pickle around here?"

Becky went to the fridge and brought the jar to the table. She placed a spear on Lisa's plate. "Nine o'clock."

Lisa picked it up and bit off a large portion of one end. She shuddered, smacking her lips.

"Tell me about the school. Besides regular classes and the riding program, what do you do here?" She finished the pickle and grinned. "Umm."

Becky put another on her plate and chuckled.

"Well, we have a swim team and we play *serious* tennis. There are three other prep schools in the area that offer programs like ours, and we have extramural games, stuff like that. We belong to a large, county-wide riding club, so we show once a month with a championship show and a high point awards party at the end of the season.

Lisa listened, her expression intent as she absorbed the world of Mystic.

"It sounds so exciting. Thank you so much for making room for me, taking me into your home. That was really nice of you. Tell me more, please."

"It's my pleasure, honey. I'm glad we could give you this kind of opportunity. Okay, well, let's see. We concentrate on preparing girls for a liberal arts college. We have two full-time teachers for the regular term, plus two tennis coaches. The kids attend all kinds of labs and clinics for outside study. We offer a minor in Performing Arts, so by the time the girls leave Mystic for college, they already have a pretty good handle on what makes a TV show click."

"Sounds wonderful. Do you go down to San Diego much? Or the ocean? Do you ever go to the beach? I love to walk along the shore and listen to the birds screaming overhead. The waves pounding on the sand, so loud. They're very exhilarating."

Becky smiled at the expression on Lisa's face. "I know what you mean. We get to the beach as often as we can

manage it, but we keep pretty busy, even in the summer. We go up to Los Angeles at least twice a month to a play or a musical event. San Diego has great afternoon events like art exhibits.” She shifted in her chair, gazing at Lisa.

“Summer session only deals with sports, mostly; swimming and tennis tournaments, also riding and showing. Mr. Martin and I offer intensive riding instruction and barn management all year round and the girls show every other week. We go to different schools for competitions and attend clinics under special coaches. Four girls live here full time except for holidays, and this fall term, we’ll add two more boarders and three day students.”

“Where is everyone? It’s so quiet for that many kids.”

“They all went home for the Memorial Day holiday except Amy. Her folks are out of town, so she stayed here. I’ll introduce you after lunch.”

“That’s cool. Ms. Becky, please tell me more stuff about Angel. Do you know much about her?”

Becky cleared away their empty plates, a nostalgic expression on her face. She smiled.

“Angel belongs to my friend, Blair Evans. Her sister, Jessi, is my best friend. Angel used to be a champion show horse. She jumped fences and won all kinds of prizes. Then Blair went off to college, so now Angel hangs out in a pasture at Doubletree ranch and has babies. I borrowed her for you to use this summer. She’s careful and really likes kids, so I thought she’d be great for you. What do you think?”

“Oh, I love Angel. She’s beautiful and I know we’re going to be great friends. Is she preg ... in foal now?”

“Yes, she is. Kinda cool, huh?”

“When is she due?”

“I’m not sure of the exact date, late February or early March.”

“Oh.”

“Well, shall we get you unpacked? I’ll show you around the apartment.”

Becky led the way into the bedroom, Lisa and Sadie right behind her.

“That’s yours.” She pointed at the twin bed up against one wall and then shook her head. Taking Lisa’s hand, she led her across the room and patted the mattress.

“The bathroom is right here.” Becky guided her to the commode, then the sink and shower.

“Okay. Let’s put Sadie back in the bedroom and I’ll do it myself.” After telling the dog to stay, Lisa let go of the harness and sat on the bed.

She took a deep breath, rose, and with her left hand made contact, first with the bed, then with the wall. She inched her way along until she reached the bathroom door. Lisa turned toward Becky with a grin.

“Not bad for a first time, huh?”

Without waiting for a reply, she turned, and sliding her hand along the wall, counted out five steps and then extended one leg. Her foot came in contact with the toilet. “Bingo.”

Lisa worked her way around the room from the commode to the sink to the shower, and by the time she reached the door again, she wore a wide grin.

Stunned at Lisa’s self-assurance and freedom of movement, as well as a profound gratitude for her own sight, Becky nodded. “You’re amazing. Very independent.”

“Well, I was born like this. My parents wanted me to live as normal a life as possible. They found me the very best schools, hired special tutors, stuff like that. Dad makes lots of money, which helps. I get around so well because I learned to count steps at a school I attended in Switzerland. Everything is a measure, either steps or counts of time, or a pattern. It’s a very interesting concept.”

She returned to the bed, stroking the silky head that now rested in her lap. “Sadie gives me so much confidence, I’m never afraid when she’s with me, which is pretty much all the time.”

Becky shook her head, lips pursed. Here was a kid with every excuse in the world to be a spoiled brat, a recluse. Instead, her friendly attitude and lighthearted personality held no hint of the melodrama that usually accompanied teenagers, let alone those with a handicap.

“Well, if you’re ready, I’ll take you up to the house to meet the rest of the gang. We’re blessed to have a Mexican lady named Anna to cook for us. We have our own kitchen here and I’m a pretty good cook, but when we’re in the mood, we can join the other students and staff for lunch and dinner. You like Mexican food?”

“One of my favorites. Our cook is Mexican, too. She taught me how to make tortillas and enchiladas, all kinds of great stuff. Her salsa is to die for and her flan? Oh man, let’s do Mexican tonight. I’ve got a taste for it now. What do you say?”

Laughing aloud, Becky agreed. “That’s a date, but I have to warn you, she makes lots of great stuff, so there’s no guarantee she’ll make Mexican tonight. She does super Chinese and Italian dishes and her meatloaf is truly out of this world. No matter what it is, you’ll be happy.”

They walked across the yard to the main house and Becky started to mention the stairs and then stopped, waiting to see what the dog would do.

When it became clear that they were going up the steps, Sadie nudged Lisa’s leg several times with her shoulder, steering her toward the handrail. Sadie hesitated, causing Lisa to slow her pace and when they came to the first step, she stopped. The dog leaned forward and put both front feet on the step, elevating her harness height and telling Lisa they were going up.

Without hesitation, Lisa reached for the rail, found it and began the climb. At the top step, the dog hesitated again, signaling that the stairs had ended. It reminded Becky of a dance or a dressage test.

Amy, Anna, Miguel and Hernando sat in front of the TV eating taquitos and watching *Another Life*. Becky made the introductions quickly, not wanting to interrupt their soap opera. As Tracy appeared on the screen, Miguel turned to Lisa and said in proud but halting English, "That our Senora Tracy on the TV. She is big star."

In fluent Spanish, Lisa replied, "This is my favorite show. I never miss an episode. Can I watch it with you?"

Nodding, Miguel patted the sofa then wiggled his fingers at Hernando in a 'scoot over' gesture.

Becky helped Lisa to the sofa and then perched on the side chair, enthralled as always by watching Tracy's portrayal of one of the most beloved soap stars in history.

When the commercial came on, Amy leaned forward and glanced at Lisa.

"Tracy is so wonderful. She's Mr. Martin's mom, you know. She comes here to the school sometimes and teaches us about acting and directing. She's the most beautiful person I've ever seen and so nice. Last year we did a musical play and she choreographed it. She helped us all with our parts. It was so fun."

A wide smile spread across Lisa's face. "How exciting. What play did you do?"

"Oh, we did parts of *West Side Story*. That way we got to sing and dance as well as act. All our parents came and we had a party afterwards. Man, it was a blast. Are we going to get to do that again, Ms. Becky? That was so cool."

"I think it's on the agenda, Amy. Sometime before Christmas break. I have to check the schedule to make sure."

Conversation ended as the show started again.

Chapter 3

The show ended and Becky said, “Hey, Amy, I thought Lisa and I would get some sun out by the pool. Want to join us?”

“Sounds like a plan to me. I’d like to get a jump-start on my freckles.” She giggled at Becky.

“We can have a race and see who has the most by summer’s end.”

“Smarty pants,” Becky said, continuing the banter. “But at least I have an excuse, all this red hair. Blondes usually don’t.”

Amy shrugged. “What can I say? Okay, I’ll go up and put on my suit. Meet you by the pool.”

Becky lifted the empty suitcase off the bed, smiling as Lisa unpacked the remainder of her things. A large bag of apples and two sacks of carrots sat on her nightstand. Her skirts and blouses hung in the closet; tee-shirts and shorts nestled in her dresser drawers. Last of all, she placed her laptop and a huge pile of books on her desk.

“Wow, you like to read, huh?”

“Oh, yes. It’s a big part of how I live. Reading takes me to places and lets me do things I’ll never do for real. One of the first books I ever read alone was about a girl and her pony. Got me started on horses and I’ve never stopped.”

"I loved the Black Stallion series when I was a kid. Read all of them."

"Me, too. Which was your fave? Mine was The Black Stallion and Satan, where they race against the fire. I always knew the Black would win."

"Oh, I loved that one, too, but my favorite was The Black Stallion, the first book. It was the great love of my young reading life. So, do you have a career in mind?"

"Oh yes," she said, matter of fact. "I'm going to write horse books -- novels, actually."

"Good for you. That's cool. I like to write, too, but I never have time to devote to it. Always something going on that's more important."

Lisa chuckled. "It's neat to have a teacher you have so much in common with. I think I'm going to love it here." Bathing suit in hand, she rose and headed for the bathroom. "I guess that's about it for unpacking. We better get going. Amy's going to be several freckles up on you."

They found Amy lounging on a chaise. A huge pitcher of lemonade and several glasses sat on the table next to her. She raised her glass and winked.

"Anna made this fresh just for us. Mmm, it's so good."

Becky grinned. "She makes the best of everything, doesn't she? Lisa, do you want to sit in the sun or what?"

"Oh yes, full sun. I know I look like a ghost. It's about time I get a freckle or two of my own." She reached down to stroke Sadie's neck. "Is there a shady place I can put her?"

"Yep, right under the table. I'll get her some water. It's not that hot, but I'm sure she'll appreciate it in a while."

Becky returned with a bowl of water, several large fluffy towels and a bottle of sunscreen.

"You know how to swim, right Lisa?"

“Oh, yes. I have medals to prove it. At my old school I did competition swimming in breast stroke and free style. You don’t have to worry about me around water.”

“Great. I have to run into town for a couple of things. I won’t be long. Please stay together until I get back, okay? And use plenty of sunscreen, girls. You’re both white as milk.”

“You bet, Ms. Becky. Don’t worry about us.” Amy smiled, picked up the bottle and waved her off.

“Go do what you have to do. We’ll be right here when you get back.”

* * *

“So, describe yourself to me, tell me what you look like. In detail. All I know is that you’re blonde. Also, what’s your last name? Ms. Becky didn’t say.”

Amy grinned and reached a hand toward her generous nose, a heredity trait from her French grandfather.

“It’s Steele, with an e on the end.” She chuckled and took several sips of lemonade. “Well, my hair is blonde, but kind of what they call honey blonde, not the real light kind. But it’s straight and thick, so I’m satisfied. I think my eyes are unusual, probably my best feature. They’re kinda greenish, but they have gold and brown threads or something running through them. I’ve never seen anyone else with eyes quite like mine.

“I have sort of a big nose ... Mom says I’ll grow into it, which means I’ll top off at about 6’8”. Inherited it from her father. But it’s straight, so it’s not too bad. My lips are too thin. I wish I had lips like yours, ‘cause full lips are the thing, y’know.” She took another long sip from her glass, hesitating. Finally, “Have you ever seen your face?”

Lisa’s negative response was short and quick. “No.”

“I’m sorry if that’s a sensitive subject.”

“No, really, it’s not. I was born blind, so it’s not the same as having memories. How would you describe me? After the lips.” Lisa smiled.

“Oh, you have beautiful teeth and a great smile. I think you’re too thin, but I’d give anything to have that problem. I can’t tell much about your hair except it’s long and dark. Do you ever play around with it? Mine’s too short to do much with, but you have all kinds of possibilities.”

“I don’t think about it, I guess. I keep it long enough to braid and tie back with a rubber band, but that’s about it.”

“I love to work with hair. My mother is a hairdresser up in Hollywood, works for Tracy’s studio. They’re friends. Anyway, Mom’s one of the top stylists in the whole movie industry and she’s taught me lots of stuff. I want to be a stylist, too, maybe do makeup as well. Shall we dream up something exotic? I have all kinds of fancy clips and barrettes in my room.”

“Sure, that sounds like fun. I’ll wait here for you. Won’t move a muscle, I promise.”

“Okay, I won’t be long.”

Lisa leaned back in her chair, letting the sun wash over her body. She felt a cold nose nudge her hand.

“Hey Sadie, how’re you doing? I’m having the best time, girl, aren’t you? I love our horse. Maybe in a couple of days I can ride her. I hope we get to visit Angel again when Ms. Becky gets back. And how about her? It’s wonderful to have a teacher you’re crazy about, huh? Not all gruff and grumpy like Ms. Muriel. We didn’t like her, did we?” Lisa heard footsteps approaching.

“Oh, I didn’t realize I had so much stuff.” Amy plunked an enormous cosmetic box down on the table with a gasp, almost tipping the pitcher of lemonade.

“Wait until you see all the....” She stopped talking as color flooded her cheeks.

Correctly interpreting her silence, Lisa said, “Oh please, Amy, you don’t have to watch your words with me. I know what you meant. And when I get hold of them, I’ll know just what they look like.”

Amy pulled the rubber band off and undid the braid. She began to brush the shimmering dark hair in long easy strokes.

“Girl, you have great hair. It’s the color of burgundy, but not so red. More like plum. Yes, it’s plum-colored. Gorgeous.”

She separated the hair into three sections and hesitated, thinking. Using the rat tailed comb, she pulled the hair on the sides of Lisa’s face free of her glasses.

“I get the feeling you never take them off.”

Lisa shrugged but did not reply.

“That’s okay, I can work around them.”

Amy put the finishing touches on Lisa’s new hairdo just as they heard Becky drive up the driveway and park her truck. Soon footsteps told of her approach.

“Wow, girls, beauty parlor day. What fun. That’s a super job, Amy. You’re going to give your mother a run for her money.”

Becky placed her bags on the table, several horse magazines falling across the surface.

“And Lisa, you look like a movie star. What beautiful hair you have. What color would you call it?”

“Plum,” they said in unison.

Becky fished around in the tell-tale Starbucks bags, extracting three large beverage containers.

“I figured these would go down nice about now. Hope you like chocolate frappuccinos.”

Lisa snorted with delight. “Who does not like chocolate?”

Tinkling laughter floated across the air as they enjoyed their sweet indulgence.

* * *

It was a little before five that Sunday night when a white Mercedes convertible pulled into the driveway and stopped in front of the house.

Emily Morgan hopped out of the car and reached into the back seat for her suitcase and several department store shopping bags. She waved goodbye to the young man behind the wheel and ran up the steps and into the house.

Becky, Amy and Lisa lounged around the living room, watching TV and relaxing after spending the afternoon by the pool.

"I got you beat," Becky said, glancing at Amy's new freckles. Even Lisa had a pinkish glow to her skin, a tiny sprinkling of freckles dusted her upturned nose.

"Hi, Em," Becky said. "Welcome back. Did you have a nice holiday?"

"Eh, I guess. It's great to be back, Ms. Becky. Yeah, we had a good time, did lots of shopping." Eyebrows elevated, Emily glanced at Lisa and then returned her stare to Becky.

"We have a new student here for the summer term. Emily, this is Lisa Freeman and her dog, Sadie."

"Hi, Lisa," Emily said, approaching the sofa, dark eyes wide in question.

"That's a really cool dog. We have a Lab, too, but he's black. Hi, Sadie." She extended her hand to the dog, petting the soft fur in gentle strokes.

"Hi, Emily, nice to meet you. Sadie's just the best. What's your dog's name?"

Emily chuckled. "He has several. I call him Harry, which is his real name. Dad calls him 'ding-bat' and Mom calls him 'no-no, bad dog'. My brother calls him Buddy and my little sister won't call him anything since he chewed the heads off all her Barbie dolls. It's like he's invisible to her or something. Really weird."

Just then, Shelby Simpson and Marcy Goldstein charged down the back steps, calling hello to Emily.

“We’re going to barbecue outside by the pool, Em. You got here just in time.” Shelby plopped down on the sofa next to Amy. “Great way to finish off the holiday.”

“Yeah,” Marcy said, licking her lips. “Hamburgers, baked beans and corn on the cob. First of the season.” She laughed under her breath and shrugged. “Looks like field corn to me, but Anna says it’ll be fine. We’ll see.”

“Well, I want to unpack and change into something comfortable. I’ll be right back.” Emily got to her feet and grabbed her suitcase.

Picking up the shopping bags, Amy said, “I’ll go up with you. I have to get something anyway.” The two friends climbed the stairs, bags crinkling and banging against their legs.

Emily walked into the room they shared and plopped her suitcase on her bed. She snapped the locks and opened it.

“Where is Lisa sleeping? With the other girls?” A quick glance took in their room. Since nothing had changed, she turned to Amy, curious.

“She’s staying with Ms. Becky in her apartment. I think the stairs might be a bit too much for her and the dog.”

Emily began to unpack. “What’s she like? Did you get to know her while we were gone?”

Amy grinned at her best friend and flopped down on her bed. “She’s a lot of fun. She just got here, so I don’t know her well, but I like her. I like her a lot.” There was a momentary pause. “Can you imagine what it must be like to be blind?”

“Poor kid. Just thinking about it gives me the creeps.” Emily hung a pale yellow sundress in their shared closet and stuffed several pairs of new shorts and tops into her bureau drawer.

“She’s a bit shy, like I said. You just have to get to know her, but it doesn’t take long. We played cards this afternoon and had a lot of fun just hanging out at the pool. She’s a great sport.”

“How do you play cards with a blind girl?” Round brown eyes, usually merry and warm, stared at Amy in clear surprise.

“Good grief, how do you think? She has a deck that has Braille marks on it. Looks regular except for that. She knows what she’s holding. You just have to tell her what you have when the time comes.” She pursed her lips, staring at her best friend.

“It’s sad, but you have to give her credit. She’s really smart. I can’t even imagine it. And she’s got the most gorgeous hair.”

Amy rolled over on her back and tucked her hands behind her head.

“How was your holiday? You seem kinda tense. Is your mom okay?”

“No real change and we’ll never get along. She still loves to shop and drink and give me a really hard time.” Emily looked at all her new clothes and shook her head.

“Actually, she probably is a little better with me out of the way. I think she likes her new therapist. She still drinks a lot, but she doesn’t seem so angry all the time. In September, Laurie’s leaving for boarding school. She’s starting first grade. I can’t believe they’re sending her away full time like that.” She sighed.

“What’s your dad going to do?”

“I’m not sure. Once Laurie leaves, that will lighten the load a bit. He may send Mom to a sanitarium to dry out. Or he might shine the whole thing and live at his office. It makes me crazy the way he can ignore stuff like he’s blind, like nothing’s happening.”

“My dad’s the same way. I could dye my hair green and he wouldn’t notice it for weeks. Oh well, everyone has something, huh? Let’s go pig out.”

“Go on down, I’ll be with you in a minute.”

* * *

Anna prepared their dinner by the pool, encouraged by the warm night. Steam rose from the huge grill as the corn simmered and the baked beans bubbled on the side plate. She flipped the burgers one more time and decided they were ready. She placed the bowls of salad and condiments on the table as well as the platter of burgers. It was a self-serve meal, with the corn and beans on hotplates in the middle of the table.

“Oh, I hate these things,” Marcy said, struggling to keep the corn from hooking onto her braces.

“At least you could take off the rubber bands,” Shelby said with a grimace. “And look at all the butter you used. I thought you said you were on a diet.”

Round face tinged with pink, Marcy stared at her plate. She held her napkin in front of her mouth and muttered something about the corn tasting good and finished with a disparaging remark about friends. With that she left the table.

Lisa stared into her plate, knowing Becky had arranged her food like the numbers on a clock. Hoping to avoid conversation, she picked up her burger and took a substantial bite. Not that anyone cared or was likely to ask what she thought. Still, it was a good ploy since she couldn’t talk with her mouth full.

“Whoa, talk about PMS,” Amy said, glancing at Shelby. “Just gave your best friend a real shot of overkill, huh? Why?”

Before Shelby could respond, Emily jumped in.

“Because Marcy’s always complaining about being fat, but does nothing about it, for one thing. And that corn in her teeth ... it was a bit much. Gross.” She stared at the other girls.

“It’s a bit hard to take at the dinner table, don’t ya think?”

Marcy returned to her seat, corn problem solved. She glanced at Shelby and shrugged.

“You’re right. I should cut it off the cob, I guess, but that’s half the fun. I hate these braces.”

“I’m sorry I was so mean,” Shelby said, her cheeks pink with embarrassment. “We okay?”

“Hey, of course we are, and you’re right. I’m the only one who can control what I eat.” *I’m sick of being the butt of jokes. Starting now, I’m back on a real diet.*

She stared at the pooled butter and delicious homemade bun for a moment, and then at the mound of baked beans next to it and shrugged. Resolute, she slid the burger onto a fresh plate. It looked lonely just sitting there.

Anna took the rejected plate and handed her a bowl of salad without dressing. She bent over and whispered in Marcy’s ear.

“Try the salsa on your ensalada, Niña. No mucho calories. Es muy bueno.”

Chapter 4

Billy sat in his car Monday morning, battling with himself. His schedule today included mounted lessons and a lab in barn management. Responsibilities nagged like a dripping faucet. Without them he'd still be home in bed, wallowing in depression or off somewhere alone, licking his wounds.

Resigned, he forced a smile and stepped out of the car. He stopped at the house long enough to get a warm blueberry muffin and a coffee refill from Anna and then headed for the barn office.

“Morning, Mr. Martin,” the girls called, waving at him from across the yard as they prepared to mount their horses.

Billy put his cup and muffin on the little table and waved back. He reached into his pocket, withdrew his keys and unlocked the door to the office.

His lesson schedule lay on top of his desk along with two unopened letters, several show brochures and a couple of magazines, including *The American Educator*. He picked up the book and headed for the arena, glancing at his notes.

Marcy was the least experienced member of the riding team, but she had improved 100% since coming to the farm and Billy considered her his shining success so far.

In an effort to help her lose weight, she had begged her parents to buy her a horse and agree to her attending Mystic Ridge. Her mother, quite impressed with the emphasis on an all-around education, sided with her daughter.

Her dad, on the other hand, didn't like the idea one bit. It was several hours drive from their home in Malibu to Del Mar under the best of circumstances, but after much research on his part and determined arguments on Marcy's, he gave in to her request.

He especially liked the low ratio of pupils to teachers, a rate almost as unheard of as the tuition costs, but the emphasis on bringing out the talents and abilities as yet undiscovered in the student did the trick.

Although blessed with a high IQ, Marcy was an underachiever, a mediocre student making below average grades with no motivation or inspiration, no challenge she would rise to. Nothing piqued her interest except riding horses.

For several years she'd leased a horse at a nearby show barn and took daily lessons. For whatever reason, she'd never asked for her own horse, preferring to ride a variety, agreeing with her trainer that it gave her an advantage in technique.

Mystic Ridge, with its small classes and emphasis on the creative arts sounded perfect for Marcy. In the end, Mr. Goldstein capitulated and never regretted his decision for a moment. He bought her a wonderful horse and watched her leave for school with a heavy heart and high hopes. Three weeks later, Mr. and Mrs. Goldstein attended an exciting parent's weekend at Mystic, and couldn't believe their eyes. The transformation in Marcy was quite remarkable.

* * *

Billy walked to the center of the ring, watching as the girls worked their horses. He felt personal pride in

Marcy's weight loss and the associated improvement in her riding. She had about ten pounds to go, but now her body was hard and fit, and the difference in her riding was dramatic. Satisfaction in her accomplishments made him smile. She'd been able to talk her parents into staying there for the summer term and by the beginning of the fall semester, he knew she would achieve her weight goal.

Shelby trotted along the rail, talking to her horse, Prince, and conjugating French verbs. Riding came to her like breathing. As kids, both her parents competed in jumpers and now traveled the country as A-Circuit accredited judges, something that kept them away from home most of the time.

When Shelby discovered Mystic Ridge while cruising the net for private schools, they all rejoiced. The equine emphasis in the core study program suited her educational needs and after an in-depth interview and a weekend retreat at the farm with her parents, they knew this was the place for Shelby.

Amy and Emily kept to the rail, chatting as their horses walked.

"Okay ladies, let's form a single line and trot. Amy, cross the arena and get in behind Shelby, please. Emily, you behind her and Marcy last."

After they'd circled the arena several times in that order, Billy had Marcy take the lead. She began her pass to the inside, lengthening her horse's stride and keeping the proper distance from the horses on the rail. She overtook Shelby and then moved into the lead.

"Nice job, Marcy. Okay, Emily, you're next."

They followed the pattern until Shelby led once again. Billy called them down to a walk, allowing them and their horses to catch their breath.

"Very good flow, girls. Emily, be sure to keep the correct bend on the corners. He likes to get inverted sometimes, and that can give you problems on the jumper

field. You all got smooth transitions with proper application of the aids. Very clean job, very professional.”

Shelby led the next exercise, a half turn in reverse, which all the girls loved. It was a jumper move and when performed at a canter was very exciting to watch as well as ride. Shelby picked up the left lead and rode up the line, about ten feet out from the rail.

As they approached the top of the arena where they would normally follow the track to the left, she looked to her right, asked her horse for a lead change and sat up extra tall. Raising her right rein slightly and following with her left, they turned into the rail and continued down the arena in the opposite direction with no excitement or change of pace.

She kept the exercise smooth, steady and expertly performed. The other girls followed suit, now cantering right behind her. Shelby performed the turn again at the bottom of the ring.

After an hour of intense exercises, the lesson ended with girls and horses puffing.

“Excellent rides, all of you. Tomorrow we jump.” Smiling, Billy glanced at his watch. “See you in half an hour.”

Becky looked up as the office door banged behind Billy. She leaned back from her desk and hesitated a moment. This was the first time she’d seen him since he got back from L.A. and from the expression on his face, the news wasn’t what they wanted to hear.

“So, how did it go? Not so good, huh?”

“Nope, not so good at all. The doctor said there was nothing left to do. The bones in my pinky and ring finger are crushed beyond repair. He did say he might be able to bring more movement to my thumb and forefinger, but no promises.” He gave a sarcastic sniff, his expression twisted with bitterness. “That’ll be a great help with my riding.”

Sorrow filled her face as Becky shifted in her chair, hands gripping the armrests. She shook her head.

“I’m so sorry, Billy. I know you had high hopes with this doctor. What are you going to do next?”

“There’s nothing left to do. Even Mom seems resigned. I guess we can stop looking for a miracle.”

“Oh man, that just sucks.” Her voice quivered, eyes glittering. “Sucks.”

They sat together, quiet, remembering how it was before. Their eyes drifted to the walls, to the photos of Billy and Bitsy jumping huge fences at Showpark, taking victory gallops as the long tri-color fluttered from her bridle. Earlier photos of him at the Del Mar Fairgrounds riding Magic in the Maclay, of galloping ponies and endless championships, pictures from a time before he rode a strange horse into a big fence and crashed.

Tears spilled from her eyes as she glanced at him.

“I wish there was something to say.”

“I know, Becky. Me, too.”

Chapter 5

Lisa and Sadie made their way up the steps without incident. She opened the door and hollered hello as she stepped into the foyer.

Becky answered, calling her over to the sofa.

“Lisa, I want you to meet Mr. Martin. He teaches riding and several of the horse labs just like I do. Billy, this is Lisa Freeman.”

Lisa extended her hand, waiting for him to shake. He reached his left hand out to her, lightly touching her fingertips. She hesitated a moment, turned in Becky’s direction and then back to Billy.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Martin. Ms. Becky’s told me lots about you. I appreciate you giving me a chance to come here. I know you don’t normally take blind students. Thank you.”

Billy smiled at her and nodded. “You’re welcome, Lisa. I hope you enjoy your stay. Have you met all the girls?”

“Oh, yes, they’re all very nice. Did you know that I’m working with Angel for the summer? She’s just the sweetest mare. This afternoon I’m going to ride her.”

Billy shot a quick, questioning glance at Becky. She grinned, nodding her head. He turned back to Lisa.

“Are you sure you’re ready to do that? What if you fall?”

Lisa shrugged. "Well, what would you do if you fell? Just get up and climb back on, right? I'm just blind; my body is strong and I swear I've gained five pounds since I got here. All my pants are getting too tight." She chuckled. "I'll need to go to the mall pretty soon."

"Well, Angel is a wonderful mare and very gentle so I'm sure it'll be okay." He turned to Becky. "You'll have her on a leadline, right?"

"At first, for sure. As she gets familiar with the arena, learns its size and shape, I'm sure she and Angel can go it alone." She shook her head and brought her finger to her lips as Billy's eyebrows shot to his hairline.

Their conversation ended as the other girls came bounding down the stairs, hair still wet after their recent showers.

"Mr. Martin, that was a great lesson this morning," Marcy said, tucking her shirt into her shorts. "I love the half turns. I really felt Cocoa bending in the corners, too. When you do it right you can feel it; it just flows."

Emily nodded in agreement. "It's so smooth, and it has such a connected feel. When I first started doing them, Elvis had a fit. Then Ms. Becky started giving him regular massages and now he does them without making it an issue." She chuckled and gave Amy the elbow. "But he still doesn't like them."

"Okay girls, let's get into the school room. We have a fun topic today." Billy nodded at the kids as they walked down the hall. "Halter breaking and tying; loads of fun. Wait until you see the film."

They gathered on the large sofa in front of the TV as Billy turned on the DVD. Becky had already seen the film and decided to keep Lisa at the back of the room so she could narrate for her without bothering the other students.

"Okay," said Becky, voice just above a whisper, "here we go. They have a brand new baby here, so cute, probably only a couple of hours old. When they're first born,

foals have quite a little beard. The whole muzzle is covered with fine hairs and when they get excited or scared, the whiskers roll forward like a little shield of protection.”

“What’s it look like, Ms. Becky? What color is the baby?”

“It’s a little chestnut, much like Angel. Okay, here we go. One handler keeps the mare in a corner of the stall, which mama doesn’t like, and another grabs hold of the baby, which mama *really* doesn’t like. They put one arm around the chest and the other hand grabs its tail and pulls it straight up.”

The girls groaned in sympathy and Becky giggled. “Good grief, ladies, that doesn’t hurt. It just keeps the foal quiet.”

She lowered her voice again and continued to narrate as a young man approached the foal and slipped the halter over the tiny head. The baby called to his mother and chewed like crazy, begging for kindness and freedom.

“The halter is made of leather with rawhide laces holding it closed. It’s called a breakaway and it’s meant to come apart if the baby panics or gets hung up on something. Never ever use a nylon halter on a horse under six months old. It’s just asking for trouble.”

The film continued with three more foals and their first experience with a halter. They each reacted differently, one shrinking in the corner, finally collapsing into the straw in fright. One managed to jump out of the handler’s arms twice before he could grab the tail.

Next it showed a large tree with a bulky canvas protective padding about five feet up its trunk. A thick heavy rope wound itself around a high stout limb. On the end of the rope swinging three feet from the ground hung a heavy duty quick release clip. The tree, an old and very stout oak had no low branches a youngster could get caught in. Ten feet straight up, the trunk bore the scars of many a battle.

“These horses are about six months old. They already know how to lead, but now they need to learn that when they’re tied, they stay put and there is no escape. This is one battle you have to win right from the get-go. This time the horses are wearing unbreakable nylon halters lined with fleece and what looks like a little beanie cap to protect their poll in case they fall or bang their heads somehow.”

The handler snapped the halter to the quick release clip and stepped back, leaving the lead shank attached to the halter. The horse tried to follow, and coming to the end of the rope, he pulled back. He strained, snapping his head back and forth and then sat down, giving additional oomph to his pulls. Finally his hind legs slipped out from under him and he fell.

With his head elevated a good foot above the ground, he began to thrash. The handler picked up the trailing lead rope and then pulled the quick release. Freed from the hold, the horse jumped to his feet and immediately the handler snapped the quick release back on. The horse went down twice more before he gave in and stood tied.

The next horse backed up to the end of the rope, stood quiet for a moment then gave a hard pull. The pressure got to her and she bounded forward, slamming her chest against the canvas-padded tree trunk. Surprised, she stood stock still for a moment then charged to the side.

The rope held, snapping her head around and giving the filly a sharp jolt. She stepped forward into the slack, waited a moment, and then backed to the end of the rope and pulled lightly. The rope held and she gave up. She stepped forward again, relaxed one hip and began to chew on the canvas padding.

Billy turned the TV off and turned to the girls in question.

“So what did you think of the film? Do you see why it’s necessary to make sure, from the start, that your horse will stand tied?”

He glanced at the girls, eyebrows elevated. “Shelby, what did you learn today?”

“It confirms what I already thought. My parents do it that way, pretty much. I liked it that the handler left the lead line on the halter. If the horse had managed to break the tie rope, he’d be running around loose without it.”

Amy raised her hand, nodding. “I liked the quick release snap rather than a regular bull snap. If the horse goes down, how would you get enough slack in the rope to let him get up?”

“That’s a good point,” agreed Billy. “You would risk injury to horse and handler. Seems we all agree that a quick release snap is the way to go. How about the protective gear ... the leg wraps, fleece halters and cap. Overkill? Em?”

“It looks like my brother’s yarmulke.” Marcy chuckled, digging an elbow into Amy’s ribs.

Emily shot her a withering glance and everyone else laughed.

“I think it’s important to keep the horse from being hurt or scared, so covering the tree with canvas padding was a great idea. If they get freaked out, you know, and start jumping around, they could get hurt banging up against the bare tree.”

Amy nodded in agreement. “If they get frightened or injured when they’re learning to tie, they might fidget and dance around all their lives. You can get stepped on when they do that and when you’re shipping a horse, it can be lethal. Just imagine.”

Billy agreed. “It’s dangerous when a horse won’t stand quiet when he’s tied. We all have the same opinion on that. Now, how about dealing with the new babies? Have any of you ever been involved in halter breaking a foal?”

Emily nodded. “I didn’t do it, but they had a mare and baby at a place I boarded Elvis. She was born in a pasture and they had a heck of a time catching her. By the time they did, she’d already fallen twice. They made it look

a lot harder than this tape did, but in the end the horse tied and led just fine. Still, I would rather see it done without the drama.”

“That happens when amateurs do the breaking, regardless of how much skill they think they have. Speaking from experience, the best thing is to make your horse want to work with you from the very beginning. And remember, the younger they are when you start the groundwork the easier it is. They never get any smaller.”

* * *

“Okay. You comfortable?” Becky checked the stirrups one more time, making sure they were the right length for Lisa.

“Remember, if you get unsteady grab the strap around Angel’s neck. Here.” She guided Lisa’s hand up the mare’s neck again, then back to the pommel and the other strap. “You cool?”

The girl smiled, reaching down to pat her horse’s neck.

“Angel and I are wonderful. We’re good to go.”

“Super. Stand right here and let me get up on Champ.” Becky slipped her left foot into the stirrup, grabbed the cantle with her right hand and with the reins and a hank of mane in her left she hopped aboard. Nudging Champ over, she snapped the lead shank on Angel’s bit.

Angel, who normally would not tolerate another horse invading her space, walked sedately around the arena as though aware of the vulnerability in her rider.

“Do you think I’ll ever be able to trot?” Lisa turned toward Becky, voice light yet wistful.

“Yep. Before the end of the summer, I’ll teach you how to canter. You can learn a lot in three months.”

“Then can I jump? Do you think I can jump? Oh, how exciting.”

Becky hesitated, unsure how to word her reply, wanting to give Lisa all the encouragement in the world without building her up to impossible expectations.

“Well, not like a big jump, of course. But Angel has so much experience, I know you’ll be able to manage the cross rails. We’ll start with poles on the ground. It’ll give you the feeling of jumping, anyway, and we’ll go from there.”

They walked around the smallest of the rings for about twenty minutes before Becky said, “I think it’s time to teach you to do a two-point. It’s also called the galloping position. You start by leaning forward a bit and placing both hands on the top of the horse’s neck, right on the leather collar. Feel it? Good. Now open the angles of your knees a little bit and lift your butt out of the saddle.”

Without the ability to see it performed by another rider, Lisa rose straight up in the saddle, standing on her toes, arms stiff, handfuls of mane mixed in with the reins.

“That’s the basic idea. Now bring your shoulders back. Bend your upper body forward, from the hip not the waist, and keep your back flat and straight. Alright, that’s good. Just bend your knees a little more and lower your heels. Your crotch should be just above your saddle ... that’s right, good girl. Just let your weight sink into your heels and ankles and press your hands into her neck. Hey, there you go, you’re doing great.”

They made two circuits of the ring in two-point. Lisa smiled with relief when Becky told her to resume the normal, three-point position.

“Whew, that’s hard,” Lisa said, rubbing her side. “Kind of gave me a stitch, but I worked out of it. Man, this is even more fun than I dreamed it would be.”

Becky grinned. “That’s exactly how I feel about riding and I always will. I guess you never get over it no matter how long it’s been or how much you’ve done. If you

continue to improve like this, we can take a ride around the farm and try out some of the public trails.”

“Oh, man, can I go out with the other girls? They keep talking about how much fun they have out there. I’d love to do that.”

“We’ll see. The only problem is the girls go out pretty far and some of the community trails are steep and narrow. You’d have to be on a lead line for safety sake. The darned ATV’ers can make a lot of noise. But we’ll see. Like I’ve said before, nothing in the world is new to Angel and she’s really taking care of you, so chances are pretty good, but don’t hold me to them, huh?”

“Can I ask you something, Ms. Becky?”

“Well, sure, anything.”

“The other night I heard the girls talking about Mr. Martin. They said he used to be a great rider, a champion. They said he was so good, he went all over the country to show and qualify to ride on the Olympic team and he probably would have made it. Then a horse fell on him and messed up his hand so he can’t ride anymore. Is that true?”

“Yes. The horse misjudged the distance to the fence and crashed. He fell on Billy’s hand and smashed it up real bad. He’s had all kinds of operations, at least half a dozen, but there’s nothing more they can do for him.”

Lisa frowned a moment. “That still doesn’t explain why he can’t ride anymore.”

“Well, it’s not that he can’t ... he just doesn’t want to. I guess when you’ve ridden at such a high level it’s difficult to be satisfied with just a trail ride.”

“So he just ... like, quit? Just gave up?” The expression on her face said it all.

“That’s not a winning attitude. Where the heck do you think I’d be if I just quit?”

“He had such high hopes, Lisa, and it’s only been a couple of years. I’m sure he’ll come around, especially since they can’t operate again. He just needs to get his interests

back. Problem with horses is it takes two good hands.” Becky glanced at the girl, touched by her concern. “He loves to teach, so he gets to work around horses that way.”

“But he still doesn’t get to ride. He just stays on the sidelines.”

Shrugging, Becky said, “Well, it’s something he’ll have to deal with. So, if you’ve got your breath back, let’s reverse and do it again.”

* * *

Lisa and Sadie sat at the pool under a shady umbrella. The rest of the girls rode in the arena with Becky, working on gymnastics. This was Lisa’s free period; she knew it was Billy’s, too. She also knew he spent much of his free time in the pool doing laps or under an umbrella reading and grading reports.

Even if Sadie hadn’t whined a greeting, Lisa’s ear picked up his footsteps halfway down the walkway. His flip-flops clicked down the walk and onto the pool deck.

“Good morning, Mr. Martin. How are you?” She heard his slight intake of breath and hoped she hadn’t startled him. She adjusted her dark goggles and smiled.

“I’m great, Lisa, thanks. Beautiful morning, isn’t it?”

“Sure is. Are you going to swim? If you are, can I go in with you? I can’t go in alone.”

“Sure, that’s fine with me. I love to swim in the morning. It starts the day out with a bang.”

Lisa told Sadie to sit and stay, and then turned to face him.

“I can jump in from the edge of the pool. Then if you’ll get me turned in the right direction, I’ll do laps while you swim or whatever you do.”

“I do laps, too, so we can work out together.” He placed his brace on the table, led her to the edge of the pool

and jumped in with her. She popped up next to him and giggled.

Billy turned her toward the long side of the pool and said, "Straight ahead. I'll swim with you until you get the feel of the pool length."

They swam together, increasing their pace until by the third lap they were at competition speed. Billy stayed with Lisa until she stopped after the sixth lap.

"Whew! Oh, that was fun, Mr. Martin. I always prefer to swim against someone, even if they're giving me a handicap." She chuckled between pants of breath.

"Aha," Billy said, "who was giving to whom? You had me stretching. Do you swim competitively?"

"My old school had several blind students. We swam against each other. It was great fun."

They did several more laps, extending the pace. When they got out of the pool, Billy walked Lisa back to her table. He pulled out a chair for her.

"Mind if I join you?"

She flashed an extraordinary smile, beautiful teeth gleaming in the sun. "I'd like that very much."

Billy settled in the chair, toweling off his hair.

"How are you doing here, Lisa? You're getting around just fine and I noticed you riding off the lead line with Ms. Becky the other day. Good girl."

"Oh, Mr. Martin, I'm having a ball and so is Angel. Ms. Becky says it's because she's a mare; maternal caretakers, she calls them. I'm sure she's right about that, plus, I just think Angel likes me. We've become good friends." She paused a moment.

"Tell me about your riding experiences. How old were you when you started to ride?"

Smiling wide, he told her about riding with Becky on the Doubletree team, his old trainer, Karen Allen, and her daughters, Jessi, who served Mystic as tennis coach, and Blair, Angel's owner.

“What about in the beginning when you were little. Did you ride ponies?”

“Oh, yes. I started riding at four, so ponies were a part of my life until I hit twelve or so. I had one named Tango Tilly.” He smiled when Lisa giggled at the name.

“I didn’t name her, she came with it. I called her Tilly. Anyway, she was a caretaker like Angel and totally honest. We had such fun. I remember when Blair, Melanie, Shievon and I would gallop on the trails. I can still see us jumping over rocks, fallen logs; half the time we rode bareback. It’s a wonder any of us survived.” He chuckled at the memories. “No helmets, if you can imagine.”

“Did you always ride English and jump and all? There are so many other ways to ride.”

“I never gave a thought to anything but jumping. When I first started out, I rode pony hunters. That’s where they judge the horse, how he jumps, pace maintenance, stuff like that. I started doing equitation and medals when I turned twelve. That’s just the opposite, where they judge only the rider, his style and ability.”

“You won the Maclay,” she said, awe in her voice. “The biggest of all the medals.”

“Well, not exactly. I won the qualifier at the Del Mar Nationals, but at the time, I didn’t want to go back to New York and ride at Madison Square Garden. Now I regret that decision, but there’s nothing for it. Hindsight.”

“Always twenty-twenty,” she murmured.

He turned to her, amusement in his voice. “So they say.”

They sat in silence for a while, each lost in thought.

“After the Maclay, is that when you decided to try for the Olympic team?”

“No. I did almost three more years in the jumpers, serving my dues. I made the decision going into my junior year in high school. They have tutors available at all the A Circuit shows, so I didn’t miss a thing with my education.

My trainer had three other kids my age in his barn and we studied together. Actually, it was a very exciting time for me. I spent almost four years like that, very successful and fulfilling. Then....”

Billy glanced at his watch and rose. “I have to run; my class starts in five minutes. Can’t have the teacher be late. Do you need help getting to the barn or wherever?”

“Oh no, we’re cool. I’ve got the lay of the land. This was fun, Mr. Martin. Maybe we can do it again tomorrow?”

“You bet. See you later.”

Lisa sat in front of her computer, about to put her plan into action, a plan she’d been mulling over for almost a week. She bounced the mouse around and a voice said, “You’ve got mail!”

She typed in the word *search*, followed by *cutting horse* and smiled as she heard the machine begin to click. Before long, a small stack of papers gathered at the mouth of her printer. She picked them up, running her fingers across the page face.

Lisa typed again and shortly, three more sheets of paper emerged from the printer. They were photos.

Several emotions flitted across her face, one so wistful as to be almost sad. She read on, grinning now and then as her fingers flew across the papers.

Becky called hello as she came in the front door. She popped her head into the bedroom.

“Hey there, what are you doing?”

She walked over to Lisa and stared at the pile of what looked like blank pages. Closer inspection showed the raised Braille dots. She picked up one sheet, clearly able to discern the picture it portrayed. A horse, so far down on his front end that his elbows almost touched the ground, stared down a rather substantial cow, blocking her from returning to her buddies.

“Wow, that’s really something else.” She glanced from the paper to Lisa’s computer in awe. “That must be state-of-the-art to produce this. I can see the picture, too.”

“This is a very special computer. It translates anything I want off the net and prints it out in Braille. It’s a Howtek Pixelmaster, a prototype. Instead of regular ink, they use a plastic-based ink that stays liquid until it hits the paper and then it sets up immediately. Cool, huh?”

“I guess! I bet they don’t come cheap.”

“Like I said when we first met, my parents give me every opportunity to be normal, and this computer is an example. They may cost a fortune now, but in another couple of years, they’ll be within reason. Can you see the picture, too?”

“Oh yes, the rows of dots show everything like an outline or something. Way cool.”

She patted the girl’s shoulder, headed for the kitchen and asking, “How about a salad for lunch. I have chicken left over. Sound good?”

“Sounds great, Ms. Becky. Did you have a fun lesson?”

Lisa signed off, rose from her chair and walked around her desk. Steady determined steps brought her to the doorway. She heard the refrigerator door slam and turned in the direction of the kitchen. Quick confident strides led her to the end of the hall.

“Yes, a very good lesson. That Shelby is amazing. She rides like she’s part of the horse. Kinda reminds me of Melanie, one of the Doubletree riders. Like they’re welded together or something. Great talent.”

“How about Mr. Martin. Was he a good rider?”

Becky chuckled. “Good? More like fantastic. He’s another one with that instinctual feel for a horse. You can’t teach it. Actually, you can’t learn it. You either have it or you don’t.”

By that time, Lisa had taken her chair at the table, Sadie by her side. Becky placed a salad bowl in front of her and a glass of lemonade above the tip of her knife in the familiar pattern.

“I have Blue Cheese, Thousand Island or oil and vinegar. What’ll you have?”

“Blue Cheese at nine o’clock, please.”

Becky took her seat, pushing the basket of rolls closer to Lisa. “Bread products at eleven.”

Lisa snickered. “Ms. Becky, you crack me up ... pray tell, what sort of bread products?”

“Leftovers.”

They both laughed.

“Nah, they’re fresh from the bakery, those crispy hard French rolls we like so much. Here.” She broke one in half and little specks of crust flew in all directions. Buttering it, she placed it on Lisa’s plate along with several slices of chicken.

“Did you have a nice swim this morning? I saw you talking with Mr. Martin.” She stared at Lisa, correctly reading the blush that crept up her neck.

“Girl, you don’t fool me for a minute. I know what you’re up to. You’re gonna make Billy ride again, aren’t you?” Round aqua eyes filled with quick tears. Becky dashed them away and cleared her throat.

“Anything I can do to help the cause?” She listened in silence as Lisa set out her plan, and by the time she’d finished, Becky nodded in encouragement, convinced it could work.

Lisa continued to cruise through the net. The next site dealt with western competitions, specifically reining and cutting. Reining patterns, much like jump courses, challenged each entry to perform a series of patterns at different speeds and the winner was often as subjective as the hunter winners. Shrugging, she hit the next entry and

began printing out the information. Billy might like the technical aspects of reining, but his comments about hunters made her wonder.

The next site ... Cutting.

Enthralled, her fingers flew over the pages she'd just printed. "...Points awarded solely on the ability of the horse to keep the designated cow from returning to its herd. Interference by the rider with reins is strictly forbidden although subtle leg cues are allowed. Only one hand may be used on the reins at any time during the performance. The other remains stationary, either on the horn or across the waist..."

Yes!

Chapter 6

Amy stared out the window, hands on her hips, head cocked to the side. “That’s impossible, Emily. Ridiculous. I can’t believe you even said it.”

Emily glowered at her friend.

“So? Like what? That’s four mornings in a row. A private swim, just the two of them? What’s with that?”

Emily stood by the window, gazing at the pool where Billy and Lisa swam laps.

“When was the last time he swam alone with you? What do you have to do to get a little attention around here?”

“But it’s different for Lisa and you know it. She’s blind, for Pete’s sake. Ease up. She’s not allowed in the pool alone and she misses out on riding with us. I see no reason why Mr. Martin shouldn’t swim with her when they’re both down there together. What should he do? Just ignore her? Besides, who says it’s private?”

“Garbage. She has the hots for him. Check out how she looks at him and then she grins. And see that?” An expression of outrage on her face, she pointed out the window as Billy patted Lisa’s shoulder upon rising.

“Next thing you know, he’ll be kissing her goodbye!”

“That’s it,” Amy said, grabbing her racket. “You’re watching too many soap operas for my taste. You’re out of

your mind. Come on, we're going to be late for tennis." She glanced out the window again and shook her head.

"Besides, there's no *how* in how she looks at him, Em. She's blind, remember?"

Amy stormed down the steps, grabbed an apple from the kitchen fruit bowl and headed for the tennis courts, Emily right behind her.

"Why does that seem so impossible to you? Mr. Martin isn't all *that* much older than we are and I don't think he has a girlfriend. As for Lisa, she wouldn't be able to tell how old he is! Maybe she's looking for a daddy figure."

"He's like ten years older and that's the least of it. *Listen* to yourself, Em. You sound like a writer for some tabloid. Honest, I don't know you anymore."

The hollow sound of returned tennis balls, squeaky shoes and explosions of breath held the promise of a good match in progress.

The girl, although small, packed a powerful return as she slammed the ball over the net.

A grin of approval swept across the face of her opponent. With a shake of his head, he returned with a backhand move that should have put the ball on the line and out of her reach.

Bending low, Jessi swept the ball high. It landed just on the other side of the net. Jeff never had a chance.

"Ya sure are gettin' good at this," he said, smiling.

"*Getting* good? Stuff it, dude. I beat you half the time." She chuckled. "I have a great coach."

They turned to greet Amy and Emily.

"Hey, Mr. Young, Ms. Young."

Jeff nodded at them and grinned.

"Hey, girls. We have mixed doubles on the schedule today."

"I'll team up with you, Emily." Jessi hopped the net, nodding to Amy to join Jeff.

They played for an hour, perfecting returns, working on moves they hoped would put them in the winning spot come tournament time.

Exhausted, Amy and Emily headed back to their room for a shower and lunch.

With a chuckle, Amy glanced over her shoulder. "Now, if I were to develop a taste for older guys, Mr. Young would be at the top of the list. What a hottie. Dreamy eyes, don't you think? And that accent, not to mention a bod to die for. Sweet."

"Ha!" Emily snorted and popped Amy on the butt with her racket. "We'd have another blind student in school if Ms. Jessi ever caught wind of that. She's little, but whew, check out the muscles on her arms. Besides, looks aren't involved with Lisa, as you *sooo* delicately pointed out earlier, and Mr. Martin isn't running away."

Amy stopped halfway up the stairs and turned.

"You're serious. You really are wigged out, y'know. Think of the trouble you're starting with that kind of talk. *God!*"

They entered the room and faced each other.

"This isn't exactly an unheard of concept, Amy. Stories like this are on the net all the time. Why couldn't it happen here?"

"Out of your everlovin' mind. Yes, you are." Amy headed for the shower, banging the door closed.

"Who cares?" Emily muttered under her breath. Their incoming mail box contained everything from letters to new assignments and notices of upcoming special events. It threatened to overflow onto the table. Sorting everything into two piles, she sighed.

No mail for me. Again.

She hadn't heard from her parents for more than a month. Her lips pursed with bitterness and she tasted tears. *It's just not fair!*

* * *

“Mr. Martin,” Lisa said, slipping the towel over her shoulders. “Do you think I’ll ever be able to take a lesson from you?”

“Why? Aren’t you happy with Ms. Becky?”

“Oh, sure, of course I am. It’s just that the other kids take lessons from both of you. I thought it might be fun. Of course, well, if you don’t want to, never mind.” Her lips tightened.

“It has nothing to do with wanting, Lisa. There’s a good reason why. I can’t ride and I can’t effectively use a lunge line.”

“Well, would that have to matter? Angel is real quiet; she never does anything bad.”

“I know she is, but I can’t take that chance, Lisa. She could spook, something could happen and she’d be loose with you aboard.”

Cheeks turning pink, she said, “Well. She wouldn’t be exactly *loose*; I know how to use the reins. You haven’t seen me ride lately, that’s for sure. I can canter, I can do a two-point and I can fall with the best of them. Twice, so far. I’ll take the chance. Besides, you could ride if you wanted to.”

“Well, I don’t. It’s out of the question, Lisa. Now, please excuse me. I have a class coming up.” To soften his words he patted her shoulder then turned away.

* * *

Becky watched the kids file into the barn. Today’s lesson: stretching exercises. Her gelding, Champ stood in the cross ties, smacking his lips at Becky, hoping for treats.

“Okay, girls, gather around the near side here and let’s get started. Stretching exercises help to guard against injury. This one stretches the leg and shoulder.”

Becky moved to the front of the horse, stroking his shoulder. She bent over and grasped his right leg behind the knee with both hands. He lifted his knee and she transferred her grip to his hoof, cupping his heel. She raised the leg a bit at a time until Champ leaned into her and stretched.

With a shudder he pushed out and down and sighed, his head lowered. She performed the same exercise on his left foreleg and moved to left hind leg and picked up his hoof.

“Now watch closely. Cup your hand on the hoof and fetlock and gently, a bit at a time, bring the hoof up to the belly. Never push hard and never force or go quick. Less is better. Let the horse tell you how high to go.”

Still cupping the hoof, she brought it toward the rear. Champ stretched his hind leg out like a ballerina, stretched and shuddered again.

“This is one happy horse,” Becky said. She lowered his hoof and repeated the stretch on the other hind leg.

“Another great exercise is the bow.” She pulled another carrot slice from her pocket and unhooked the cross ties. Standing by his left side, she stuck the carrot between his front legs to get his attention. She retreated under his belly until he’d stretched his head between his legs, nose almost touching the ground.

“Remember he’s not a rubber band. You just want that good tight rounding through the back and neck. This one is great, too.”

She showed Champ another carrot, then drew the tasty morsel towards his shoulder and down toward his knee. Without moving his legs, Champ followed her fingers, neck elongated, sniffing for that carrot. He took it from her fingers, enjoyment and satisfaction clear in every expression. She walked to his other side.

“What you do on one side, *always* do on the other.” Becky went through her repertoire of stretches. When they’d finished with Champ, Becky put him away while Shelby went to get Prince. Each girl would perform the exercises on her own horse.

* * *

It was just before four when Becky dragged herself into her house. She walked into the kitchen, pulled a soda from the fridge and headed for her room.

“Hey, Lisa. How are you?”

She stretched out on her bed, leaning against the wall. “I’ve been better.”

“I take it Mr. Martin said no, huh?”

“Exactly. He said he couldn’t ride or use the lunge line. I told him he could ride if he wanted. He has a heck of a lot more going for him than I do.” Lisa stared into space, still as a stone.

“What did he say?”

“He told me it was out of the question. The conversation ended there. He just left me sitting at the pool.”

They paused a moment, quiet.

“I have a favor to ask you, Ms. Becky. Would you find five or six photos of cutting horses in action? I have the names of some magazines to check. Probably can find them at the tack store.”

“What’s your plan?”

“Plan B, I guess. At first I hoped to guilt him into it. Like, if a blind girl can ride why can’t you? Stuff like that. I’m afraid I was too pushy. Maybe I can intrigue him into it with pictures and enthusiasm. If that doesn’t work, how do you think he’d react to a full-blown tantrum?”

“Shoot, Lisa, I don’t know. He’s an only child. Why?”

“That’s Plan C.”

“Oh dear. Well, I told Anna we’d be up for dinner. I’m too exhausted to cook. That okay with you?”

“Whatever. I’m too depressed to eat.”

Becky’s lips twitched. “Billy will be there. It might give you an opportunity to put Plan B into action without being too pushy. Start slow, build up later with the pictures. The other girls will be there, too. We might just trick him into cutting. I’ll run down to Mary’s and pick up some magazines.”

Lisa perked up, a smile on her lips. She rose and nodded at Becky.

“I already had my shower. I’ll just change into something nice.”

* * *

The girls sat at the table, talking about the upcoming cruise. Billy had invited the students and their parents to celebrate July 4th with a dinner cruise on his parent’s yacht. The girls chatted about sailing and water sports while Anna placed dinner on the table.

Lisa sat next to Becky, Marcy on her other side. The conversation switched from their upcoming sea cruise to the jumping clinic next week at Showpark. Several big-name trainers had volunteered their time to charity and every rider in the area planned to attend.

“I’m so excited,” Marcy said. “I just heard from my folks and they’re coming down for the cruise. They haven’t seen me for more than ten pounds.”

The girls laughed, passing the bowls along.

“Do they do clinics like this for western sports like reining or cutting?” Lisa turned toward the other girls, waiting.

Amy shrugged. “I don’t know about around here, but they do a lot of cutting and reining up in Temecula. A girl I used to go to school with rode there.”

“I bet there’s a lot of it going on down here, too,” Becky said. “We just don’t have much contact with other riding disciplines.”

“Check over at Mary’s Tack,” Shelby said. “They know about everything that’s going on in the county.”

The girls chuckled in agreement. Mary’s was the local gossip mill for all things pertaining to horses.

Amy leaned forward, eyes wide. “Why, Lisa? What’s your interest in cutting?”

“I don’t know for sure. Just sounds like a ball, don’t you think? I downloaded a couple of pictures from my computer about cutting. Ms. Becky could tell what they looked like. Want to see?” She pulled the folded papers from her pocket and placed them in the middle of the table.

The girls passed them around, commenting about the Braille pictures and questioning Lisa about her computer.

Emily took a cursory glance at them and then tossed them back on the table.

“How incredibly weird, Lisa. I don’t see you doing very well in that sport.”

All eyes turned toward Emily.

“What the heck does that mean, Em?” Billy stared at her, eyebrows up.

Before she could answer, Amy turned toward her best friend.

“What a strange thing to say. It sounds to me like you have more to add.”

“Nah, really don’t. Even talking about it seems dumb to me.” Emily shrugged and continued to eat, refusing to make eye contact with anyone.

Shelby nodded, glancing around the table. “I don’t mean to hurt your feelings, Lisa, but I have to agree with Emily. I can’t imagine you being able to learn to ride that well. Cutting horses move exceptionally fast and they, like, dart from side to side, and what if you came off and got run

over by the cow?" She shrugged at Lisa. "Besides, I don't see Angel cutting cows at her age or in her condition."

Lisa chuckled and then turned toward Shelby and shook her head.

"Oh, I never planned to do it myself. It was just something I came up with while cruising the net. It caught my interest. All kinds of horse info is available."

"I had a friend in Malibu who rode cutting horses. I used to watch her all the time. It's a fabulous sport and the horses are wonderful." Marcy pointed at the pictures. "It's so exciting to see how they work the cow. The rider basically just sits there. Actually, if they do anything much at all, they're scored down. It's all judged on the horse."

Billy leaned back in his chair, watching the dynamics of the conversation. More than cutting, some subtle undercurrent ran this conversation; he couldn't put his finger on it. A glance at Becky told him she was in the loop, whatever that meant. He returned his attention to Lisa.

Amy changed the subject, talking once again about the yacht cruise. "Will we be able to see fireworks off the coast, Mr. Martin? I'm so excited."

Marcy and Shelby threw in similar comments, but Emily did not contribute. She gazed at Lisa through lowered eyelashes. Every once in a while she'd glance at Billy, and then quickly back to Lisa.

Dessert finished, Billy prepared to leave.

"This was a lot of fun, girls. We'll do it again. Becky, can I walk you and Lisa home?"

Emily pursed her lips and tossed her napkin on the table.

"I have a book to finish." Without another word she left the room, stomped up the steps and closed her door with a bang.

The girls all rose from the table, pushing in their chairs and making small talk.

Amy followed them as they headed for the TV in the living room. She didn't follow Emily upstairs, not in the mood to have another argument about Lisa and Mr. Martin. After two incredibly stupid sitcoms, she stretched her arms over her head and rose.

"I can't believe I'm sitting here watching this crap when I'm in the middle of a great book. I think I'll go upstairs to finish it." She nodded at her friends and bid them goodnight.

Amy opened the door, expecting to see Emily either reading in bed or working on her computer. Instead she found the room in darkness.

"Are you asleep?" she said, voice just above a whisper as she headed for her desk, hand already reaching for the lamp.

"Don't turn the light on."

Startled, Amy glanced around the room, squinting, trying to locate Emily from the direction of her voice. In the far corner, next to the window, a shadowy outline moved.

"Are you okay?"

Her responses, more guttural sounds than speech, gave Amy the creeps. She walked across the room and sat on the floor next to her friend.

"Something is really wrong, isn't it, Em? I want to help. You've been so quiet. It's been days since I last saw you smile. Can't you tell me what it is?"

"I feel so bad I can hardly talk."

"But why? Is it that time of the month or is something really wrong?" She reached for her friend, slipped an arm across Emily's bare shoulders and gave her a hug. "God, you're freezing cold. Where's your robe?"

"It's over on my bed."

“This is really bizarre, y’know, sitting in the dark with you half naked. You’re creeping me out. I’d like to turn on the light, Em. It’s kinda spooky like this.”

“Please don’t.”

The voice, detached and distant, made the hairs on the back of Amy’s neck rise. She picked up the robe, crossed the floor and gave it to Emily. She made no effort to take it, remaining still as stone. Amy bent over and draped it across her friend’s shoulders.

“I’ll be right back. I have to go to the bathroom.” Emily did not respond as Amy walked away.

It wasn’t until she was about to turn the bathroom light off that she noticed red smears on the side of her shirt. Amy looked closer, astonished.

What the heck did I lean up against? Goosebumps rose on her arms. *Oh, no, not again.* She opened the door with a whish.

“I’m turning on the lights right now.”

Emily sat in the corner, legs drawn up to her chin. Her forehead rested on her knees, bare arms wrapped protectively around her legs. A series of cuts on both forearms had dried, ragged and uneven.

“What’s wrong now, Em? Why did you start this up again? Please talk to me.”

Emily raised her head to stare at her friend, eyes dead, devoid of emotion. She shook her head.

“Come on, you can tell me anything. I’m your best friend, for Pete’s sake. What is it? Did your mother take a turn for the worse? Did you get bad news from home?”

With a strangled cry, Emily said, “I haven’t heard from my parents since Memorial day. Not a postcard, not even a call. They don’t care what happens to me or how I feel. I hate them all, but I hate myself the most.”

Quicker than she could blink, Amy saw a line of blood start as Emily cut her arm again.

“You either hand me that razor right now or I’m getting Ms. Becky. You know what happens then. They’ll send you home and you’ll end up in the hospital again. Do you want that?”

“No,” Emily moaned, shaking her head slowly from side to side.

“Give.” Amy took the bloodstained razor, a look of disgust on her face. “I thought you’d stopped this stuff.”

Amy went to the bathroom and returned with a wet washcloth, a bottle of peroxide and a towel. Kneeling by her friend, she gently cleaned the cuts, patting them dry with the towel. She helped Emily to her feet and led her to bed.

“Things will look better in the morning, Em. Do you want to see Dr. Walker? Maybe she can help you feel good again.”

“That’s probably a good idea, but we’ll have to tell Ms. Becky. We’ll need a ride into town.”

“I’ll talk to her. She’s about as understanding as they come and I don’t see why we have to tell her you’re cutting yourself again. Let’s just tell her you’re feeling bad and need to talk to Dr. Walker.”

Tears filled her eyes. “You’re a great friend, Amy. Best ever. You’re the only person in the world that cares about me.”

“Oh, Em, that’s not true. Your parents love you, so do your brothers and sister. It’s just that your mom is screwed up right now and everyone is concentrating on her. Are they coming to the party Saturday night?”

“I haven’t a clue. I wrote Mom a letter, told her about the cruise and all, but they never wrote or called, so I guess the answer is no. Not Stan, for sure. He’ll be at Arrowhead with his college friends, like every July 4th, and Laurie? Since she’s only a little kid, I doubt she’ll be coming alone.”

“We’ll have a great time, just the two of us. My folks will be on the Hamilton’s cruise like every year, so they aren’t coming. Politics, y’know.”

With a dismissive wave for all parents, she said, “Just as well. I won’t have to listen to them bicker and you won’t have to hold your breath wondering if your mother is going to get drunk and flip out and embarrass you in front of your friends. All in all, I like it better this way.”

“No you don’t.”

Amy paused. “Well, normal parents would make a difference, for sure, but given the hand we have to play with, yes, I like it better this way.”

Chapter 7

Amy woke to a beautiful sunrise. She glanced across the room at the empty bed and then at the open bathroom door.

“Emily?”

Amy stretched, trying to remember if there was an early class today. Something got Emily up early, and that was strange in itself. She slept in whenever she could. The bedside clock told her it was almost six.

Last night came back to her and a cold jolt of fear swept her body. She jumped out of bed in a flash. The empty bathroom showed no sign of recent use.

Amy walked to Emily’s corner of the room. Her cell phone usually sat on her table, recharging, but not this morning. She noticed her favorite yellow backpack and matching purse were not in their usual spots, but Emily had so many clothes there was no way to tell what she might have on.

She hurried across the room, snatched up her cell and placed the call. Voice mail. She left Emily a quick message then turned to the bureau, hastily slipping into a pair of shorts and a yellow and white top.

Amy burst into the kitchen to find Anna making tortillas. “Have you seen Emily this morning?”

“No, *senorita*. Nobody awake yet except the grooms. You want hot tortilla? Coffee?”

“I’ll be back in a little bit. Right now I have to find Emily.”

She waved hello to the grooms as they tossed hay to the horses. As she neared Miguel, she said, “Have you seen Emily this morning?”

“Not yet, *senorita*. Are you having early lesson?”

A shrill whinny rang out as her horse, Moose, called hello.

“Hey there, good buddy. Have you seen Emily this morning?” She scratched his cheeks, giggling in spite of her state of mind as the gelding snuffled her shirt for carrots.

Elvis popped his head over his stall door and nickered.

“Well, at least you’re here. I half expected to find you gone, too.” She stroked the silvery neck while her eyes searched the inside of his stall. She wouldn’t put it past Emily to be hiding in a corner.

But she was not.

A little quiver of fear ran up Amy’s back as she hurried to the pool.

She’s probably waiting to swim with Lisa and Mr. Martin. It’ll be a threesome this morning.

Her eyes searched the empty deck. She checked the dressing room, finding it empty as well. She collapsed into a chair, berating herself.

“I should have gone to Ms. Becky last night. I should have said something right away. Oh, God! Where can she be?”

She ran through the list of possibilities. *Home? Not likely, although if not there, where?* Amy began to shiver. She pulled her cell from her pocket and dialed.

“Emily, it’s around seven. I don’t know how long you’ve been gone or where you are, but if you don’t call me right back, I’m going to tell Ms. Becky and she’s going to tell your folks and ... you call me right back!”

Amy stared at the phone in accusation, willing it, demanding that it ring. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Lisa and Sadie walking toward the pool. Amy called a sullen greeting to them, surprised to see a genuine smile of pleasure on Lisa's lips.

"Hi, Amy. Are you going in to swim? I can't go in alone, but maybe I could tag along with you?"

"I'm just sitting in the sun a minute. I don't have my suit on, but I can watch you."

"Oh, well, if you can't go in, I'll just wait for Mr. Martin." She hesitated then turned toward Amy.

"Is everything okay? I don't mean to butt in, but you sound sorta strange, different."

"It's probably my allergies kicking in." She rose. "See you later, I'm going to get some breakfast."

Amy hurried across the pool deck to the kitchen, afraid Lisa would ask her to bring something back. She wasn't ready to talk about Emily. She just needed a quiet place to think.

She snagged a large cup from the counter, filled it with coffee and headed back up to her room. She sat on Emily's bed, staring out the window. Her stomach turned over and she put the cup on the windowsill, shuddering.

I am going to strangle her when she gets back. Really, I am.

Tears formed in her large hazel eyes, paused a moment on thick black lashes and then tumbled down her cheeks.

An hour passed in slow, dragging steps while Amy wrestled with herself, unsure what to do. Her biggest fear, after wondering about Emily, was what Becky would do. The last time Emily cut herself, she'd been told in no uncertain terms that Mystic Ridge was not equipped to deal with severe emotional or behavioral problems.

Ms. Becky and Mr. Martin were kind but firm. If Emily continued to cut herself, she would have to leave. It

had been a strong motivating force and for a while, Amy had high hopes. Now those hopes died.

I can't wait any longer. I have to tell Ms. Becky. Sick at heart, she headed down the stairs to the office.

Becky sat at her desk enjoying her first cup of coffee. She took an appreciative sniff, then another sip and placed the cup in its saucer. She went over the guest list for the cruise one more time. Most of the old gang would be there and the students, of course, but only two sets of parents. Emily's parents had not even responded, and Amy's mother called to say they'd be away and unable to attend.

Surprised to get an affirmative from Shelby's folks, she chuckled. They always seemed to be on the road, but not this time. Becky looked forward to talking to them again. With their life-of-the-party personalities, Kenny and Nancy, renowned judges in the hunter/jumper world, would keep the party lively. They always had hysterical stories to tell about the rounds they'd seen and the riders they'd judged, both famous and infamous.

Lisa's parents would also attend. All together, she had twenty-two guests to plan for. Chef handled all the preparation and food service and Bob always attended to the drinks, so all she had left to do was some minor decorating. The menu pleased her, simple and elegant at the same time.

She got a kick out of the girls. In many ways they were sophisticated beyond their years, and their *been there ~ done that* blasé attitudes belonged more to kids in their late teens. At the same time, they still liked to do the things regular kids did, including shooting fireworks off the bow and playing with sparklers.

The knock on the door startled her.

"Come in."

A downcast Amy hurried to the chair opposite the desk, wringing her hands.

“I hope I’m not interrupting, Ms. Becky, but I have to tell you something.” Just then, her cell went off. She flipped it open. *Emily*.

“I’ll be right back. I have to take this.”

Amy hit the button and charged for the door. Voice clear as a snake’s hiss, she said, “Where the hell are you? I’m scared to death!”

“I’m fine, Amy. I just called to say goodbye. You’re the best friend I ever had and I hope you’ll do something special for me.”

“Sure, I will, yes. What?”

“Please take care of Elvis. Don’t let my folks just sell him. See if you can find the right kid for him. Okay?”

“*What?* Oh, Emily, please. Whatever you’ve got planned, please don’t do it. Please come back to school. No one even knows you’re gone. We can go on just like....”

“I can’t come back. I just want to go away by myself. To think. Promise about Elvis?”

Tears choked Amy’s throat. Her voice sounded more like a squeak.

“Yes, I’ll take care of him, but Em, please! What about me? *Us?* We’re best friends. We can get through anything together, right? Em?” The cell lost connection. Amy started to cry.

Becky watched the tableau play out, unable to hear Amy’s voice, but easily able to read her facial expressions. She was upset about something, very upset. Becky saw her mouth Emily’s name and glanced at the clock.

It was almost nine and she couldn’t remember seeing Emily this morning. Not at the breakfast table and not at the barn. An uneasy feeling swept Becky as she saw Amy burst into tears.

“Oh, crap.”

She headed for the door, long strides carrying her to Amy’s side.

“What’s the matter?” She slid an arm around the girl’s waist. “Come back inside and tell me what’s wrong. Is it Emily?”

The sobs increased in intensity and Becky’s heart sank as they entered the office.

“Okay, Amy, stop crying, hon, and tell me what’s wrong. Did Emily run away? Did she start that cutting again?”

A series of quick nods, followed by a strangled yes got Becky’s heart racing.

“When? How bad? How long has this been goin’ on?”

Amy continued to sob, speechless.

Frowning, Becky said, “Good grief, girl, get hold of yourself. I need to talk with you and I expect the truth with real, complete answers. Come on!”

Amy grabbed several tissues, blew her nose and sniffed. “I found her doing it last night. She’s just so sad and lonely, Ms. Becky. Her parents ignore her and she thinks nobody loves her.” More tears followed.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Well, it was late. And Em promised not to do it again. In fact, she wanted to see Dr. Walker this morning. We planned to ask you for a ride into town. Anyway, sometime during the night, well, before six, anyway, she ran away.”

“Is she fighting with her parents? Anything specific? Is she having problems with someone here at school?”

“Well, she pretends she’s jealous of the attention Mr. Martin pays to Lisa, but it’s just a cover to hide the truth. It’s all her parents fault; they make her crazy. Her mother is a self-absorbed drunk who shops for a living. She’s always finding fault, fighting with Em. Nothing pleases her, no matter how hard Emily tries, so she doesn’t even try anymore.” Amy wiped her eyes again and shook her head.

“Her dad is a copout who just stays at his office and works all the time. He thinks if he makes lots of money and pays all the bills, that’s all he needs to do. They act like Emily doesn’t exist.”

Becky leaned back in her chair, uncertain what to do next.

“Okay, Amy, let’s keep this to ourselves until Mr. Martin and I decide what to do.”

“Yes, ma’am. None of the other girls felt close with her anyway, so they don’t need to know.” Amy rose slowly and walked to the door, head down, shoulders slumped.

Becky sat across the conference table from Billy, catching him up on the latest problems with Emily.

“We have to call her parents. They need to be involved right away.”

He nodded. “I’ll do it. Do you have their number?”

Becky flipped through the index file, extracting Emily’s personal information card. She handed it to Billy, who started dialing.

“Mr. Morgan, this is Billy Martin, from Mystic Ridge. Emily’s school? Yes, we just discovered that your daughter left her room sometime before dawn. No, I haven’t ... yes, I think it would be a good idea for you and your wife to come to the school.” He paused while the other man spoke.

“No, she was not kidnapped, Mr. Morgan. I have not spoken with Emily, but her roommate talked with her about an hour ago ... no, Amy did not disclose her absence until ... yes sir, we’ll be expecting you.”

“I take it Mr. Morgan is upset. It was a shock remembering he had a daughter, huh?” A bitter grimace twisted Becky’s lips.

“Something like that. He was justifiably concerned at the length of time she could have been gone, but this isn’t a

prison. We don't have locked doors and barbed wire, for Pete's sake." He shook his head several times, fast.

"This is just what we need. We should have expelled Emily over that last episode. We're just not able to deal with this kind of thing. If this ends badly, he's going to sue us, big time."

"Do you think we should call the police? Report her as a runaway?"

"Mr. Morgan said he'd handle that. I wouldn't be surprised to see them coming up the driveway any minute now. I guess I'd better contact the attorney, see what he wants us to do when they arrive."

"Both of them? Oh, joy."

* * *

Amy sat with her back against the huge oak tree, forehead buried in her knees, crying.

Why? Why did this have to happen?

Her stomach churned and fear raced up and down her spine with cold icy fingers. Emily had sounded terrible, so much more than just upset and sad. Her voice, empty and hollow, sounded weird, almost foreign.

She hit the redial button again, not expecting Emily to pick up. Instead, she listened to her friend's voice, left another message and dragged herself to her feet, glancing at her watch. Her riding lesson started in twenty minutes.

Disconsolate, she wandered toward the barn, alternating between fits of fury at Emily's parents and fears of what might happen to her best friend.

If Amy hadn't been so preoccupied, she might have seen the flash of color in the shrubs surrounding the back of the stables.

Emily dodged behind a row of bougainvillea and watched her roommate enter the barn. She crouched on the

grass and peeked through a gap in the hedge, staring at the barn. Her folks would be arriving soon. They had to come. No doubt Amy already told Ms. Becky and Mr. Martin; they'd have no choice but to call her parents. This time they would be forced to pay attention to her, whether they wanted to or not.

Emily stared at the fresh cuts on her arms and laughed, knowing how mortified and disgusted her mother would be. Like always, her father would gaze at her in vague recognition, removed from her reality, her pain, and anything that had to do with her life.

She wondered what they would do with her. Would her father take a whole day off from work? Would her mother miss her morning massage and spa routine on her account?

Except for Elvis, she really didn't care about anything. Her eyes filled with tears as she thought about her beloved horse. He was the only one that loved her no matter what she did to her arms. In fact, the big gelding adored her, was always happy to see her, to greet her with a delighted neigh and a joyful snuffle of her pockets.

For a moment, Emily faltered. What if this didn't work? What if they just shipped her off to rehab, left her with a bunch of strangers to sort things out alone, again.

A wintry wind blew through her heart as she realized the possibilities she had set in motion. She wouldn't even have Elvis or Amy to console her. Rehab could be her next stop. She picked at the scabs on her arms, relishing the pain, concentrating on it rather than her lonely heart.

At the far end of the barn, she heard the girls lead their horses to the large arena while the lonely cries that echoed through the stable broke her heart.

"Poor Elvis. I'm so sorry, buddy." She reached into her purse and pulled out the razor.

A pearly-white Mercedes drove up the driveway and stopped in front of the office. Becky drew a deep breath and shook her head. She glanced across the room at her partner and shrugged.

“Here we go.” She leaned forward and hit the record button on the tape recorder. The tape began to roll.

Billy nodded. “Stay cool, Becky. I’ll handle it. You don’t need to get involved unless they want to know something I can’t tell them. Less is better. Since our attorney can’t be here, we have to be extra careful in what we say. These two are looking for trouble.”

Mr. and Mrs. Morgan typified all that Becky hated about the rich, high-society culture all the girls came from.

More money than sense and as shallow as a desert creek, they stomped up the steps, properly outraged and ready to blame everyone but themselves.

Extending his hand with a curt nod, Mr. Morgan said, “Have you heard from her yet? How about her roommate? Is she available to speak with us? Maybe she can shed some light on where Emily might be?”

Billy nodded, extending his hand toward the leather sofa. “Please come in and be seated. May I get you a cup of coffee...?”

With an abrupt wave of his hand, Mr. Morgan cut Billy short. “This is not a social visit, Mr. Martin. We sent Emily here to get a good education and to be properly supervised in our absence. Now we find out she’s gone? Run away?”

“Mr. Morgan, if you remember, the last time we met pertained to this very subject ... Emily is cutting herself again. We told you then it was our desire to send her home where she could receive regular, consistent counseling and help from a therapist. At that time, Emily promised that this kind of behavior would not occur again and you supported her in her desire to remain at Mystic. You said she would

receive regular therapy and that's why we let her resume studies here after the semester off.

"She's cutting herself again and when her roommate, Amy, found her last night, she was very upset. We don't know exactly when, but she slipped out in the middle of the night."

With a look of disgust on her face, Mrs. Morgan said, "Did she say what upset her, why she started doing that again?"

"Yes, she did," Becky said. "Simply put, she blames you. She thinks you don't love her, don't care about her. That's why she does it."

Mr. Morgan's face darkened as he stared at Becky.

"That's rubbish. Look at all we've done for her. We sent her here, supposedly one of the best private girl's schools in the whole country, costs us a fortune. We sent her horse, too. We gave her everything a girl could want."

Billy cast a quick glance at Becky.

"Mr. Morgan, Emily is aware of what you buy for her, but that's not what she's upset about. She wants your attention, your love. When was the last time you saw her, talked with her?"

"I give her as much time as I can spare. I have a huge business, three other children and a wife. I can't spend every minute of my time with her." His voice rose, defensive, self-absolving.

Billy realized the conversation was over. He raised a palm and shrugged.

"I have no solution to this problem, Mr. Morgan, but one thing is clear. Emily cannot remain here at Mystic Ridge. We just aren't able to deal with this kind of situation. Now, have you called the police?"

Chapter 8

Emily crept along the edge of the bougainvillea until she reached the end of the hedgerow. She stared at the quiet barn aisle and hesitated, waiting to be sure no one lingered behind.

With most of the horses gone for the summer semester, the grooms finished their chores early, turning their attention to farm maintenance that included fence repair, painting, and the building of new jumps. Cautious, she waited, listening. One of them could have remained behind to clean tack. She could not afford to get caught this close to the end

The barn, quiet in the restful shadows, smelled of fresh hay nets and stalls bedded with fragrant wood shavings. Emily listened to the contented sounds of horses munching their hay. Becky's horse, Champ, swished his tail several times, stomping his hind leg at a persistent fly buzzing his hock.

The astringent smells of liniment and body wash wafted in the breeze. The sweet smell of fly spray jetting from the metered dispensers overhead shooed all but the most persistent insects.

Elvis' stall was the third from the end. Emily snuck down the row, opened the door and closed it behind her. She threw her arms around her horse while tears poured down her cheeks.

"I think I blew it, El," she sobbed. "I didn't mean to. I thought it would make them see me, care about me, but I was wrong. They're going to send me far away and I'll never see you again. I just know it. Everything I do is wrong."

She slipped the safety-edged blade from her pocket and began to cut her forearms. Without a sound she sliced with methodical quickness until blood flowed down both arms and dripped into the horse's bedding. She wrapped her bleeding arms around Elvis' neck, turning his gray coat a mottled pink.

Emily sank softly into the deep shavings, too exhausted to do anything but weep. Elvis stood guard over his friend, snuffling her from time to time and nickering.

* * *

"Well, that was the strangest thing, don't you think?" Marcy led Cocoa into the wash rack for a bath.

Shelby took the next stall and nodded. "Really weird, but I didn't mind. I had a ball doing the lead changes. Y'know, if I didn't love jumping so much, I might take up dressage." She pushed Prince over and bent down to take off his boots. "Maybe when I'm too old to jump."

"Whose car is that?" Marcy nodded at the Mercedes. "I don't recognize it. And where's Emily this morning?"

Both girls turned to Amy, eyebrows up, wondering.

"Your roomie sick?" Marcy glanced at Amy before turning on the water. "Is she okay?"

Amy pursed her lips and then shrugged. "I really can't say much, y'know? She's got some personal stuff going on right now with her parents. That's their car at the office and that's why we rode alone today. I really don't know much else. Not really."

Amy finished quickly, wanting to put her horse away and get some alone time. Her stomach flipped, nauseating

her as she ran the shedding blade over Moose, whisking the remaining water off his belly.

She unsnapped the cross ties and headed for the barn, heart heavy. She opened his stall door, led him inside and unsnapped his halter. Closing the door behind her, she hung up her equipment.

Elvis stuck his head out the door, smears of blood on his neck.

“Oh, my God, no.” Beginning to panic as bubbles of fear rose in her throat, she dropped her halter on the floor and ran to the horse. For a moment she couldn’t bring herself to look. Finally, she leaned over the door and peered inside the stall.

Emily huddled in the far corner, curled up, forehead leaning against the wall. Blood mixed with short silver hairs smeared her arms. Amy jerked the door open and hurried inside. She squatted in the hay next to her friend and started to cry.

She reached out to Emily, afraid to touch her, afraid not to.

Emily stared at Amy, brown eyes usually so sparkling and clear, now red-rimmed and puffy. They hugged, crying, while Elvis stood over them, chuckling with anxiety and snuffling their hair.

“We have to go to the office. Your folks are in there with Ms. Becky and Mr. Martin.” She rose, pulling gently on Emily’s hand.

“I’ll go down there with you. I’ll stay right there if you want me to.”

“Oh, please, yes. Stay with me, Amy,” Emily said, voice ragged.

The girls walked out of the stall, arms entwined and headed for the office. The worst day of their lives was about to take a dump.

Mr. and Mrs. Morgan locked eyes as Billy repeated, "Have you called the police?"

"Even for a minor, especially since it's a voluntary disappearance, they can't do anything for twenty-four hours. I'm hoping we don't have to involve the court system this time. I..."

Amy and Emily, still entwined in an effort at mutual comfort, entered the office.

Becky took one look at Emily's arms, closed her eyes and sighed.

"What the *hell* do you think this will accomplish?" shrilled Mrs. Morgan, voice harsh like an angry wasp.

"Look at you, dear God. If you had the pride of a flea you wouldn't do this, wouldn't allow yourself to be seen like this. You are disgusting."

She swung her gaze from her daughter to Becky. "Do you have a restroom we might use?"

"Well, yes, of course, but don't you think we..."

"Where is it?" Her voice rose to a screech.

Unable to control her boiling anger, Becky nodded once and flicked her thumb over her shoulder. Slowly, deliberately, she raised furious blue eyes and made direct contact with the woman.

Voice as cold as ice, she said, "See the sign over there? *Rest ... Room.*" She leaned back in her chair, expression insolent.

Gloria Morgan returned the stare, her jaw clenched with an *I don't take lip from the staff* look on her face. She started to say something, then turned instead and glared at her daughter.

"Follow me."

Walter Morgan sputtered in anger at the disrespect Becky showed his wife. He stood up and pointed an accusatory finger at Billy.

“Don’t think you’ve heard the last of this. My attorney will be in touch. You failed in your duty to care for my....”

Billy held up a finger as well, shaking his head and demanding silence.

“You don’t know who I am, do you? Don’t threaten me, Mr. Morgan. Perhaps you’ve heard of my father, Tom Martin? Martin Industries? The Martin Group? You give me a hard time and he’ll make your company disappear.” He reached into his wallet and withdrew a business card.

“And before you go any further, remember, this is your daughter and you’ve failed her, not us. You and your wife bear total responsibility for her condition, for this cutting thing she needs to do. I plan to talk with our attorneys and see if there isn’t some way we can remove Emily from your custody. You obviously have more on your mind than you can deal with and our concern is with the girl.”

Turning away from a sputtering Mr. Morgan, he nodded to Becky.

“Please make the call to Dad’s office and tell the attorney we want a hearing with Child Protective Services on this matter as quickly as possible. Then call the police.”

“Don’t you even think about it! Stay out of this.”

Billy cast a swift look at Becky, nodded, and rose to his feet.

“Mr. Morgan, we will notify CPS of our concerns for the safety of your other children as well. I don’t think you or your wife are fit to parent a dog let alone a teenager with serious problems. Emily needs someone to care about her, to love her, and we’re going to do what we can to find the right place for her. Now what do you think of *that*?”

Face filled with rage, Mr. Morgan leaned toward Billy, menacing.

“How dare you talk to me that way? This is none of your business. We’ll deal with our daughter as we see fit. Butt out.”

Amy shrank back against the wall, stomach churning as she listened to Mr. Morgan’s threats. Angry adults always scared her. When they yelled it got worse. Her eyes flicked rapidly around the room. She smelled violence in the air.

Furious, Billy stood his ground, eyes closed to slits.

“Don’t think you can push me around, Mr. Morgan. I don’t bully as easily as a young girl.”

Just then they heard a thud in the bathroom, followed by sharp, slapping sounds. Becky leaped to her feet, covering the distance from her desk to the bathroom in four strides.

“Mrs. Morgan, what are you doing?” She banged on the door, which swung wide open at her touch.

Emily crouched in the corner, her arms scrubbed with such force the blood flowed anew. Piles of stained paper towels, shredded in the middles, attested to the pitiless cleansing. Her hair, which had obviously been pulled several times, stood out around her head like a halo.

Out of control, Gloria Morgan loomed above Emily, periodically slapping her daughter’s face and screaming insults. The names she called the girl echoed across the bathroom, audible to everyone in the office.

“Stop it!” Becky grabbed the older woman by the back of her collar and jerked hard, pulling her backwards. Gloria turned on Becky, who raised her chin in contempt and grinned.

“Make my day.”

Gloria Morgan swung her hand back and hit Becky so hard the younger woman staggered backward, almost knocking Billy over as he walked up behind her. He caught

her in his arms before she hit the floor and then turned to Gloria.

“That’s assault. You’re going to jail.”

“She started it,” Gloria said, her composure slowly returning. “Grabbed my collar.”

“She’s a damned liar,” Emily said, dark eyes boring into her mother’s.

“Ms. Becky never touched her. I’ll testify to that in court.”

Becky tilted her chin, fire in her eyes. She stepped toward Mrs. Morgan, teeth bared.

“You beat your daughter in front of my eyes and you expect to get away with it? *When cows roost*. I’m pressing charges against you for assault and for child abuse.”

“It’s none of your business, you little witch. Just who the....”

“Gloria, please,” her husband said, eyes the size of dollars. “Stop right now. Don’t say another....”

“Shut up, you big fat idiot. You’re never around, you never have to deal with this miserable, disgusting....” She turned toward Emily, lips curled in contempt. “Freak.”

She swung around to Becky again, face a mottled red, pointing her finger.

“And you, if you ever lay a hand on me again....”

“You shut up right now, Gloria, or I promise you, you’ll face this one alone. No more covering up and no more money. You got that? Now shut your ugly mouth and let’s go. Come on, Emily, we’re going home.” Mr. Morgan moved toward his wife, expression grim.

“Oh, no you don’t. Not for a minute.” Billy picked up the phone and dialed 9-1-1.

Becky stepped forward, standing between the Morgan’s and the front door. She fixed her gaze on Gloria.

“You’ve got to be kidding. You don’t think I’m going to let that pass, do you? I’m pressing assault charges against you. I think you need to plant your elegant person in

the county lockup for the night. No cocktail hour for you. Then I'm going to do my utmost to see that you pay the maximum penalty."

Amusement clear on her face, Becky waved a cautionary finger at Gloria, who had closed the distance between them.

"You want to go for double or nothing?"

Azure blue eyes froze Gloria in her tracks. Becky grinned, taunting her.

"Well, as I see it, that's the first smart thing you've done since you got here, but it's not your usual course of action, is it? You're just a born bully aren't you?"

When Gloria refused the bait, Becky stared at her husband.

"I'm going to do everything I legally can, use every resource at my disposal to remove Emily from your custody. I'm also going to have CPS check your other children. Somehow I don't think this is unique to Emily."

Becky turned toward Gloria, eyes glinting in amusement, still taunting, sarcastic.

"How's Laurie doing? Your youngest? What kind of problems does she have?"

"How dare you," Gloria said, eyes narrowed to slits. "You can't call the police. I'm her mother, it's my prerogative to discipline her as I see fit."

"So that's what you call it, huh? Discipline? Well, I don't. I call it child abuse. Pretty soon we'll see what the police and CPS call it. I can't wait to hear."

"You stupid little twit, you're just a child yourself. What do you know...?"

"Shut your mouth, Gloria. We need to get out of here right now." Mr. Morgan glanced from his wife to his daughter and back. He threw his hands out in despair as he turned to Billy.

"What are you going to do?"

“Already done,” Billy said, cupping a hand to his ear in derision. “I think I hear them now.”

Sirens wailed in the distance, carried on the morning breeze.

Chapter 9

“Holy cow,” Amy said as she walked out of the office with Emily. “They really went to bat for you. Can you believe it?”

Amy paused a moment, trying to think about the best thing to say, not just the first thing that popped into her mind. She gazed at her friend’s sullen face and shrugged.

“It’s you I can’t figure out. This whole deal just blows me away. You cut yourself because your parents ignore you and yet, after all this ... you’re like all cool with getting a divorce from them or whatever it’s called? You’re okay with that? Man, I don’t understand any of this.”

“An emancipated minor is what it’s called, but it’s all just words. I can’t do it until I’m sixteen, a full eighteen months from now.” Emily shrugged, staring at her arms.

“Besides, they didn’t do all that for me. They did it to get back at my mother. I wish Ms. Becky had punched her lights out. Wait until I tell CPS what she’s done to me in the past. I hope she goes to jail for a long time.”

“Listen to yourself! Oh, my God, I don’t believe any of this.”

Amy stomped up the porch steps to the house, shoved the door open and gave it a push for good measure. Halfway up to their room she stopped, turning toward Emily.

“You’re full of crap. I just realized what you said and I can’t believe it. *They* did it to get back at your folks? Ms.

Becky and Mr. Martin? That's totally ridiculous and you know it. What you really mean is that's why *you* did it. That's what you're doing, isn't it? You're just getting back at your parents for what they've done to you."

"Nobody cares, not even you."

"*Even* me? Well, that sure tells me where I stand with you, doesn't it? I tried to talk sense into you this morning, Em. I begged you to come back. We could have accomplished the same end result if you'd just told me where you were. Crud, hiding on the other side of the bushes. You played me for a fool, scaring me to death like that.

"And that bit, that wiping your arms on Elvis? That's just plain gross. And while I'm at it, I want you to know just how furious ... how really ... *really* mad I am at you." Her voice began to quiver as she charged into their bedroom.

"How could you *do* this to me? How could you put me through this?" Amy threw herself on her bed and wailed. "I'm your best friend, I love you like a sister. How could you do this to me?" She burst into tears. "Now you have to go away."

* * *

Billy and Becky sat on her front porch, watching the sun set and making plans. He'd been on the phone most of the afternoon, speaking with his mother, father, the company attorney and a representative from Child Protective Services.

In view of the fact that Emily was already enrolled in the summer program, they agreed to give temporary custody to Billy on the proviso that Emily undergo therapy. Billy noted the names of three court-approved doctors in Del Mar, chose one and made an appointment for the following morning.

His conversation with Tracy provided the best news of the day. She knew of a small school in Burbank that

specialized in girls with emotional disorders. It seemed the daughter of one of her co-stars had a serious case of bulimia. Even more coincidental, they had horses, although not a riding program like at Mystic Ridge.

Some of the girls at Quiet Harbor kept their horses nearby at a little barn that bordered on Griffith Park's bridle trails, all fifty-five mindless, relaxing miles of them. No trainer and no showing, just stress-free, endless riding.

To the best of its ability, the school shielded the girls from outside pressure, providing them with the missing stabilizing elements of their life: love, nurture and encouragement.

Several of the students had famous, attention-craving parents; another thanked her existence to a rock star of dubious character. The flotsam and jetsam of the Hollywood crowd's attempt at playing normal often ended up at Quiet Harbor or one of the dozens of other similar private schools in the area.

Experience showed that teenage was just that, an age to get through, and if the kids came out the other side in one piece, life usually took care of itself. They just had to survive it.

The girls at Quiet harbor received therapy for their emotional problems, but the school focused on their future and where they saw themselves in it, not their pasts. Quiet Harbor did not resume classes for another week, so Emily would stay at Mystic Ridge until then.

"What a day," Becky said, reaching for her iced tea. She lifted her fingers to her cheek and winced.

"She has a kick like a mule."

Billy shook his head and nodded at her in sympathy.

"Talk about trash. Both of them. No wonder Emily is so messed up. I think Quiet Harbor will be good for her." He shook his head and then shrugged.

“I’m grateful we all got out of this in one piece. It could have been really ugly.”

She chuckled deep in her throat. “When you told him your father would make his company disappear, I almost choked.”

Billy leaned back in his chair and stared intently at Becky.

“It’s always nice to know people in high places. Besides, that’s exactly what corporate raiding is all about.”

They sat in silence, watching the sun slide beneath the horizon. Shards of gold shot up from the ocean like pathways to heaven.

“I’m glad she hit me ... showed her true colors. At least she’ll never get the opportunity to hurt Emily again. What kind of penalties come with assault. Do you know?”

“Well, they’ve got tons of money, so that means a top attorney. In her case, probably no more than a fine and maybe community service.”

Becky snorted. “The best service she could do any community is leave it. What about CPS? What can they do?”

“That’s an entirely different story. Emily will be fifteen in a couple of months, so she probably won’t get into the foster care system, especially if she works something out with her father. I’d imagine she’ll finish high school at Quiet Harbor and then go on to college. Her father is monetarily responsible for her, and besides, I think he had his eyes opened today.” Billy tented his fingers in front of his mouth.

“Living with that woman must be a wild ride. And she was sober this morning. Imagine her with a snoot full.”

“Thanks, I’ll pass. I hope he decides to kick her to the curb. What a miserable bitch. Do you think the other sibs are affected?”

“I would imagine Laurie is, living with them, but the one brother is in college and the other just graduated and isn’t even in California any more....” He gazed down the driveway at the approaching Mercedes. “They’re back.”

“You’ve got to be--only him, looks like.”

Fascinated they watched Mr. Morgan park in front of the house. He got out of his car and crossed to the porch.

“Ms. Edwards, Mr. Martin, excuse me for arriving unannounced. I’m wondering, do you think Emily would like to go out to dinner with me tonight?”

Becky’s eyebrows lowered slowly. She glanced at Billy from under her lashes and shrugged.

“Only one way to find out; go ask her. She’s up at the house.”

* * *

Emily stripped off her filthy clothes and headed for the bathroom.

Amy rolled over on her bed, gloomy. She heard the sounds of running water, followed by the sweet smell of shampoo and glanced at the smears of blood on her shirt with a shudder.

So far, this is the worst day of my life. I think I’ve lost my best friend.

More tears dripped down her cheeks. Angry at herself, she grabbed a tissue, wiped her eyes and blew her nose.

Amy saw the aloof look on Emily’s face as she opened the bathroom door and raised a hand, shaking her head.

“Please don’t let’s fight, huh? Em, it’s *your* arms you’re scarring, not your mother’s. It’s *you* who will have to explain to your children, to your husband, why you did such a terrible thing, took such drastic measures. *You, not her.* Why?”

Amy got up from bed and started for her closet.

“To hell with the whole bunch of them, I say. Good riddance to them. This is nothing ... oh, no *no*, don’t you dare start ... this is nothing new, Em! This is how it’s been

forever. Nothing's gonna change, you know that. You have to get control of your life and stop the cutting."

They sat for a while in the quiet room, not talking, just thinking.

"So what should I do, Amy?"

"I don't know right now, but if you get the chance to become a ward of Ms. Becky and Mr. Martin, I'd take it in a heartbeat. They might not be blood relatives, but they care about you, they want the best for you, Em. That's a good start, don't ya think?"

"That's not going to happen. This time next week, I'll be gone to Quiet Harbor." She chuckled in bitterness and cocked her head at Amy.

"It sounds like an insane asylum, y'know, where everyone talks in low tones. They'll have padded cells, creaky stairs and a bell tower, for sure. Complete with bats."

"That's really not very funny, Em. The kid of a friend of Billy's mom goes there, so you already have someone you sort of know. And, best part, you can take Elvis. I've ridden some of the trails up at Griffith Park. It's beautiful. Hard to believe you're in the middle of a big city. Maybe I can come visit you over the holidays, y'know, maybe we can get together then."

Emily stared at her friend, lips pursed into a quirk. "One thing I've learned along the way is not to make plans in advance and if you do, be prepared for them to fall through. We can talk about Christmas in December."

She pulled the towel from around her head and began to run a comb through her shimmering brown hair. She swept it back from her face and pulled it into a pony tail. Wrapping the hair around her fingers, she made a French knot, jabbed a long pick into the center and shrugged. "Besides, who knows what we'll be up to by then?"

The wall phone rang and Emily picked up the receiver.

* * *

Frank Morgan gazed across the table at his daughter as though he hadn't seen her in years. Grown up now, almost a woman, yet there remained that air of innocence and trust he remembered so well. When did it start to go wrong?

"I'm so glad we could have dinner together, Emily. There's so much we need to talk about."

He glanced at her, hoping she would say something, would tell him how she felt. Even though the temperature hovered in the high eighties, she wore a blouse with long flowing sleeves. He knew what they hid and sighed in compassion. He grimaced, remembering the fresh cuts from today's event as well as old scars he never realized existed.

How could that be? How could I be so out of touch with the realities of Emily's life?

He knew how bad living with Gloria made him feel. He should have realized long before today what it did to his children and done something to fix it. He sighed in shame and gazed at his daughter.

"Tell me what's going on, Emily. I want to help you in any way I can. It's no excuse, of course, but I never knew that your mother ... I never realized any of this." He spread both hands toward her and made direct eye contact.

"I should have, though. I'm so sorry. I hardly know where to begin. If you'll forgive me, work with me on this, we can fix it."

He leaned back in his chair, gazing into his glass, unsure of her reaction to his next bit of news.

"I started divorce proceedings against your mother today. I know it should have happened years ago, but I can't do anything about the past except regret it. However, the future is different."

"Daddy, it's not your fault. You didn't know. I should have told you, but I was afraid it would make things worse. I don't feel so bad when I'm away at school, and this

is the first time in ages....” Emily glanced down at her covered arms and shook her head.

“What set you off, honey? Why’d you start again?”

“It was because I hadn’t heard from either of you for so long. And neither of you called back to accept Ms. Becky’s invitation for the cruise next week. It made me so mad! I wanted to hurt myself, but it’s the last time, Daddy. It’ll never happen again. It’s Mom I’m trying to hurt, only I’m not hurting her at all ... she couldn’t care less. It’s like Amy said, I’m only hurting myself.”

Mr. Morgan leaned back in his chair. “A cruise? I never heard a word about a cruise.”

“It doesn’t matter anymore. It just hurt at the time.”

“Sweetheart, I’m so sorry about that and I promise, it won’t happen again. How do you feel about Quiet Harbor? Do you want to be surrounded by troubled kids or do you want to go somewhere else, or maybe stay here. We can make arrangements anywhere, especially since your grades are so good.”

“Ms. Becky made it clear today that can’t happen. They warned me the last time and now I’ve run out of chances. Plus, after that scene with Mom and the cops, and Mr. Martin getting so involved, I have to leave. It’s too humiliating.”

“I’ll talk with them if you’d like. With your mother out of the picture, perhaps you could come home more often. I wish you were old enough to drive.”

Emily chuckled. “Yeah, me, too. Got a while to go.”

“You sure you don’t want me to intercede?”

“It’s way too late, Dad. I’m already so ashamed knowing the other girls saw what happened ... the police dragging Mom off and all. I just can’t stand it. Actually, I’d rather go to Quiet Harbor and try for another fresh start. It’s so much closer to home, I could come home on the weekends.”

Emily heard the pleasure in her voice chill and she paused as a cold, clammy ball rose in her throat. She'd been here before.

"Daddy, please don't just say stuff to make me feel better. You're serious, right? You're going to come home at night and be around for us? And what about Mom?"

"I told your mother that if she went into rehab and got control of her drinking, I'd provide for her until she remarries. The only contact she'll have with you is your choice, including none at all." He looked down and sighed.

"Emily, you have every right to doubt me, to believe I'll let you down again, but I promise I won't. You can depend on me."

Chapter 10

Amy sat at her desk, trying not to look at the clock. Her mind whirled as she thought about the possible consequences of Emily going to dinner with her father. With any kind of luck, he could make things right for her. Maybe she wouldn't have to leave school and maybe, just maybe, life wouldn't have to be a tragedy.

She sighed, propped the book up on the desk and tried to concentrate. The material about equine massage fascinated her, and under normal conditions, she'd be riveted to every word. After reading the same page three times and still not having a clue, she tossed the book aside and turned off the desk light.

The bedroom window faced west, giving them a stunning view. Spectacular sunsets splashed the sky with pink, magenta and gold. Spears of brilliance pierced the heavens. Every night a different pattern splashed across the heavenly canvass.

Tonight the stars began their nightly dance against a backdrop of soft fluffy clouds that played hide and seek with the moon. Usually stargazing had a calming effect on Amy's mind, but not tonight.

Music ... I need something louder than my thoughts.

Just as she inserted her earplugs and turned on her iPod, Amy saw lights come up the driveway. She recognized the Morgan's car as it stopped at the front stairs. Moments

later, a door slammed and Emily entered the room, a huge smile on her face.

Amy returned the smile, relieved at Emily's mood.

"Looks like you had a good time tonight. Tell me all about it." She nodded, patting the bed.

"It was really good, Amy. Strange, but very good. He and Mom are getting a divorce. Seems strange to say that out loud and be so happy about it. I'm going to Quiet Harbor next week when they reopen."

"But won't you at least give it a try here, see..."

Emily shook her head, a hand raised in interruption.

"Ames, I can't do it. I can't stay here with the daily reminders of what a fool my mother is. I need a new start. Quiet Harbor is really very nice. Dad brought me some brochures and I think I'll like it. I'll get to spend weekends at home with my dad and Laurie. He's changing her school. She's going to a private day school instead of boarding out. Besides, you were right. I'm so over this. I'm finished cutting ... finished with a lot of things, including my toxic mother."

"Oh, man, I'm so glad to hear that. Maybe things will get better when you're older, y'know? You hear of stuff like that happening, Oprah reunions and all. Do you think he really means it, Em?"

"I know what you're thinking and I wondered, too. But when I begged him not to jerk me around, he promised to live up to his word." She stared at her friend and then shrugged. "I have to give him a chance."

"Of course you do. It's just that I don't want you to leave Mystic. I'll die without you, but that's just me being selfish. You have to do what's best for you, even if it sucks for me." Amy stood up and stretched.

"Let's go talk with Ms. Becky and see what she can do for you. It's not even eight yet. Come on."

Becky sat on her porch with Billy. Two hurricane lamps cast soft shadows on their faces. A bottle of wine and a small plate of cheese and crackers sat on the table between them. Smells of roasting meat wafted from the kitchen to their nostrils.

“What a miserable day, huh?” She gently palpated her swollen cheek, already tinged a bluish green, and shrugged.

“I never thought being a riding instructor at a snooty private girl’s school would include combat pay.” She sipped her wine and chuckled.

“If I’d gotten to you a minute earlier, I’d have been able to stop her. I’m so sorry, Becky, I had no idea she was violent. Does it hurt?”

“Ah, it’s nothin’, just a tad tender. It probably looks worse than it feels.”

He placed a slice of cheese on a cracker and took a bite. “Umm, that’s very good, especially with the wine.”

“There’s an elephant in the room.”

“I know.” He paused a moment, thinking. “We just don’t have a choice. It’s like we told Mr. Morgan earlier. Leaving everything else out of it, we owe it to the other students. They’re already buzzing about the cops being here and dragging a parent away, kicking and screaming like that. Man, she’s a piece of work.” He pursed his lips, drained his glass and refilled it.

“They know Emily is cutting herself again, and that’s bad enough, but when the girls saw your face, their expressions clinched it for me. She has to go. Tell you the truth, I wish she’d left already. I don’t look forward to the next week at all.”

“It’s just a week. It’ll go fast enough.” Becky drew a deep sigh and shrugged.

“I hated having to rescind the invitation for the holiday cruise, but I had no choice. The girls are going to talk, there’s no avoiding that, but we can keep it to a

minimum if the Morgan's aren't there." She rolled big eyes at Billy and shook her head.

"Thank God Lisa's and Shelby's are the only parents coming. I can't imagine what I'm going to say when they ask me where I got the shiner, especially since the kids know the truth."

"I know. It's infuriating and so bad for the school's image. Can you imagine what would happen to our reputation if word of this got out? Very bad news for Mystic. That's another reason why Emily has to go. We have no choice."

Becky nodded, her voice sad. "I know, but it's so unfair for her to suffer for her mother's behavior."

"I think you're missing the major element here, Becky. It's *Emily's* behavior that brought her mother to Mystic in the first place. Emily has to take responsibility for that, just as her parents have to realize their actions are to blame, that they caused their daughter's problems through neglect. Twisted bunch, fully dysfunctional."

The girls hid in the shadows of the porch, eavesdropping, listening to the conversation. Emily clamped a hand over her mouth and beckoned to Amy. They disappeared into the darkness.

Once out of earshot of the house, Emily said, "See, I knew that would happen and I totally understand. What is Ms. Becky supposed to do? Lie? Make up some story for the parents when it happened right in front of everyone? And Mr. Martin's right. I brought this all on myself. I had the control and I blew it."

"Oh, Em," Amy murmured, patting her back. "I'm so sorry."

"I can't face talking to them right now. Let's go back to the room."

They closed the door behind them and flounced onto their beds.

"I wish we hadn't overheard that." Amy glanced at Emily with veiled eyes.

"I'm not. It just reinforces how much I hate my mother. All the kids know she punched Ms. Becky for sticking up for me. She has to tell the truth, this is their business. Oh, God, I wish I'd never started this."

"Me, too, Em. Me too."

Emily pulled her cell from her purse and dialed. "Hi, Dad. I'm wondering, can you come to school tomorrow morning and pick me up? I'd like to spend the rest of the week with you and Laurie." There was a momentary silence as a ghost of a smile spread her lips.

"That's great, Dad. I'll see you at nine. I love you, too."

* * *

Emily piled her possessions by the front door and glanced at her watch. She'd said her goodbyes to the girls and Anna, saving the hardest for last.

Becky and Billy stood in the barn aisle with the farrier, discussing the horse cross tied before them. Becky saw her first and smiled.

Before they could speak, Emily grinned and extended her hand to each of them in turn.

"My dad's taking me home today. He should be here any minute. I just wanted to thank you for all you've done for me. I loved it here and I'm so sorry for the trouble I've caused. Can you forgive me?"

"Of course we can, honey. I hope things just get better and better for you. We'll take care of Elvis until you send a van over to get him."

"Thanks, Ms. Becky. Actually, it won't be long, maybe even tomorrow. After we get my stuff dropped off, Dad's taking me over to see the new barn. Laurie's coming, too. She wants to get a pony."

The Mercedes drove up the driveway for the last time and stopped at the steps.

“Well, there he is. I guess I’d better go.” She turned on her heel, gave them a wave and hurried back to the house.

Becky watched them load the bags and suitcases into the trunk.

Mr. Morgan gave Emily a hug and gallantly opened the door for her, causing her to make a mock curtsy.

Becky blinked back quick tears and glanced at Billy. “I think we have a happy ending.”

Chapter 11

The long black limo pulled to a stop in the driveway of a house of monumental proportions. Red tiled roof in the Mediterranean style, with blindingly white stucco, it crowned the gentle knoll above them. Tall palm trees swayed overhead, the fronds crackling in the late afternoon breeze.

Becky continued to describe the estate as she helped Lisa and her dog out of the car. She turned Lisa toward the ocean and said, "If you just kept walking, you'd end up in the water. The sand is white and very fine."

She led Lisa toward the house, describing its unique style. Then she said, "Come with me and let me see if I can do justice to the *Sea Nymph*."

"What a beautiful name, *Sea Nymph*. I already have a mermaid in mind."

Becky chuckled as they walked across the back patio to the marina. They cleared the house area and approached the pier.

"When they bought the yacht, Mr. Martin's dad had a jetty built to form a little harbor so they could keep the boats here. The captain and a crew member live on board and take care of everything. They have a sailboat and a speedboat for skiing, too."

"That sounds like so much fun. Do you come here a lot?"

“Oh, yes. We come out here several times in the course of the summer. The girls love to ski and the surfing is outstanding. We came here all the time as kids, and I have great memories of boogie boarding with the team ... and Steve.”

“Who’s Steve?”

“Steve Bianchi. He was my first boyfriend. He’s in college now. He’ll graduate next year.”

“Where does he go?”

“He’s back east at Harvard.”

“Oh, that sucks. I mean, it’s a great school, but why go so far away? Does he get to come home much? Do you still see him?”

“Nah, not really. We kinda grew apart, y’know, but we still email a bit. We were just a couple of lonely kids. When he graduates he won’t come back to Del Mar. He has plans for graduate school and then he wants to live in Washington and go into politics.”

“Doesn’t he come home for visits?”

“Nah, he never did. Right from the first vacation break, he interned in every political office that would have him. He spent an entire summer at a firm in Germany ... got a great education at the ground level. He lives in Manhattan when he’s not in school.”

As they approached the dock, Becky warned Lisa of the raised lip but she didn’t need to. Sadie slowed her pace, stopping and placing her front paws on the step.

Lisa chuckled, stroking the Lab’s head. “That’s why I call her my wonder dog. She’s just a person in dog fur. So tell me, Ms. Becky, what do you see? Every single detail.”

“The *Sea Nymph*; all ninety feet of her. She’s white and very sleek. The stern, that’s the back end, is set up for our dinner and it looks very cool if I do say so myself. All red, white and blue decorations with flags and balloons. The bow has chairs and tables set up for tonight’s entertainment. There isn’t a bad seat in the house.”

“Oh, Ms. Becky, it sounds so beautiful. I like the noise the water makes, slapping the sides like that. Tell me more, please.”

“They don’t have the Plexiglas windows up yet, but if it gets cold out to sea, they’ll put them up. We’re going to cruise down to La Jolla and watch the fireworks from there. It’s the best place because we can see the most shows at once. They won’t be particularly loud, but I’m wondering about Sadie.”

Lisa reached into her pocket and withdrew two balls of brown fluff.

“I’m prepared. Marcy said I could borrow Cocoa’s earmuffs. Nothing seems to bother Sadie, not traffic or sirens, any stuff like that, but you never know.”

“Good thinking. Okay, here’s the gangplank. It has raised slats all the way up to avoid slipping when its wet, so you’ll have to pick your feet up, y’know?”

“No problem,” she said, and followed Sadie and Becky onto the yacht.

They stood in the stern, alone except for the crew and the banquet waiters on the other side of the deck. Becky wanted to oversee the table settings and floral arrangements and get started on the last-minute display before the other guests arrived. That required lots of quick, independent movements.

“Come over here and sit for a bit, Lisa. Did you bring your iPod? Good girl. I have some last-minute things I have to do. Just sit here, okay, don’t wander around. Promise?”

Lisa giggled. “I’ll be a good little girl, Ms. Becky,” she said in a tone just this side of sassy.

Becky laughed aloud. “Okay, I know you’re not a little kid, smarty pants. I’ll be back soon.”

“We’ll be right here. Don’t worry.”

The caterers buzzed around in the galley and delicious smells permeated the air. Becky called hello to the banquet captain, beckoning him over.

“Everything looks perfect, Maurice, and the tables are gorgeous. Mrs. Martin will be pleased.”

He smiled. “Thank you. I thought they turned out well, especially your idea of weaving the fresh flowers around the bases of the hurricane lamps; very clever suggestion.” Maurice checked his watch, eyebrows elevated.

“Is there anything more I can do for you? If not, I’ll be upstairs in the salon. We plan to serve the hot hors d’oeuvres when the guests start to come aboard and I want to make sure they use the correct plates for each presentation.”

Becky nodded. “I noticed the bar is all set up and everything is ready to go. Great job.”

“We’re doing just fine, a bit ahead of schedule if anything. This galley is a dream to work in. We should always be so lucky.”

Becky returned to the main salon in time to see Billy and his parents crossing the patio. When she reached Lisa she gave a titter.

“Tracy’s coming up the gangplank, Lisa. You’re about to meet your TV idol. She’s mine, too.”

Billy introduced Lisa to his parents, smiling as the girl blushed in excitement.

“Hello, Lisa,” Tracy said, taking her hand in a warm grasp. “I’ve heard so much about you. It’s a pleasure.”

Momentarily tongue-tied, Lisa just gaped in the direction of the voice.

“This is Sadie,” she finally managed to squeeze out. “It’s ... it’s *fantastic* meeting you, too.”

Tracy smiled her famous smile and patted the dog.

“I’ve heard that this is a wonder dog. What does she do?”

“Oh, well, just about everything,” Lisa said, composure recovered and tongue loosened.

“Not only does she keep me safe, which is a tall order, you have to admit, Sadie’s smart. I can’t tell you how many words she knows, plus she’s my best friend.”

Tracy blinked several times, glancing from Billy to Becky. She laid a light hand on the dog’s head, gently stroking the silky ears. “Have you girls ever been to Hollywood?”

“No, we haven’t.” Lisa sucked in her breath and grabbed hold of Sadie’s harness, just knowing what came next.

“Would you like to come to work with me one day? Billy could bring you over and I’ll introduce you around. I know you’re a fan of the show, so who else would you like to meet?”

“Oh, oh.” Lisa stuttered, speechless. “Uh huh, oh yes! I love them all, but you’re my fave ... of course. If you could arrange it, I’d love to meet Julia. She has the neatest voice. And Maxie, oh yes, I love Maxie. How about Cade?”

Becky pulled Billy aside as Tracy continued to describe her plans for Lisa.

“Look, I know you don’t like going up to L.A. and the whole studio thingy makes you crazy, so like, if, y’know, well, I’d be glad to take Lisa up there, free your afternoon. I....”

Billy held up two hands and began to laugh. “No problem, Becky. You can take her up.” He shook his head and then leaned into her and whispered. “You never got over it, did you?”

“Nope,” she trilled. “Never will.”

Music floated above the conversation as the *Sea Nymph* made her way down the California coast.

Shelby's parents told one hilarious story after another about the riding world, hunters and equitation in particular. Someone asked if they'd seen much change in the show scene since they'd first started judging.

Nancy said, "I remember this one show, years ago, before we had all the wide fences, the wings, set strides, stuff like that. The jumps were narrow and very sparse, mostly natural post and rails and walls and almost always on an outside course.

"Anyway, this one lady who rode sidesaddle decided that the jumps, in her words, needed to be spruced up. So at the next show her club put on, she did just that. I'm telling you, she started the whole phenomenon of decorating the jumps like we do today; she made it the rage. Only problem was, she didn't tell the horses."

She glanced at Shelby with a grin. "Here were all these rock solid, cool-as-a-cucumber field hunters, bomb proof, unflappable, jump anything types. Most of them rode to hounds during the season, and they're all dodging out at the fences, stopping dead and pitching the riders head first into the jumps, one after another after another.

"My God, the jump crew virtually had to remodel the course with bits and pieces of demolished fences. Today, even the little local shows decorate the jumps bigger than we did then. Ah, the good old days."

* * *

Lisa smiled as she heard Billy call to her. He crossed the pool deck with those same familiar steps and placed his notebook and towel on the chair next to hers. The soft summer breeze played with the flowers, perfuming the air.

"I've never had such a thrill in my life, Mr. Martin. Your mother is wonderful. I could pick her voice out of a million."

“She’s really special, and not just because she’s my mom. She just is.”

“Ms. Becky said she’s going to drive me up to Burbank to the studio. She’s crazy about Tracy, too. What’s it like to have her for a mother?”

Although it was not his favorite topic, he told her how intrusive and downright scary having a movie star in the family could be.

“Just going out for dinner with her is a major production and the fans are so pushy. They gawk at you and sometimes they point. She walks into a restaurant and it’s like something sucked the life out of the whole building. Everybody stops talking ... stops moving, even. It gives me the creepiest feeling.

“As if that’s not bad enough, my father is what’s known as a corporate raider. He buys companies that don’t always want to be bought. It makes for hard feelings sometimes.” He shrugged, glancing at the girl. The placid look on her face said she wasn’t fazed.

“We all have body guards ... we still do. Mine is named Bob. He doubled as my chauffeur before I could drive. I was in fifth grade when one particularly demented fan ran up to us at lunch, threw her arms around Mom and began crying hysterically. Absolutely gave me the crawlies. That night I told my folks I wanted to live at the beach house in Del Mar instead of up in Beverly Hills with them. They didn’t like that one little bit, but I persisted. On top of everything else, the thought of graduating from Hollywood High some day gave me the willies.

“In the end they caved. I can throw a fit with the best of them, but I had to take Bob with me. It was a deal-breaker so I had no choice, but it was fine anyway. He’s a great friend and we’ve had lots of adventures. He used to be a Navy SEAL. Man, does he have some stories.”

“You know, Mr. Martin, I have an idea. I’m riding really well now. Angel takes great care of me and I’m proud

of what a little blind girl can do when she puts her mind to it.” Voice coquettish, she tilted her head and pursed her lips.

Billy cast a quizzical eye at Lisa, grinning.

She sighed, tilting her head to the other side.

“Well, it is pretty exceptional, don’t you think?”

“Yes, I do, Lisa. Very exceptional indeed.”

“Well I’m wondering, have you ever considered being exceptional, too? Like maybe riding western? They only allow one hand on the reins, so besides trail riding, you could compete.”

“Compete how?”

“Well, I have a whole bunch of ideas, actually. Those trail horse classes are really tough. You have to back through stuff, open gates, all kinds of fun obstacles. Bridges, tires. Or you could do cutting horses. That’s where horse does all the work by himself. Some Quarter horses have this special instinct, they call it *cow* and you can’t teach it. Horses have it or they don’t. Or you could do reining; it’s very fast. They have all kinds of divisions, and it’s always only one hand, oh my ... sorry about that,” she said, breathless. “You can jump in here any time.”

Face serious, Billy took a deep breath. “You know, when we talked about this before, I didn’t want to think about it. My *no* was kind of a knee-jerk reaction. I’m sure you know what I mean.” He glanced at her, noting the solemn expression.

“I’ll never be able to jump again, but I can still ride. Being a lefty anyway, I can do lots of things.” He leaned toward her and whispered.

“What do you think? Will we be able to get away with cows in Del Mar?”

Peals of delighted laughter poured from her throat.

“No doubt about it! Ms. Becky says we’re in the most rural part of town. We don’t have close neighbors to be disturbed, and best part, guess what? You can rent ‘em. Cows. Keeps ‘em fresh. They like new horses, new

surroundings, that's what they need. Evidently, if they stay at a farm too long they get kinda stale and don't want to play anymore. That's why they rotate the herd every thirty days. Cool, huh?"

Touched, Billy nodded several times. "You checked out all this stuff for me? How kind, Lisa. I truly appreciate it."

"Well, I know how much a person can do if they want to, and no one who ever rode like you did could be happy just teaching. I hope you don't think I'm being rude or forward bringing this up again. It's just that I know you can do it."

"I'm grateful for all the time you took looking into this. What a wonderful gesture. Do you have any info on the cow rentals? I guess I need to find myself a well-trained horse with cow."

They both laughed.

Chapter 12

Billy kept his word and by the end of the week, Charlie Horse arrived. All the girls and most of the staff came out to the barn to get a look at him.

Becky led the way to the driveway just as the large van pulled to a stop. Lisa and Sadie walked with her, their strides brisk and long, having no trouble keeping up. The rest of the girls trailed right behind.

“Oh, Ms. Becky, when he gets out of the van, tell me what he looks like, okay?”

“You bet I will. Billy told me this was all your idea, Lisa, and that you talked him into riding western. You had an excellent plan, and no matter how it turns out, you did a great thing. I haven’t heard him this excited in a long time.”

“Are we gonna get cows, Ms. Becky?” Amy asked as they approached the van. “I’d love to learn how to cut cows.”

“I think we’re gonna get on the rental program, get them changed out each month,” Becky said. “I’m not sure yet. Mr. Martin is handling that.”

“Oh, can’t you see Amy and Moose, all seventeen hands of him, down on his front end, dogging cows.” Shelby’s snicker was so infectious, even Amy laughed.

“So very funny, Shel. Moose would scare them to death. No, I’d buy a Quarter horse, too, and do it right.”

The men jumped out of the cab of the truck and hurried to the side of the van. They opened the side door and dropped the ramp down. One guy walked into the trailer, soon returning with the gelding.

Charlie Horse looked more like My Little Pony to the girls, who all rode tall horses, mostly warmbloods; the bigger the better when it came to jumpers.

Charlie was just a little guy. He must have been a grand sight in his day. Even now, the sprinkling of gray hairs on his forehead did nothing to diminish the proud, well-bred head. His ebony mane and tail glowed blue-black in the morning sun. The beautiful neck still bore the proud carriage of his youth.

Charlie had won them all. The Cow Palace knew him on a first name basis as a regular competitor and he was no stranger to Madison Square Garden. Magazines carried stories about his incredible prowess for more than a decade and he earned points that garnered him top honors in cutting.

He belonged to the mother of a dear friend of Tracy's. When she heard that Billy wanted a horse to learn how to cut on, she offered retired Charlie, who she referred to as the *cutting machine* for as long as needed.

As the groom led the old horse down the ramp, the little gelding paused mid-way and in an attempt to say hello, issued a high-pitched whinny that ended in a squeak. All the other horses responded in welcome.

The girls tittered.

"He sounds like a baby," Shelby said.

"Oh, Mr. Martin, he's just darling." Marcy reached Charlie first, running her fingers through his short black mane. "What a little doll."

Amy threw her arms around him, offering a handful of sugar cubes. "He's just bite-sized."

"What's he look like, guys? Somebody tell me!"

"He's a real dark bay, almost black," Amy said, "and he's got white hairs all over his body. He's an old guy but

he's in great shape. And he's so *cute*." She threw her arms around Charlie again, her face wreathed in smiles. "Oh, I want one, too."

Billy grinned at their reaction and glanced at Becky. "He's only sixteen, so there's plenty of spunk left. Besides, he doesn't do so much running around as he does bossing the cows. He's got years of experience, so if you girls want to give it a try, we'll share."

Everyone clapped and shouted except Lisa.

He's supposed to be your horse, Mr. Martin, not the school's horse. I think I've just been sidestepped.

* * *

"How many cows did you order," Becky asked.

"I ordered six to start. I don't have a clue what I'm doing here," Billy replied. "I've watched several tapes and from what I can see, the rider just sits quiet and lets the horse do everything."

He rose, glancing at his watch. "They should be here soon. I'm anxious to get started."

Becky leaned back in her chair and grinned. "Back in the saddle again! How do you like riding western?"

"It's very different. I'm learning the lingo, too. The fenders ... they're like our stirrup leathers, are real wide; it makes it harder to feel the horse. I mean, when you think of how flat our jumping saddles are and how much we depend on leg contact, it's a new concept, just like riding with one hand."

Becky chuckled. "Does the horn get in the way? How does it feel? I've always imagined it'd feel kinda lopsided or something, only using one hand."

"With just flat riding, there isn't much difference, but I know what you mean. Since I can't use my right hand anyway, I haven't 'pulled leather' so far, but I will soon."

He chortled. "That's what they call it when you hold onto the horn. The horse moves so fast, I know I'm probably going to come off a couple of times until I get the hang of it. I'm using closed reins, so I'll probably just drop them on his neck and grab the horn with my left hand."

"Are you excited to be riding again? Bless our dear Lisa, huh?"

"I guess. She's just the funniest little thing, and such a sunny outlook. She shamed me into riding again, y'know; just wouldn't take no for an answer. I'm glad she didn't. Well, shall we go out and welcome our cows? I see the truck coming up the drive."

Six cows of varied colors bunched up in the corner of the pasture, mooing softly and checking out their new home. Meanwhile, every horse in the barn had a hissy-fit as they drank in the aromatic smells of the newcomers.

Charlie Horse stood in the cross ties while Carlos tacked him up. The heavy western saddle was more than Billy could handle with only one functional hand. Carlos tightened up the cinch, slipped the hackamore over the horse's head and led him over to the mounting block.

Charlie never took his eyes off the cows; short little ears perked high, tail aloft, he did the two-step across the ground.

Billy hopped aboard, stroked the gelding's neck several times and drew a deep breath.

The girls lined up along the fence with Becky as Billy and Charlie entered the ring for the first time.

"Ms. Becky, please tell me what you see. Everything, even the littlest things."

"It's really exciting, isn't it? Okay, Charlie is staring at the cows, and the cows are all packed up into one corner, staring right back at him. I mean, it's like they're really *staring*. Now, he's, okay, he stopped a second. He's just

standing there and the cows are getting all nervous or something. They're starting to break up.

"Oh boy, here we go, he's cut one out of the herd. Yikes, the cow just dodged to the side real quick and Charlie cut him off and he's down on his front end, chest almost touching the ground and ... oh dear, Billy just fell off."

"Oh, no," Lisa said, clutching Becky's arm. "Is he all right?"

"Shoot, yes. He's already getting back on." She paused a moment as Billy remounted.

"I guess, yes, they're doing the same thing again. It's a different cow this time, a black one. He really does not want to be cut. He keeps dodging back into the herd. Okay, there we go."

"She, Ms. Becky. She. It's a girl cow."

Becky grinned. "Yep. Charlie is taking it a little slower this time. I think Billy scared him to death, falling off like that. Oh, they're dodging back and forth, Charlie is so low down, Billy's feet are almost touching the ground. He's really doing a good job. They both are."

One after the other, Charlie cut each of the cows from the herd, played with them for a while and then went on to a new one. By the time it ended, Billy's face was wreathed in smiles, red as a radish and soaked with sweat.

"Oh, Mr. Martin, what fun. How did it feel?" Amy smiled with delight as she and the rest of the girls gazed at Billy in adoration. They knew his story, his past achievements and that one, horrible fall that changed his life. They admired his spirit and spunk and secretly envied Lisa for being the one to bring Mr. Martin out.

"It's great fun, girls, very fast, quick moves. It's hard to believe a thousand pounds can move in so many directions at once. Whew!" He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand and grinned.

"I think I'm going to like this a whole lot. I just have to find a trainer to work with. I don't believe in self-teaching

with horses. You need someone on the ground who knows what they're doing if you ever expect to excel."

"There's a place up in Temecula called the BTR Ranch. They do this stuff." Shelby shrugged and stuck her hands in her pockets. "That's too far away to go, but they might know someone local to train you."

"Or you could check around at Mary's Tack." Marcy nodded several times at Billy as she loved on Charlie.

"They have a huge billboard filled with business cards and ads for sales horses and stuff. I bet someone there would know."

Becky stood off to the side, blinking rapidly and trying very hard not to cry. Just watching Billy ride again and seeing the wide smiles of satisfaction on his face touched her to the core. She drew a deep breath and finally acknowledged something she'd known for over a year. She was head over heels in love with her best friend.

Chapter 13

Becky and Billy sat at the table in her apartment discussing the coming school year at Mystic Ridge. Ten girls would live at the school and as many as six more could be accommodated as day trippers.

Between them on the table were seventeen applications that had made the cut from the dozens they'd received.

Tracy won their bet hands down. From the day they opened, they'd had a waiting list they could not possibly accommodate.

"What would you think about Lisa attending here full time? Her parents are thrilled with her progress. They called me this morning to see what we thought. I'm all for it. She's comfortable here, very much in the loop. The girls treat her like everyone else.

"What do you think? She could move into the main house, take that downstairs bedroom and bath for herself. I don't think it's a good idea to have her on the top floor. I shudder when I think of her on those stairs, even with Sadie."

"That's fine with me. She's my riding buddy, not to mention my inspiration to make a new riding future. Cutting horses? Who'd have thought it?" He looked down at his right hand and grimaced. "She changed my life. Yes, full time is great with me."

“Good. Now we’ve got three to pick out of this pile. I really like Katie Abrams. She has good grades, she’s a great rider and has a great horse. If we had the room, she’d live in. Good thing to keep in mind.

Billy nodded, then tapped the paper in front of him. “Irene Sanderson is an excellent student, but I don’t think she’ll keep up. She’s not much of a rider and has never shown her horse at county level. Financially, I don’t think it would work either.” He shrugged, tossing the application onto the large pile.

They weeded their way through the stack and in the end, came down to three additional girls.

Becky tapped the files and grinned.

“These kids will fit right in. All three would board here if a space opens and they’re equally good students and riders.

Billy fluttered his eyebrows and grinned. “That would mean sixteen students total. Still a super low ratio with three teachers; what do you think? Can we do this?”

“If we limited any further expansion to day trippers, we could go to a total of twenty students with no problem. Poor Anna. She’ll need help in the kitchen. That’s a lot of extra places at the table.”

“You think we’re ready for that many this year?” His eyes closed a moment and he shook his head.

“I trust your judgment. Oh, by the way, I just got Jeff’s signed contract renewal in the mail. He and Jessi will coach tennis again this term.”

Becky chuckled. “I already knew that. Jessi told me at lunch Saturday. Jeff has high aspirations for the girls ... he thinks they can do well in the statewide year-end tournament. Besides, they all have crushes on him and they just can’t help loving Jessi, even if they have a thing for her hubby, so it’s a perfect team.”

He remembered a particular Tuesday afternoon two years ago when the girls wouldn’t get serious about their

game. It didn't matter to Jeff that right after their lesson they'd be going home for Christmas break. By the time the session ended, the girls were dripping.

"We put together a great staff, I think. Mrs. Baylock is outstanding and so is Ms. Horton and if even half the stuff on his resume is true, Mr. Austin will fit right in. It says something about our business skills, Becky. We know how to build a good team because we're a good team."

She blushed and stared at a resume in front of her.

"I agree with that. We have very clear goals, not to mention we've been lucky. Plus, we know what we're looking for and the end results we're trying to achieve, so we pick the right staff. We're all young enough to be able to connect with the kids. Segue, but have you ever heard Mrs. Baylock read Poe? It gives me goose bumps. She changes her voice for the characters. It's something else. Her Spanish is text book and I would imagine her French is as well."

"It is. If anyone could make math interesting, it's Ellen Horton. I wish she'd been my teacher." His laugh was caustic, not at all amused. "I still hate math."

* * *

"I don't feel like eating at the house tonight," Becky said as she rummaged in the fridge. "Do you want to eat with me or go up there? What's your preference?"

Lisa shrugged. "Depends on what's on the menu. What are you going to make?"

"I thought I'd grill some burgers and make a salad. Sound good to you?"

"Count me in. I love your salads and you can never get too many burgers, huh, Sadie?" Lisa stroked the dog's head as she sat at the table.

"Did you and Mr. Martin talk with my dad about whether I'll be staying at Mystic for the next year?"

“Yes, we did, Lisa. You’re officially on board.” Becky chuckled as she formed the burgers, pressing them flat so they weren’t too thick.

“Oh, that’s wonderful. I never had a doubt you and Mr. Martin would accept me. It’s my dad. In the past, he wouldn’t let me commit long spans of time to anything. He likes to plan stuff for me to do on the spur of the moment. I guess he realizes I’m growing up, plus he knows how happy I am here. Did Mr. Martin say anything else?”

“Billy said he couldn’t take a chance on losing his riding buddy. How’s that going?”

“You know, Ms. Becky, I think it’s going great. We ride a couple of times a week and he seems to be having a good time with Charlie. We talk about everything under the sun. This morning he told me about when he rode Bitsy on the circuit. She must have been a kick.”

“Oh, she was. Does he ever talk about the accident?”

“Not in great detail ... just that his horse fell on him at an oxer. It stepped on his hand and smashed some fingers. I’m sure jumping will always be his favorite thing, but he seems to enjoy Charlie and the cows.”

Lisa shifted around in her chair, her face carefully composed.

“I told him how much I enjoyed the cruise and he started reminiscing about growing up in that house and how much fun you all had together in the summers.” She grew pensive, turning her head in the direction of the sounds Becky made.

“He talked a bit about Shievon. You knew her, didn’t you?”

“Oh, sure, she trained with us when we rode with Doubletree. What’d he say?”

“He said they went together in high school, but when he started on the circuit in his junior year, they just drifted apart.”

“Shievy had a hard time with him being gone, especially around the holidays and prom time. Billy hardly ever showed on the west coast except for HITS up in Indio and a couple of nominating qualifiers at Show Park, so they hardly ever saw each other. Most of the time he was back east and in Europe. Then her dad got transferred up to Seattle and they all moved. The last time we saw Shievy was at Jeff and Jessi’s wedding.”

“Wow, he showed in Europe. He didn’t mention that.”

“He went there twice. You should hear the stories he tells about famous venues like Hickstead.”

“The *bank*,” Lisa said, voice full of awe.

“Oh, yeah. It’s really important that prospective American Olympic team riders get exposure to European style competitions. Very different from here. He’d just come back from Germany after several impressive wins when the accident happened.”

“Oh, that’s so sad. He said they worked with George Morris. Can you imagine? He’s my riding idol.”

You are one of many happy fans, kiddo. He is the absolute best.”

Becky nodded as she slid the hamburgers from the broiler pan to a service plate. She placed Lisa’s food in the now-familiar pattern.

“Here we go. We got the burger, lid off, at six; pickle spears, tomato and onion slice at three; salad at nine and chips at twelve.”

“Smells delish, Ms. Becky.” Lisa lifted the lid, delicately tapped the surface for the proper amount of catsup on her burger and then turned to Becky.

“Do I need more? It feels about right.”

“Probably great just like it is. I know how much you like. Take a bite and see.”

“Mmm,” she said around her burger. “Perfect.” She picked up a pickle and took a bite.

“So, does Mr. Martin have a girlfriend now?”

“Nah, at least none I’ve heard of or met. Why?”

She gave a delighted chuckle. “Well, I think he likes you, Ms. Becky. More than just a friend or associate, although I hate to use the word *just* with friend. Friends are very important, I think. But he feels more for you.”

Color flooded Becky’s cheeks. “What makes you think so?”

“Oh, lots of things. Whenever he says your name it’s like a caress or something. I can hear him smile. Being blind, I seem to hear a lot more than most people do. Or maybe I just listen better, I’m not sure. You do the same thing, but it’s not so obvious.”

When Becky didn’t respond, Lisa said, “Am I being rude? I don’t mean to. I feel so close to you, sometimes I forget our roles. I’m sorry.”

“Oh, sweetie, not at all. I know you care and the feeling is mutual. It’s just, well, Billy and I have been friends for ages.”

“When did that change?”

Becky stared at Lisa’s twitching lips and shook her head.

“You are such a tease. And if we’re going to have this conversation, I want your word of honor it’ll go nowhere else.”

“Solemn promise, pinky swear, not a word.”

“You know Billy and I work very closely on the school programs. We think part of our success is because we try to pick similar types of kids who will fit in with our other students. That’s why we couldn’t let Emily stay here. Harmony in a small school like this is very important. Our aim is to build a team of girls who want to excel in all areas of their lives, not just the academics. Anyway, Mystic Ridge is like our baby.”

“That’s a very strong bond, I agree, but there’s more to it.”

Becky's voice changed just as Lisa knew it would.

"I guess it's been going on for a year, but watching him ride Charlie, seeing that wonderful smile, it just broke my heart. It's been a long time since he's really smiled. Then I realized there was no point in denying it. I might as well admit I'm in love with him and figure out what to do next."

"So, what are your plans?"

"I don't have any, Lisa, not even a little one."

"Did Mr. Martin agree to me moving up to the big house?"

"Yes. Looks like this is our last night as roommates. We can move you in the morning."

"Good. Tomorrow night invite Mr. Martin over for dinner. Make something special. You're a good cook, I think. From what I hear, scented candles are a nice touch. I like the way they smell, especially the jasmine ones. Anyway, set a romantic mood and see what happens."

The next morning, Becky had two of the grooms help them take Lisa's belongings to her new room.

"Before we get you settled in, I want your opinion on how I arranged things. It's a really easy pattern."

They left Sadie sitting in the hall and walked into the small room.

"Where's the bathroom from here?" Lisa asked, her right hand resting on the door jam.

"Directly across the floor from you. To your right is your workstation. On the far wall is the closet. Your bed and nightstand are next to you on the left and a dresser is on the wall by the bathroom."

Lisa tucked her hand into Becky's elbow and began to learn about the room.

"I'm going to feel my way around, starting with the bed." Tentative fingers glided across the wall then reached down, touching the comforter and pillows. With her knee in contact with the bed, she counted four steps. As expected,

the bed ended and she moved laterally until she touched the wall.

“When we get to the bathroom, let’s check it out.”

Tour completed, Lisa called Sadie to her side. “To tell you the truth, I prefer a small room like this. It gives me a snug feeling, I guess. The bathroom is perfect. Where do you think the best place is to put Sadie’s mat and her bowls?”

They arranged her room in a few minutes and then Lisa said, “I’ll be just fine, Ms. Becky. Now what are you making Mr. Martin for dinner?”

“Tuna casserole.”

“You’ve got....” Lisa paused a moment and then grinned. “Just like the liverwurst and onions, right?”

“Yep.”

* * *

Becky buzzed around her apartment, checking everything twice as she put the special finishing touches to the table. A low arrangement of garden-fresh, fragrant flowers nestled between two candles.

Earlier that afternoon she’d driven to Jensen’s to pick up two huge stuffed pork chops. While she felt confident in her basic cooking skills, she wanted this, the first meal she’d ever cooked for Billy, to be special. The delicious aroma of roasting meat permeated the air.

She glanced in the mirror and ran a hand through her wavy red hair. She applied a final coat of lipstick and peered closer. The addition of mascara and the difference it made always startled her.

A car stopped in front of her house and she glanced at her watch with a smile.

Right on time, just like clockwork.

“Hey there,” she called as she walked across the living room. “Come on in.”

“Something smells great. I didn’t know you could cook anything that smelled that tasty. You’ve been holding out on me. Mmm, it’s all over the farm, too.”

He gazed at her and smiled. “After all these years, you’re keeping secrets.” Billy hoisted a bag.

“I brought some wine to celebrate.”

She chuckled, taking the bag from him.

“Well, I’m great at the grill and I have a couple of killer casseroles, but I wanted dinner to be extra special, so I cheated. I went down to Jensen’s and got two of the most gorgeous stuffed pork chops ... you’re gonna love ‘em, and nice fresh broccoli. It’s almost ready ... another couple of minutes is all.”

They took their glasses and the bottle out to the porch and fell into the easy banter of longtime friends.

Becky stared off into the sunset and sighed.

“Lisa’s all settled into her new digs. She told me she likes smaller rooms. I think it’s probably easier for her if she doesn’t have to cross a lot of space or zigzag around stuff. With all the other students doubling up, I kinda wondered if they might be jealous, but who could envy a blind person?”

Billy uncorked the wine and poured.

“Really. She’s so smart and quick, it’s hard to remember she’s blind, especially if you’re just sitting around talking.” He chuckled, and leaning toward Becky, handed her a glass.

“You talk about relentless? When she gets an idea, she’s tenacious.” He tipped his rim to hers in a toast. “To the coming year.”

Becky grinned and took a sip, blue eyes dancing.

“Oh, yes. To the future, to the new kids, and to us.”

He nodded, a smile of agreement on his lips.

“I talked to Tracy the other day, told her about the programs we planned and she offered another tour for all the

girls to come up to the studio like Lisa did. Now that's what I call a field trip. Lisa will remember it for the rest of her life and so will the other girls. Me too, actually."

"My mother ... she's another one who's a force of nature." He swirled the wine around his glass and took another swallow. "Can you imagine the reaction when the kids on MySpace and Facebook hear what the girls at Mystic do on field trips? Our kids will be bragging about the stuff they do at school and every girl in the world will want to study here."

Fireflies flitted in the dark, dancing on the breeze that kissed the air from time to time.

"Tracy has a lot to do with our success. She knows so many people and she's so proud of you, it's natural that she brags. I'm glad of it, y'know?"

They talked about the future, the programs they wanted to initiate this year and their plans to expand. For a while, the faint smell wafting across the porch could be ignored. Suddenly it registered and Becky jumped to her feet.

"Good grief, I forgot the food. Man!"

Billy followed her, chuckling in spite of his rumbling stomach. "I can help. Tell me what you want done."

She hurried over to the oven and donned her mitts.

"For starters, turn back time fifteen minutes or so." She stared at the chops. "Make that half an hour. I don't think they're supposed to be crisp like that." She pointed at the chops, now but a shadow of their former plump and juicy selves, and shook her head.

Becky placed the pan on the stove and peered closer.

"They were a lot bigger when they started out, let me tell you. I checked just before you got here and they were all, like, moist and puffed up and stuff. What the heck happened here? They look like hockey pucks."

Billy stifled a grin. "They seem fine to me. Let's get them on the table and eat. I'm starved."

With obvious reluctance, she pried them off the baking pan and placed a shriveled chop on each plate.

Billy followed her lead, bearing a bowl of what might once have been broccoli and two nice, surprisingly crisp salads, considering the abundance of dressing.

They sat next to each other, not making eye contact, just staring into their plates.

“I just love radishes,” he said, fishing one out of his blue-cheese-drenched salad. He tapped it on the edge of his bowl to remove the excess dressing and popped it into his mouth. “By any chance, do we have rolls?”

“I forgot to get any.”

“Oh, well. No problem.” With great caution, Billy picked up his knife and fork and gazed at the chop. It glared back at him in insolence, daring him to try. Tentatively, he attempted to pierce the meat with his fork, his right hand awkward in its brace.

A small piece of the tail section shot from under his knife and landed in Becky’s salad with a splat. For a long moment, neither of them moved. Fixated, they stared at the offending piece of meat.

Becky picked it up between thumb and forefinger, popped it into her mouth and rolled her eyes.

“Thank you very much. Good aim. Tastes like bacon.”

She grinned and continued to chew as a blush crept up her neck.

He let out a chuckle that ended up sounding very much like a snicker. She tossed him a glance and guffawed, eyes beginning to glaze over with tears. They started to laugh in slow ripples, escalating until they doubled over and tears poured down their cheeks.

Billy leaned back in his chair and wiped his eyes. “You crack me up.” He chuckled again then visibly restrained himself.

“Okay, I’m still starving to death. Let’s put this away and go out.”

He pulled his cell from his pocket and made a call while she cleared the table. His voice, just audible in the kitchen piqued her curiosity.

“That’s none of your business and you don’t need to give me a hard time about it. Oh, you’re funny.”

Billy closed the cell just as she came out of the kitchen. “I’m ready if you are.”

They hopped into his car under a blanket of stars, and made their way down the long, hilly road toward Del Mar. The Porsche hugged the pavement and soon turned onto Via de la Valle. They were more than halfway through town when Becky realized they’d passed the restaurant area.

She turned to Billy and shrugged. “Where are we going to eat?”

“How about on the Sea Nymph? I thought that would be cool, listen to some CDs, dance. Even when she’s not going anywhere, it feels like she is.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No, really. I just asked Bob to make us something special and serve it on the stern. Doesn’t that sound like fun?”

“It sure does. You always have the neatest ideas. I have such great memories of that yacht, so many cool things we did on it. Like the pirates, oh man. I’ll never forget that one. I got sidelined with Shievon and never did get off the bench. That was fine with me, but Shievy was so mad.”

She hesitated a moment, then continued. “Poor Steve; his first cruise turned out to be more exciting than expected.”

“Do you ever hear from him? He’s graduating in a couple of months, right?”

“Yeah, but he’s not coming home. He’s not even taking a break, really. He’s starting grad school two weeks later. He sends me an email every once in a while, but it’s

been years since I've seen him. How about Shievy. You ever hear from her?"

"No, just Christmas cards. Except for Jeff and Jessi's wedding, I haven't seen her since I started on the circuit." He put on his blinker then pushed a button on his dashboard, alerting the guard to open the gate.

"I remember the first time I saw your place. I'd only been at Doubletree a couple of weeks, and we all came out to swim. I could not believe how beautiful it was. I'm used to it now, but I'm still blown away."

"Oh, I remember that day very well. You wore a melon-colored bathing suit and you looked fabulous."

She stared at him. "Wow, you fooled me. I didn't think you noticed me at all, but I sure noticed you."

He chuckled and then took her hand.

"Shievon felt very possessive, which I really don't mind, for the most part. Sometimes, though, it can limit friendships, if you know what I mean. But then, there was Steve."

Becky's laugh floated above them as they neared the yacht.

"She was so jealous of Melanie ... she'd talk about it all the time."

"See? That's what I mean. With Melly it was honest admiration. What a rider. She can jump the moon. Shievon had a hard time with that."

He took her arm and tucked it in his as they started up the gangplank. The usual ocean wind, now but a breeze, barely fluttered the flag that hung from the stern. Music played in the background, subtle haunting sounds of flutes and pulsating drums floated on the night air.

Bob leaned against the bar, a smirk on his face. He called hello as they walked down the steps to the stern.

"Hi, Becky, Billy."

They replied and Billy asked what he'd made them for dinner.

“You guys got so lucky. The last time your mother came down she went on a cooking spree. She made seafood stew and froze batches of it. I have salad and a nice crusty bread, but no garlic tonight.”

“Oh, that sounds wonderful, thanks.”

Eyes twinkling, he smiled back at Becky and then snuck a quick peek at Billy.

“I figured it was just chilly enough that you’d appreciate a way to stay warm.”

Billy gazed at Bob, face as straight as a poker.

“Thank you for thinking of that.”

“No problem. When do you want me to serve?”

“I don’t know yet. I’ll beat a spoon on the table or something.”

Bob cleared his throat a couple of times and turned on his heel.

“Alrighty, then, I’m sure I’ll hear that.” His voice had an odd gurgling sound to it.

Becky watched Bob head for the galley.

“What was that all about?”

“Well, he knows I’m going to kiss you and he thinks it’s funny.”

“When is that going to happen?”

“Oh, pretty soon, I think.” Chuckling, he pulled her into his arms.

“You are the most delightful girl I know. Always have been.” He ran his hand through her hair. “I love red. When I first met you it hung down your back in curls. You were as cute as a button.”

He placed his left hand on her cheek, cupping it, and stared into her eyes, waiting.

She leaned into him and raised her lips to his. Soft, quick little kisses grew slower and longer. They began to sway to the music, lost in each other.

“Now, Billy,” she whispered in his ear. “You remember what happened to the pork chops.”

He nuzzled her neck. "I know, and I'm famished, but I don't want to let go."

"Won't be for long. We just need to fuel up."

He leaned far enough away from her to see her face fully. He sighed, nuzzling her neck.

"I've wanted to hold you like this for a long time."

"I know. Me, too."

He pressed his lips against hers and sighed.

Bob brought a silver tureen to the table along with two salads and a large basket of bread and butter. He lit the hurricane lamps that graced either side of the table and cleared his throat.

"Dinner is served."

Chapter 14

General Orientation Day at Mystic Ridge dawned bright and clear.

Amy worried about the new roommates who would arrive shortly and glanced in sorrow at the empty bed. She missed Emily and even though they texted each other and talked on the phone every day, it wasn't the same.

With school starting and free time at a premium, she knew they'd grow apart. At least Emily wasn't cutting anymore. Thank God for that.

In the suite next door, Marcy and Shelby, best friends and long-time roomies, glanced out their bedroom window as another car pulled up to the house.

"I guess we'd better go down and say hello." Marcy shook her cup and gave a shrug. "Besides, I need a refill."

Lisa opened her bedroom door as the aroma of perking coffee and fresh baked goods wafted into her nostrils. She reached down and stroked her dog's head.

"Oh, Sadie, I'm starved." They entered the kitchen and Lisa slid into her assigned seat where she and Sadie were out of the traffic pattern.

"Good morning, Lisa." Anna pulled another pan of muffins from the oven. "You hungry?"

“Hi, Anna.” Lisa turned toward Anna, her head tilted to one side. “Do I smell cinnamon buns?”

“Yes, you do. I’ll get you one.” She placed the bun in front of the girl. “It’s hot, so be careful.” With her other hand, she gave Lisa a napkin.

Marcy and Shelby charged down the stairs ahead of Amy. Laughing they came around the corner, calling hello to Lisa and Anna, refilling cups and glasses.

Shelby snagged a bun and took a bite. “Oh, Anna, this is delicious, oow...” She took a swig of milk and grinned, blinking several times. “Hot lips!”

“Are any of the new girls here yet?” asked Lisa.

“No one’s here in the room with us, but it won’t be long.” Amy laid a gentle hand on Lisa’s arm.

“I saw two girls unloading luggage out front. Kind of exciting, isn’t it, first day, new friends?”

“Oh, yes. I still can’t believe Mr. Martin let me stay. I know Mystic isn’t set up for a blind student, so I’m doubly grateful.”

Shelby shook her head.

“Lisa, you get around so well, no one even notices. You’re just one of the team. Except I’m jealous you get to have your dog.”

They all chuckled and then paused as approaching footsteps warned of company. A small girl, dark hair pulled back from her heart-shaped face into a pony tail, offered a tentative smile and her name.

“Hi, I’m Molly Stewart.”

The introductions barely finished when another girl with red-gold hair entered the kitchen, followed by Becky and Billy.

“This is Ginger Banks, girls. Introduce yourselves.”

It started all over again amid laughter and high spirits, and by necessity, the group gravitated toward the huge living room as more students arrived.

Billy took Becky's arm, pulling her aside.

"I think the best thing to do is let everyone mingle a little longer and then we'll assign them rooms so they can get settled in."

"Good idea. It takes off some of the stress. Not a sad face in the group." She glanced at a folder she carried and pointed at the chart.

"I placed them mostly by age. Amy is the oldest, so I thought she'd enjoy Ginger and Molly. They have a lot in common so it should be a good match."

"How about Marcy and Shelby? Who do they get?"

"Jean will be happy with them, I think, and since Betsy and Alison are the youngest, they'll do fine in the smaller suite next to Lisa."

"Good pairings, I think. We'll have to make sure no one gets feeling left out. Amy is the best candidate for housemother."

Becky chuckled. "A very nurturing spirit. Yes, I'll mention it to her. So, what do you think, is it time to get them settled in?"

Billy nodded. "Girls?"

He raised his voice slightly and got their attention. "You probably want to know who your new roommates are and Ms. Becky has the breakdown."

Becky grinned at the girls.

"First of all, welcome to Mystic Ridge. Mr. Martin and I are right here if questions or concerns arise. We like to think of ourselves as a team and we want you to feel a part of that team as well. Amy, raise your hand, please?"

"Ginger, you and Molly will bunk in with Amy. Marcy, give a wave. Jean will bunk with you and Shelby, and Betsy and Alison will share the downstairs suite next to Lisa."

The buzz escalated as the girls paired up.

“Okay, let’s gather your suitcases and check out your new digs.” She turned to Billy. “I’ll get Alison and Betsy settled in.”

“Good idea. The staff is already in the school, waiting. Most of the day kids are already over there, so we’re right on schedule. I just got a call from Jose. All the horses are here except for Molly’s mare. Her parents are bringing her down early this afternoon.”

Becky nodded as she turned away. “Outstanding. Okay, I’ll meet with you in about twenty minutes.”

“See you there.”

* * *

Amy led the way up the steps while Marcy delivered a running commentary on how things worked at Mystic.

The new girls fluctuated between high excitement and anxiety, not sure what the future held, but anxious to find out. Amy led Ginger and Molly into the room and pointed at the beds.

“Those are yours, and the bathroom is through that door. That big closet is yours to share. This little one is fine for me.” Amy flopped on her bed, watching as the girls unpacked.

Molly set her suitcase on the bed and snapped open the clasps.

“My mother is bringing the rest of my clothes down this afternoon.”

She hung a few skirts and blouses in her share of the huge closet, closed her suitcase and shoved it under her bed.

“My side looks pretty sparse right now, but don’t let that fool you. These are just my faves.” Ginger giggled. “Don’t worry. I have two more suitcases and a huge duffle bag waiting on the porch for me. This is the smallest one. I

can't get the others up the steps alone. Do we have help around here?"

Amy nodded. "We can have one of the grooms do it. They'll be safe where they are until you're ready to bring them up."

"So, what's it like around here?" Ginger cocked her head at Amy, green eyes sparkling. "That Mr. Martin is a doll, isn't he?"

Amy chuckled. "We all have a crush on him, and wait until you see Mr. Young, our tennis coach. I mean, he's drop-dead gorgeous, all blond and tan and stuff; married. Mmm. Tall." She chuckled again. "You'll see."

Molly placed a pile of books on her desk and shrugged, scooting her laptop over so she'd have more room.

"My mother knows his mother ... Mr. Martin's. They work at the studio together."

"No kidding," Amy said, eyes big. "My mother is the hair stylist for Tracy's show. What does your mother do?"

"She's one of the script writers."

Amy gazed at her in envy and amazement.

"So you get to know what's going to happen on the show and stuff? How cool."

"Ha, not a chance. Her mouth is closed tight as a clam. They work under some code of silence or something. They can't talk about anything that's going to happen. Even the actors are in the dark for the most part."

Amy smiled. "I bet our mothers know each other. Man, what a small world."

"Wow," Ginger said. "How cool is that? My mother doesn't work at a job, unless you call shopping and the spa a job."

"Oh, God, not another professional shopper." Amy pursed her lips. "My last roommate had a mother who did that. Made her crazy."

"Not me. My mother is the coolest adult I know. I want to grow up to be just like her. I love to shop."

* * *

When Billy and Becky decided to expand the number of students accepted at Mystic Ridge, the first problem to solve was the school itself. After much discussion, they purchased a new three bedroom, three bath mobile home and converted it. The convenience of kitchen and bathroom facilities made life easy.

They agreed that if the growth continued, Mystic would require a large addition to the school. In turn, the mobile would provide housing for six more girls. For the moment it served their needs for additional classrooms quite well.

Mystic Ridge lured an exceptional staff with the promise of an unheard of salary, excellent benefits and a very small ratio of students to teachers. Billy amassed as talented and devoted a teaching staff as money could buy.

Math and science teacher Ellen Horton leaned up against her desk as the students approached. She smiled in welcome and introduced herself.

Barbara Baylock taught English, Spanish and French. Her ability to give a stirring, theatrical reading of the dullest, most unexciting story made her a favorite with her students.

Charles Austin brought history alive, using skits and improvisation to ingrain otherwise boring historical tidbits. An artist in his own right, he sniffed out hidden talents like a hound, and more than one former student pursued a successful art career thanks to his tender nurturing.

* * *

The temperature hovered in the mid-eighties, causing Becky to ask Anna to turn dinner into an outdoor meal by the pool, especially since she had a Mexican feast on the menu.

The girls, although wound up tight with their new experiences, and in full sensory overload, were exhausted. Cheeks might be pink with excitement, but droopy, half-closed eyes told another story.

Becky smiled at the yawns hidden behind polite hands and grinned as she thought of the chicken and cheese enchiladas, chilies rellenos and refried beans ahead of them. It would be an early night.

The sun began to set in a hazy mist that blurred the outlines and intensified the colors. Red, pink and gold shards of color shot through the clouds. A gentle breeze blew through the tops of the tall palms, whispering. The sun slid from sight, leaving in its wake every possible shade of crimson.

Surreptitiously, Becky gazed from one face to the next. The pairings seemed to work fine.

Betsy and Alison, already attached at the hip, welcomed Lisa into their little circle with open arms.

Amy liked both her roomies, finding Ginger's droll personality similar to Emily's while Molly, the comedienne, kept them giggling.

Even Jean Crane, normally shy and reserved, had no choice but to make friends with Marcy and Shelby. It could not be avoided.

Becky nodded at Billy, a smile tilting her lips. She glanced at the girls. "Happy campers, for sure."

* * *

Marcy pulled her new breeches on and smiled in satisfaction. "Aha, they zip and I don't have to lie on the bed to do it."

"High fives to you, girl. I'm proud of you." Shelby nodded in approval. "I know it wasn't easy, but it was worth it. You look so cool. Way to go."

Jean shuffled through her welcoming package.

"I lost my schedule. It was in here ... okay, there it is. I don't ride with you guys, huh? Why?"

Marcy shrugged. "Not today. Mr. Martin and Ms. Becky will evaluate you and your horse first. We have two groups of riders, but we change off all the time, depending on what else is on the schedule."

Shelby patted Molly's back and grinned.

"You new kids get a private lesson and then they'll put you on one team or the other to start out, but it doesn't really matter. We're always switching around anyway, so we all get to ride together. Do you show much?"

"Oh, yeah, up at Griffith Park. It's a great place to board and some of the best trainers in California work out of the barns up there."

"Oh, that's where our friend, Emily, went. She used to go here, but now she's attending a school near her house and boards her horse at the center."

"Which barn, do you know?"

"Foxcroft, I think. Something like that. She loves it."

"Well," Shelby said, jumping to her feet. "I'll race you to the barn."

The girls bounded down the stairs and hit the back door with a resounding bang.

"Ninas! Por favor!" Anna cried. "You give me the *feets!*"

Calls of "I'm sorry" floated on the breeze. They raced across the courtyard just as Becky came out of the barn. She held up one hand, frowning.

"No running in the barn area, girls. You'll get someone killed."

More apologies mixed with smiles as they slowed to a walk, calling hello to Becky.

"We're all just so excited."

"I can understand that," Becky replied, a big grin on her face. "Go ahead and get your horses ready. We meet in the big arena in fifteen minutes."

Billy and Charlie Horse stood in the middle of the arena while the girls warmed up.

"Okay, let's tighten up the line, ladies. Marcy, you take the lead. Alright, canter please, and remain in line."

Marcy and Cocoa led the way down the rail, the remaining girls following in formation.

"Make a change across the arena and down the other side," Billy called. "Amy, when we get on the long side, take the lead."

Amy took a light feel of the reins, assumed the two-point position and extended the canter. Prince lengthened well and began to make the pass. They took the lead from Marcy and slowed their speed to a normal canter once they reached the front of the line. One rider after the other took the lead until, at the end, Marcy led once again.

"All walk."

Panting and grins met his gaze. He smiled back, nodding. "That gets you going, doesn't it? We have two weeks until the first show. We need to be fit and ready to canter forever."

Jean, Molly and the rest of the new girls rode with Becky in the smaller ring. After scrutinizing their abilities, Becky decided to keep the new kids on one team, except for Ginger.

Although all the girls rode well, Ginger and her gelding, Frenchy, were on a par with Amy and Shelby, the most advanced riders at school. Becky made a mental note to assign Ginger to the other group and then began the lesson.

Lisa sat on a pool chair next to Billy and Becky. The late afternoon sun grew cool and she pulled a light jacket over her shoulders and turned toward Becky.

“Is something wrong? I know you have something on your mind. Am I in trouble?”

No, honey. Not at all. Mr. Martin and I are just concerned about the show coming up. We aren’t sure it’s a good idea for you to come. I know you want to and it makes me sad to disappoint you, but we’re going to be racing around, getting the kids ready for their classes, schooling them and all. There’d be no one to help you out, watch out for you.”

“Goodness sakes, you make it sound like I’m going into the lion’s den or something. It’s just a horse show, right?”

“Well, yes, but it’s so much more. It’s a very unique site. Most times we have at least a hundred outside horses entered, not to mention the variety of barns located at Show Park that are private. It’s a zoo, and we can’t let you be there alone. I hope you understand.”

Lisa leaned back in her chair, silent. The idea of missing out on the show made her mad, but the fact that once again she came up against a stone wall caused by her blindness depressed her. Gentle fingers stroked the soft fur around Sadie’s neck, seeking calm and consolation.

“I understand. It’s all part of why you don’t ordinarily admit blind students here. You can’t be babysitting me while the other kids need help.” She let out a deep sigh and pursed her lips.

“It’s just so unfair. I miss out on so much already, and I, oh, never mind, it’s not your problem.”

They sat a while longer and then Lisa rose.

“I have homework I want to finish. Have a nice night and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Becky and Billy watched her walk away.

“She just breaks my heart ... such a little trooper. I wish we could do something for her.” She sniffed in silence.

“She just needs an escort, someone who knows their way around the show grounds and can keep her out of harms way. I have an idea.”

Chapter 15

A buzz of excitement ran through the girls as the day approached. The horses, fresh from a full day at the beauty parlor, had glowing coats and polished hooves. They sparkled like fine jewels. Most of the girls showed in hunters or equitation, so their horses had their manes and tails braided.

“The only time I regret riding jumpers is times like this,” Amy said to Prince as she adjusted his day sheet. She glanced around and shrugged. “They all look so pretty, don’t they, boy? I wish we braided jumpers, too.”

Becky chuckled. “I heard that. There’s nothing to keep you from braiding, Amy. It’s just that you don’t *have* to.” She gave the girl a gentle nudge with her elbow.

“Besides, when the oxers get wide, I like a bit of mane to grab, don’t you? Just in case?”

They both chuckled.

“You’re on the first load, so get his boots on and we’ll meet you out front.”

Becky continued down the aisle, looking for trouble. This was just about the time when the first case of willies set in. No doubt about it, someone was about ready to hurl. Sure enough, the look on Molly’s face said it all.

“You okay?” Becky slipped her arm across Molly’s shoulder and gave her a hug. “Feelin’ a bit queasy?”

Molly nodded. "I think my breeches are too tight! I can hardly breathe."

"Well, you look wonderful and Sparrow, wow, I never realized what a beautiful neck she has. Look at that lovely crest." She threw a sidelong glance at Molly and nodded.

"She is gorgeous, isn't she?" Molly stroked the soft forehead, moving aside just in time to avoid some horsie love in the form of a sloppy kiss.

"We've been together forever it seems like. She was my tenth birthday present."

By that time, Molly's natural color returned and she'd unclenched her fists. Becky patted her back, murmured goodbye and continued down the aisle.

"Ms. Becky? Can you hold her a minute?" Jean perched both hands on her hips and glared at her pony.

"Kitty, stand still. I have to put the shipping boots on. You'll hurt your legs ... Ms. Becky?"

"What's the matter, Jean? Won't she stand still?" Becky glanced at the magnificent, if spoiled rotten pony and shook her head.

"You're a little bully, aren't you? You need a tune-up in the manners department. Or maybe...." She turned to the side, bent slightly and picked up Kitty's right foreleg, encouraging the mare to stretch.

She did, quivering. The other leg quickly followed suit and she rewarded Becky with a deep, shuddering breath and then she sighed.

"I think she just had the jumps, y'know, fidgets? Whenever she gets like that, just stretch her front legs first, before anything else. She'll stand quieter. Go ahead and try again."

Kitty stood like a statue while Jean put on the boots. Pink in the face but smiling, Jean said, "You know everything about horses, don't you?"

Becky chuckled. "Only about half. Just remember those stretching exercises. Saves a lot of bad feelings on both sides."

She made her way down the aisle, nodding at Billy as he came out of the office. "You look like the cat that swallowed the canary. What's up?"

"I just talked to Jessi and she's going to bring Lisa to the show. Jeff has a meeting down in San Diego so she has free time. She should be here any minute. Where's Lisa?"

"I'd imagine in her room unless she's out by the pool. I haven't seen her since we got up."

"You have everything under control here, right?"

"You bet. Go give her the good news. She'll be thrilled."

* * *

Billy entered the kitchen, relieved to see Lisa sitting at the table eating a muffin. "Hi, Lisa, I've been looking for you."

She raised her head, turned toward his voice and grinned.

"The muffins are out of this world. Banana nut and raisin bran. I've had one of each. Want one?"

"I already did; they're great. Hey, do you still want to go to the show? 'Cause if you do, Jessi's on her way over to pick you up. She used to show there a lot when we were teens. She still rides but jumping isn't her thing anymore. Now she rides dressage."

"Oh, yes, I really do. What should I wear? Do I look okay?"

"You look just fine. You might want to grab a light jacket. Come on out to the front porch. I think she just drove up." He patted her shoulder, grinning at her expression.

She picked up the harness and rose. "Come on, Sadie. We're going to the horse show."

Jessi Young stopped next to the front porch, the Dixie Chicks playing on her car stereo. Grinning, she took the steps three at a time, almost colliding with Billy as he opened the door.

“Hey!”

He gave her a grin and a hug.

“Hey to you.” He turned and led the way back down the steps.

“I sure do appreciate this, Jessi. She was so upset at being left behind, but you know we can’t have a blind kid loose at a show. Even with Sadie, so much crazy stuff happens; even people who can see get in trouble.”

“Oh, no, you’re right, but it’s no favor. I’m glad to do it, actually. I haven’t been to Show Park in ages. Be fun just to reminisce. I can still see Melly and Benny out there on the Grand Prix field, Shievon and her incredible smile; Blair and Angel. We had a ball, huh?” She glanced across Billy’s shoulder, grin widening.

“Hey, Lisa, how’re you doing?”

“Very excited, Ms. Jessi. It’s my very first time. Mr. Martin said that when you were my age you showed there. I bet I’m going to learn a whole lot about showing today. I’m going to be an author when I grow up, y’know, and I need a lot more experience. Actually....”

Giggling, Jessi took her arm. “Wait, let me open the door.” She pulled the passenger seat forward and got Sadie settled on the back seat.

Lisa extended her arm, slowly sweeping the space before her.

“I can’t feel the top and I don’t want to bump my head when I get in.”

“I put the top down. It’s a convertible. Let me lend a hand here.” Jessi helped Lisa to the seat and adjusted the seatbelt. She waved goodbye to Billy and drove down the driveway.

“Whoa, a convertible. This is way cool. I’ve never been in one before.”

“Oh, yeah, it’s a ball. Messes your hair, but what the heck. So you want to be a writer. Go on.”

“Well, at first I thought I’d write mysteries, but I think I’ve had a change of heart. I’m going to write stories about a blind girl who gets to ride horses and do all the things other kids do.”

Huge eyes the color of a Hershey’s kiss glazed with tears. Jessi coughed and turned to the girl.

“Like a biography.”

“Oh, yes. Auto.”

Jessi parked the little yellow Mustang in a shady spot near their barn. She and Lisa, with Sadie in tow, walked down the aisle. All the girls were in the warm-up ring with Becky, getting the horses used to the new facility and calming their jitters.

“Tell me what everything looks like, Ms. Jessi. Where are we exactly? Wow, it’s noisy, huh?”

Jessi chuckled and slipped her arm through Lisa’s.

“Well, it is crazy. Okay, directly in front of us is one of the openings to get into the warm-up rings. They have two of them side-by-side, and they have openings so that the riders can switch from one to the other without having to use a gate. Very clever.”

They came to the fence and Lisa put one hand on the top rail, quickly retracting it as a horse cantered by, almost close enough to touch.

“Oh, my, this is just a bit, um, scary, Ms. Jessi. Can we move back a bit?”

“Sure. In fact, how about if we go sit in the stands over by the Grand Prix field.”

Another horse whipped by them, causing Lisa to cringe. Jessi took her arm again, turned her away from the fence and led the way to the relative calm of the upper field.

“Where are we now, Ms. Jessi? It seems a bit quieter.”

Jessi glanced at Lisa, alarmed to see her lips pale and pinched together. “Are you okay?”

“I think I’d like to sit somewhere for a minute and sort of get collected.” She hesitated a moment and shrugged, tightening her hold on Jessi’s arm. “You have no idea what it’s like, hearing all this activity and not being able to see. I think Mr. Martin was right. I probably don’t belong here.”

They sat in the first row of bright blue stadium chairs that faced the Grand Prix field. The morning sun bathed them with warmth and Lisa slipped her arms out of her jacket. The color slowly returned to her cheeks and her full, bow-shaped lips no longer covered clenched teeth.

“I’m sorry I’m such a coward. Usually I do just fine as long as I have Sadie with me, but this time, I don’t know.”

“Coward? You? That’s just ridiculous. You’re the bravest person I’ve ever met. Look at you! Becky says you’re doing a great job with Angel and that you’re cantering on your own. Not too many blind kids can do that, y’know.”

“That’s all thanks to Angel. She takes such good care of me. Ms. Becky told me you used to show here. How did you like it?”

“Well, when your mother is the trainer it doesn’t really matter. You just do it. I had a good time, really, it was a lot of fun, especially since we had such a great team, but it never meant to me what it does to Billy or Melanie or Blair.”

“Don’t you still ride?”

“Oh, heck yes. I always loved riding. It was the show jumping I didn’t like so much. I always felt like I was on the brink of disaster or something. Once the other kids went off to college, I stopped showing.”

“Didn’t you go to college?”

“Nah, I didn’t think there was any point. I didn’t want a job or a career. All I wanted to do was marry Jeff and have lots of kids. We got married last June, shortly after he graduated.”

“Are you sorry now? That you didn’t go?”

Jessi chuckled. “Oh, not really. Sometimes when Blair and Melanie talk about new friends and the social stuff, dances, I guess a little, but that’s no reason to go to college. Besides, I got to do all that with Jeff, anyway, so even though I wasn’t enrolled, I had loads of fun. I never was a good student, had to really work for Bs in high school, so I’d never have made it through anyway.” She giggled and gave Lisa a gentle nudge.

“We’re pregnant. That’s the career for me. I’m going to be mother of the year to my children. I have excellent role models. You should meet Julia, my mother-in-love ... that’s what she calls herself. And, of course, my mom is the greatest. She’s already shopping for ponies!”

Lisa’s mouth dropped open and she turned toward Jessi. “You’re pregnant? Oh my gosh, that’s so cool. Can I feel the baby ... oh dear, that was rude. I didn’t....”

Jessi chuckled, interrupting. “I’m only about a month along, so there’s nothing to feel yet, but when I begin to show I’ll let you know. It’s so exciting.”

“My goodness, yes. Do you want boys or girls?”

“Several of both. Oh, my gosh, not to change the subject, but wait until you hear who’s next to go. My teen heart-throb. Oh, man, when I was showing I had such a crush on him. He had this fabulous gray gelding, Robinson. Horse had invisible wings, I swear, and turn? Holy Toledo, you wouldn’t believe it. He retired Robbie several years ago. This one is a new horse, at least to me. I haven’t been to a show in quite a while.”

“Who?”

The announcers mike crackled. “Next rider to see, ladies and gentlemen, number 489, Pacific Coast Grand Prix

Rider of the Year, Richard Spooner, the Master of Faster and Mirisole. 489 on course.”

“Oh, my,” Jessi said, blinking back tiny tears. “What a beautiful horse. Want me to describe what’s going on?”

“Yes, please. Every move.”

Lisa listened intently, attention divided between Jessi’s description and the pounding, rushing sound of the horse’s hooves as it galloped across the turf. There was the familiar intake of breath as the horse made the extra effort at the combination, bringing a sigh of delight from the crowd.

She listened as the hoof beats grew faraway and muted. Expectant, she tilted her head, intent, waiting. They came again from another direction, the steady cadenced beats, closer and closer, and when they cleared the last vertical and flew through the timers, the fans surged to their feet, cheering for their living legend.

With a chuckle, the announcer said, “489, clean in the time of 65.498. Now that’s the time to beat. Richard Spooner and Mirisole move into the lead.”

The remaining horses went, trying valiantly to beat the *man*, but it was not to be.

“We want to thank Del Mar Marine for sponsoring this class. Give that first place trophy and the winner’s check for twenty-five thousand dollars to 489 the Master....”

The crowd erupted, drowning out the announcer as Richard entered the ring. Handsome face wreathed in smiles, he waved at the cheering fans and then bent over and hugged his horse’s neck. As though in triumph, the huge mare whinnied.

Jessi opened the car door, grinning at Lisa. She held the seat while Sadie got settled and then helped Lisa buckle up.

“I’m starved and I don’t feel like cooking when I get home. How about if we stop off and get a bite to eat.”

“Me, too. Where do you want to go?”

“I’m sort of in the mood for a burger and a double side of crispy fries. Sound good?”

“Oh, yum.”

Jessi made an abrupt right turn and bounced into the parking lot of Maggie’s Burgers. The smell of hot grease and salt hit both girls, making them salivate. They hurried out of the car and entered the lobby of the pleasantly quiet restaurant.

“This is lucky, we caught a break. We’re probably ahead of the dinner crowd by half an hour. Usually you have to wait forever to get a table.”

The host led them to a small booth by the window where there was a safe place for Sadie to lie down. Jessi read the menu to Lisa and by the time the waitress got there, they’d made their decisions.

“Two Big Maggies’s, fries extra crispy and no onions, please. Oh, and two glasses of iced tea, please.” Jessi handed the menu to the girl and turned to Lisa. “So tell me about Angel. Are you enjoying riding her?”

“She’s the best, Ms. Jessi, and....”

“I’m sorry to interrupt, Lisa, but how about if we just make it Jessi? I know at school it’s different, but you’re not one of my students and I’m not all that much older than you. Okay?”

“Okay with me.” Lisa smiled at Jessi, brilliant teeth flashing her killer smile. They continued to talk about riding and Angel.

“That mare was so competitive with Blair you wouldn’t believe it. She can’t jump very high but she can turn on a dime and they just ruled the Children’s Jumpers. Okay, here comes our food, lean back.”

The waitress deposited their dinners and refilled their glasses.

“Okay, can you help me here a bit? Where’s the burger? I like it at six. That way the fries are on the other end.”

Jessi turned the plate as requested. “Burger is right in front of you and two super-duper looking pickles are at, like, three and the fries take up the rest of the plate. There’s lettuce and tomato on the lid and they brought the onion *anyway*. *Eeuw*. You want me to put it together for you?” Jessi wrinkled her nose and slid her onion to the side of her plate.

“Nah, that’s fine, thanks. Just as long as there’s nothing I can knock over, I’m okay. I like a medium amount of catsup. If you could do that, I’m a go from there.”

“On the bun or the burger?”

“On the burger is great, thanks. If you put it on the bun first, stuff seems to slide. Don’t know why that would be, do you?”

The tips of her fingers touched the bottom of the plate, advancing toward the bun. She felt the edge of the onion and moved it aside with thumb and forefinger. Lisa placed the tips of her index fingers around the edge of the top bun, ring fingers underneath for balance, and deftly put it on top of the burger. Unless you paid close attention, you’d miss the subtle placement of both thumb and pinkie.

Jessi watched as Lisa pressed down on the sandwich top and smiled as the aroma of grilled meat wafted into her nostrils.

“Oh, man, that smells wonderful.” She lifted it to her lips and took a substantial bite. “Mmm, good.”

Jessi nodded, her mouth too full to talk. While they ate, she began to study Lisa, really look at her for the first time. Her natural abilities and confidence in most situations were incredible. Just remembering how busy it was as they walked through the gathering of horses, people talking all

around them, being bumped and jostled, all the while unable to see what came next must have been terrifying.

And yet once they got out of the traffic zone, she relaxed. Now, here she sat, calmly eating her burger and looking just like everyone else. Fully half the people in the restaurant wore shades and Jessi grinned at the thought of their expressions when they saw Sadie crawl out from under the table.

“So, where is Jeff tonight? Are you going to brown-bag him a burger?”

“I talked to him just before we left the show. He got back from San Diego a little early so he’s over at his mom’s for a visit and a meal. She loves any opportunity to get him home, especially since Kenny got his own place. She’s suffering from empty nest syndrome or something. This baby is going to know all about love, let me tell you.”

“That’s so neat. I bet she’ll spoil the baby rotten. Is she close to Jeff?”

“Yeah, she sure is. With Melanie going directly on to Med School after graduation, Julia has a lot of free time on her hands. We get along great and she loves me, too. She teaches me all her cooking tricks, all kinds of domestic stuff my mother never had time for.”

“Does she know you’re pregnant?”

“I’d imagine she’s hearing it just about now. That’s one of the reasons Jeff is over there. He wanted to tell her on his own. Like I said, they’re very close and having him alone for the night will make the whole thing extra special. It’s such fun for her this way. They’ll do a lot of reminiscing, stuff like that. She’ll cry.”

“That’s so sweet.”

“Okay, I’ve been thinking about something all day. You said you and Angel are doing great on the flat. Have you ever thought about dressage or are you stuck on jumping?”

Lisa shook her head. “I don’t want to jump anymore, Jessi. The only time I tried a cross rail, I fell off. It was way different from just falling, too. Kinda scared me and I haven’t jumped again. Ms. Becky and I decided we’d put the jumping on hold. I can always give it a try later. What’s dressage like?”

“Oh, it’s great fun. You ride in a rectangular ring and there are letters at each corner and along the short and long sides. When you get to a certain letter you change gaits, say, from a walk to a trot. You follow patterns and it’s great fun. Odd, too, ‘cause I used to forget my jumping courses all the time, but I’ve never once forgotten a dressage test. Says something, I guess. Would you like me to teach you dressage?”

“Yes, that’d be wonderful. And not forgetting the pattern says you’re not afraid. I learned that one early on and patterns are my whole life. Yes, I would love that. Will you come over to Mystic?”

“No, you need a specific arena to do it. You’ll have to bring Angel back to Doubletree. Mom’s into dressage, too, so you’ll get to meet her, ride with her and see how stuff works. I can pick you up on your free time and we can ride together. How’s that sound?”

“Oh, man, I’m so thrilled. When can we do that? Can we take Angel over tomorrow? What will Ms. Becky and Mr. Martin say? I know they’ll be cool with this. Oh, wait until Amy hears about what I’m going to do. She’s always teasing me that she’s jealous because I get to bring Sadie to school. Wait until she hears I’ll be riding with Karen. She’s like a legend at Mystic. The stories we hear. Ha!” Her voice rose with glee. “She’ll be green with envy.”

Brown eyes glistening, Jessi pursed her lips a moment, nodding to the waitress for their check. “You’ll have a ball. My mom’s a kick, you’ll love her.”

“What are the patterns like? Do they have graphics? I have a special computer that will print out maps and intricate puzzles. It should be able to print me out the arena, the letter placement, stuff like that. I can memorize it that way.”

Dinner finished and bill paid, they climbed out of the booth, groaning.

Lisa slipped her arm through Jessi’s and picked up Sadie’s harness.

“Thanks so much for hanging out with me. I had a great time today and dinner was delicious; I’m stuffed. When can we move Angel?”

“How about tomorrow?”

“Sweet. And Jessi, you’re right. You’re going to make a fantastic mother.”

Chapter 16

Lisa waved goodnight to Jessi, hurried across the porch and into the house. She dashed into her room, smacking her knee in her haste to get to her computer.

“What the heck is that?” Still holding Sadie’s harness, she reached out in front of her and slowly swept her hand through the air until she connected with her wastebasket. “Who moved you?”

She pushed it next to her desk where it belonged and reached for the chair.

“Sadie, this is going to be so much fun I can hardly wait. I’m gonna learn how to ride dressage.” She ran her hands over the soft silky fur then patted the dog’s side. “Go on over to your rug. I’m going to be a while.”

Quick fingers flew across the unusual keyboard and the monitor sprang to life. She tapped another key and a voice said, ‘Welcome to the United States Dressage Federation, Inc. scroll below for information.’

The first test offered, Introductory Level – Test A, sounded right for her. She hit the copy button and then audio. While the printer worked, a voice said, ‘This unique series of tests provides an opportunity for the horse and/or rider new to dressage to demonstrate elementary skills. The tests have been designed to encourage correct performance and to prepare for the transition to the USEF tests. Walk and trot only.’

Lisa began to bounce slowly in her chair, head nodding as she ran her fingers over the newly printed dressage test.

“I can do this. ... *working trot rising, track right medium walk...* You bet we can.” She continued to read the test, riding in her mind as the moves came up.

“Well, Sadie, first off, I need to learn where the letters are located on the arena.” She picked up the last of the copies. Placing her fingers on the dots she began to memorize the letter placement in the small arena, starting with A.

“That’s the one Jessi said we’ll use, at least at first. Okay. Got it.”

More than an hour passed before Lisa pushed away from the computer, a satisfied smile on her face. She ran her fingers over the face of her watch and the smile spread to a grin.

“Any minute now, they’ll be home. I can’t wait. Hey Sadie, come here.” She stroked the dog then rose to her feet, plucking a light sweater from a hook by the door.

“Let’s go take a walk.”

The crisp November night carried the distant scent of fireplaces and an occasional waft of salt from the ocean. Although the stars glittered in the heavens and the full moon made the barn area light as day, it didn’t matter to Lisa.

Humming lightly, she and Sadie strolled down the middle of the aisle, careful to steer clear of tack trunks and feed bins stored next to the stalls. Sixty-one steps and she stopped in front of Angel’s stall, calling hello.

A delighted nicker, followed by that low chuckling sound Angel used when she talked to Lisa, emanated from deep in the stall.

A moment later, the mare laid her muzzle on the outstretched hand, slowly dropping her head until she and Lisa were cheek to cheek.

“Girl, you are not going to believe it. You have a new career. Dressage. Isn’t that just too cool?” Fingers entwined in the silky mane, she stroked the fine strands. “Umm, you smell so good.”

Angel continued the low rumblings, occasionally punctuated with a lip smack as she took strands of Lisa’s hair into her mouth. The girl stood motionless, enthralled, while Angel explored her face. Many times a mother, Angel sensed the birth of her foal approaching, and responding to maternal hormones, she loved on Lisa, gently licking her neck and ear like a warm-up preparation for her foal.

“Oh, you wonderful girl. I love you, too.”

Their solitude was interrupted by the reverberation of the horse van coming up the driveway. Sounds of scrunching gravel and the hiss of air brakes told Lisa the van had stopped in front of the barn. With the aisle about to become very busy, she and Sadie headed back to the house to wait for the girls to return.

They paused, about to climb the steps to the house when cars came up the driveway followed by slamming doors and calls of hello as the girls headed to the house, steps dragging, but still full of energy. They entered the living room together, patting Sadie on the way and asking Lisa how her day went.

Anna appeared from the kitchen with pots of hot chocolate and slices of pumpkin bread. The girls grabbed cups and shivered as the warmth hit their stomachs. They gathered by the fire, munching on the cake, and calling thank you’s to Anna’s retreating back. Finally, they began to wind down.

Becky called to Lisa and gave her a hug. “Did you have a good time at the show? I heard you got to enjoy Richard Spooner’s win. That’s Jessi’s old crush; did she make you chase him around with her?” Becky elbowed Billy and they both chuckled.

He shook his head. "It got to the point that when he'd see her coming, he'd run. She was crafty, though. Very determined. Finally, he gave up. He's such a class act anyway, guess he figured half an hour talking with her then could head off years of future stalking and he was right. We took tons of pictures of them together and she put them up all over the Doubletree. I swear, you couldn't talk to her for a week."

Lisa giggled. "I'm gonna tell her you said that."

"Oh, go right ahead. She's got a regular gig. Get her talking about our adventures when we all rode together. She's a laugh a minute. So, how was the show? A bit much, huh?"

"Well, yeah. We were on the main level at first, over by the hunter rings. It was just so busy, I got a bit scared. Jessi was great, though. She figured it out pretty quick and we spent the rest of the day at the Grand Prix field. We had great seats. I could hear very well. The acoustics in that amphitheater are incredible. Anyway, Jessi has some great ideas. I take it you've spoken. She tell you what she has in mind?"

"Not in any detail. I was in the middle of loading the horses so we only spoke a second, but she said you had some great plans to tell us about. So, what's up?"

"Well, you know how much I want to show a horse. At first I thought maybe I could jump, but I really don't like it. I figured that was it until Jessi mentioned that she rides dressage. We talked about it all afternoon, actually. She thinks I could do it just fine on Angel."

"Dressage?" Billy glanced at Becky and furrowed his brow.

"Dressage," Becky said, nodding. "I can see that. You have an excellent memory, especially for stuff like that. Wow."

"Dressage? How can she do that? We don't have a dressage court, and honestly, I don't think...."

“That’s okay, Mr. Martin. We’ll use the court at Doubletree. I don’t know whether you know, but Karen rides and teaches dressage now. They have three courts and Jessi said that we can use the small court at first. Besides, Angel’s due to foal in late March, so she has to go back fairly soon anyway. Might as well get her settled in early. Jessi said we’re only a ten minute drive from Doubletree. Hacking distance.”

Before Becky could respond, Billy said, “We need to talk this over, Lisa. It’s not quite as simple as you make it. I promise to have an answer for you tomorrow, though. I won’t hang you out, but there are several things to consider. Give me that time, okay?”

Becky shot a quick glance his way and shook her head.

Lisa fought to control her expression, lips twitching, hands clenched.

“Yes, Mr. Martin, that’s only fair.” The words were low and level and the tone respectful, but there was an unmistakable hint of willful determination. It was the first negative emotion Becky had ever seen from her.

The girls faced another hard day tomorrow and left the TV room singly and in pairs, muttering goodnights as they headed for bed.

Becky got to her feet, stretching her arms high above her head.

“I have to get some sleep, so I’m going to head out. We’ll see you in the morning, Lisa. And Billy, can you walk me over to the house?”

Lisa called a hopeful goodbye and turned for her room.

Billy scowled, shaking his head. “What do you think Jessi has in mind? Telling her she can ride in a show. We can’t have that, Becky. It’s just not safe.”

“I have concerns, too, Billy. It’s one thing to have her confined in an arena, but the dressage courts are just boards on the ground. If Angel spooked for some reason and ran away, dear God, just thinking about it gives me the creeps.”

“Also, we’d have to get her parents involved, deeply involved. They have to see first hand what risks are inherent in riding; let them be the ones to make the ultimate decision.”

“Is there any kind of controlled area she could do it in? Like could we make a regulation size 20 X 40 meter court and enclose it? We could leave a twenty foot edge around it so it wouldn’t be crowded. We’ve been talking about putting in another arena. Could we do that, Billy?”

They crossed the wide parking lot and paused at the steps to her apartment. “You don’t have to leave, do you? I still have half a bottle of that nice wine you brought over the night of Operation Porkchop. Come on in and let’s talk about this some more.”

“Sounds great, lead the way.”

Billy built a quick fire while Becky poured the wine into a carafe and brought it to the table.

Billy took the offered glass with a nod of thanks.

“Okay, here’s my biggest fear. Somehow she either gets run away with or dragged. When horses are in the wide open they freak when strange stuff happens. You know that. At least if it happened in an enclosed arena, we could get to her.”

“You’re talking about Angel here. Freak? Not Ange.”

“She’s still just a horse, Becky. Add to that, we can’t control the other riders or what’s happening with their horses. And dogs? What about them? Accidents happen ... I don’t know, but I tell you one thing. She’s determined. I could see it on her face.”

“Sometimes I could just strangle Jessi. I know she means well, but she doesn’t always think stuff through. She just grabs the bit and runs.”

Billy shook his head. “Being brave and courageous, believing in yourself, that can be a good thing at the right time. Then again, it can be disastrous. Well, we have to talk with Lisa’s parents. That probably should be the first step”.

“I’ll call Karen first thing tomorrow and see what she has to say. No doubt Jessi will have her up to speed by now. Becky glanced at her watch.

“Shoot, it’s not even eight yet.” She pulled her cell from her pocket and dialed.

* * *

Jessi sat at the kitchen table with her mother, arguing.

“But Mom! It’s Angel, for pity sakes. She doesn’t spook at anything, you know that. Even when she was younger, she was rock-steady. Now? Nothing gets to her.”

Karen shook her head, eyes puzzled. “I just can’t support you on this one, Jessi. Just imagine if something *did* happen to that poor child. Even if she just took a hard fall, think how frightened she’d be. I’m sorry, but we’ll have to come up with something else. How’d you get involved in this anyway?”

“Billy asked me to take Lisa to Show Park, kinda keep her company. They couldn’t bring her to the show and then leave her alone, of course. Anyway, we had a great time. Originally Becky thought she might be able to jump....”

“*Jump?* She thought a blind girl could jump?”

“Mom, we’re talking cross rails here, not five foot walls. Where’s your sense of adventure, that *you can do anything you put your mind to* thingy? You lose that along the way?”

“Don’t be rude, and no, I still feel that way, within reason. The girl is blind, Jess. She can’t see! How the heck do you think she could jump or ride dressage? Crazy for Becky to even consider it.”

“No, it’s not. She’s got darned near a photographic memory; like Melanie. She has the letters memorized already ... I just know she can do this with a little help from us. I’ll stand in the ring and call out the numbers as they approach. The first tests are walk-trot only. Mom! Please!”

Before Karen could respond, her cell rang. She glanced at the faceplate and shot a crooked smile at Jessi.

“Reinforcements. Hello, Becky, how’s it going?”

Karen listened, occasionally rolling doubtful hazel eyes in Jessi’s direction. Twice she drew a deep breath and once she sighed.

“Well, of course, I didn’t know she could canter on her own. That Angel, she’s worth her weight in gold, isn’t she? But that’s in your arena, right? Entirely different situation with a dressage court.”

There was another long pause and Karen shrugged.

“Okay, I guess we could do it that way at first. Yes, give me a call when you get free on Monday and we’ll have a conference. Okay, dear, ‘nite.”

“What?”

“Well, it seems that Billy is receptive to building another ring and putting a dressage court inside it. They’re thinking about putting in stadium seating, which will come in handy on their play-days and when the parents come up for orientation. Nothing is more portable than the dressage court poles; they’ll move them when they want to put in jumps.

“Becky says Lisa’s really quite accomplished, all things considered.” Karen shrugged again and gazed at her younger daughter.

“We’ll go over on Monday, watch Lisa ride, see how it works out in the arena and then make a decision. I suppose

we could let her ride here at times when the farm is quiet. We can control that, for sure. I still think this is the most harebrained scheme you girls have ever come up with, but what the heck, we can at least give it a try.”

Lisa and Sadie walked down the steps and headed for the barn. Although she'd never met Karen, she was a legend at Mystic. Billy and Becky would regale the girls with long-ago tales and the oft-mentioned admonition ‘do not run at the fences.’

“We have to make a good impression right away, Sadie. It's really up to Karen how this all works out. I know Mom and Dad will support me, I just know they will.” She ran quick fingers over her watch. “They should be here any moment.”

As though on cue, a black Mercedes drove up the driveway and parked across from the barn. A man and woman, faces wreathed in smiles, hurried toward Lisa.

“Oh, darling, my God, I'd never recognize you!” The woman flung both arms around Lisa, hugged her several times then held her at arm's length.

“You look wonderful. I bet you've put on ten pounds and you're so tan!”

Lisa giggled. “I told you. And it's not just the outside that's changed. Wait until you see me ride.”

“Hey, am I chopped liver here,” her dad said, tapping Lisa's arm and then enfolding her in another huge hug.

“Mom's not kidding, honey, you look wonderful. And you cut your hair. Oh, my little girl is growing up. Did you save the pigtail?”

Lisa blushed. “Daddy, I'm grown up now. I didn't save the whole tail. Just a little bit.” She chuckled. “I saved it for you.”

“It really looks beautiful. Who cut it for you?”

“One of the girls here is going to be a stylist just like her mom. Amy cut it for me.” Lisa ran her hand through the shimmering waves and chuckled. “I wish I could see what it looks like, but it sure feels great. Come on, let’s walk to the barn.”

They continued to chatter as they entered the barn to a chorus of welcoming whinnies. Becky called hello and approached Lisa and her parents. Hand extended, she reintroduced herself.

“Hi, Mr. Freeman, Mrs. Freeman. Let me introduce my friend and former trainer, Karen Evans and her daughter, Jessi Young.”

Still talking amongst themselves, they walked down the aisle to Angel.

“She’s all tacked up and ready to go. Here, put on your helmet.”

Lisa took it and settled it down on her head, buckling the chin strap with sure, practiced fingers.

“Thanks, Ms. Becky.” She turned to her dog then, bent over and whispered. “Stay, Sadie.”

With the confidence of a sighted person, Lisa extended one hand, felt the cross tie and followed it down to Angel’s muzzle. She unbuckled the halter, released the cross ties and took the reins in one hand. She stroked Angel’s face then and whispered, “Come on.”

The Freeman’s stared in disbelief as their daughter led her horse down the aisle, unassisted. Becky put a tentative finger to her lips and winked. “There’s more to come, wait until you see.”

They nodded and released long-held breaths.

Karen swallowed several times and took Jessi’s arm. Voice ragged, she whispered, “We’ll make this happen, Jessi. Somehow....” Her bottom lip bobbed and she turned her head away.

Sixty-one steps to the door of the barn, two to clear and then a sharp left turn. Eighty steps to the arena gate. She knew it would be open for her and proceeded into the ring. She waited for Becky, who followed behind, to give her a leg up.

Without a word, Lisa bent her knee and Becky lifted her into the saddle. She settled on Angel's back as light as a feather, slipped both feet into the stirrups and picked up the reins.

"Okay, Lisa, show them what you can do."

Becky backed away, taking her position in the center of the arena.

Lisa nodded. She nudged Angel with her left foot, asking the mare to walk forward and laterally to the right until they were next to the rail. They continued at a walk for half a circuit and then Lisa squeezed lightly with her calves. Angel lowered her head a bit and slipped into her smooth-as-silk trot. Lisa felt the shoulders moving individually, left, right, left and properly rising on the correct diagonal, she posted.

Jessi stared, open-mouthed. She reached for her mother's hand and squeezed. "This is incredible."

Speechless, Karen could only squeeze in return.

They made two circuits of the ring and came back to the walk. They took a little breather and then Lisa asked Angel to canter. The lightest tap of her right heel began the gait, smooth again and steady they went.

Lisa wore a huge grin, teeth sparkling in the sun, body relaxed and at one with her horse.

Irene Freeman clapped both hands over her mouth and leaned into her equally stunned husband.

"My God, Jim, she said she could do this and I prayed it would happen, but look at her. I mean, she's really riding."

“Look at the expression on her face, Renie, she’s ...” he gave a short sob, “really riding. Oh God, we have to buy her that horse.”

Slowly Lisa rose in her stirrups, placed both hands on Angel’s neck and assumed the two-point jumping position. Back straight, heels down, legs as steady as a rock, they cantered around the ring.

Billy watched Lisa through squinted eyes. He’d seen this many times before, so he was not as emotionally moved as the others, but his heart still went out to Lisa. He glanced at his hand, secure in its brace and gritted his teeth. *Life is so unfair.*

Lisa and Angel reversed and performed the gaits in the opposite direction. By now, Amy, Marcy and Shelby joined the group of onlookers.

Voice pitched low, Marcy said, “Hi, Ms. Jessi. Did we miss much?”

“She’s probably close to finishing, I’d think. It’s been incredible. This is the first time I’ve seen her ride. Oh, girls, this is my mother, Karen Evans.”

“It’s truly amazing, isn’t it? Almost from the beginning, she and Angel just clicked,” Shelby said. “Downright miracle. You see something like this and you begin to believe in the impossible.”

“Well, there’s no doubt it’s due in large part to that wonderful horse.” Irene Freeman, face aglow, gestured to the ring. “I mean, look at the care she takes, how gently she does everything. I rode as a kid and I know what I’m seeing. We need to buy her that mare. Does anyone know who owns her?”

“My daughter does, actually.” Karen divided her time between watching Lisa and speaking with Irene. “She’s truly one in a million. The horse. Daughter, too, of course.” Karen tittered.

“Will your daughter sell her to us? Does she still ride her?”

Karen shook her head. "I doubt it. Blair's graduating from college in a couple of months and I hope she continues to ride when she gets home."

Jessi stared at Karen, eyes wide. "But it wouldn't be Angel, Mom. Why would she start up on her again? She's moved up to Lance. I bet she'll continue with him and besides, she's anxious to start work, and with her and Kenny getting married and just buying that house and all, she won't have much time to ride."

"But sell Angel?" Karen shrugged. "Well, you never know, especially considering the circumstances." She turned toward Irene.

"You know she's in foal. It'll be born in three months or so and then Angel will have to switch jobs for a little while. But once the baby is weaned, Lisa can ride her again. Let me talk to Blair and see what she says. Just please don't get your hopes up. I'd prefer you don't mention it to Lisa until we're sure."

"It'll be our secret," Irene said, nodding at her husband.

Lisa continued to ride for another ten minutes or so. Finally, she called it quits and stopped in the center of the arena near Becky.

Lisa slipped both feet out of the stirrups, gathered the reins in her left hand and prepared to dismount. Getting down was the hard part, oddly enough, and half the time she landed on her butt, even with Becky there to catch her. Praying for a dignified end to her performance, she leaned forward, threw her right leg over the mare's rump and began the slide down to the ground.

This time she landed on the balls of her feet instead of her toes and keeping a firm hold of the saddle, managed not to fall.

"Good girl," Becky whispered. "You were wonderful."

Lisa turned a radiant smile on Becky then slipped her arms around Angel's neck. "She's the good girl."

* * *

The long semester break for Thanksgiving brought everyone home for the holidays.

Blair Evans sat across the kitchen table from her mother and sister. Eyes wide she repeated, "Sell Angel? Never. Why in the world would I do that?"

Jessi cocked her head and made a wry face.

"Never say never, Blair. Wait until you see it. You remember Lisa, the blind girl that's leasing Ange? Well, Becky did an excellent job with her, gave Lisa tons of confidence, enough that she rides alone without a leadline now. Well, she and Angel have been training together for what, five or six months? Anyway, she's doing a really good job and wants to learn to ride dressage. Angel loves every minute."

Blair glanced at Jessi and shrugged. "Well, that's fine for a bit longer, but Angel is due to foal in March. I thought she'd be back at Doubletree by now. She's still at Mystic, huh?"

Cupping both hands around her mug, Jessi nodded. "Lisa was only signed up for the summer session, but she had such a good time and fit in so well, her parents said she could continue at Mystic as long as she wants. She's a wonderful kid, you'll love her, you wait and see."

Blair's shrug was noncommittal as she stared at Jessi.

"Anyway," Karen said, shooting a glance at Blair. "Jessi and I went over there the other day for an exhibition, and I'm telling you it was the most moving thing I've ever seen. Here's this little blind girl putting Angel through her paces and Angel's just bopping along, you know her, steadying the kid. Twice she actually moved under Lisa

when she got a bit off balance on the turns. Angel took such great care of her, the whole thing made me cry.”

Blair rose abruptly and walked to the sink. She finished her coffee, poured herself another cup and turned, waving the pot at Karen and Jessi. Negative shakes and murmurs of no thanks followed the offer. She replaced the pot on the counter and leaned over the sink, staring out the window. Finally, she turned to face them.

“I can’t sell Angel. It’s out of the question.” With that, she turned and walked down the hall, leaving Karen and Jessi sitting at the table, open-mouthed.

Blair flipped on the light switch and gazed around the study, touched once again by Karen’s generosity of spirit. She and Joe had been married almost seven years now, and she’d put her personal stamp on every room in the house but this one. Like a shrine, nothing in the room had been changed or moved in twenty years.

The walls held beautifully framed oils, pastels and photos of a stunning young woman and her horses. Horses dominated the room, jumping huge fences, riding to hounds, proudly carrying the girl into the spotlight while she smiled her dazzling smile, accepting one glittering trophy after another.

Blair paused before the fireplace and stared at the largest of the paintings. Gazing upward, she turned on the small light above it. Elbows resting on the mantle, she blinked as memories of her mother filled her mind.

Bright green eyes, so like her own, stared straight ahead, the quirk of her lips showing deep dimples. She knew she’d won and so did the horse that carried her through the air.

The rich deep gold of the stallion’s coat glistened in the sunlight as he tucked his knees to his chin, small ears pricked forward. A smug expression filled his eyes as they cleared the fence with inches to spare.

Blair always thought of this as their *last jump*. Winning this class cinched a place on the Olympic team for Betsy Evans and her stallion, Hemming, but they never jumped again. Her mother died a week later at the hands of a drunk driver.

Betsy's broodmare, in foal to Hemming, carried their dream of another Olympic contender. Later that month, Windsom Angel greeted the world and Blair's was the first face she saw, a daily occurrence with rare exceptions until Blair left for college.

Mom, they want me to sell Angel and I can't do it. She's the last tie I have to you since Nana died and I can't. I know I'm mean and selfish, but I just can't let her go.

* * *

A tall, blonde girl hopped out of the little BMW and strolled across the driveway, drawing in deep breaths of sea-scented flowers. Thick beds of sweet white Elysium lined the walkway, their fragrance filling the air. Studding the beds next to the front of the house, wildly blooming gardenias sought for dominance, their perfume heady and exotic.

The combination always made her think of growing up here with Blair, her best friend and college roommate. She smiled and hurried up the walk, giving a perfunctory knock before opening the door and calling hello.

“Hey, Melanie, we’re in the kitchen,” Jessi called, hopping to her feet. She had just the tiniest baby-bump going and played it for all it was worth, especially around friends and family. Her sister-in-law and longtime pal swept into the kitchen and grabbed Jessi by both shoulders.

“Hey, Jessi,” she said, holding her at arm’s length a moment before pulling her in for a hug.

“Mama is so proud, she’s about to come unglued, I’m sayin’, and Papa looks positively weird with that smirk. Ever since Jeff told him y’all decided to name the baby Lonnie Joe and make everyone happy....” Eyebrows up, bright blue eyes fastened on Jessi, she grinned. “It’s a southern tradition, y’know, namin’ the firstborn after both grandfathers.”

“Lonnie Joe?” Jessi’s voice cracked. “Ya gotta be kidding.”

Karen and Melanie dissolved into guffaws, unable to hold back a moment longer.

Jessi let out a chuckle and then frowned, patting her tummy.

“That’s not good for me, you know. I’m not supposed to get stressed out in this condition.”

At that, Melanie rolled her eyes at Karen and shook her head.

“Talk about a long four months to go. I’ve got a feelin’ she’s got it all orchestrated, too. If she has a girl, we might as well just cash it in, y’all. I thought it was bad enough when Becky joined the team and they started their little shtick. Can ya imagine the routines she’ll dream up when she’s in full control of another human being? Dear me!”

“Well, I hope it’s a girl and if it is, we’re calling her Camilla. Camilla Danielle. Or maybe Nicole; we love all three. Sounds like a movie star, don’t you think? We’ll call her Cammi. That should be southern enough for anybody.”

They chatted for a moment longer, catching up on the news. Although Melanie and Blair shared an apartment near campus, they came home frequently enough to keep their parents' happy, replace dirty clothes with clean and concentrate on their riding.

"Hey, Melly," Blair said as she walked into the kitchen. "What's so funny? I heard you guys clear in the back of the house?"

"Nothing, she just tried to talk me into naming my baby Lonnie Joe if it's a boy." She turned to Melanie, head cocked. "You know, that would work for a girl, too. Can ya imagine going through life with a name like that?"

Everyone laughed but Melanie. "Nobody'd think a thing of it where I come from."

"You're just a chuckle a minute, Melly." Blair glanced at her friend and shrugged. "Let's take a trip over to Mystic and say hello to Billy and Becky. You want to come, Jessi?"

"Sure, sounds like fun."

Mystic Ridge hummed with activity as the girls prepared for the holiday break. The girls going home for the full three weeks had their bags stacked on the porch, waiting for parents to pick them up. Those staying at school until the end of the second week looked forward to the plans Becky and Billy had for them.

Their days and nights were jam packed with exciting activities, including hunting in Temecula, held enough allure the girls didn't mind not going home for the full holiday. In addition, they also had a date to take a three day cruise on Billy's yacht, another sure hit.

"It got kind of hard to decide who to feel sorry for," Becky said to Billy, chuckling. "You don't get to attend the Blessing of the Hounds and hunt every day, let alone take a beautiful cruise along the coast. Yeah, staying at school for

most of the holiday isn't so boring when it's Mystic, and that little play day we're having over at Doubletree will be a ball."

Billy chuckled. "You know, I think it's the Christmas shopping trip up to South Coast Plaza that's got them jazzed the most. Staying overnight at the hotel and catching a play is cool, too, but those girls are ready for some serious shopping."

"We'll have a great time, no doubt about it. So, you have the list?"

He nodded. "Okay, here we go. Lisa, Amy, Ginger, Shelby, Marcy and Jean are staying at school." He shot a glance at Becky and chuckled.

"Man, when Lisa gets hold of a plan, she's immovable. Her parents were no match for her once she found out about the play-day at Doubletree. She can't hunt, of course, but she's working so hard on her test. I'm excited to see her do it in a real dressage court."

"Ah, she doesn't fool me. She doesn't want to leave Angel. Pretty soon we have to take her back to Doubletree and Lisa's getting anxious. We've got to talk to Blair, see if she would be willing to sell Angel."

"I don't think it's likely, Becky. You know how she feels about that mare."

Chapter 17

Lisa counted the steps as she walked down the aisle to Angel's stall. After asking Sadie to stay, she settled the harness and stroked the dog's face several times, crooning to her.

Straightening, she took the halter off the hook, opened the door and stepped into the stall. Angel chuckled several times, crossed the space between them and lowering her head slightly, she snuffled the outstretched hands.

Angel remained motionless allowing the girl to adjust the halter. Lisa gave a gentle tug and they walked out of the stall into the aisle. She ran her fingers lightly along the wall until she found the cross ties and snapped them to Angel's halter.

Her strategically placed box of brushes contained all her cleaning equipment and she reached down and selected a black rubber curry comb. With firm round strokes, Lisa started at the top of Angel's neck and worked her way down, all the time talking to the mare. She softened the pressure of her strokes when she reached the swollen belly.

"Oh, Angel, I wish you didn't have to have this baby, darn it. I know, it's wonderful for you and a whole lot of fun, and I can't wait to meet the foal and all, but really, it's going to mess up our schedule something awful. Becky said you have to go back to Doubletree right after Christmas and I won't be able to ride you again until August. But at least

after that, we'll always be together. I bet that Mom and Dad buy you for me for Christmas. They think you're the most wonderful horse in the world and they're excited about us doing dressage."

The mare murmured in seeming agreement and shifted her weight from one hind leg to the other. Lisa moved to her rump, once again applying a bit of pressure to the thick, heavy muscles. Angel signaled her approval with several deep sighs.

Lisa pulled the comb from her pocket and began to run it through the long silky tail. Without warning, Angel's head shot up. She stepped forward to the end of the cross ties and let out a loud shrill series of nickers that vibrated through her body like a pulsing electric shock.

"Well, hello to you too, young lady. What are you doing just standing around in the aisle? How's my Angel baby?" The voice slipped into a croon. "Ange, I've sure missed you."

Lisa popped her head around Angel's backside, smiled uncertainly and said, "She's not here alone. I'm here, too." She raised her hand and waved the comb.

"Oh, hey," Blair said. "I didn't see you standing back there. You must be Lisa."

"And from the welcome, you must be Blair."

Lisa approached Blair, her arm sliding confidently along the mare's back. She extended her hand. "I'm pleased to meet you."

Blair took the hand and smiled. Before she could say a word, Billy, Becky, Jessi and Melanie entered the barn, calling her name.

Lisa and Angel stood to the side as Blair said hello to her old friends.

With a wide grin, Becky took Lisa's arm and pulled her into the mix.

“Now you’ve met Blair, there’s someone else here I’d like you to meet. You’ve heard a lot about her. This is Melanie.”

Face wreathed in smiles, Lisa extended her hand. Melanie clasped it in both of hers and said, “Pleased to meet you, Lisa. I’ve heard a whole lot about you, too.”

“It’s so exciting to meet you, Ms. Melanie. You’re a legend here, you know. All the girls talk about you ... Ms. Becky and Mr. Martin, too.”

Melanie continued to hold her hand as she turned toward Angel.

“Please, call me Melly. I hear you and Angel are doin’ dressage. I can’t tell ya how impressed I am with that. What a brave girl ya are.”

Lisa blushed slightly and ducked her head. As her hand came in contact with Angel’s side, she nodded. “It’s all Angel. She gives me the confidence I need. There isn’t another horse in the world I’d be able to do it on. She is so special, so perfect. She’s my wonder horse, just like Sadie’s my wonder dog.” She buried her face in Angel’s mane.

Eyes the color of a summer sky turned toward Blair. Delicate eyebrows rose; she cocked her head to one side and sighed.

“There’s no doubt about that, for sure. I could tell ya stories about when Blair and I were little. Angel’s a great mare.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Lisa,” Becky said. “You’re doing a wonderful job. I can’t wait until you get to show off at the play day at Doubletree. Well, are you ready to put her away and have lunch? Fajitas! Anna made fresh tortillas and I can smell the carne asada grilling from here.”

Lisa led Angel into the stall, removed the halter and patted Angel’s nose.

“I have to go eat lunch now, but I’ll be back later on this afternoon for my lesson.”

There was a definite party attitude going on at the pool area. A rock station played in the background and puffs of smoke rose in the air, bearing the smell of roasting meat. Although too chilly to swim, the warm sun shone down on them with a wintry, far away feeling. It was a perfect day for a walk on the beach, a game of tennis or anything to do with a horse. After-lunch plans were already in the making.

Lisa sat at one corner of the long picnic table, Sadie curled up and safe next to her feet. Becky sat to her left, at the end opposite Billy. Melanie sat on Becky's other side, commenting about Mystic, the growth they'd sustained in a relatively short amount of time, and what a great group of girls they had. Jessi chimed in about the potential tennis stars for the spring tournaments and Jeff's high hopes for a championship year. Blair sat at the other end of the table, quiet.

Amy and Ginger talked with Billy about the upcoming cruise to Newport Beach and their shopping extravaganza in Costa Mesa.

Marcy gently tapped Lisa's arm and whispered, "Would you like me to put a bit of everything on your plate? You don't want to miss out on the goodies."

"Anna usually does that for me, but sure, go ahead. I love guacamole. Chicken or steak, either is fine, and her rice is to die for, but no beans, please. I have to ride later."

Marcy snickered. "I definitely hear you."

Lisa snorted. "I hope not." Light gurgling laughter flowed, followed by a thank you as Marcy set her plate down and told her how things were arranged.

"Thanks so much. I appreciate that." Tentative fingers picked up her fork, a delicate index finger told her where to get a bite of rice. With expertise come from long practice, she guided the rice to her mouth, making appreciative sounds as the delicious flavors flooded her tongue.

Melanie paid close attention to the exchange between the two friends. She watched as Marcy filled the plate, heard the amusing repartee between the girls. She glanced away, lips pursed in an attempt to make them stop quivering.

Staring at Lisa in open admiration, fork poised in midair, Melanie glanced at Blair for a moment. Her eyes glazed over again and she turned toward Becky. They stared at each other; both girls nodded. Melanie turned away, wiping her trembling lips. She took another deep breath and sighed.

Lisa's proficiency in just about everything, including her ability to eat dinner, went unnoticed by the rest of the group who were already beyond amazed at what a blind girl could do. She gently grasped several strips of thinly sliced steak and positioned them across the tortilla. Another inquiring fingertip told her where the salsa was, as with the guacamole. Soon her fajita was ready to eat. Amazed, Melanie continued to watch Lisa.

No one noticed Blair leave the table.

* * *

Blair attached the lead shank to Angel's halter, led her outside to the mounting block and hopped aboard. With just the lead shank to guide her, they headed for the back pastures.

A cool breeze, aromatic of sea salt, competed with the flowers for dominance. Small woodland creatures cavorted on the lawns. An adventurous squirrel sat in the middle of the trail, treat clutched between his front paws, chittering away, demanding they stop. Angel lowered her head and snorted, causing the little dude to scamper up a tree.

"What a mess, huh, Angel? I never should have let you come over here in the first place. What was I thinking? You should be home in your own pasture, enjoying some

freedom before your baby gets here, and instead, I've got this huge problem on my hands."

Blair dismounted, opened the gate, led Angel inside and shut the gate behind them. She slipped the halter off and clicked her tongue several times, shaking the halter at the mare.

Angel power trotted up the length of the pasture, strides long and free. At the corner she spooked at nothing, leaped sideways and bucked. Squealing all the way back to Blair, she slid to a stop at her feet and thrust her muzzle into Blair's hand.

"You act like a little girl instead of a three time mama. So, do you prefer more fillies or would you like to try your hand at a colt? Being such a princess, you might be just the one to keep a rowdy young man in his place." While she talked, Blair stroked the silky blonde mane, pulling the long forelock through Angel's ears and positioning it to the side of her right eye.

"You have the prettiest face I've ever seen. Have I ever told you that?" She pulled back a bit, studying the head and neck.

"You look so much like your daddy. Mom would have been very proud of you." She turned away, walking toward the lone tree in the pasture and the shade it gave. Angel followed along behind, long tail swishing in rhythm.

Blair slid down on the ground, her back resting against the huge trunk. In an attempt to offer protection from the pasture's inhabitants, the tree wore a coat of carpeting on its trunk, but the lowermost limbs, long since trimmed to adequate height, still tempted the intrepid.

Angel, unwieldy but determined, raised her muzzle as high as she could and flapped her lips at the delicious leaves waving above her. Refusing defeat, the mare rose on her hind legs and balanced while she snatched a small mouthful of leaves, including the tip of the branch. She held

on to the little twig and came back to earth with a thud and a ripping sound.

“You are such a hoot, Ange. Reminds me of the veggie-saurus in Jurassic Park. Now you have green foamy lips. Quite a fashion statement, for sure. I feel there’s a good chance I’m going to get slimed.”

Angel sneezed.

* * *

Melanie leaned back in her chair, a glass of iced tea in her hands. The afternoon revealed many things, including the fact that Lisa was as tenacious as a pit bull and not to be pitied. While she thought tenacity was admirable, especially since it was one of her own dominant traits, she wasn’t happy with the target. Blair. That made all the difference.

Out of the corner of her eye, she’d seen Blair leave the table and her immediate impulse was to join her friend, but she succeeded in ignoring it, knowing instinctively it wasn’t the right time. Blair’s connection to Angel went far beyond reluctance to part with a beloved childhood pet.

Losing her mother at five deprived Blair of real-time memories, but thanks to the hours of video tape Joe had of Betsy showing, she’d maintained a very tight, close emotional connection with her mother and her horses.

“Hey, Becky, do ya have any idea where Blair might be? She left in the middle of lunch and I’m a bit worried about her.”

“I didn’t see her leave, Melly. I just noticed at one point she was gone. Is she having a hard time with this?” Becky cast a sidelong glance at Melanie and shrugged.

“Because frankly, I’m really having a hard time understanding her, if you want the truth. I mean, Blair hasn’t ridden or shown Angel since she went to college. She rides Lance now, he’s her show horse and they’ve done great considering how little time she has to spend in her current

training program. I know it'll change when she graduates, but why be stingy about Angel? She'll never show or really ride her again. What's with that?"

"Ah, Becky, ya just don't understand about Blair an' Angel. I know ya know the *story*, but livin' it with her the way I did, well, it's different. When her Nana died ... Betsy's mother, it just about killed Blair. It was like the last link, the last connection snapped. I loved Nana, too; just about broke my heart. She was the one keepin' Blair centered all those early years. They were very close.

"Joe just wiggled out after Betsy died. He up an' shipped Blair off to Nana for danged near a year while he virtually lived at the hospital. Let me tell ya, it was terrible. Finally, he kinda ran outta steam. He brought Blair home an' then really closed in ... wouldn't talk to anyone, just sat in that study for weeks, playin' those tapes over and over again. Enough to make ya lose it, an' poor little Blair, just sitting on the floor at his knees an' the both of them cryin'. God. It makes ya want to scream. And that was almost twenty years ago, although I remember it like yesterday."

"Oh, Melly, I had no idea. Joe has always seemed like ... Joe Normal, sorry, I couldn't resist. But really, in all this time, Karen never said a word."

"Well, that's not surprisin'. Almost ten years had passed before she came along, an' Joe had reached some kinda peace, an' of course, Karen was his first love from high school, so they got back together pretty quick. She made quite a change in both of them. Blair wanted a family more than anything and when Karen came along, offering to be her mother an' providin' a sister into the bargain, Blair was complete. Now this thing with Angel, it's brought it all back."

"What do you think she'll do? I mean, it's not like Lisa can just get another horse. And Angel will be treated like the princess she is for the rest of her life. What more could Blair want?"

“I’m not sure, Becky. It’s all the history involved, plus Angel’s gettin’ old. I don’t think Blair wants ... well, ya know. Would Lisa keep her at Mystic permanently? I think that would be an important consideration.” Melanie closed her eyes for a moment, remembering the years before Karen. She rose from the table and pushed her chair back.

“Lunch was wonderful, thanks so much. Now I’m gonna go find Blair.”

* * *

Lisa sat in her room, formulating a plan. She had to have Angel; it was as simple as that. Methodically, she stroked Sadie’s face, smoothing the fur between her eyebrows.

“I don’t know how it’s going to happen, Sadie, but I have to find a way to buy Angel. What does Blair want her for anyway? All those babies she makes her have and she never even rides her anymore. Angel’s like some old toy. She doesn’t want her, but she doesn’t want anyone else to have her, either. She’s just stingy.”

Lisa shook her head, hands clasped together. “When we went down to the barn and found Angel wasn’t in her stall, I got so mad, Sadie, I wanted to scream. I knew Blair had her, I just knew it, but I couldn’t try to find them because I didn’t know where to look. What if she rode her to the Doubletree? What if she took her back? Ms. Becky said Angel didn’t have to go over there until after Christmas.”

Lisa rose from her chair and began to pace up and down the small room. Back and forth she walked, muttering to herself and periodically scratching her head.

* * *

Melanie strolled along the trail, enjoying the beauty of the day. She glanced down the barn aisle, saw Angel’s

stall door opened and knew she and Blair had taken a walk. She continued toward the far end of Mystic, mulling over the events that happened during lunch. She reached the bottom of the lane and saw them in the distant pasture. Melanie quickened her step.

“Hey, Blair.” She climbed through the fence rails, voice tentative. “Do ya want to be alone or can we talk?”

Angel trotted over and snuffled Melanie’s pockets, looking for a treat. Grinning, the girl rewarded her with two sugar lumps. When no more were offered, the mare went back to grazing.

“Blair?”

“I’m not sure I can talk about this right now, Melly.”

“I understand. I just want ya to know I’m behind whatever decision ya make. Would you prefer I leave ya alone?”

“No, please stay.” She patted the grass beside her.

Melanie sat cross-legged next to her friend, silent, waiting.

“Of all the things I never thought I’d have to deal with, this one tops the list. Sell Angel? How could Becky even ask me that? When this whole thing came up and she wanted to lease Angel, I should have said no right off the bat.”

“Well, ya have to admit Angel looks great. Except for that belly, she looks like she’s in show shape. Must be boring for a horse with her history to just hang out in a pasture and have babies.”

Indignant, Blair turned to Melanie.

“That’s just ridiculous. She loves her babies and everyone looks forward to retirement, right? She deserves to be able to rest and relax.”

“Mind numbing.”

“What?”

“Well, after a while, it’s like summer vacation. By the end of August, we’re dying to go back to school. Too much of a good thing, I guess.”

Blair sighed. Pursing her lips, she plucked several blades of grass from the lawn, inspecting them as if they had the answer to her problems.

“You know what this is about as well as I do. Angel would prefer to be with Lisa than a rowdy baby, I know that. And yes, she’s probably bored stiff hanging out in the pasture.” Vivid green eyes glanced at the mare and back to Melanie.

“I was ready to leave her here for a while longer. She isn’t due to foal until the end of February, so it made sense, but after that, I have no control for six months. She’s committed.”

Melanie chuckled. “Yeah, ya could say that. Well, actually, I think that’s a good idea. Becky will be watchin’ her like a hawk. No baby is gonna sneak up on her. Rest assured, Angel’s safe here. An’ ya know how easily kids bore. Just like the horses. Once Angel foals, it’s six months of motherhood for her. Who knows what might happen in that time? Maybe Becky can put some feelers out, see if there’s another horse that might be suitable, maybe change the course of things without firin’ a shot or havin’ hard feelins’ about your decision. Her parents are obviously able to buy her any horse she wants.”

“You always have good answers, Melly. Maybe Lisa will have a new horse before Angel is ready to wean the foal. If it could work out like that, fine.” More blades of grass were plucked and savored.

“I wouldn’t mind if Angel stayed at Mystic for the rest, well, y’know, but I can’t sell her. I have to have the control. Once she’s sold, regardless of what they say now, they could move her, take her up to LA or wherever. They could make it impossible for me to ever see her again. I can’t chance that.”

“Have ya met Lisa’s parents? Do we know anything about them?”

Blair shook her head. “Becky says they’re very nice, devoted to Lisa, as you can imagine. They’ll move heaven and earth to get her what she wants. Becky really likes Lisa, so I don’t see any help coming from her. She thinks I’m a selfish brat.” Blair continued to pluck blades of grass. She shook her head. “Am I?”

“I sure don’t think so, an’ I’d be amazed if Becky felt that way, either. Listen, this is a subject with a lot of emotional pull to it. Either way. She has a lot of compassion for Lisa, feels like she owes her, maybe, but you’re under no obligation to this kid. You did plenty already by lendin’ her Angel. It’s not your fault she’s blind, and Lisa’s in no position to make any kind of demands of you.” Melanie shrugged, gazing at her friend with compassion

“Nor, frankly, does she have the right to get all huffy, not in my book. She should be glad of the time she had. What you did for a complete stranger was more than kind. Still, ya gotta feel sorry for her. God has blessed us, for sure.” Thick ash-blond lashes veiled her eyes as she shot a glance at Blair.

“You know I feel that way, too, and I’m reminded of my blessings on a daily basis. I feel terrible about Lisa. I know I’d never in a million years be as independent as she is. Truly, she’s a marvel. But Angel is not some kind of consolation prize.” More blades of grass left the earth as she plucked substantial handfuls.

“Melly, I understand their dilemma. Like Becky said, it’s not as though she can just go out and buy another horse. Angel’s one in a million. We all know that.”

“Oh, I’m sayin’, for sure. One in a billion, which is why Becky is so determined about Lisa buying Angel. It is understandable, y’know. So, did ya ride her down here? How long’s it been anyway ... four years almost? Bet it felt good

to be back on your old buddy. I know I'd miss Benny like crazy if I hadn't ridden him in that long."

They sat in comfortable silence, watching the old mare graze.

"Say, total segue, but that final round you had yesterday on Lance was outstandin'. I meant to say somethin' about it earlier, but it just kept slippin' away. He's so catty and quick he reminds me a lot of Bitsy. Did Billy keep her, do ya know?"

Blair gazed at Melanie and nodded. "According to Becky, Bitsy stays here for the kids to use. If the right match comes along, he'll sell her, but he's in no hurry. Besides, it's really nice to be able to offer quality school horses for the kids to ride and show. He brought his whole string here after his accident." She let the blades of grass tumble from her fingers, eyes downcast.

"Becky and two of the girls ride them for him and she said anytime we want to, we can give them a try."

"Whoa, that's one offer I plan to take her up on ... tomorrow." She giggled, running her hand through light blonde hair.

"I watched Becky ride this morning, Melly. She's gotten really good, I mean really. You should see her. She's like me, just doesn't want to jump real high. Billy has a gray mare here that's a terrific equitation horse. She's old as time, done all the medals and gives the kids a made horse to practice on if they don't own one."

They continued to reminisce as the afternoon wore on. Inevitably, the discussion returned to Angel. They tossed around several ideas, Blair's favorite being that by the time Angel weaned her foal, Lisa might have moved on to another horse.

The only scheme they could come up with was such an outright lie, it gave them both pause. Still, it was all they had.

“If her parents will go along with it, can we just lie like that? Could it hurt to let Lisa think she owns Angel? Tell her Merry Christmas and the whole deal. That way, she gets what she wants and so do you. I’m sayin’, Lisa shouldn’t be puttin’ us in this situation in the first place.”

“Do you think they’ll agree with that, Melly?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never met them. I do know they want Lisa to live as regular and normal life as she can and they see Angel as a way to do that. Deceptive is it is, it might be somethin’ they’ll go along with once they accept you won’t sell.”

“With any kind of luck, we can have the best of both worlds.”

Chapter 18

Blair and Melanie sat on the sofa facing the crackling fireplace, waiting for Becky to finish her call.

“Hey, what are you doing right now? Can you come over for a minute? Cool.” Becky turned toward the girls and nodded.

“Billy’s on the way. Anyone up for some hot chocolate? I have a whole pitcher already made. Just nuke it when I want it.”

“Sounds great to me, Becky. Ya need any help?” Melanie got to her feet and glanced around the little apartment with a grin.

“Every time I come here, this place just makes me smile. It’s so quiet with all the trees an’ flowers so close. Absolutely enchantin’, like a little house in the woods. I love what you’ve done with the decoratin’, too. My folks bought me a condo in La Jolla as a graduation present. I’ve been offered an internship from Scripps and I’ve decided to take it, so I have to live down there anyway. I can’t intern and commute.”

“It pays to have a mother who’s a real estate broker. She found one that’s just darling, beautifully laid out, great for roommates, at least at first,” Blair said, joining them on the walk to the kitchen.

“Mama’s had her eye on it for a while, now. It’s huge, almost twenty-five hundred square feet, but she said

it's the investment of a lifetime. Plus, I can have an office in the condo when I finally am ready to set up private practice. It's a relief to know I can expand without having to move. It's on the second floor in a gated community, not far from the hospital, so it's safe an' very convenient."

They continued to talk about Melanie's new condo and her pending internship, Blair's upcoming wedding to Kenny and the outstanding success Becky and Billy had achieved at Mystic.

Becky pulled the pitcher from the fridge, filled four cups and popped them into the microwave. She returned the pitcher and leaned against the counter, arms folded across her chest. Eyes veiled, she glanced from Melanie to Blair.

"I take it this is about Lisa and Angel."

"We came up with an idea, but we want to run it by you and Billy before we say anything to Lisa."

Just then the front door banged closed and they heard him call.

"Hey, girls, what's up?" His eyes darted from one to another, finally coming to rest on Melanie. "Do we need to sit down for this?" His grin was tentative as he took a chair.

The girls sat as well.

"Hey, Billy. This won't take all that long. We just want y'all to know that Blair isn't gonna sell Angel. That option is off the table." Melanie fastened her gaze on Becky, whose suddenly pink cheeks indicated an argument was about to ensue.

Blair spoke up first, voice determined.

"I don't see why Lisa has to know. Can't we just tell a little white lie and *say* Angel's hers now? I have to maintain control over where Angel stays. I will not take the chance that a year or two down the road they'll want to move her to L.A. or wherever. I want to be able to see Angel on a daily basis if I choose, but if Lisa keeps Angel here, then I'm fine with everything staying like it is. We can tell

her she owns Angel, she can show as the owner, all that.” Blair chuckled.

“They can pay the bills just like they have been, but the final say of where she boards has to be mine.”

Billy shrugged and took a sip of his chocolate. “It’ll never fly and I can’t lie to her. Sets a bad precedent, for one thing. I have no idea what fired up this big need to buy Angel, but I know her parents. They do their best to give her whatever she wants. I just don’t think we have a prayer of pulling it off, not for the long run.”

Lips pursed, Becky shook her head, gaze fixed on Billy.

“Oh, you guys, this whole plan is nuts. It’s not gonna work.” She glanced at her friends and then turned to Blair.

“How about if you sold her with the proviso that they can’t take Angel off the premises? Would that work? Lisa’s only fourteen and I know she wants to stay at Mystic until she graduates, so we’re talking four more years. Lots of things can change in four years.”

“A real sale is off the table, Becky, ya gotta remember that. We’re only talking about pretendin’ here.”

Blair shook her head. “But *then* what? Imagine thinking for all that time that she owns Angel and all of a sudden, now she can’t take her to another barn up near her home? Picture how she’ll feel when she learns that the most important people in her life have lied to her for years!”

Blair stared at Becky, watching the expressions flitting across her face.

“Impossible, I take it back. This is never ... I can’t go along with this.”

Melanie leaned forward, glancing at her friends.

“Selling Angel is off the table and Lisa is the one who needs to compromise here, not Blair. Frankly, we shouldn’t be put in this position at all. She’s gettin’ exactly what she wants an’ I can’t ... not for the life of me,

understand why she wouldn't be happy with the offer. To all intents and purposes, she'll own Angel."

Blair clasped her hands, expression miserable. "You hit on my biggest concern, Becky. In four years what happens? Is Lisa going to become a permanent fixture here? I mean, Angel is only seventeen, well, coming eighteen, but still, we all know she could live another ten years, maybe longer. What then?" She pursed her lips, determined.

"By that time, I could have a little girl myself, no doubt I will. I want her to know Angel, to take rides on her. I want to do it just like my mom did. When I reminisce about her grandmother and all those things that mean so much to me, I want her to be able to touch Angel and make a connection, not just look at a bunch of photos. I'm sorry, but I can't take the chance of that not happening, of missing out on it."

An uncomfortable silence reigned. Becky got the pitcher out again, refilled cups and popped them into the microwave.

"Then we have to tell her the truth now. The hostilities we'll be facing when the truth comes out would be devastating to her core relationships. Nope, I'm not for lying about this. The only thing to do is play it straight, tell her she can *consider* Angel hers, but that, in the end, Blair makes the calls." Becky cast a glance at Billy and shrugged.

"Does anyone know why Lisa's so eager to buy Angel? They've been doin' fine here for months, an' now, all of a sudden, it's like she's on fire to buy her. Anyone know the answer to that or how this all got started? Is it the dressage? Do y'all think that started her off?"

Becky put her cup down on the counter and stared at Blair and then Melanie.

"It might be that, but I doubt it. She's afraid; afraid that somehow she'll lose Angel. Lisa thinks of her much like she does Sadie. One more way to get around, to be normal and have fun like anyone else. She's devoted to them in a

way we never could imagine. Her parents are absolutely wild when it comes to giving her every opportunity to live a normal life. You would not believe the things she's done.

"She's skied, if you can believe that. This summer she's determined to surf. It's a blessing Bob is so well trained in diving and such a good sport. He's going to teach her to water-ski as well, so at the very least she'll be able to ski and lie on the surfboard. Can't you see her now? As for her parents, they'll go along with whatever we come up with if it means Angel stays with Lisa."

Blair drew a deep breath and glanced at Melanie with relief.

"Then it's agreed. We'll tell Lisa straight out that while I won't sell Angel, she can pretend. She can keep the mare here or at Doubletree permanently, her choice. Also, I won't breed Angel back. This will be her last foal. To all intents and purposes, Angel belongs to Lisa."

* * *

Lisa heard the knock on her door. "Come in."

"Hey, Lisa, you have a minute? I have some good news. Am I interrupting anything?"

"No, Ms. Becky, not at all. Please have a seat. So you talked Blair into selling me Angel? I knew you would." She grinned, shrugging at the chair next to her computer.

"I've been working on the dressage tests and I have them memorized. Look."

Lisa nodded toward the printer where the final sheet prepared to land in the tray.

"I checked out the first recognized level and I know we can do that, too. Once we establish a familiar pattern she'll learn the test. She'll be quick, I just know it." Lisa was quiet a moment, expression thoughtful.

"Do you know where I can get an abortion for Angel?"

The breath came out of Becky in a whoosh. “*What?* You’ve got to be kidding! Of course not. Why would you ask?”

“Well, I’m not sure what you mean by *of course not*. Have you checked? It’s an everyday occurrence, abortion. Women do it all the time. It’s just that this foal is very inconvenient. You have to admit it. Angel and I will be back to square one by the time the foal is weaned. Everything we learned will be lost and I’ll have to virtually learn to ride all over again. And I know it’s unlikely, but what if something happened and she ... my Angel, what if she died?”

Becky shook her head several times, eyes wide.

“Where is this coming from, honey? Angel’s had four beautiful fillies, with no problems, not even little ones; why would you even think that? She’s not going to die foaling!”

“Well, like I said, I know it’s not likely, but it does happen. Basically, it’s not convenient for her to be tied up that long. My riding career will end for six months. That’s as long as it took me to get where I am right now. It’s just not fair! I think Blair should help me out here, don’t you? How many horses does one person need to have?”

“I guess I should have interrupted you from the start, Lisa, but you blew me away with the abortion thing. Blair won’t sell Angel. She said you can keep her here or at Doubletree for the rest of her life and you can pretend she’s yours, think of her as your own, but that’s the best I can do for you.”

“*No!* No, it’s not. You have to make her change her mind, Ms. Becky.” Lisa turned in her chair and leaned forward, intense.

“Why won’t she sell her? Why is she so stingy?”

The girl began to cry, fists clenched in her lap. Sadie shoved her nose under her hand offering consolation and love. Finally the sobs subsided. She pulled a tissue from the box on her desk and blew her nose.

“Is that her final word? You’re sure she won’t change her mind?”

“As Melanie said, selling Angel is off the table.”

“What’s *Melanie* got to say about it? It’s no concern of hers.”

“She’s Blair’s best friend. There’s a lot you don’t know, years of sentimental attachment between Melly, Blair and Angel. I just finished talking with her and she said you can keep Angel as your own for the rest of her life, but she has to stay here or at Doubletree. She even agreed not to breed Angel again. She wants you to have the chance you deserve.”

Lisa turned her face away from Becky as she struggled for composure.

“What about if Angel has her foal here at Mystic? At least I could ride until the vet says I have to stop, right? I could get to know the baby real well and maybe we could start riding a lot sooner than six months. I did a lot of research and the cowboys had to do that, same with the Bedouins. They liked mares, gave them a way to increase the herd without spending money. Anyway, they rode the mare darned near to the day she foaled and rode again the day after foaling. Now, I know *that’s* not possible, but what about in like, two weeks? Could that happen? It sure used to.”

She clasped her hands, an earnest expression on her face. “After all, it would give Angel good exercise and get her back in shape at the same time. Not to mention how good that’ll be for the baby. I mean, even if we just walk first and maybe a bit of a trot, it can follow along beside us. Oh, doesn’t that sound fun? And we can....”

* * *

Becky leaned back in her chair, the tips of her fingers tented next to her lips. Disturbed, she reached for the phone

twice only to put it down again. Finally, she picked it up and dialed Billy.

“Where are you?” She nodded several times. “Have you had dinner yet? I need to talk with you.” A smile spread across her face.

“Yes, I’d love to. I’ll be ready by the time you get here.”

* * *

They sat on the enclosed upper balcony of their favorite restaurant, the Beach House in Cardiff by the Sea, gazing at the gray everything. Sky, sand and water, even the birds, all painted in various shades of gray. The little sand pipers flitted just in front of the waves, searching the wet sand for crabs with quick sharp darts of their beaks.

Above them, always raucous, the seagulls swooped, fighting with each other and looking for larger prey. Cloaked by thick puffy clouds the sun departed; gray disappeared into black. The stars didn’t stand a chance.

The waitress bore a tray holding iced teas, two steaming bowls of fragrant seafood chowder and a basket of corn bread. She held a pepper mill aloft, delivering a generous twist to both bowls.

“I could live on this stuff. I can’t tell you how many nights Shievy and I came down here after a show or late lesson and ate chowder.” He nodded at a corner table where two people sipped wine and held hands.

“That was her favorite spot. I love being so close to the ocean. Only place better to be is my back patio.” He stared at her a moment and smiled. “In the hot tub.” He leered, beetling his eyebrows.

“It’s a date. We don’t have classes tomorrow so I’m yours for the evening.” She popped a piece of buttered cornbread into her mouth and smiled.

“We all have such a history together. Steve and I would come here, too, but our fave place was the Crab Shack. Growing up here was such fun. All the adventures we had, the cool things we did ... great horse shows, pirates, sleuthing in Las Vegas.” She chuckled, glancing at Billy.

“I’ll never forget our first cruise. There’ll never be another one like it.”

“I hope not. Once was enough, thank you very much, even if we did get a Commendation from the Coast Guard.”

Memories made them giggle.

He nodded. “I think you have more on your mind than pirates or sleuthing. What happened? You told Lisa and she had a fit? What?”

Large blue-green eyes sought his.

“Well, I think I know why she was so hot to buy Angel. She sees the foal as an impediment, something keeping her from going on with her training in dressage. Melly had that one nailed flat, huh? Lisa asked me if horses had abortions and where could she get one for Angel. I just about passed out.”

Billy blinked at her, disbelief written across his face.

“Man, that’s one for the books. I’ve never heard of anyone even thinking about that unless they have a high risk pregnancy and a very valuable mare or they know the foal is lost and the mare will die if they don’t take it. In the first place, Angel isn’t in foal by accident. She’s carrying a South Pacific baby. Worth a ton of money before it even hits the ground. That’s really way past strange and incredibly selfish. What did you say?”

“I told her an abortion was out of the question. She had a fit, kept saying how stingy Blair was. I don’t think Lisa’s heard a lot of *no* in her life. I just rode it out, but when she gets something in her mind, she expects it to happen. Certainly her parents want her to live as full a life as possible, and if she’s a bit self-centered, I can understand. If I had a blind child, I’d do the same things. Good grief, who

wouldn't? It's beyond my comprehension, living like that." Becky took another spoonful of chowder and gazed at the ocean.

Voice low, she murmured, "So, Lisa's a master manipulator. I can't deny it. I just feel so darned sorry for her I could cry. And yet, that won't help."

"She's a tough cookie and very determined, I'll grant you that. When she decided that I would ride again, it was like fighting a force of nature. No withstanding her. Frankly, Blair wouldn't have a chance alone, but with Melanie running interference, I think Lisa has met her match. Melly is as soft as a cloud, but her spine is steel. She's another one who's immovable. This should be an interesting couple of months."

"Oh, rest assured, as long as there's breath in Melanie's body, Blair will prevail." She gazed at Billy and shrugged.

"We need to file this one away for future reference and make sure nothing like it ever happens again."

"I know. You start out trying to do something nice for someone and it gets all tangled up."

"I really felt for Blair this afternoon when she talked about her mom and her future daughter. It's so sad. I didn't meet Blair until three or four years after her mother died. We were like eight or nine, in the same pony club, but she was always so sad. Not, y'know, boohoo, pity party, woe is me. Just kind of sad and withdrawn, very quiet. I certainly understood about that, considering my mom, but it made me wonder. Shievon told me about what happened, but that was years later. Does Lisa know about it?" He leaned back, allowing the waitress to remove his bowl.

"I told her enough that she understands Angel is more than just an old pet to Blair. She just has to reconcile herself to waiting until the foal is ready to wean and that's all there is to it. After that, she has all the time in the world to ride.

He nodded. "She needs to think of someone other than herself. I think that'll be a novel concept for her."

"Hey! What do you mean by that? I thought you two were so close."

"Oh, we are and I don't blame her for a minute. Look at the performance I put on and it was just my hand. Being blind, like you said, it's incomprehensible. You can't fault her for wanting her way. On the other hand, life is like that. I don't know how much of a favor we're doing her by always caving in."

"Well, I think it's going to turn out just fine. Wait and see. You about ready?"

Billy nodded, glancing around for the waitress and their check. He paid the tab and helped Becky with her wrap. Arm in arm they walked down the steps and across the parking lot to the car.

The ocean mist settled on their hair and he reached for her, sliding a red curl away from her eye. He gave her a resounding kiss and whispered, "Hot tub, here we come!"

Chapter 19

The sound of Christmas carols wafted out of the house, accompanied by the smells of ginger and chocolate and wood burning in the fireplace. The star-filled night, clear and crisp, encouraged outdoor activities with just enough chill in the air to make the girls squeal in delight.

Officially closed until January third, Mystic's teachers and most of the students departed in a flurry of morning activity. Cries of Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays floated across the parking lot.

The remaining kids gathered with Billy and Becky to watch the grooms attach the last of the Christmas lights to the front of the house. The girls set up the life-size pieces of the crèche, arguing about how close the Wise Men should be to the manger and just where Joseph and Mary should stand.

Marcy shook her head.

"They get to move closer as the day arrives. If you have them right there at the beginning, you won't be able to do it right." Determination clear on her face, she grabbed the kneeling wise man and placed him several yards from the manger.

"Put the other guys behind this one, Shelby."

The girls bickered back and forth about how much straw they should use, happy and excited.

Amy nodded several times and elbowed Ginger.

“I still think the icicles would look better draped across the porch alone rather than mingling with all those garlands. It’s getting to be a bit much, don’t you think? Like over the top?”

“Looks like a Hollywood pizza parlor,” Ginger said succinctly. “But it’s still good, y’know, very homey and cheerful.”

The girls got together on the lawn to take a critical look at their decorating. The columns wore a festive draping of imitation icicles that blinked in some mad, random pattern. A small pine, planted when Billy and Becky first opened Mystic, now wore blue lights on its boughs and large, red unbreakable plastic ornaments.

The barn bore exterior lights on the roof, well out of the reach of persistent equines. Each horse had a stocking pinned next to his stall with his name embroidered across the top.

The horses remembered the stockings from one year to another and spent a good bit of their stall time chuckling at each other and trying to reach the treats they knew the stockings contained. They searched in particular for the homemade carrot and bran cookies Becky made them each year as well as fragrant green apples.

Lisa and Sadie walked down the middle of the barn aisle until they came to Angel’s stall. She opened the door and stepped inside. Angel crossed the stall, taking careful, measured steps and snuffled Lisa’s hands. Nestled within were several carrot slices and some sugar cubes. The girl giggled, and placing both hands on the mare’s cheeks, she stroked the soft fur.

“It’s almost Christmas, do you know that? December twentieth, exactly two months from your due date. I can’t wait.” She moved to the mare’s side, running her hand along the sleek neck and shoulders, continuing until she reached

the bulging abdomen. Fingers caressing the swollen belly, she spoke.

“I never knew how horrible and ugly I could be, Baby. And I didn’t really mean it, y’know. I’m just ... a spoiled jealous brat. It’s a wonder I have any friends. I just wanted your mommy all to myself. I’m so sorry.”

She placed her ear against Angel’s tummy and waited. She didn’t know what for, but just yesterday she’d felt it kick, and it was sharp enough to make Angel grunt.

“Hey, you awake in there?” She tapped gently several times and was rewarded with a gurgling sound.

Tittering, she pulled back and turned toward Angel’s head.

“That’s cheating. Gut sounds don’t count. Hey, you want to take a walk?”

Lisa plucked the halter and lead shank from the hook outside the stall and put it on Angel. She snapped the shank in place and called Sadie to heel. Dog on one side, horse on the other, they proceeded down the aisle and onto the driveway.

“It’s pretty busy up by the house. The girls are putting up the decorations. Probably not a good place to go. How about if we walk to the pasture and back? I bet a bit of exercise is just what you need, Ange.”

The mare nickered under her breath and shortened her naturally long strides. It didn’t matter to any of them, but the huge full moon hung in the heavens like a celestial ornament while the stars danced beside it, dazzling like tinsel. Delicious clouds, puffy like cotton candy, floated above them, dodging across the face of the full moon.

Lisa let Angel graze for a while, enjoying the night sounds of crickets and the subdued chirps of the woodland creatures as they settled for the night. She shivered a bit and wrapped her arms across her chest.

“I guess we better go back, girls. We don’t want to catch a cold for Christmas.”

The three friends reversed their direction and headed back to the barn. As they came abreast of the barn aisle, Angel moved to the right, away from Lisa while Sadie nudged Lisa's knee. Like a practiced dance, dog, horse and girl made the turn and started down the row. They stopped at the open stall door and Lisa put Angel to bed for the night. She removed the halter, patted the mare one more time, closed the door and latched it.

"Night, Angel. See you in the morning."

"Hey, Lisa, we wondered where you got off to. Come here and let me tell you about the decorations." Becky took Lisa's free arm and led her to the tree.

"You remember how this felt this morning? Well, not only does it have these colorful balls hanging on the bough, there's a big star on the top and it blinks off and on, like a lighthouse or something." She placed Lisa's hand on the bough and said, "There's an ornament just below your hand. Can you tell what it is?"

Lisa released the harness and told Sadie to sit. She took the ornament in both hands, gently holding with her left while with her right she traced the outline. A grin spread across her face. "That's a horse's head."

"Sure is! Now, I told you the house at this end is shaped like a shoe box, right? And the next part is like a two-story shoe box."

"Yes. Yes, I remember."

They approached the steps and Becky led her to the edge of the porch.

"Okay, here are the columns. You can feel the bulbs? Yes, and there are gold garlands winding around it with tassels on the ends. Starts on the porch floor and goes clear up to the roof line." She drew Lisa's hand to her and made several quick circles around her wrist and arm.

"Like that. Then, the roof has multicolored lights across the whole front."

“What smells so good? Like spices or something?”

“That’s Anna’s gingerbread men. I think they’re ready to eat. Are you hungry?”

Lisa chuckled.

* * *

The mood remained upbeat and jovial as the gang sat around the festive tree, listening to carols and drinking hot cider. The fireplace crackled with the fragrant essence of burning oak; blue and yellow flames devoured the hard dry wood.

Becky and Billy sat on the sofa together, a snarky smile on their faces.

The kids talked about their upcoming cruise to Newport Beach and the shopping spree they planned at South Coast Plaza. Most fun of all, they’d participate in the famous Newport Boat Parade that circled the harbor and passed all the beautifully decorated estates nestled on the shoreline.

“There’s been a slight change of plans regarding the cruise up to Newport.” He hesitated as the girls groaned, waiting for bad news. “It seems all the slips that can accommodate us are taken and we have nowhere to dock overnight, so the *Sea Nymph* will lay off shore in the harbor.”

The kids looked at each other, shrugging. They waited.

“The good news is we can stay aboard the yacht rather than go to the hotel if you want. Your choice.”

The kids started to cheer before his sentence ended. Grinning from ear to ear, he added, “I take it the yacht wins?”

They all agreed. There wasn’t a hotel going that offered what the *Sea Nymph* did, starting with the best chef

in the world, at least they thought so. Adequate public day docking assured they would not miss their shopping trip.

Unnoticed by anyone but Ginger, Amy leaned back in her chair and studied Lisa. Periodically, her eyes shifted to Becky, and once she sighed.

Unable to restrain herself another moment, the always curious Ginger elbowed her best buddy.

“If looks could kill, Lisa and Ms. Becky would be out on the floor. What’s up?”

Amy shrugged, refusing to look at Ginger. “I just know something you don’t know.”

“Since when?” Ginger snorted, eyes alight.

“Oh, you are such a riot! It’s terrible and you don’t want to know.”

“Oh, please, stop with all the drama. It’s really not your forté. Like what already?”

“I overheard something last night that just blew me away.”

“About what?” She drew the words out with slow deliberation.

“More about whom?”

In a singsong voice, Ginger said, “Okay, Amy, I’m just about out of patience here. *Whom?*”

“Lisa.”

“No! Holy cow, you’re kidding. I thought you had some insight about the global warming issue or the cure for acne or something. Of *course* it’s about Lisa. Why else would you be giving her the hairy eyeball like that?”

“Okay, I’ll tell you, but if you say one word about how we should feel sorry for her and cut her all kinds of slack because she’s blind, I’m gonna pop you one right in the nose.”

Ginger glanced at the fists waving in front of her face in mock threat. She shook her head and made a face.

"Amy, in the first place, don't tuck your thumb into your palm." She made an example. "You'll break it."

Face as solemn as a past due notice, she nodded at Amy. "There, that's better. Now, spill."

Amy rose to her feet and grabbed Ginger's hand.

"Can't do it here." She turned to Becky and the rest of the group. "Early day tomorrow. We're off."

The girls entered the bedroom and flopped on their beds. Ginger switched on her bedside lamp.

"It's nice to have the room to ourselves for a while. Two whole weeks ... I might not let them back in. So, spill. What did Lisa do?"

"I was raiding the fridge the other night ... had a sweet tooth, and I overheard Ms. Becky talking with Lisa about buying Angel. You are *so* not gonna believe this. I really hesitate to tell you."

Ginger stuck her fist up and said, "See, I know what to do with my thumb. Now spill or I'm gonna mash *you*." Giggling she fluffed up her pillow and settled back on her bed. "Girl, this better be good."

"Lisa wants to get an abortion for Angel because her baby is *inconvenient*."

Ginger stared at Amy, green eyes wide. "Shut up! That's not even slightly funny."

"Sure isn't. That's why she's so anxious to buy Angel. So she could get rid of her foal."

Ginger sat straight up in bed, face a thundercloud. "Are you serious? Did you actually hear Lisa say that?"

"That and more."

"What's Ms. Becky got to do with it? You glared at her, too."

"She's a wimp. She should have kicked Lisa out right then and called Blair to take the mare back. That's the most selfish, disgusting thing I've ever heard. That wonderful old mare has carted Lisa here and there, given her

chances she never thought she'd have, and Lisa wants to abort her baby because it interrupts their training. Can you believe it?"

"That's a first. I knew ... we all knew she was mad about Angel going back to Doubletree to foal, but it never occurred to me she wanted to go that far. Good grief." Ginger lapsed into silence a moment.

"What did Ms. Becky say? She must have been blown away."

"Not enough to suit me. It started when she told Lisa that Blair wouldn't sell Angel. That set her off, wailing about how she deserved a chance and that Blair was stingy. Ms. Becky just sat there, listening to her rant. I'd a walked out on her second sentence. When Lisa kinda quieted down, Ms. Becky told her abortion isn't possible and off she went again, throwing a tantrum. I was so furious by that time, I either had to leave or bust in there and give them my two cents worth. Being a coward, I left. Given the chance again, with more time to think about it, I'm not sure."

"Do they know you know? Have you talked with Lisa?"

Amy shook her head. "Not a word and I don't plan to. She sure fooled me. I remember the day she came to Mystic. I really liked her, admired what she could do. Now, not so much. In the end it all turned out okay, so I guess it doesn't matter, but I have to admit I'm looking at Lisa in a different way. I used to feel sorry for her, but not any more."

Chapter 20

Breakfast at Mystic was usually conducted on the run, with go-cups and napkin-wrapped goodies clutched in one hand, books, tennis racquets and the odd saddle in the other.

This morning they departed from the norm and with nowhere to go, the girls, who always seemed to be late for something, became ladies of leisure.

They were on their own until mid-afternoon when they'd head over to the yacht.

Amy finished her coffee, rose and placed her cup in the dishwasher.

"I'm going over to Mary's. Anyone else want to come?"

Shelby shook her head. "Thanks anyway. I have a book I want to finish before we go tonight.

"I need to get a couple of things, actually," Marcy said. "When are you leaving?"

"Pretty quick. I want to get back in time to give myself a pedi. Hey, you want one, too?"

"Oh, how cool. Thanks, Amy, I'd love one. I can't do it well for myself. Always smearing something."

"Good deal. We're going to have a ball in Newport and I've got the coolest pair of open-toed shoes. Wait until you see them. Have you ever been to the boat parade

before?" They left the table, walked through the living room and climbed the steps.

"No, I've never attended one, but I remember seeing a wonderful article on it in the paper last year and they did a bit on the TV, too. How about you?"

"Nah, this will be a first. Sounds like fun." Amy snagged her purse and a light jacket and joined Marcy in the hall.

As they came back down the stairs they saw Lisa sitting on the sofa, Sadie at her feet, reading a Braille book.

Marcy looked over her shoulder. "Should we see if Lisa wants to come too?"

"Absolutely not." Amy passed her and strode out the door, an amazed Marcy hot on her trail.

"What the heck was that about? I thought you and Lisa were friends."

"Not anymore we aren't, not by a long shot."

Eyes wide, Marcy hopped into the car and pulling the seatbelt across her chest, stared at Amy, astonished.

"Whoa, what happened? I haven't heard a word of gossip. Did you two have a fight? Sheesh, what kind of fight can you have with a blind kid?"

Amy cast a quick glance at Marcy and shook her head.

"It doesn't matter. I just don't like her anymore. I think she's a spoiled brat."

Marcy leaned forward, about to say something. With a sigh she leaned back again and shook her head. Finally, "Well, I guess if that was the worst thing anyone could say about you, it wouldn't be all that bad, huh? Knowing you, you have valid reasons, but I sure don't understand. We all have to make some concessions to each other, don't you think? Imagine if you were in her shoes. You'd hope people would give you the benefit of the doubt, huh, cut you some slack?"

“See, that’s the reason I don’t see much point in talking to you about this. You have a lot of natural empathy and you always try to see the good, the nice side of people. It’s one of your neatest traits, but in this case, well....”

“What a sweet thing to say, Amy, but I still don’t have a clue what you’re talking about now, not a clue.”

“I know and I ... well, it’s not going away, so. The other night I had the munchies and I came down to the kitchen in time to hear Lisa tell Becky that she wanted to get an abortion for Angel.”

“Give me a break!”

“Heard it with my own two ears.”

“She said that?” Marcy stared out the window as they pulled into the parking lot of Mary’s. The little Starbucks shack across the street did a booming business. She turned to Amy and nodded. “That’s the worst thing I’ve ever heard. I need a latte. A double.”

“Won’t change things.”

“Make my mouth taste better.”

“Well, there’s that.”

They got out of the car and strode across the parking lot.

* * *

Shelby sat curled up on her bed, gratifying tears sliding down her cheeks as she read the closing paragraph. She sighed, closed the book and dashed a tissue over her cheeks.

Marcy entered their room bearing two bags, another Starbucks cup and a gloomy expression.

“Hey, you. Chocolate?”

Shelby took the offered container, stuck the straw in the slot and sucked.

"You little mind-reader, that hits the spot. Who cares about the calories?" She patted her bed and nodded, sipping, indicating she wanted to see what Marcy had in the bags.

"Thanks a bunch."

Marcy tipped both sacks out and an assortment of horse goodies landed on the bed. Cookies for Cocoa, a tube of Stick'em, four rolls of bright pink vet wrap and a variety of magazines littered the bed.

"You finish your book?"

"Oh, yes. It was excellent." Shelby reached for the copy of *Equus* and turned to the art section.

"I have a thing for this magazine. Covers all kinds of weird stuff, lots of artwork and all. Definitely not your typical horse magazine." She pointed at a full glossy photo featuring a beautifully painted ceramic carousel horse.

"That's why I bought it; it's for you. I prefer *Show Circuit*. Love the gossip and all the talk about the social stuff they do. Florida is the place to be when you're really into hunters." She leafed through the magazine and then shrugged. "I have something to tell you that's gonna blow your socks off."

Shelby raised her eyes to Marcy, grinning.

"I love gossip, especially about people we know. So." She wiggled her toes and chuckled. "Knock'em off."

"Lisa wants to have Angel aborted. The foal is interfering with her training."

Shelby paused a moment, shrugged and nodded at her feet. "Socks still on."

"*What?* That doesn't just blow you away?" Amazed, Marcy's lips formed a perfect O of disbelief.

"Well, it sure bugs you, I can see that, but she does have a point."

Marcy sat bolt upright, lips pursed. "A point? I can't *believe* you said that. What point? What about the foal? What about Angel? How do you think she'd feel? And Blair? What about her?" Her voice continued to rise as she talked.

Finally, Shelby raised a palm. "Take a breath, girl. You're not really thinking this through. Angel? You think she cares or would even know? I mean, in less than six months they're going to take away a baby she'll actually know and love and no one will stress about how she feels then. And she'll be over it in a couple of days, anyway. Why would an abortion matter to her?"

"I ... well." Marcy wrung her hands, not sure what to say next. "Because she loves her babies. It's a mean, cruel thing to do...."

"Give me a break, would you? You're thinking about this from a human perspective. Angel is a *horse*. Actually, the only one with a word to say about this is Blair. It's her choice, her foal to do with whatever she wants, and Lisa has no say. Obviously, there's a bigger risk in full abdominal surgery than there is in allowing a mare with a history of multiple successful births to foal naturally. Even an elderly mare with her history is a safe breeding bet. But you must know that the procedure is as safe as colic surgery or any other invasive operation. There are risks, but it's often an option, especially if a filly comes into early heat and one of the colts gets to her." Eyebrows raised, she stared at Marcy.

"I'm sorry, but I think I'm missing something here. You're not worried about risky surgery, but you're still up in arms. I'm not sure why."

"Oh, get off it with all the clinical talk!" Marcy muttered something more, rose from the bed and walked across the room to her dresser. She placed the bags on top and shrugged. "It's just gross."

Shelby shook her head, a look of astonishment on her face.

"Gross? How ya figure? You're just being overly sentimental. It's one of your sweetest qualities, but if you looked at this from a clinical point of view, you'd feel differently."

"I think you can do that because your folks are horse breeders, and horses are your whole life. You've had bunches of experiences we've never had. Like, I didn't know, well, I didn't think about..."

"Too much Black Beauty. You're romanticizing your feelings, attributing stuff to Angel, emotions she's incapable of feeling. If I were Lisa, I'd probably want to do the same thing. Only difference is I'd never think to suggest doing it to someone else's horse, not even in a close relationship. But if she owned Angel, I wouldn't bat an eye ... except she sure should have reached this decision about six months ago."

"So you think the whole thing is ridiculous. I'm just amazed."

"Oh, no you're not, not really. You've just been offered another point of view on the matter. You still haven't given it sufficient time to sink in or whatever. I bet by this afternoon you'll agree with me. Does Ms. Becky know?"

"She was the one Lisa told in the first place."

"What was her reaction?"

"Well, she told her it couldn't happen, that Blair had plans for the foal and that she wasn't going to sell her Angel. Lisa can keep the mare here forever if she wants, but she can't take her anywhere else but Doubletree. I bet if Blair knew about this, she'd have a whole different take on it."

Dark eyes hooded now, Shelby shook her head.

"Don't you dare. Don't you even *think* about it. No matter what happens it won't be good, and it'll start trouble that might really escalate into a war. And since it isn't going to happen anyway, except to cause trouble, what's the point? You're not that kind of person, Marcy. Don't get involved. Who started this, anyway? Who first told you about this?"

"Amy."

"Good grief. *Amy*? You have to be kidding. Who told her?"

"No one told her anything. She overheard Lisa and Becky talking about it."

“Oy, what a mess.” Shelby glanced at her watch, rose from the bed and began packing for the cruise.

“Well, you all have to do what you have to do, but so do I. Just giving you fair warning right now, I’ll side with Lisa on this one if you start a fight or whatever.”

“That’s sweet! Best friends forever doesn’t mean much to you, does it?”

“It has nothing to do with BFFs! You’re wrong, pure and simple. You’re all upset over a non-event ... it isn’t going to happen. And even if it were, you’re pretending that it would matter to Angel when, believe me, she couldn’t care less. Wouldn’t know if or when it happened. We may be BFFs, but that doesn’t mean we have to agree on everything.”

“Well!” Marcy jumped from her bed, ran into the bathroom and slammed the door.

* * *

The limousine pulled up to the base of the steps and stopped. A tall man, fit and muscular and more than slightly reminiscent of a famous movie star, stepped out onto the driveway. Black uniform, starched white shirt, the crisp black chauffeur’s cap pulled low over his eyes, Bob walked swiftly around to the back of the car and opened the trunk. He stowed the waiting luggage inside, closed it and opened the car doors.

He turned toward the girls as they gathered on the porch, touched his fingers to the visor of his cap and nodded.

Even though they knew him well, his elegant appearance threw them off and they giggled, standing at the top of the steps, suddenly shy and unsure.

Amy nodded once and took the lead, the other kids right behind her. As she neared the car, he extended his arm, bowed slightly and assisted her inside.

“Bond,” she whispered. “James Bond.” She disappeared into the car, tittering.

“Sweet.” Marcy, face pink and bashful, grinned as she took his arm. Shelby was next in line, her lips curled in a delicious smile. One after another, he helped them into the car and when it came Lisa’s time to board, he slipped a gentle hand under her elbow, whispered hello, and sat her next to the door. Sadie lay on the floor at her feet, panting. The door closed with a whisper.

The girls chatted all the way across town, still going strong as they pulled up in front of Billy’s house. The huge Mediterranean villa crowned a gentle hill and overlooked the ocean. Behind it and invisible from the driveway, a private cove lapped at the sides of the yacht. A long dock wrapped around the artificial island, providing calm waters for the boats tethered there.

Palm trees cloaked the red tiled roof, casting wispy shadows on the stark white walls. Sweet flowers permeated the air, challenging the salt water for dominance. Secure in their pond, colorful Koi swam on the front verandah, circling the edges of their habitat and begging for treats.

No strangers to the estate, the girls whiled away many a hot summer afternoon there, surfing or water skiing. Still, in the coming winter twilight, it took on an ethereal quality, dressed as it was in its Christmas finery.

Becky and Billy waved hello from the verandah above the driveway and pointed toward the dock.

The *Sea Nymph* bobbed on the water. Blue and white lights outlined the yacht, and a magnificent tableau of the Nativity scene graced the prow. The Plexiglas screens shielded the mariners from sharp, biting ocean winds and tall heaters kept the area toasty.

Departure was always an exciting part of the voyage and they gathered on the top deck as the Captain engaged the engines and guided the bow of the yacht away from the dock. The steady rumble of the engines, the churning of the

waters and the almost hypnotic throbbing told of daring voyages to come. The turn for the open sea, wide and easy on this calm day, brought no squeals of excitement, but rather the seasoned ahs of approval as the huge yacht headed for deep water.

The sun, still vibrant and pulsing, didn't want to set. It held on, clinging to the edge of the earth and then disappeared. Like an explosion of color, shards of purple, red and gold shot into the sky, shimmering above the silvery ocean.

Slowly, with considered deliberation, the colors melted, blending into mauves and rose. The sun pulled its trailing robes behind it and bowed to the inevitable. Dark descended.

Becky guided Lisa across the salon and down the hall to their stateroom. They would stay on the main deck so Lisa could avoid the rather narrow stairs that led from one deck to another. The other girls would bunk together below in the huge family room.

Lisa had Sadie lie down in a corner and began to familiarize herself with the dimensions of the room. So many steps to the bed; so many from bed to bath. Here's the sink and the commode. Just like always, she made a mental map of her surroundings.

"Shelby said you and Billy are going to tell us the story of the cruise with the pirates. She's already heard it, but she says it's worth hearing again."

Becky chuckled as she hung her clothes in the closet.

"Truth is, neither of us had anything much to do with it. But it's still fun to tell."

"I thought you were there, too?"

"Oh, I was, barely. I sat on the bench for the most part and Billy was tied up on the deck with the other boys. Still, we've heard the girls tell it so many times, it feels like we really did something. You'll like it. Okay, all unpacked?"

"Yeah, I'm ready to go, whatever that means."

“You have a heavy coat, right? It’s freezing out there; at least it feels like it. When you’ve had enough and want to come inside, just let me know, okay? I won’t be far from you.”

They walked back across the salon and onto the main deck. The girls gathered in the stern, sipping cups of hot chocolate and commenting on the decorations as they made their way up the coast. Every color scheme imaginable decorated the houses on the shorelines, one outdoing the next with their number of lights and extravagant displays. Christmas was in the air.

The Mormon Temple in La Jolla, one of California’s most recognizable sites, rose from the inky darkness, lighting the sky with an eerie luminosity, spires reaching into the heavens. Clouds skittered across the face of the moon as the stars flickered above.

“Tell us about the pirates, Mr. Martin. It was a dark night like this, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, just about this time five years ago, and on a night much like this one. We were on a cruise to Hawaii for our Christmas break....”

* * *

Between the shelter of the high Plexiglas windows and the tall electric heaters, the stern of the yacht was warm and comfortable.

Every boat in the parade, no matter the size, would be decked out with colored holiday lights and the *Sea Nymph* was no exception. The outline of all three decks flashed in a merry rhythm. On the forward deck, a series of colored lights depicted the Nativity.

Dinner was an eclectic combination of soups, sandwiches and everything to go with, including individual little desserts.

“Something smells wonderful, Ms. Becky. What’s for dinner?”

“Oh, boy, lots of good stuff. I knew it would be chilly even with the Plexiglas up, so I told Chef to concentrate on tummy-warmers. We have the usual seafood chowder, best in the world, I think. Chicken tortilla soup, to die for, and his signature chili, plus sandwiches, all kinds, hot or cold. We’ll talk about desserts later.”

“You know what I like. I’ll leave it up to you, although I would love to hear about the choices. Something easy to deal with, I think. By any chance did he make egg salad? I know that sounds crazy, but for a couple of days I’ve had a taste for it. Of course, it won’t compare to yours. Egg salad is just one of the things I miss about living with you. Your grilled ham and cheese is super, too. You’re a great cook.” She slid an arm around Becky’s waist.

“Liverwurst and onions?”

They chuckled at the memory of their first faux lunch together as they checked out the buffet.

“Chef must have read your mind, girl. Right here we have a variety of sandwiches and egg salad is one of them ... on white, right?”

“Yes, please. What else is there?”

“Ham and cheese, roast beef and what looks like tuna. Oh, that’s for me.” Becky filled their plates. “Do you want some tomato? Nice fresh lettuce, too, and all your favorite condiments. Pickles, mmm, and a variety of olives.”

“Perfect. I’ll have that egg salad sandwich and a cup of seafood chowder, please.” She chuckled and turned toward Becky. “Does that sound good to anyone else but me?”

“I’m having one of everything, so I’ll try that combo with you.” Knowing Lisa’s preferences, she placed a handful of chips on the plate, along with a pickle and several celery sticks.

Becky took the chair at the foot of the table, Lisa sitting next to her on the end of the bench, Sadie at her feet.

Lisa spread her hands and reached for the plate, finally closing dainty fingertips around what turned out to be one of several narrow, crustless finger sandwiches.

“Oh, what a funny-feeling sandwich.” She popped half in her mouth and made yummy sounds. “Oh! It’s a *tea* sandwich, isn’t it?” She continued to chew, smiles wreathing her face. “Oh, my, that’s to die for, although I really love the crusts. Who knew egg salad could taste that good?”

Slowly her hand proceeded up the table until her fingers felt the soup cup. She grasped the finger-hold deftly, swirled some chowder onto the spoon and brought it to her mouth. A smile flooded her face as she swallowed.

“Oh, that’s super. We have to give Chef something special for Christmas. This is to die for.”

After several moments of tasting, Lisa reached for her glass, pulled it to her lips and took several swallows. She grinned. “Ms. Becky, I may have to change my mind. That sandwich is, well, outstanding is an understatement.”

Becky could only nod in agreement and murmur as she finished her sandwich. *Like eating a fluffy cloud.* Tomorrow she would harass Chef until he finally gave up the recipe.

They gathered by the rail, their chairs facing the shoreline. Cameras clicked as one beautiful display after another became immortalized forever. No longer alone on the voyage, smaller boats zipped by them, alive with holiday lights, honking their horns and waving at the huge yacht. The girls waved back, singing along with the other carolers.

The Harbor Patrol took a dim view of speeders in Newport Harbor at any time of year. When the boat parade was in progress and the tourists partied, they became positively manic.

Five miles per hour in the procession and if you weren't in the procession, you'd better be able to prove you were heading for your slip. Between the mass consumption of adult beverages and the lack of skill on behalf of many a boat's captain, laws were stringently enforced. No roaming around alone and no zigzagging in and out of the parade.

At ninety-five feet, the *Sea Nymph* couldn't just slip into line. A Harbor Patrol skiff escorted them, waving a big holiday greeting to the kids.

They joined the cavalcade, weaving in and out of Lido and Linda Isles and back around to Newport. Over and over they followed the route while people gathered on the walkways, beaches and shorelines, waving sparklers and colorful banners.

The boats' decorations rivaled the homes and local TV stations covered the event for live news across the country. One cable channel had its own entry in the parade.

A bit before nine, Lisa turned to Becky and yawned.

"I think I'd like to go to bed now. I'm freezing and I bet Sadie is, too. I'd love to take a nice big mug of hot chocolate back to the room. Could you please get me one?"

Becky filled the large mug, spooned in a generous helping of whipped cream and led the way to the bedroom. She placed the mug on the edge of the night table and guided Lisa's hand until she gripped the handle.

"You sure you don't mind being here alone? I figured I'd get tired of it, but honestly, it's so beautiful I wish...."

"No problem at all. I have a great book to read. See you later." She wrapped a soft fluffy blanket around her shoulders, pulled the book from her knapsack and waved at Becky. "I'm fine. Really."

The girls stood atop the observation deck to get the best view, arms clutched across their down-jacketed chests, shivering as the icy sea air blew through their hair. Marcy

pulled Shelby aside and said, "I want to tell you something. Is there somewhere private we can go?"

"Anywhere inside. Man, I'm freezing to death."

The girls went back down the steps, but instead of returning to the stern, they continued to the nearest restroom.

"Whenever I get really cold like that, I spend half my time in the john. It's why I can't ski." Shelby closed the stall door behind her. "So, what's up?"

Marcy gave a big, theatrical sigh.

"I've thought a lot about what you said about Angel and Lisa and I agree. I talked with Amy and Ginger, and after hearing what you said and kinda tossing it back and forth, they agree, too. It wouldn't matter to Angel at all. She'd never have a clue what happened.

"Amy's still a bit miffed, but she'll get over it. It was just the idea.... Anyway, no one is going to talk about it again, especially since it's not going to happen. No point in being mad with each other, especially during the holidays."

Shelby walked to the sink and washed her hands.

"I'm glad to hear that. I hate all the drama. I'm gonna get another cup of chocolate and hit the sack. Tomorrow we shop 'til we drop. Right, BFF?"

"Oh, I'm *so* ready."

Chapter 21

The girls walked down the gangplank and headed to the parking lot. Bob stood by the trunk of the waiting limo, packing away their luggage; colorful shopping bags already lined one side of the huge compartment. Still riding high after their monster shopping trip, they skipped across the verandah and down the stairs, laden with additional bags and packages.

Amy nudged Ginger and grinned. “That mall beat everything else I’ve ever seen. Anywhere.”

“I just love *Nordstrom’s*, don’t you? They have so much neat stuff to choose from and so many different departments. Whenever I can get to a *Nordy’s* it’s a good day.” Ginger handed her bags to Bob with thanks and climbed into the car.

Amy collapsed next to her and yawned.

“As far as department stores, I agree, but it was the boutiques I loved. They have a *Sophisticated Lady* like the one at North County only way bigger. It’s the best place for prom gowns and stuff. And that craft shop? I bet I spent an hour in there. I never thought of myself as being particularly crafty....”

She chuckled and moved over as Marcy and Shelby climbed aboard.

“Who’s crafty?”

“Amy. She’s looking for a hobby.”

“Who has time for anything new?” Marcy shrugged.
“Not me.”

Bob peered inside the car before helping Lisa to her seat. Billy and Becky took the jump seats and the limo got underway.

They pulled to a stop in front of the house and the kids piled out laughing as they grabbed bags and ran for the steps.

Lisa and Sadie pulled up the rear with Billy and Becky.

“That was the most fun ever, Ms. Becky. Thank you, Mr. Martin, for planning such a wonderful time. I had a ball.”

Billy grinned at her and then patted her shoulder.
“I’m glad, Lisa. Did you get everything on your list?”

“Every single thing and then some. What a great mall. Smelled fantastic with all the sugar and butter and spices. It must be huge. I stayed on one floor and still got a real workout.” She stroked Sadie’s head in comfort. “I bet she’s tired, too.”

Becky patted her arm, chuckling.

“You spent a lot of time at the jewelry counter in *Illusions*. Lots of little boxes, I noticed.”

“Yes, I did. I’m going to need your help giving them out.”

“My pleasure. Christmas is my favorite time of year. I love to give people things. It’s the best part of all.”

“I think so, too. My parents are picking me up later this afternoon, so I want to hand them out when we get home, but everyone has to put them under the tree and wait until Christmas.”

“We’ll do our best, Lisa.”

The girls gathered around the tree and checked out the individual piles of gifts. Earlier in the month, they'd pulled names out of a hat, and those gifts as well as others, lay under the tree, concealed in shiny paper and colorful bows.

Becky helped Lisa, attaching the colorful name tags on each box, smiling. "How did you decide on these gifts?"

"*Illusions* designed a great web site and they give detailed descriptions of everything they carry. They cater to the blind and it really makes things easier when you're trying to buy stuff you can't see. Do you think the girls will like them?"

"I think everyone likes charms and when they're personalized like this, you better believe it. They're so beautifully done. How clever to have them monogrammed."

She pulled one from its cotton-filled box. The beautiful heart bore the words *Marcy and Cocoa* in elegant script.

"These will be treasured, let me tell ya. Now, where is a nice big bag, oh, here we go. I'll pack your presents and get them ready to go. Your parents should be here any minute." She glanced out the window in time to see a black Lincoln Towne car pull to a stop in the driveway.

"Oh boy, your folks are here."

A beautiful smile spread across Lisa's face as she rose and walked toward the door. She and Sadie crossed the hall and entered the living room just as Mr. and Mrs. Freeman rang the bell.

Cries of Merry Christmas filled the air as Lisa hugged her father and even Sadie joined in the merriment with a low-pitched woo-woo woof. Mrs. Freeman placed a gorgeous plate of decorated Christmas cookies and a platter of brownies on the table and engulfed her daughter. Sadie sang again.

Mr. Freeman handed Billy an impressive bottle of champagne and an envelope.

“Merry Christmas to you and Becky. These small tokens cannot begin to express our gratitude for what you’ve done for Lisa. We’ll be eternally grateful.”

“The pleasure is all ours, Mr. Freeman.” Billy eyed the bottle and nodded.

“Perfect for a night like tonight.” He turned toward Mrs. Freeman. “Would you care for a glass of champagne?”

“Oh, thank you, no. Every other car on the road has a cop in it. Not the night to get caught. Besides, we have a long drive back home and two places to stop off at before we get there. Thank you anyway and when you open it, raise one for us.”

One by one, cars arrived, more holiday greetings and gifts were exchanged, and then the kids departed. Soon the house was empty.

Billy took Becky’s arm and led her out to the front porch. The stars glittered and light, fleecy clouds skipped across the face of the moon. She leaned against him, nestled into the crook of his arms. He sniffed her hair and laughed.

“You always smell so good. I can’t define it; not flowers. I don’t know, very nice.”

“Pantene.” She turned in his arms, gazing into his eyes, light blue, like a winter sky. Thick lashes fringed his cheeks as he returned her gaze.

“I love you,” they said in unison. More chuckles as he drew her closer into his arms.

“I’d like to take you out to dinner tonight. We haven’t been out in ages and I feel like dressing up. Or better still, I’ll take you up to L.A. and let you get your fill of movie stars. Mom’s having a huge bash. Sound good?”

“Oh, yes, let’s go to your mother’s party. Oh, my gosh, Billy, how cool.” She shivered. “Who will be there?”

“Everybody who’s anybody. She’s very popular, has tons of friends outside of TV, so you never know who might show up. How long will you need?”

“Can you give me two hours?”

“See you at seven.”

Becky opened her closet and confirmed what she already knew. She only owned two formal party dresses, but both made her look fabulous. Her favorite, an apricot velvet sheath, slit up to here, with long sleeves and a low, heart-shaped neckline spoke to her. She rarely listened because it was a *showoff* dress and she really didn't like the attention, but tonight she wanted to show off. Big time.

She pulled the apricot confection out of the closet, put it on the bed and walked into her bathroom. A low rolling chuckle escaped her lips as she stripped off her clothes and stepped into the shower.

Billy's mother, her longtime idol and now a dear friend, bought the dress for her on impulse. She said the moment she saw it, Becky immediately came to mind. So far, she'd worn it once. Tracy would be delighted that it was her choice for the party.

And with any kind of luck, my engagement as well.

Billy wanted to marry her, she just knew it. They'd played around the question for months, and tonight she had the strongest feeling he would propose.

What if he doesn't? What will I do? I'll die!

No you won't because he's going to, tonight.

Becky scrubbed her hair and started to hum to distract herself.

She peered into the mirror for the last time, once again seeing the faint resemblance to a young Nicole Kidman that people often commented on. Large aqua eyes wore a mascara-darkened fringe of long, thick lashes. A tinge of gold shadow kissed her eyelids and the trace of blush graced the apples of her high cheeks. Just then, the doorbell rang.

There he stood in his tux looking way too cute. Dark blond curls brushed the top of his collar. Becky blushed and invited him in.

“My goodness, you look like a movie star, and I should know. What a dress. Turn around, let me see the back again.”

“Your mom bought it for me.” Cheeks pink, she twirled slowly, shoulder-length ruby-red hair rippled out behind her, gold slippers peeping from under her hem.

“Oh, Becky.” He took her in his arms and kissed her. “You’re the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen.”

She started to giggle. “I don’t know why, but I feel about sixteen.”

“Wait until you see the night I have in store for you. You’ll be glad you’re not sixteen.” Chuckling, Billy helped her with her coat and opened the door.

“You brought the limo?”

He nodded as Bob opened the door for them.

“I thought it would be more fun if I didn’t have to drive. Besides, I have a lot to say.”

They settled on the rear seat and Billy pulled a bottle of champagne and two chilled flutes out of the little fridge. He popped the cork and half-filled their glasses.

“I have lots of toasts. First, to you.”

“And you right back,” she replied, touched the rim of her glass to his and took a sip.

He put his glass on the little table and placed his hand on her cheek, gently stroking the strands of her hair. They stared into each other’s eyes forever. Finally he sighed.

She waited, breathless, eyes half-closed, poised on his next word.

He picked up his glass again and clinked his rim against hers. “To an absolutely fantastic school year. Carol, over in accounting, sent me a Christmas card and in her note she said there are over fifty prospective students who’ve applied to Mystic for the next semester. Can you believe it?”

She thinks it will double by the end of the regular term in June.” He opened the fridge again and pulled out a silver platter of hors d’oeuvres.

“Oh, Billy, that’s incredible. How big are we going to get?” She selected a snow pea-wrapped shrimp and sucked it off the toothpick.

“The future ... that’s part of what I wanted to talk with you about.”

Becky glanced at him, noticing the color suddenly rising in his cheeks. She shivered and held her breath. Finally, “I’m all ears. What?”

“I want to make you my partner in Mystic. I couldn’t begin to do this alone. You’re the heart and soul of the school, you know that. The girls love you, they depend on you. I do, too.”

She nodded, mind racing. *Partner is good. Not exactly what I-- but still good.* “I’m honored, Billy, thank you.”

He didn’t respond right away and she noticed the light film of perspiration on his forehead. She chose another shrimp, her heart pounding in her throat. They sipped their champagne, silent.

He made a sound that was part sigh, part chuckle, reached into his pocket and withdrew a small black box.

“I’m not very good at this, I don’t think. First time, you know ... last time, too.” He tittered. “Becky, I love you more than I know how to say. Will you marry me?” He popped the box open and Becky almost fainted.

“Oh, yes. Oh, my God. Billy, that’s the most ... I love you, too! Oh, my God, it’s the most gorgeous thing I’ve ever seen.” She collapsed back into the seat, hand at her throat, batting her eyes in rapid fashion in order to stem the tears that threatened her mascara.

He pulled the ring out of the case and slipped it on her third finger.

“Becky Martin. I just love the sound of that.”

Her head bobbed up and down. “Me, too.” She gazed at the ring and blinked back tears, overwhelmed.

“I love you so much. Longer than you’ve loved me, and I can’t tell you how happy I am. Oh, Billy.” She melted into his arms.

Chapter 22

The limo exited the freeway and headed north on Wilshire toward Beverly Hills. A wide variety of cars, mostly foreign, joined them on the boulevard, many sporting small holiday wreaths or bright red bows on their grills. The lamp posts bore greenery, and tiny white lights twinkled as they arched their way up into the dark night. All the businesses bore holiday decorations and Christmas carols wafted through the air.

They left the traffic behind as they continued into the hills and wound their way toward fantasyland. Huge iron gates swung open in response to Bob's activating button and the limo cruised down the tree-lined driveway, stopping at a secondary gate, this one manned.

Alfred stepped out of the little brick building and nodded at Bob. After a short confab, Bob turned into a small cull de sac and parked. He opened the back door and nodded at Billy.

"Looks like a full house. We can't drive any closer, but Alfred has your mother's golf cart for us to use. Do you need me or do you want to drive it yourself?"

"Thanks, Bob. I'll take it from here."

"I have the beeper on. Let me know when you're ready to head back." He grinned at them from ear to ear and then chortled. "You kids are so cute. Have fun."

They drove the golf cart past one unbelievable car after another and stopped at a winding stairwell leading to the house. Similar in architecture and about twice the size of the beach house, it stretched for the heavens. Tall palm trees swayed in the gentle breeze, ground lights lit the trunks, culminating in the lacy fronds dancing high above them. Live music floated on the air while the beautiful people strolled the property, seeing and being seen.

Designer gowns, original, one-of-a-kind shoes and diamonds of all colors, shapes and sizes graced the necks, ears, wrists and fingers of all the women and many of the men. Most faces looked vaguely familiar.

Billy took Becky's arm and walked into the foyer, nodding at Charles, his mother's butler.

"Good evening, Mr. Martin, Ms. Edwards. Your mother will be so pleased. She's in the living room."

"Thank you, Charles, and Merry Christmas."

Billy and Becky entered the room just in time to hear his mother finish a joke.

Tracy looked like a goddess in a column of white silk. Dark hair, highlighted with deep auburn, floated around her shoulders like a glossy mane. She glanced at the people closest to her, dark eyes following their gaze, quickly coming to rest on her son. Face alight, she spoke again.

"Ah, my Christmas is complete. Please excuse me while I get a kiss from my son."

They met halfway, grinning.

"Mom, you look wonderful. Merry Christmas." He gave her a hug then turned to Becky. "We have some great news."

He picked up Becky's left hand and proudly displayed her engagement ring.

Those anywhere within hearing eavesdropped on this most exciting moment.

“Oh, Becky, that’s the best news in the world. I’m finally going to get a daughter and it’s going to be *you*. I could not be more thrilled!”

She squealed, grabbing Becky by the shoulders and giving her a resounding kiss on both cheeks. She turned then and raised her voice, that voice so recognizable it stopped all conversation.

“I have an announcement, friends, the most wonderful Christmas present I could ever get. Please join me in welcoming the girl who will soon be my daughter, Becky Edwards.”

Becky felt herself flush as they applauded. She clung to Billy’s side, shy beyond belief, words abandoning her. What felt like hundreds of hungry, greedy eyes swept her body, noting her makeup, her hairstyle and the cut of her gown. She took a deep breath and saw her future.

Now she understood why Billy refused to live up here with his parents, why he chose Del Mar all those years ago. Anyone involved in Tracy’s world got residual attention and a little bit went a long way.

The guest list, liberally sprinkled with younger types from the show, provided great people watching, but the majority of the guests were unknown to Becky. She’d met several of Tom’s business associates over the years, usually aloof types with little to say and an aversion to eye contact. The two men at his side fascinated her, dressed as they were in black tuxes with black silk turbans.

“Those dudes look like they could be the bad guys in a thriller, Billy.”

“They’re friends of my father, so you might not be far off. Dad knows a lot of very strange people.”

“See that guy over there?” She nodded at a fresh-faced fellow about their age whose large dark eyes peered at them from under wispy brown bangs.

“He’s one of my favorites. He’s going to win an Emmy this year, mark my words. He plays the most incredible part on your mom’s show.”

Billy chuckled as the one in question approached, hand extended.

“Hey, Bradley, how’s it going? Let me introduce my fiancé, Becky Edwards.”

Becky felt her knees wobble a bit, still unsure of herself. She stuck out her hand, and in full character, Bradley replied, “It is my pleasure to meet you, beauteous red-haired one.” He bent over her hand, kissed it, then turned to Billy with a leer. Still bent at the waist, he released her hand and rubbed his together, winking. “A delectable morsel.”

He turned back to Becky, straightened and said, “So, do you work in the field? I don’t recognize you and believe me, I’d remember a striking girl like you.”

Becky blinked, still blushing. She stuttered a bit. “I work with Billy at Mystic. I’m a riding instructor.”

“You’ve missed your calling. Surely Tracy’s told you as much. You should audition. We’re actually looking for a girl to fill in the cast of younger actors. I’ll ask....”

“Never mind, dude. We’re happy where we are.” Billy slipped an arm around her waist, nodded at Bradley and began to move away. “We’ll catch you later. I have to say hello to my dad.”

Every couple of feet, congratulations and extended hands assaulted the happy couple who became increasingly less happy as they walked. Becky’s showoff dress was exactly that, and many a girl stared at her in obvious envy. The younger men flirted, the older men ogled and none of it went unnoticed.

Billy drew her close and whispered in her ear.

“How much more of this do you need?”

“Do we have more to eat in the limo?”

“Yes, actually. Why?”

“I’m starved, but we can eat there. Let’s say goodbye to your folks.” She moved closer to him as another wave of eyes swept over her. “A little of this goes a long way.”

“Now I know why I love you.”

* * *

The remainder of the holiday flew by. The girls returned to Mystic with wide smiles and hugs, happy to be back at school with their friends and resume training with their horses. The play day at Doubletree fast approached and they wanted to be at the top of their form.

Becky sat behind her desk, going over new schedules for the upcoming semester. She smiled as Billy strolled through the office door. Over steaming cups of coffee, they reviewed and approved the semester lesson plans from the teachers and talked about their future.

Becky placed her mug back on the desk and shook her head. “I have to admit I’m of two minds. I like the school small like it is. It gives the kids more of a homey feel, cuts down on homesickness issues. On the other hand, we don’t take little kids anyway, so I’m not sure that’s a consideration.” She lifted her mug again and swallowed.

“Most of our girls are pretty sophisticated and they all know the value of the educational opportunity they’re getting here. Plus, they’re good girls. Life is a lot easier when everyone wants to cooperate and go with the flow. But still, growth is exciting. I’m not sure. What’s your take?”

He shrugged. “Mom says we’re all the rage, even come up at cocktail parties, if you can believe that. At this point, the house is full and we’ll have to reserve your apartment for whoever takes on the live-in duties. You have any ideas yet? I’m hoping you’ll move into the beach house with me soon.”

Becky blushed, staring at the magnificent diamond on her finger.

“How soon do you want to get married? I don’t think it sets a good example here at school for the Headmistress and the Director to live together without benefit of clergy, as it were.” She tittered.

“On the other hand, there’s no reason to mention where I live. We’re expanding and I want to live off campus. It’s no one’s business where.”

“Then move in this weekend. How about it? I’d like to get married as soon as you want. How about Valentine’s day?”

“*What?* That’s like five weeks away.”

“Well, I know it’s quick, but it’s not like tomorrow in Las Vegas, just the two of us. I’d love that even more, but my mother would kill me.”

Aqua eyes scrunched tight, Becky laughed.

“Life as we know it would end. No, can’t do *that*, but I think we can do this, huh? I love a challenge and I know your mom will help. Okay, February 14.” She sighed deep and long.

“What?”

“Well, I have so much to do to get ready ... you sure you don’t want to try for the end of school year ... June something?”

Disappointment clear on his face, Billy shrugged.

“I guess if you think that’s better, we can wait, but I really don’t want to. I’ll leave it up to you, though.”

“I’m just thinking, in June, Blair and Melly will be home from college and they can give me some ideas. And Jessi’s already been through this, so she’s ... but now, being pregnant and all, I don’t know.” Her voice trailed off, insecure with the responsibilities looming before her.

“Very poor timing, especially with my mother far away and all. Hard to do alone.”

Billy grinned and handed her a business card.

Becky stared at it as a smile slowly spread across her face. *Byron Goldman, Wedding Specialist and Consultant to the Stars.*

She turned it over and noticed a handwritten phone number. She flipped it back.

“Do people actually talk about themselves like that?”

“He does.” Billy chuckled. “While I agree there’s a downside to being associated with my mother, there are also great perks. You won’t have to do a thing but talk with Byron. Tell him what you want and where and magic happens. We just have to show up.”

“I can’t afford this dude, Billy. I may not be that poor little kid you first met, but this guy is way out of my league.” She turned the card over again. “I can tell.”

“I knew we were going to get to this, but I didn’t think it’d come up this fast. Okay, you love my mother, right? I know she loves you.”

Almost indignant, she said, “Of course I do. She’s been like a mother to me, especially since my mom moved so far away.”

Billy shrugged and took both her hands in his.

“Admittedly, the bride is in charge of the wedding, but if we don’t make it the social event of the season, she’ll be crushed. Really. Money, what stuff costs, it just can’t be a consideration this time. If you want to run around barefoot after we’re married and shop at K-Mart, that’s fine with me. But in this one thing, can we ignore tradition?”

Becky knew she didn’t have a leg to stand on. What was she trying to prove, anyway?

“I sure don’t want to disappoint her. Besides, I know whatever she comes up with will be wonderful. You know me, grade horse with humble origins. I don’t have the background or experience for this, so I’ll need the help for sure.” She made a face. “I wish my mom hadn’t moved clear to Maine to open a Bed and Breakfast. Why couldn’t she and Walt ... oh, God, I can’t change it so why talk about it.

They'll be here for the wedding, of course, but she can't contribute anything but a check and best wishes."

"Oh, I'm so glad we're in agreement there. So, where shall we have it? I don't have any church affiliations, do you?"

"No, shame to say. How many do you figure for the reception? Got a figure?"

He shrugged. "I'm thinking five hundred, easily. We know a lot of people on our own; then comes my mom and dad."

"Good grief. Any thoughts on where?"

"How about the beach house?"

"Wow, I can't imagine saying this, but I think it's too small. And February can mean rain. Maybe the club?"

"I already checked. They're booked every Saturday and Sunday for the next six months. What about my mother's house? They're far less likely to get rain and it's plenty big enough. Mom would absolutely love that. So, all the old gang in the wedding party?"

"Well, not the *whole* gang, but yes. Won't that be great? Just like Jessi's wedding." Becky glanced at her watch and nodded. "I've got a lesson in fifteen minutes. Can we have lunch together and talk more about the wedding then? Now we need to talk school." She picked up several shiny brochures and slid them to Billy.

"I think the mobile home is working out great. If we expand, we'll have to get another for lodging. The only downside to that is it removes those girls from the camaraderie, the togetherness of living with the other students."

"Then let's make it a big deal. Reserved only for graduating seniors, like it's something special."

"There ya go, great idea. Plus, they'll still spend meal time and stuff at the big house."

"We have to hire at least two more teachers, probably three. Maintaining the low teacher/student ratio is

one of our best selling points. Of course, the size of the expansion depends on the number of new students. No one's given notice that they're leaving, so, what do you think?"

"I figured twenty resident students tops. We can adjust the day students according to their school year and how many we have in each grade. That would bring Mystic's enrollment to fifty." She paused a moment, glancing at Billy, eyes wide.

"Whew, that's going to be huge. Are things gonna get tight? Will the day kids be riders, too?"

"That was one of my main concerns, so when the ten acres behind us came up for sale the other day, I bought it. I got a good price and it's a beautiful addition to the school. So there's our extra space for another barn and more rings. The top of the new piece leads to the San Juan trails and ends up in the park, so it's a double good deal for everyone. Now we need another trainer."

"This is really amazing, I swear; must be a sign or something. I have your riding instructor ready to go. A gal named Jennifer Harrison drove up the other day, gave me her resume. She heard about us down at Mary's and thought she'd take a chance. We talked a bit and it turns out she knows Karen, said to use her for a reference. Karen had nothing but great comments about her and that's good enough for me. At least that hunt is over. I'll give her a call in a minute. We really lucked out. Not all that easy to get a talented riding instructor. How about new teachers?"

"Talk about a good omens." He continued to make notes. "I have six interviews today and three tomorrow. Should be able to firm up the new staff in no time."

Becky glanced at her watch, eyes drawn to the magnificent ring. She sighed then and grinned at Billy.

"I have a lesson with Lisa. She swears she has the entire test memorized. I can stand at the sidelines and call the letters out, but other than that, she says she can do it alone. This is gonna be something else."

He nodded at the shelf and the video cam. "I'd love to see it, but I'll be in meetings. Can you film it for me?"

"My pleasure. Honestly, I want to study it myself." She snagged the camera from the shelf, blew him a kiss and walked out the door.

Chapter 23

The gray and overcast sky held a subtle threat of rain; thunder rumbled in the distance. Jose held Angel at the mounting block as Lisa prepared to climb aboard. The patient mare stood like a rock while Lisa settled in the saddle, picked up the reins and slipped both feet in the stirrups.

Becky called hello and gave Jose a smile of appreciation. She led Angel to the new dressage ring while the girl babbled with excitement.

“I’ve done this so many times in my mind I just know I’ll do great.”

“Are we going to walk it together once or do you want me to just call out the letters?”

“I think we can do it alone. If you’ll just call out when the letter approaches, that’s all I need. You won’t have to tell me what to do.”

They entered the ring and Becky patted her knee.

“I’ll walk with you to the middle of the arena and stand there. You’ll be able to hear me easily and I can help out if needed. Okay, here we go.”

Becky began to walk straight down the center of the ring. When she reached point A, she called, “You can begin.”

Lisa picked up a strong trot and rode into the arena.

“X.”

Lisa halted and saluted. She proceeded at a medium walk to C, tracked right to M where she began a working trot. She attempted to make a large circle, but her sense of placement left her and she halted, scared.

“I can’t do it, Ms. Becky. Where am I? I can’t do it.”

“You’re cool, Lisa, no problem. The first step is always the hardest. Now this is the second step. Come on, let’s go out and start over.”

They worked for more than an hour and things improved to the point where Becky suggested that the problematic circles which they’d decided to tackle later, should be left off altogether rather than worked in. This wasn’t a real test, but an exhibition and the ride could be modified to suit Lisa.

“Once I get good at this, I’ll be able to do the circles, too. Whew, it’s a lot harder than you’d think. Okay, let me go one more time.”

Lisa and Angel performed well together. The mare, now heavy with foal, took extra precautions for herself and her precious rider, rounding off the corners and slowing her pace gently.

“I think you two are amazing. We’ll do this again tomorrow, huh? Practice every day. Only one week to the play day.”

“I’m really excited, Ms. Becky. I know we’ll put on a good performance. How did we look?”

“Just great, sweetie, just great.”

“No. I really mean it, how did we look? I felt a couple of times that we had a really nice bend. I felt it. A couple of good trots, too, huh?”

“Oh yes, especially towards the end there. Angel relaxed a good bit and gave you several fine moves. She’s a little stiff, plus she worries about you, y’know.”

“Did she have fun?”

Becky laughed. “What do you think? She’s grinning from ear to ear.”

Lisa and Angel met Becky in the dressage ring every morning at nine. The test worked out well. It didn't take Angel long to learn the pattern and she did her best to walk and trot in a straight line, although without a guiding leg, she did get a bit ragged up the long sides. Even so, both girls were thrilled with such an unheard-of exhibition.

* * *

The play days at Doubletree started when Mystic first opened and gave the kids a challenge, good judging and good competition without having to leave the barn overnight.

Doubletree kids loved to go to Mystic as well, and three other barns also joined their mini-circuit. They held impromptu little gatherings, invited well-known local trainers to give clinics and had a great time.

Angel walked off the trailer first and gave a shrill whinny of greeting to her former home and friends. She drew in deep gulps of air and chuckled several times. A beautiful blazed face popped over a stall door, neck arched, ears pricked. The huge gelding screamed hello to his old friend, pushing against the door with his chest.

Angel chuckled at Benny, snaked her head around and pranced a couple of steps just to show him she was still the top dog.

The groom stroked her neck as he walked her in a circle, waiting for the other horses to get off the trailer. Angel led the way down the barn aisle to the pipe corrals located under huge shade trees. She continued to make that chuckling sound in her throat as familiar faces leaned over their stall doors toward her, nostrils flaring as they remembered and returned the greeting of their longtime teammate.

Becky parked behind Angel's pen and hopped out of the truck. Play days provided the girls with a new if familiar

venue, different fences and today, especially, a treat of monumental proportions.

George Morris, Karen's former trainer and mentor, was in Del Mar on a horse-buying search and agreed to judge the equitation classes. Every rider in the club entered, even the jumpers. The honor itself made them crazy, but to know they'd get honest feedback from the most respected, well-known and popular hunter/jumper instructor and rider in the country gave them fits.

Becky wrung her hands. "He's a stickler for appointments, girls. For the rider, for the horse, and please, *please*, clean your tack to within an inch of its life and then clean it again."

She nodded at the girls as they unpacked, watching for a sweat-encrusted brow band or telltale gray stains on a girth.

"Polish your bits until you can see your reflection in them, and for God's sake, brush off the inside of your horse's splint boots or we'll hear all about what friction and abrasion can do to a tendon. For hours."

She remembered her very first clinic with him with mixed emotions. Internationally renown as a rider of the highest order, he'd won several Olympic medals and served numerous Olympic Teams as their chef d'Equipe. Those who trained with him usually went on to riding stardom in their own right.

Scared witless, she could only stutter, especially when he'd compliment her, which he did every so often.

The grin on her face reminded her of the condition called *risus Sardonicus*, an involuntary smiling grimace. Her cheeks hurt so bad she wanted to cry. Worst of all, she knew full well how much he disliked grinning riders. It was one of his *things* and yet she couldn't stop.

The second clinic went better and now, years later, she could actually hold an intelligent conversation with him. *It's hard to chat with your idol.*

He stepped onto the field, impeccably dressed in polished tall boots, buff breeches and tweed hacking jacket, including a helmet. Still as lean and fit as he was forty years ago, he looked more like a contestant than a judge.

That voice, so familiar it gave everyone present the shivers, echoed in their memories as well. Almost everyone there showed under him at some point in their life.

Presentation is all about respect. Respect for yourself, your trainer, your barn, the judge and most of all, your horse. How you look says something to the judge, it's his first impression. Make him look forward to something fantastic from your performance and then give it to him.

Lisa stood next to Becky as Angel stopped at the mounting block. She climbed aboard, deftly collected her reins, and slid her feet into the stirrups. She turned to Becky, the most sublimely confident expression on her face, and smiled. "How do we look, Ms. Becky? Are we perfect?"

"Absolutely. Shall we go over to the dressage ring and see what's going on? I'm pretty sure the ring will be empty and I'd like you to get the feel before your performance."

"Sounds good to me. This is the last time I'm going to ride Angel until she foals. She feels huge to me and I don't want to hurt her or the baby." She dipped her chin to her chest and sighed. "You know that, don't you, Ms. Becky?"

"Yes, I do. I've forgotten we ever had that conversation. You should, too."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now, it's showtime, honey, let's concentrate on what we're doing. Okay, there are stadium seats on all sides, just like what we have at home, and it's the same size, of course. The judge's box is at the bottom of the ring on a straight line from the entry gate. Just think

about being in the Mystic ring and remember how you do it there and you'll be just fine."

"Oh, I know. I'm not at all afraid."

The equitation classes ended shortly before Lisa's exhibition time and the entire Mystic team and most of the other competitors gathered by the rail to watch. They knew Lisa was blind, but other than that, they had no idea what they were about to see.

A solitary figure climbed the steps and sat in the judging box, his eyes focused on the ring.

The announcer's microphone crackled to life.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we will enjoy several individual demonstrations today. May I present our first entry, neither of whom are strangers to Doubletree. Lisa Freeman goes to school at Mystic and never ceases to amaze us with her abilities. And yes, you recognize her trusty steed, erstwhile jumper champion, now dressage horse in the making and soon to be a mama, Windsom Angel. For obvious reasons, we ask that you restrain yourselves and do not clap or cheer until Lisa leaves the arena." He nodded at Becky. "You may enter."

"Just like always, sweetie, make me proud."

Becky hurried to the center of the ring, stopped at X and called. "Ready."

You could hear the grass grow as, from a dead standstill, Angel moved into a trot. Neck arched, ears pricked, she flicked her toes as they moved toward Becky. The sun turned her coat to burnished gold. White legs glistening, she strode along, tail aloft.

Lisa rode lightly, keeping contact with the bit, legs quiet against the mare's ample sides. Confident, secure in each other's care, girl and horse proceeded down the ring.

"X," Becky said, voice low.

Angel and Lisa came to a full stop, saluted the judge, and proceeded up the arena at a strong walk. At the exact

spot, they transitioned to a soft sitting trot around the short corner and now they performed a working trot across the diagonal long side. Slowing at the precise spot, they moved into a free walk.

The performance continued while the audience reached the point of no return. Tears poured freely as they held their breath.

Doubletree kids hugged each other, jumping up and down, hands over mouths, amazed beyond belief at what they saw.

The Mystic kids smirked, eyes glistening. They knew her performance by heart; light grins appeared in anticipation of her finish; lower lips trembled.

Lisa reached the top of the ring, turned down the diagonal and cantered. Three strides from the appointed letter, they came back to a long, free walk. Pace energetic, they returned to X and stopped. Again they saluted the judge and proceeded out of the ring.

The man in the judge's box rose and removed his sunglasses; he wiped his eyes and nodded at the girl who saluted him. "Brava," he said, famous voice pitched low, but audible to everyone present. "Brava."

People poised, hushed, waiting.

Lisa dismounted and gave Becky a hug.

The announcer's voice was ragged. "You may congratulate...." Pandemonium broke out and everyone but Lisa cried.

The grin never left her face as she hugged Angel, who was more than used to the cheers of the crowd. It was their due and she knew it.

Chapter 24

Byron Goldman strolled across the floor, one arm through Tracy's, the other hand outstretched, knuckles up, as if he expected someone to kiss his ring. Face as straight as a poker, Tracy said, "Byron, please meet our bride, my new daughter-to-be, Becky Edwards.

Following her lead, Becky nodded gravely and shook his hand.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Byron." She had the urge to curtsy and bit her lips hard. Color flooded her cheeks and she glanced at Tracy.

Merry black eyes danced in delight although her expression never changed. She patted Byron's arm several times and disengaged. "And, of course, you remember...."

"Ah yes. Billy, who isn't little any more. Congratulations you rascal. Been a while." The extended hand now offered a firm shake and the simper slid off his lips like dew in the sunlight.

"Good to see you, too, Byron. How's it going?"

"Ah, the girls always keep me busy, but I'm still one step ahead of them. Seems to be the time for marriages, though. Romantic Valentine's day."

He twirled toward Tracy and Becky, sandy colored eyebrows up, a smile on his sculpted lips. "And so?"

Tracy handed him a tablet of paper and a grin. "I've been busy, By, and most of your work is done already."

He harrumphed and stared at the list.

“Okay, guest list, location, ah, right here. I just love this place, Tracy. If you ever move I want to buy it. I’ll make it into the most famous wedding spot in the United States, if not the world.” Byron glanced around the house, nodding, making notes on Tracy’s notes and muttering.

“Formal, of course. Which designer gets the deal?” He appraised Becky with the precision of an artist. He turned to Tracy. “Definitely Vera Wang. Yes?”

Billy cleared his throat and glanced at Becky. Her face wore the same blank expression Jessi’s used to just before she went off course. He took her hand and squeezed.

“Becky? What do you think? Have you a particular designer in mind? What do you think about a Vera Wang?”

Aqua eyes wide and guileless, she gazed up at him.

“I take it the Sophisticated Lady is out?”

A profound silence hit the room.

“Well,” she said with a shrug. “It’s the nicest place I know of. That’s where Karen got her gown and it was beautiful. Jessi, too, and Blair.”

Three pairs of eyes fastened on Becky.

“The Sophisticated Lady?” they said in unison. “At the mall?”

“As in off the rack?” said an amazed Byron. “Really, dear, I ... it just wouldn’t be suitable. I, no, I think not.” A clear look of amazed disapproval tightened his lips to a pinched line. Eyes squeezed to slits, he glared at Tracy.

Tracy drew a deep breath and glanced at Billy.

“Well, of course, if that’s what she wants....” She glanced from Becky to Bryon and then halted. She turned back to Becky a moment, noticing a gleam in the eye, a quirked lip, and began to giggle. That was all it took.

Becky threw out her arms and guffawed, hugging Tracy.

“I don’t believe it! Had ya going there for a minute. I’m going to marry the most wonderful man in the world in a Vera Wang original. Can you believe it!”

Not totally amused and trying to recover his aplomb, Byron asked, “Have you developed a theme, Ms. Edwards? Colors?”

Chastened, Becky said, “Oh, yes, quite definitely. I’d like an Empire design for all the dresses, strapless with high waists, something that does not even resemble a bride’s maid’s dress. Cherry red, elegant and sophisticated. Most of the girls are quite slim and can wear anything, but my best friend and matron of honor is about to have a baby and I want something flattering for her.”

Byron drew a small voice recorder out of his pocket and nodded at Becky.

“That can be a concern, yet, how thoughtful of you to consider her needs. And yes, I see a Grecian theme for this ceremony, especially considering the house. A pearl and crystal beaded bodice for you perhaps, strapless as well? Ah, best to leave the design to the expert. Late afternoon nuptials, I presume? Best bet for an event like this one. Lots of candles and flowers.”

He gazed around the house, nodding, talking to himself.

“A formal sit-down dinner with cocktails, wine, appetizers. Large, elegant cake with second sheets in the back.” He spoke aloud waiting for a nod from Becky at each suggestion.

By the time the meeting ended, Becky wasn’t sure what she’d ordered but there was no doubt she’d love it. Byron promised.

Chapter 25

The wedding of the year grew like a snowball rolling downhill. Two nights before the big day, the girls sat around Becky's apartment, sipping wine eating pizza and talking ninety-miles-an-hour.

Last night's rehearsal dinner began the countdown to the big day. With Byron at the helm, everything went off without a hitch, providing numerous photo ops and a preview of coming attractions.

The members of the wedding party had all their moves down pat, congratulating each other on the smooth presentation of their headline performers, particularly Becky, who became more nervous by the minute.

Everything about Tracy's house put one in mind of a movie set. Whether it was the stained glass windows in the west-facing living room, the massive columns that rose from the ground floor to the third like giant, alabaster sequoias, or the expansive verandah that appeared to reach out into space, all paled under the charm of the curving staircases.

Hidden behind the columns on the opposite ends of the third floor, they seemed to curve from nowhere, joining midway on the second floor, down to the ground floor foyer. They were striking, reminiscent of more than one famous movie scene, wildly evocative of another generation and the focal point of the wedding, at least the beginning.

They added more than one sequence to Becky's mounting series of nightmares as she imagined tumbling down the stairs to land in a heap on the marble floor.

"Honest to God, I don't know what I'd do without Byron. I wake up in the middle of the night, dreaming that I forgot the flowers or lost Billy's ring. Once I even dreamt that I gained fifteen pounds and couldn't get into my dress. Oh, my God, you talk about nerve-wracking. Blair, I don't know how you do it alone."

Misty green eyes roved from one friend to another. She shrugged.

"Two great mothers and the grace of God."

Melanie nodded, a smile on her lips. "There's no arguin' there." She looped an arm over Jessi's shoulders.

"An' with this little one pavin' the way, by the time it's my turn, we'll all be old hands."

Jessi perched on the sofa, legs straight out in front of her on the ottoman, trying to find a way to get comfortable. She groaned slightly and elbowed Melanie. "Do you think I'm going to make it?"

"I'm sayin', Jessi. I'm not sure. Y'all're as big as a house, just like Angel. Ya make a pair, I'm sayin'. Due around the same time, too." Melanie rested her hand on Jessi's belly, a look of deep love on her face. "I can't wait to get my arms around this little treasure."

Blair frowned at Melanie, lips pursed.

"Becky, is there anything else we need to know before these two hijack the conversation *again*. Honest to Pete, we can't talk about anything else! I wanted to ask about tomorrow night. We're all staying at Tracy's, right? And everybody comes to us? Who's going to do our makeup? I heard it was the show's artist. Can that be true?"

"Sure is. I have the best mother-in-law a girl could find. She thinks of everything. The hairstylist is from the show, too. She's the mother of one of our students, Amy. I

mean, we are gonna be as good as it gets. Billy says there will be photos of us in the tabloids. Imagine that.”

“Wearing Vera Wang gowns. I still can’t believe it.” Blair sighed, leaping forward four months to her own considerably more modest wedding, at least by such opulent standards. “Have you seen the gowns?”

“Oh, they’re here. Tracy was on them like a cheap suit. She has this cedar closet, honest, it’s as big as the average house, and she’s got everything in there under lock and key--shoes, veil, the whole nine yards. She won’t show me her gown, either, but I know it came along with the others. She’s in there a lot and every time she comes out she’s all dreamy and stuff. I figure they’re outstanding.”

“I have to give ya credit, Becky. Tracy’s got this event well in hand. Thank God she has such impeccable taste. I don’t know how much I’ll like Mama takin’ over my weddin’.” Melanie chortled. “Of course, it’s inevitable. I’ll have nothin’ to say either, I’m sure. In the end, it’s probably easier to just let them have their way.”

Blair rolled her eyes in agreement. “Mom is in a tizzy half the time. The other half, she walks around like a zombie talking to herself and making notes and talking to Julia on the phone. Poor thing. I bet she wishes she had a Byron Goldman in her pocket. Thank God she and Julia are so fond of each other. Two marriages between the same families in two years could strain any friendship.”

Blair raised her glass in a toast. “To Becky, a success story from start to finish and a great friend.”

“Hear, hear!”

Melanie raised her glass next, an impish smile on her face. “From the day I met ya, I knew ya were a winner. Not to mention a wonderful friend. Ya rock, Becky.”

More hear hear’s and more toasts. Finally Jessi raised her glass of water with a grin.

“Best buddy, confidante and cohort. You’re the best friend I’ve ever had.” Misty dark eyes roved from friend to sister to sister-in-law. “And that’s saying plenty.”

* * *

It was the warmest, sunniest, most thoroughly delightful Valentine’s Day in known history. Everybody said so. Flowers lined the walkways in such thick and colorful profusion one could imagined them shouldering each other aside for the best vantage point.

The house perched atop the cliffs, glittering in the lights and the soft sea breeze. Liveried valets parked the cars as guests arrived from everywhere. Hollywood stars gathered to celebrate the nuptials of the son of one of their most beloved members. The anticipated guest list had swelled, but nothing past what the huge house could accommodate.

The breeze blew in from the ocean with gentle salty puffs. The ornate white hurricane lamps that graced each table barely flickered on the starched white cloths. Ornate silver and embossed crystal provided a gorgeous setting for each elegant floral arrangement.

The approaching, late afternoon clouds, round like puffy snow cones, rode unseen, aerial waves, promising photo ops of incredible beauty. The guests began to gather as the wistful, haunting strains of piano wafted through the sophisticated audio system.

Four bars, set up at opposite corners of the huge ballroom, did their best to avoid congestion for guests in pursuit of adult beverages. Waiters circulated with glasses of champagne and exquisite platters of canapés.

The left side of the second floor wing, sequestered for the bridal party, hummed with activity. The makeup artist finished first. She packed her bags of cosmetics with care and left the girls with teary goodbyes and prudently distant hugs.

“See you downstairs. You’re breathtaking, all of you.”

The hairdresser put the final touches on Becky’s coiffure and attached the foam support, weaving it beneath her vibrant red hair. She sighed, long, deep and satisfied.

“What a beautiful girl you are.” She leaned back with a critical eye, studying Becky’s head like a map to heaven. “Absolutely outstanding.”

Byron knocked on the door, the only man allowed in those hallowed rooms. Sharp, astute eyes swept one girl after another, finally coming to rest on Becky. He smiled and bowed slightly.

“I have outdone myself, ladies. I’m sure you will agree. Upon reaching the pinnacle of success, I concede there will never be another like this.” He made a twirling motion with his index finger and they all turned to face the full length wall of mirrors.

Their cherry red silk gowns, similar in the empire style, but each differing from the other, shimmered in the mirror. Delicate sprigs of fresh flowers wove through their hair.

Byron stepped back several feet and appraised them individually. He blinked as his eyes fell first on Melanie.

Blonde and willowy, wraithlike, her gown fell from a high waist, straight to the floor. The light cherry red silk gown had a life of its own and moved with her slightest motion.

Blair, golden hair in a pixie cut, looked delicious in her strapless sheath. A wide satin band gathered the skirt under the bosom in gentle folds and fell to the scalloped, floor-length hemline, it showing off her slender figure.

Jessi glowed in a modified empire look, flowing and soft, befitting her impending motherhood and desire not to call attention to her condition. Flowers entwined her long,

dark updo and graceful tendrils swayed gently beside each plump cheek; she looked like a Madonna in waiting.

The dramatic cut of Karen's gorgeous A-line gown with its soft, gauzy overskirt, gave the dress the depth and drama of a blood rose, closely matching the bouquet she carried.

The change in Becky, almost eerie in its transformation, made Byron gasp.

The makeup artist brought out her individuality, highlighting each delicate feature, even playing up the delightful sprinkle of tiny freckles on her nose. Already wide azure eyes dominated the small heart-shaped face; thick smoky lashes made them glow. A cranberry blush on cheeks and lips matched the color and brilliance of the ruby earrings and necklace Tracy lent her, part of the traditional something borrowed.

The hairdresser, knowing Becky's desire to have flowers in her hair, piled her gleaming tresses in a loose knot atop her head, allowing wispy tendrils to fall, gracing either side of her face. She attached the flowing, fingertip veil to the Styrofoam base on the top of Becky's head using long hairpins to secure it. Tiny white tea roses and baby's breath threaded their way through her hair and on either side of the veil.

Layers of gauzy silk fell from under the fitted bodice in asymmetrical folds, ending at the scalloped hemline.

The fitted strapless bodice, covered in seed pearls and crystals, continued in a wide band around to the low-cut back. The cathedral-length train attached there in flowing gossamer threads. Edged in pearls and crystals, it continued down the center to its end, spreading throughout the hem in all directions.

The under-gown, a formfitting sheath of creamy satin, glimmered through the thin layers of silk, hugging her body and hinting at the illusion of misty pinks and mauves.

The girls stared at her, really seeing her for the first time.

“I’m sayin’, Becky, you are the most beautiful bride I’ve ever seen. My goodness, Billy’s gonna up an’ faint. Tracy, too.”

Tracy stood in the back of the room, off to the side, blinking back tears and determined that today would revolve around Becky, not her. Wearing jeans and a shirt would still make her the star, but that was unacceptable today.

Caftans, her longtime favorite mode of attire, made her choice of a simple off-the-shoulder deep red crepe gown easy. The elegance, the simplicity of the dress needed no embellishment. A breathtakingly beautiful diamond necklace added all the sparkle required.

She shook her head at the photographer as he pointed the camera at her, nodded at the bridal party, turned and left the room.

This was Becky’s day to shine, and her darling Billy’s, too. Tracy made it clear to the few paparazzi she did invite that she would not tolerate overt attention paid to anyone but the happy couple. The unusually accommodating paparazzi, thrilled to be admitted at all, heard her words and complied.

Many famous couples would attend a society function such as this, and who knew who shot photos of what. But the attention, the fawning and flattering, belonged to the bride and groom.

The small orchestra, strategically located behind a stand of leafy ficus trees strung with twinkling white lights, played suitable background music, soft and poignant. Butlers bearing silver platters served a wide variety of hors d’oeuvres. They glided through the assembled guests with practiced ease as the haunting refrain from *Romeo and Juliet* floated through the air.

The ballroom looked like a Faberge egg, all white on white with streamers and delicate silvery baubles festooned on the ceiling. Every rose that ever attempted to be red decorated the room, swathed in deep greens and artfully positioned. Floor to ceiling windows did nothing to obstruct the magnificent view of Los Angeles and the ocean beyond.

A makeshift altar, positioned in the center of the stained glass windows and adorned with a variety of white flowers and satin ribbon, arched ten feet in the air. Intermixed with the calla lilies and white French tulips, Stephanotis and amaryllis joined red roses of every size and color.

From tiny tea buds to lush and fully blooming, red roses snuggled in the greenery. A delicious combination of fragrances wafted through the room as tension mounted. The music changed tune and tempo again and the unforgettable strains of *Sunrise Sunset* filled the air.

Best Man, Jeff Young, tall and handsome in his white tux, escorted Becky's mother, Marty, up the aisle, seating her in the first row beside her husband, Walt. Like a mirror image, Kenny followed his twin down the aisle, Tracy's arm through his.

Her hair, highlighted in the setting sun, glowed with auburn glints. The red dress, closely aligned with the bridal party in both shade and design, swirled around her ankles. He sat her across the aisle from Marty, grinning as both women reached out and joined their hands in their moment of triumph.

Kenny joined Billy, Jeff and Bob at the altar and turned toward the staircase in anticipation.

The music changed tempo again and the guests turned in their seats.

Karen, teary eyed and smiling, walked down the stairs in measured steps and proceeded up the aisle toward Billy. Her lower lip bobbed as she approached. She winked at him and took her place at the altar.

Melanie came next, her beauty bringing a muffled sigh from an audience not easily impressed with feminine splendor.

Blair followed, smiling through her tears, eyes locked with Kenny's. Their turn was coming up. Just a little while now. She sighed.

The Matron of Honor looked a lot better than she felt, relieved that she'd made it down the stairs without falling. Jessi stared at the long aisle with bravado.

It's just like any other course. One fence at a time. All I need to do is get to that altar. Whew.

Through sheer exertion of will and lack of a secondary plan, she made it to the altar with a smile, shifted her weight from one aching leg to the other and hoped for the best.

The flower girls, shy and unsure, threw petals on the floor and tried not to giggle. The ring bearer, a seasoned TV veteran, smiled solemnly, holding the pillow directly in front of him.

The music swelled then and paused as the guests rose for Becky. The familiar strains of the bridal march began. Tom waited for her where the curving staircases joined. As she reached his side, he took her arm, tucked it through his, and escorted her down the rest of the stairs.

Becky glided the length of the aisle to the accompaniment of flashing lights and camera's snapping. Eyes fixed on Billy, she ignored the paparazzi and stopped at the altar directly in front of him. She turned and accepted a kiss from Tom, handed her bouquet to Jessi and joined hands with Billy as they prepared to take their vows.

The minister spoke the usual opening words, then said, "Billy and Becky have composed their own vows. Billy, are you prepared to plight your troth?"

"Yes, I am." Loving eyes the color of a spring sky, searched hers, confident in what they would find.

“I remember the first time I met you. Over the years, I realized I wanted you to be much more than my friend. When we opened Mystic, I knew this day would come. You’re my soul-mate, the love of my life. I’m going to do everything in my power to make you happy and give you your hearts desire, beginning with this token of my love.” He turned to the best man, hand outstretched for the ring.

“What ring?” Jeff said, loud enough for the guests to hear. A light titter ran through the room. “Oh, this?” Grinning from ear to ear he handed Billy the ring with a flourish.

Billy took Becky’s hand in his. “With this ring, I thee wed and pledge my love, fidelity and support, in good times and bad, for better or worse, in sickness and in health until death parts us.” He slipped the ring on her finger and kissed her hand.

Becky took a deep breath, hoping she could avoid bursting into tears or dissolving into a laughing fit. She was on the verge of both.

“Billy, you’ve made every dream I ever had come true. I love you more than you can know. Our life will be filled with as much happiness and joy as I can cram into it. I promise, I’ll be at your side forever, in sickness and in health, for better or worse, through good times and bad, until death separates us.”

Becky turned to Jessi and smiled.

Jessi clutched the ring tight enough to leave little dents in her palm. She figured she had about three more minutes before she would have to sit, with or without a chair. As she handed the ring to Becky, her eyes implored her friend to make it snappy.

Nodding, and without further ado, Becky said, “With this ring I plight my troth, pledging my fidelity and never-ending love to the most important person in my world, my almost husband.” She slipped the ring on his finger and smiled.

“Billy,” the minister said, “you may now kiss your bride.”

As though on command, the sun slowly began to slide into the ocean. Shards of color shot into the sky. Every possible shade of red, pink and gold tinted the windows behind the altar. As the minister prepared to introduce them, a final dart of color, the ultimate Hollywood moment, shone on them and a halo of light settled on their heads.

The minister nodded at the guests and smiled.

“Honored family and dearly loved friends, I present to you Mr. and Mrs. Billy Martin.

The End

