



THE DOUBLETREE KIDS

# RIDING HIGH

*Gayle Farmer*

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HIGH***

**Gayle Farmer**

**This book is dedicated  
with special thanks  
to my editor,  
Irene Gardner**

**And of course,  
To my beloved husband,  
Jeff**

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# **THE DOUBLETREE KIDS**

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**Gayle Farmer**

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## Chapter 1

Shievon Mahoney was not a morning person. She stuffed the pillow against her ears and tried to ignore her cell phone's tinkling rendition of Keith Urban's *Once in a Lifetime*. The cell continued to play. A small hand shot from beneath the covers, snagged the phone and retreated under the blanket.

"Hello?" she said, voice muffled. She heard the familiar voice of her boyfriend, Billy Martin, and smiled.

"Shievy, I'm sorry to wake you so early, but I've got the best news ever. You're going to want to wake up when you hear my news."

She cleared her throat and the phone crackled as she settled it on her ear. "Don't count on it. What news?" She rolled over and fluffed her pillows. Eyes still closed, she snuggled back in bed.

"My folks got home while we were at dinner last night and you'll never guess what Mom gave me. Go ahead. *Guess*."

"The moon," she whispered, still half asleep.

"Better, Shievy, much better. We have tickets to the final Olympic Equestrian Trials in Las Vegas. Eight of 'em. *Box seats*."

Hazel eyes shot open as she bolted upright in bed. She gripped the cell so tight it shot out of her grasp and bounced to the floor. Shievon followed right behind it, and landing with a thud, snatched it up.

"You have *got* to be kidding me. They've been sold out for ages. Eight? You have eight? Oh, my gosh, that's next week. How exciting! I can't believe it."

Billy's voice rose with anticipation. "Neither can I and I still can't. I'm so excited I'm bouncing off the walls."

How about if I come over and take you out to breakfast? I'll be right there." He hung up before she could agree.

Shievon bounded up from the floor and glanced at the clock on her nightstand. *Shoot, it isn't that early. Maybe the coffee is ready.* She hurried down the hall, the enticing aroma wafting into her nose and drawing her to the kitchen. She poured a cup and waved at her mother who sat on the sunny patio, reading the morning paper.

"Hi, Mom."

"Hi, Shievon. Boy, you're sure up early. What's going on?"

Shievon opened her mouth and then hesitated, figuring she'd share the good news when she knew all about it. Her mother didn't like to get a story piecemeal and she always had questions. "Oh, not much. Billy's picking me up for breakfast in a minute. If he gets here before I'm ready, please tell him I won't be long."

"Sure will, hon. Just don't be late for your riding lesson." She grinned in delight, shaking her paper. Several red circles told the story.

"I'm going garage sailing later with your sisters. We have three lined up, so it should be a full day. It's too bad you never get to come with us anymore. We miss you."

"I miss you guys, too, but I know I won't be able to make it. Karen's prepping us for the show next month and she's on fire. You'd swear it was tomorrow from the way she's working us, but I can understand. She doesn't want a repeat of the last time."

Her mother's deep blue eyes met hers, eyebrows raised. "Well, I can certainly understand that. She wasn't a happy camper after the last show, that's for sure." She folded the paper, laid it on the table and picked up her cup.

"The one I really want to catch doesn't start until after lunch, but it's clear over in Coronado, so it looks like we'll be gone for most of the day." She turned back to the

paper, red pen in hand. “Can’t imagine who starts a garage sale so late, but there it is. They have a whole bunch of that blue glass Lana’s crazy about. Looks like you’ll have to take a rain check.”

“I’ll do that next time. Have a great day.” Nodding at her mom, she hurried back down the hall to her room, sipping at her full cup and trying not to spill on the white tile.

In record time, she performed her morning ritual. She stared into the mirror in disbelief. More freckles! Heaving a deep sigh, she applied a generous dab of moisturizer on her sunburned nose and cheeks and ran a comb through her dark, glossy hair.

Shievon pulled on her favorite pair of black low-rise schooling breeches. A sleeveless white tank top showed off her bare midriff. Glancing in the mirror again, she thought once more about getting a belly ring. They were so cute.

Thankfully, her sisters had paved the way, wearing their mother down. They all had them. *Maybe I’ll do it in Vegas.* Just then, the doorbell rang.

\* \* \*

Shievon and Billy sat at their usual corner table in Denny’s, waiting. Their coffee cooled as they made plans.

“Who else are you going to invite?” she asked, gold-flecked eyes shining at the prospect.

“I have eight tickets, so that covers the team, but I want the twins to come, too. They can play tennis or golf while we’re at the show and we can get together later in the afternoon and explore, have dinner. Besides the golf is world class.” He grabbed her in a delighted hug and she squealed.

“I know. I’ve been there a couple of times with my folks. There’s so much to do and the shopping is out of this

world. Oh, we'll have a ball, I just know it. I wonder where ... oh, there they are."

Becky Edwards and Steve Bianchi, their best friends and Doubletree teammates waved as they rushed in the door. The couple hurried to the table, smiling in anticipation. Billy had only said he had big news, nothing more. Their faces lit up as he told them about the tickets.

The waitress brought a fresh pot of coffee and took their orders. Four Grand Slams for good luck.

"I still can't believe it, Billy. So, how cool is that?" Becky chuckled, running a hand through her cap of red curls. "Where did Tracy get the tickets?"

"One of her friends on the show had connections. He got them for her. Great luck, huh?"

"Oh, man, I guess." Steve nodded, his dark eyes wide. "They're impossible to get. I know. Believe me, I tried everything I could think of. I wanted to surprise Becky, but there was nothing, not even in the nosebleed section. And you managed to score a box." He chuckled at Billy, giving him a high-five.

"Las Vegas. Have you made any plans yet?" Becky eyes took on a far away look, voice dreamy. "I've never been there. Thanks for the invite." She grinned at Steve. "We both really appreciate it."

Sipping her coffee, Becky smiled. The rest of the kids had money to burn, but she worked for everything she got. Trips to Vegas had not made the list of necessities so far, but since she'd started hanging with the team last year, she'd been on several exciting adventures.

Billy waved his hand with a grin. "Oh, please. It wouldn't be the same without you guys. It's so cool there, and yes, we have plenty of things to do. We'll all ride up in the limo, of course. Driving around in Las Vegas is a nightmare and parking is impossible, so that will make life a lot easier. Dad keeps a couple of suites at the Mandalay

Bay Towers for business meetings. They're available for our stay so there's no problem there. Looks like all the bases are covered."

"Have you told the rest of the kids?" Steve glanced at Billy and then leaned back as the waitress put their breakfast on the table and refilled their cups.

"They're going to think you're kidding them. I hope the twins come too, they're such a kick."

Still lost in dreams, Becky sighed. "Wow, I'm goin' to the Mandalay Bay Towers." She leaned against the seat, grinning. "I don't believe it. That place is so fantastic. They show it a lot on TV on the vacation shows and stuff. They have this great shark reef attraction. It's so cool. Mom'll be green with envy."

"Crud," Shievon said, eyes wide. A frown creased her forehead. "I just thought of something. *My* mom will want to know who is chaperoning." She shrugged her shoulders at Billy, still frowning. "No way around it."

"Just tell her Bob will be with us like always. He'll be staying in our suite. That's all the chaperone we need, don't you think?"

"I hope so." She turned toward him with a sigh. "Too bad you don't have a ticket for Karen. That would solve everything. It might improve our lessons, too."

"Well, I don't, so forget that idea." Billy shook his head and grimaced, his frown matching hers. "Besides, I'd just as soon give her some space right now. Ever since we screwed up at the last show she's been on the warpath. All week long, it's like she's a demon or something. We're sure paying for blowing it. I will never run at a fence again, believe me. How much to you want to bet she'll blow a gasket when she hears we want to go away?"

With a sage look on her face, Becky said, "We're just lucky it's a huge show like this. No matter how mad

she is, she'd never keep us from attending the Olympic trials."

Their trainer, Karen Evans, disappointed with their performances at the last show and loaded for bear, had made their lessons difficult to say the least. The team had taken to giving her a wide berth, which was especially difficult for her daughters, Jessi and Blair.

"How's she been with you guys?" Shievon glanced at Becky and Steve, chuckling as they shrugged. "Of course, you did great at the show, so I suppose it's not flowing in your direction. She's killing us and Jessi and Blair are about to run away from home."

Steve gave a short laugh. "I guess we're on the 'A' team, at least for now."

"Yeah, we escaped the heat." Becky nodded, and then made a face, coming to the defense of her mentor and boss. "Karen was just disappointed, guys. We schooled so hard for that show. I guess you can't blame her, considering everyone was so high up in the standings first day out. When Melly and Larry pulled out of their classes and then the rest of the team kinda blew it..." She glanced from Billy to Shievon and pursed her lips. "I guess her reaction was trainer's prerogative, y'know, not really that hard to understand, considering."

Shievon nodded in agreement, cheeks pink. "Well, I admit it, my last round was lame, but I couldn't believe it when Jessi went off course. Karen was *so* steamed I thought she was gonna blow a gasket, but then when Blair went flying around the oxer and Angel almost went down again, I knew we were all in for it."

Becky finished the last of her milk with a grin and a shrug. "I think she's pretty much over it. I bet today's lesson will be fine. Speaking of which," she glanced at her

watch, “it’s just about time to leave for the barn. Last thing we need to do is give her an excuse to be mad.”

They paid their tabs and headed to the Doubletree.

\* \* \*

The warm morning sun combined with the sweet smell of flowers beguiled the bees that crawled through the blossoms, gathering nectar.

The birds fought with each other for choice bugs and the little hummers floated above the bougainvillea, attracted by their bright red color.

Under the shrubs lurked two compatriots in the ongoing, never-ending battle of the birds. A plump Siamese crouched in the warm dirt, intense blue gaze fixed on the tiny hummingbird floating above his head. His tail lashed back and forth in a strange feline beat and his whiskers trembled. Periodically the fur on his back rippled.

Only a few feet away, a white Jack Russell, dark brown ears working like an air traffic controller, stared at a Blue Jay in deep concentration. The Jay sat on a sturdy branch and ignored him with studied determination, only his rapid blinking betrayed his interest on the dog.

In unison, the cat and dog leaped into the air. The hummer rose just high enough to elude capture, not even deigning to scold the cat, but not so the Jay. Amid a tiny flurry of little blue feathers, it circled above the dog’s head, squawking, scolding and repeatedly dive-bombing the round rump, once almost getting caught for his lack of respect for his canine adversary.

Pounce lay down in the dirt again and began to purr, assuming an air of disinterest. He had all the time in the world.

Toby, always on the go and noticing a group of kids getting ready to turn their horses out in the pasture, was of two minds. His favorite thing in the world was to chase the

horses. The birds could wait. He streaked off in the direction of the turnout arena, shrieking with delight.

\* \* \*

The kids gathered in the tack room for a strategy session. They were of two minds.

Jessi, always one to meet things head on, was all for telling Karen about their Las Vegas plans straight out and letting the chips fall where they may. Becky, Steve and Shievon thought she had a great idea.

Melanie and Blair preferred Billy's plan. It had the added benefit of not alerting Karen before their lesson, which did have universal appeal, especially if for some reason the lesson did not go well.

They thought if they could manage a really great class, she'd be more amenable to any kind of suggestion.

Larry didn't know who was right and opted to go with the majority.

One thing the kids knew for sure, she'd never object to their trip to Las Vegas for the Olympic trials no matter how ticked off she might be.

\* \* \*

Billy's idea won the vote and after an excellent lesson, the kids felt confident as they gathered in the tack room, prepared to tell Karen about their upcoming trip. Ecstatic, her face split in a wide smile as Billy explained.

Eyes twinkling, she clasped her hands together. "You have tickets to *what*? Oh, Billy, you have to be kidding. That's so cool. How many?"

"That's the thing, actually. Mom could only get eight. Just enough for the team. My folks have two suites at the Mandalay Bay hotel and we'll stay there. Bob's driving us up in the limo, of course, and he'll stay in our suite."

Billy's voice began to climb as his nerves set in. "He's getting used to playing the role of chaperone." He chuckled and glanced at Shievon for reassurance.

"Oh, only eight tickets." Karen shrugged, head to one side. "Well, at least you kids can all go."

"We'll bring you home a program, Mom, and I'll take as many pictures as I can snap. It'll be almost like being there." Blair nodded several times, aware of Karen's disappointment and wishing with all her might that Billy had an extra ticket.

Melanie piped up, blue eyes wide. "I'll get ya the show tapes of all the winnin' rides, Karen, ya won't miss a trick." The musical cadence of her New Orleans accent hung in the air.

Karen smiled. "Oh, Melly, that's all right, really. I've been to several trials over the years and I guess if you've seen one, you've seen them all. You kids will have a ball. Okay, well, I have the ladies waiting for me. Great lesson today."

## Chapter 2

As the limo approached the outskirts of Vegas, the kids watched the closing scenes of *The Shining*, eyes riveted to the TV. They stared in edgy silence as Jack Nicholson chased little Danny Lloyd through the snow-covered maze, dragging that axe and screaming at the boy to stop.

Becky leaned back into Steve's knees, shifting her position on the floor of the car.

"I'm glad I'm well padded," she whispered, grinning up at him. It was almost dark, but she saw his tense expression as he watched the movie. It was obvious it made him think of his mother and the many times he had run away from her. She took his hand, kissing his fingers.

He stroked her hair, unaware of her attention, absorbed in the movie that ended just as the far-off lights of Las Vegas came into view.

On the road for more than six hours with nothing to look at but endless miles of salt flats and bleak, empty desert, the kids perked up as they saw things begin to change. Abandoned shacks and gas stations, wooden walls with roofs gone and doors ripped off, and windblown trees gave a hint of the beginnings of civilization.

Older casinos nestled on the sandy floor, neon signs blinking in welcome. Most of them badly needed a paint job and a new parking lot would be a welcome addition. Shabby convenience stores often flanked small seedy motels. The feeling of isolation disappeared as they noticed people walking around. Across the street, a boy of about twelve rode his bike, his dog close at his side.

On either side of the road, small clusters of a dozen or so houses settled into disrepair. Yards littered with

broken toys, cars on blocks and dismantled bicycles were a sure sign of life even if in squalor and poverty.

Sleazy diners, signs often missing a bulb or two, advertised their slots in a dusty blaze of glory. They lined both sides of the road, waiting for a mark to feel lucky and come in to make their day.

Then, in a blink, it all changed.

Bob rolled the sunroof back as traffic slowed for the approach into the city. The kids took turns standing up, heads and shoulders sticking out of the roof. Melanie Young stood between her twin brothers, the warm night wind blowing through their ash-blond hair. Kenny had his arm draped over Blair's shoulder and Jessi stood on tiptoe as they took in the sights.

The kids not jammed into the sunroof crowded together at the open windows, staring at the endless explosion of lights blazing in front of famous resort hotels. Buildings soared from sand to sky, so tall they dominated the heavens.

Mandalay Bay, first in the long line of luxury super-resorts that decorated the Las Vegas strip, set the tone for opulence. Billy wanted to give the kids the tour and a chance to see it all before they checked in. He pushed the intercom button and asked Bob if he would cruise the strip once before taking them to their hotel.

As the limo inched down the boulevard, they read the huge, pulsing marquees rising from the desert floor, turning the night to day. The crawl lines advertised great stars featured live on their stage. The best of the west as well as acts from all over the world gathered to entertain.

Elvis was everywhere, joined by a large number of Johnny Depp doubles, complete with dreadlocks, pirate garb and black teeth.

Casino ads reminiscent of a fireworks display offered the greatest prime rib dinner in town for \$7.95 ... kids ate free with a paying adult. Each casino touted theirs as the best paying slots in town.

As they got deeper into the strip, resort hotels and shops lined both sides of the street. It looked like a three-ring circus. Throngs of people clogged the sidewalks, laughing, pointing.

No stranger to Las Vegas, Billy answered their questions with a grin, pointing out places of interest.

“We can’t gamble here, no. You have to be twenty-one to get into the casinos, but we can go to the shows and the restaurants. Oh, look, the fountains are going at Belliago. Isn’t that cool?”

Their attention flicked from one side of the strip to the other as they stared at the casino advertisements and extraordinary display of lights. Bob pulled up to the front entry of Mandalay Bay, hopped out and opened their doors. The doorman did the same with the trunk, handing suitcases to the waiting valet, who put them on two large rolling carts.

“Oh, my,” Becky said, as she stepped out of the limo. “What a beautiful night. It’s so warm and snuggly, like being wrapped in velvet.”

Steve slipped his arm around her and kissed her neck. “Not nearly as beautiful as you are.” Dark eyes glittered as he smiled down at her.

“What’ll we do first?” Jessi asked. “Do we need to go to the suites or can we walk around?” She held Jeff’s arm tight, smiling up at him in anticipation.

“We can do whatever ya want, Jessi, but let’s find out where the rooms are first and drop off our stuff. We need a map or something, especially if we split up. We don’t want to be wanderin’ around here lost.”

They followed Billy through the huge entry doors and stepped into a marble paradise.

Blair looked around, green eyes wide. “Gosh, it reminds me a bit of Hawaii,” she said, grinning at Kenny. “Isn’t this beautiful?”

“Oh, I’m sayin’.” Melanie glanced around the foyer. Taking in the foliage and tropical flowers, she drew in deep breaths. “It smells ... mmm, wonderful.”

“Come on,” Billy said, urging them toward the elevators. “Let’s go up and drop off our things and then we can explore.”

They got out on the top floor and followed Billy down the hall, stopping to check out the fabulous artwork that lined the walls.

“Wow. That’s so beautiful. Are these real?” Becky stood before an exquisite Monet, gazing up at the famous reproduction. She traced the delicate lines of the water lilies that floated on the placid lake.

“Is that a fish?” she asked, peering closer at a shadow in the lower forefront.

“It’s a copy, and a really good one. The original is in the Louvre in France.” Larry Klein, newest member of the Doubletree team, studied the painting. “Exquisite, isn’t it? I love the impressionists. Do you like Renoir?”

“Oh, yeah, love ‘em all,” Becky said, eyes wide as she continued to study the painting.

Billy stopped midway down the hall, opened a door with a key card and flipped on the wall switch. Every possible luxury greeted their eyes as they entered the suite.

“This one is for you girls. We’re in the suite next door.” Grinning at Shievon, he handed her the key card.

The soft misty green of the carpets followed the desert island motif, accentuating the beautiful potted plants and trees decorating the corners of the large room. A large

curved sofa in stripes of cantaloupe and cream faced the window, taking advantage of the spectacular view.

“The bedrooms are down the hall and there’s a kitchenette behind that wall. The fridge should have all kinds of sodas and stuff.” Billy pointed toward the bank of windows that looked out onto the city. Lights flashed in rainbow hues, throbbing to some unheard musical beat.

“Oh, look, a monorail. What a ball. Can we go on it?” Shievon pointed out the window.

The train followed an arching, winding track, weaving its way around buildings and disappearing into the night only to reappear several blocks ahead.

“Sure we can. I’ll call down to the desk for passes. The monorail is loads of fun and I’m sure Bob will appreciate having the night off after that long drive.” Billy headed for the hotel phone.

“The train takes you to all the hotels and stuff, but they’re not all connected on one line. You have to get off at a couple of places and do a bit of walking, but it’s still lots easier to deal with than driving your own car. Having the limo is a real advantage, though, especially not having to find a place to park. Wait and see tomorrow when we go to the show.”

Billy glanced at the twins. “How about if we drop off our gear, let the girls do the same and we’ll go out exploring? I’m getting hungry.”

“We’ll be ready in a jiffy,” Becky said, easing the boys out of the suite. She shut the door behind them and turned to her friends with a grin.

“Hey, let’s check this place out. Man what a gorgeous room.”

The girls walked down the hallway, admiring the furniture and decorations. They popped their heads into the first doorway at what had to be the smaller bedroom.

“We’ll take this one,” Melanie said, grabbing Blair’s arm. She and Blair had been best friends since childhood and she looked forward to some time without Jessi. “It’s just right for two.”

The other girls nodded and continued down the hall to the master bedroom.

Melanie chuckled as she gazed around the room. Floor to ceiling windows made up the far wall, showing a spectacular view of the city. Two queen beds with matching white oak nightstands flanked one wall and opposite the beds stood a large oak armoire with TV and stereo. The desk next to it had a computer, printer and phone.

The walls, painted in pale coral, blended with the darker coral swirls in the deep green drapes. Matching bedspreads and a sea-green carpet completed the tropical look.

“That was really smooth, Melly. You got the jump on Jessi before she could say anything.” Blair chuckled and unzipped her suitcase.

“So shoot me. Dividin’ up like this makes sense. Besides, she’s kinda slacked off a bit, don’t ya think? Not such a shadow any more. There for a while....”

Blair’s eyes crinkled at the corners. Melanie came to terms with the fact that Jessi was here to stay about the same time Jessi got over her envy of Melanie’s place in her new sister’s heart. For a while, Blair felt like a pull-toy between two jealous dogs.

“She’s so close to Becky and Shievy, I think she prefers to be with them anyway. Since they’re all the same age it just makes sense. Sure does prove to you that three is *not* a crowd.”

“Funny how that worked out for all three of them,” Melanie said. “At first, there, Shievy wanted nothin’ to do

with Becky, remember? Walkin' around snipin' at her and makin' nasty comments. That sure was a miserable time for everyone on the team. I like it so much better this way ... all that drama and infightin' made me crazy."

Blair nodded in agreement. "Me, too." She glanced around the room, eyes wide. "So, Melly, what do you think? Where'd Billy hide the hula dancers?" Chuckling, she slid the mirrored doors back and hung her clothes in the spacious closet. "Wow, this must be something else in broad daylight. Very colorful—very shiny."

Melanie snickered, remembering Dustin Hoffman's performance in *Rain Man*. "Everything goes over the top out here, Blair. Y'know, the opposite of less is better, I guess." She went into the bathroom, and then popped her head out of the door. "Wait until ya get a look at this, man. Check it out. I'm sayin'."

Blair walked into the bathroom and glanced around at the wall of full-length mirrors and additional walk-in closets. "Good grief, I can't wait to see what the other bedroom is like. Do you think this is the room Tracy and Tom stay in?"

"I doubt it. This is the smaller bedroom, but who knows. They may use the other suite for all we know. Gosh, would ya look at that."

Melanie pointed at what looked like a personal swimming pool. The sunken tub was about three feet deep, complete with a ledge of seats and multiple jets. "Wow, now that's my idea of a Jacuzzi. We could have a party."

"This place is just too much. I wonder if the boys have the same amenities in their suite."

They heard the other girls laughing, so they went down the hall to see what was so funny. Becky stood in their bathroom, pointing at their bidet. "What's that?"

Shievon bent over, turned on the faucets and adjusted the water temperature. Eyes tilted at the corners,

teeth gleaming, she grinned. “There, see? It’s called a bidet. French. It’s a personal hygiene thingy, like if you don’t want to take a shower, but you ... never mind.”

Becky burst out laughing; her cheeks flushed a dusky rose. “Okay, okay, I get it.”

Just then, they heard the boys knocking on the door. The girls snagged their purses and headed out into the night.

## Chapter 3

Billy gave a grateful Bob the night off.

“I really appreciate that, Billy. The thought of driving that limo around tonight gives me the shivers. I think I’m going down to the casino for an hour or so, then have dinner in the suite. How late do you think you’ll be?”

“We’re tired too and tomorrow starts early. We’ll be back before midnight for sure.”

The warm air enveloped them as they walked across the street to the MGM Grand station. The monorail approached as they stepped out onto the narrow platform.

Billy stepped forward, his arm holding the door open as the kids hurried inside. “Let’s take it to the end and then decide what we want to do on the way back. It’s a beautiful ride and we can get a good idea what’s happening.” He slipped his arm across Shievon’s shoulders and gave her a squeeze.

Blair nodded, snuggling into Kenny’s side. “I don’t know about anyone else, but I’m getting hungry.”

They glided along the rails, staring from side to side at the fantastic sights, pointing out well-known nightclubs. They drifted between the hotels, soaring high above the busy streets below and the brilliant casinos. They changed stations without problem, rode to the end of the line and transferred to another train for their return trip down the strip.

“Hey, y’all, look.” Melanie pointed as they passed a replica of the Eiffel Tower. “Let’s eat in *Paris*. Is that a nice one, Billy?”

“You must be reading my mind. I was just about to suggest it. It’s one of my favorites. My dad takes clients

there for business dinners and the view is out of this world.” He grinned, glancing at the kids. “They have several dining rooms to choose from, but the restaurant at the top of the Eiffel Tower is one of the best around, I think. Let’s do it.”

“Are we dressed okay for that?” Jessi glanced down at her slacks. She ran a self-conscious finger along the strap of her smudged tank top and glanced at her friends. There was a definite spot on Blair’s shirt, couldn’t miss it, and Becky was, well, she was just plain *rumpled*.

“Hey,” she said, “it would take us all of ten minutes to change. If we’re gonna eat dinner in *Paris*, let’s dress for it. What say?”

“Back to the ranch,” Shievon said with a giggle.

*The Paris Hotel* is so unique that even in Las Vegas it stands out from the crowd.

From the moment they entered the lobby they crossed the threshold into another world. The high ceiling was really a mural and painted pale blue to look like a summer sky, with birds flying and puffy white clouds drifting overhead. Birds soared high, performing aerial maneuvers on unseen air currents.

They strolled along the faux village street, peering into shop windows that contained everything from stunning clothes to delicate crystal and porcelain figurines, jewelry, and unique souvenirs.

“I can’t believe it, Steve,” Becky said, blue eyes wide as she glanced from side to side. “It’s so beautiful. Look at that crystal.” She stopped in front of a window filled with exquisite collectibles. “I wonder if the real Paris is like this.”

He grinned down at her and slipped an arm around her waist. “One day I’ll take you to the real Paris. How would you like that?” Steve leaned down, kissing her lips.

The smells of freshly baked pastry made the kids' mouths water. They had not eaten in ages and the éclairs, scones and flaky croissants made their stomachs growl in hungry anticipation.

"I'm starved," Jessi said, staring wistfully in the window of the bakery like a street urchin. Tartlets oozing fresh fruit, crepes drizzled in bittersweet chocolate and all kinds of pastry delights filled the window. "Is it much farther, Billy?"

They entered the glass elevator and gaped around the city as the car shot to the top floor.

The tuxedoed host nodded at Billy in recognition, a smile of welcome on his face.

"We have a table for ten available for you now, Mr. Martin. If you will follow me?" He led them through the busy lounge where people waited for their tables to come up. They followed him across the full dining room to the front of the restaurant, stopping right next to the windows.

The long table, flanked with plump red leather seats, wore crisp white cloth covers, silver and crystal, tall flickering candles and a lovely floral arrangement. The kids sat with a sigh and opened their menus.

"I'm sure glad we changed clothes and got dressed up." Jessi sneaked a peek at the other diners and chortled. "They wouldn't have let us in the elevator let alone this dining room."

"And what incredible luck," agreed Shievon, glancing around the room in awe. "This must be the best table in the house." She took the chair Billy held for her and smiled. "Look at all those people waiting in the lounge for dinner."

Billy shrugged. "They know my mom and dad here. Besides, I made reservations when we were changing at the

hotel, but I didn't think we'd be seated this fast, especially with such a large party."

Becky's eyes were round as saucers. "Holy cow, Steve, look at the prices." She nodded at him as she scanned the menu. "This place is *really* expensive. I ... I think I'm losing my appetite."

"Ya sure know how to live, Billy," Melanie said, glancing from the menu to her brothers with raised eyebrows. "Get a load of the prices, guys."

Kenny nodded. "We don't have to stay here, Billy. We can find somethin' a little more reasonable, I'm sure."

Jeff shrugged at his twin and put his menu back on the table. "It's up to you, Billy. We're game for anything."

Jessi nodded at Jeff and shrugged. "So, what happened to the \$7.99 prime rib dinner?"

Billy chortled. "Hey, this one's on me. Or on Dad, actually. He said I was to treat you guys to a nice dinner and this might as well be it."

"Well," Blair said with a shrug, "if you're sure, everything looks great and I'm starved. Hey, Melly, look at that filet over there." She nodded at the table across from them and grinned. "Big as a fist."

They took Billy at his word and scanned the menu closer. Everything was ala carte, of course, but that did not slow them down. Most of them ordered shrimp cocktails, but Larry ordered escargot.

Predictably enough, as the plate was set before him, Becky and Jessi leaned forward, sniffing.

"*Eeuw*," they said in unison. "What's *that*?"

"Heaven help us, y'all," Melanie said, merry eyes roving the table. "Jessi's got a sidekick."

The waiter walked off with a smirk as Larry defended his choice.

“They’re great, really. Anyone want to try one? Lots of butter, lemon and garlic,” he said, which brought groans from the table.

“That’s it, he’s sleepin’ in the hall,” Kenny said with a grin as he dug into his shrimp.

“I’ll try one,” Melanie said. “Actually, they smell really great.”

Larry slid his spoon under a shell and deposited it on her bread plate.

Melanie stared at it a moment and nodded. She dug the escargot out of the shell and popped it into her mouth. Her face lacked any expression. “Umm, that’s interestin’. Uh huh. Kinda chewy, y’know, like clams, I think. Very good.” Eyes downcast, she swallowed, wiped her lips with dainty dabs and then drained her water glass.

“Looks like a big fat rubber band.” Jessi peered closer at the escargot and then back at her shrimp. “Of course, the first time I saw one of these little dudes actually walking around I thought I’d swear off shrimp forever. Looked like a giant bed-bug.”

“Goodness, girl, where’ve ya been sleepin’?” Melanie shot an amused look at Jessi then stared back down at her shrimp cocktail with a sigh. She picked one up, dipped it liberally in the piquant red sauce and popped it into her mouth in delight. The taste of the escargot outdid the shrimp and even as she finished the last one, the pervading taste in her mouth was garlic. With a shudder, Melanie awaited the next course with eagerness.

The huge salads, tossed tableside amidst much ado, filled them up and when their entrees arrived, the girls started moaning.

Melanie looked down at her plate and then at Larry. “I’m takin’ this steak home for breakfast tomorrow.” She buttered another crispy slice of bread. “This stuff is to die for and I love unsalted butter.”

In the end, three of the girls needed go boxes. Breakfast would be delicious.

“What, no dessert?” Billy glanced around the table as the rest of the kids groaned. Even the twins seemed full.

The waiter brought Billy the check, placing it at his left elbow. He turned it over, blinked and laid his credit card on the table. “Well,” he muttered, “Dad said to have a good dinner and this certainly qualified.”

They finished their coffee, pushed back from the table and rose. Clutching uniquely shaped aluminum foil swans that held their uneaten dinners, they waddled to the elevators.

“I’m sure glad we’re not showin’ tomorrow,” Melanie said with a moan. “I’d never get my breeches zipped.”

They did not invite the boys in, not even for a soda.

“We’ll see you guys in the morning.” Jessi yawned as she closed the door. “We’re beat.” She lurched down the hall, the other girls right behind her.

“Hey, Melly,” Blair said as she tumbled into bed. “What did the escargot taste like?”

Misty blue eyes glanced at Blair. Delicate eyebrows rose. She shrugged and cupped her mouth with her hand, blew and then inhaled. “Just like rubber bands, Blair. Lemony, garlicky little rubber bands. I’ve already brushed twice. Do I offend?”

“Rubber bands? That’s about what I figured ‘cause they looked gross. You’re a real sport, you know, and nah, you’re okay. We aren’t sleeping in the same bed. Good thing, though.” She chuckled. “Nite, Melly.”

## *Chapter 4*

The early morning sun poured through the open window as the girls sat on the sofa drinking coffee and yawning. The monorail pulled out of the station like a slow-moving silver bullet.

“When does the first class go, Melly?” Jessi asked. “I don’t want to miss a minute.”

Melanie scanned down the program. “Oh, here it is. First class starts at eight.” She glanced around the room. “What time is it, y’all? I can’t find my watch.”

“Almost six-thirty,” Blair said as she poured herself another cup of coffee. “We’ve got loads of time.”

“Steve just called,” Becky said, shrugging into her jeans. “They’ll be over to pick us up at seven-thirty. What’s for breakfast? Shall we mug Melly for her steak?”

Just then, there was a knock at the door.

“Who is it?” Shievon peered out the security hole, noting the staff uniform.

“Room service.”

She opened the door and the waiter rolled the service table into the room. Shievon signed the chit and he left.

“Oh, man, look at this,” she exclaimed as she lifted the lid off the hot serving tray. Nestled on separate little plates were five eggs Benedict.

“What’s with all the food all the time?” Blair stared at Shievon, shaking her head from side to side. “We’re going to blow up!”

“I’m gettin’ my steak,” Melanie said as she eyed the eggs. “I’ll just nuke it real quick. It’ll go great with that hollandaise sauce.”

“Hey, Melly, hold up. What do you think, does hollandaise go with salmon? I brought my dinner home,

too.” Jessi followed Melanie into the kitchen. “In my mind, my mouth thinks that would taste really good. What do you think?” She grinned up at her idol.

Melanie patted her on the head. “I think it’s a really good thing y’all’re so cute, Jessi.”

Breakfast over, the girls dressed and got ready to leave, expecting the boys any minute.

Bob sat behind the wheel of the limo, waiting under the shaded portico for the kids and thinking about how much he loved his job. Who would have thought that being bodyguard to a teenaged boy would be so much fun? The great pay and perks went far beyond his expectations and for five happy and mostly uneventful years, he watched Billy and his friends grow up.

It was a real treat, especially for a confirmed bachelor. He knew he would never marry, let alone have kids of his own, so each one, and they were all so different, was special. He straightened as he saw them pour out of the lobby, grinned in spite of himself and tipped his cap. He opened their doors with a flourish. Excitement was in the air.

\* \* \*

The temperature hovered in the high seventies as they got out of the car. Gazing around the already full parking lot, they grinned. Linking arms, they walked across the plaza and entered the building.

“We’re straight ahead,” Billy said. “Aisle 105, front row.”

The kids familiarized themselves with their location and then split up to explore.

Different from most regular American shows, spectators could not get into the barn areas. Unless you had a special pass, entry was restricted due to the heavy

security limitations imposed by the FEI which governed international horse sports. Only management staff, riders, trainers, owners and barn workers could enter and there were no exceptions.

Becky and Steve cruised the corridors, looking at all the well-known riders passing by. They had just got in line for sodas when a voice from the back of the room said, “Becky Edwards?” She turned around, her eyes searching for a familiar face.

“It *is* you.” A dark haired girl in her early twenties hurried to Becky’s side and gave her an enthusiastic hug. “My God, it’s been ages! It’s so good to see you. How’ve you been?”

Becky’s face lit up as she hugged the girl back. “Maggie! My gosh, oh, what a great surprise.” Stunned, she hesitated a moment, shook her head and exclaimed, “What a *wonderful* surprise.” She took Steve’s arm and turned him in Maggie’s direction.

“Maggie Wentworth, I’d like you to meet my boyfriend, Steve Bianchi.” She smiled at him and nodded. “Maggie’s mom trained at a barn I used to work at and taught me everything I know about braiding and massage. Gosh, is Toni here too?”

“She sure is. We have nine horses here. Actually, they aren’t ours. Mom is training at a new barn in Santa Barbara and we signed on to do the massage and braiding in exchange for room and board. Pretty neat deal, ‘cause we could never have afforded to come here otherwise.”

“Have you got a minute to sit and catch up?” Becky nodded at a group of empty tables.

Maggie glanced down at her watch. “Sure can. I have about half an hour. So,” she said, glancing over at Steve from beneath her lashes. “Things are looking up for you, too, huh?”

“Couldn’t be better, Maggie. I found this great barn, in Del Mar, Doubletree, and I’m working there as assistant trainer, plus I have quite a sideline business doing massage, too. Got your mom to thank for that, yep.” She smiled at Steve and took his hand.

“I’ve made a lot of wonderful friends there; it’s where I met Steve. We train together with the rest of the show team. Can you believe it, Maggie, I have my own horse. Champ is his name. Warmblood, very cute. And Karen Evans, she’s the DT trainer, great gal. She’s taught me so much. Y’know, I show in hunters now, but...”

Becky paused to catch her breath, and then laughed at herself. “I’m hogging the floor, as usual. What’ve you been up to?”

“Well, I’m engaged,” Maggie said, extending her left hand. A beautiful diamond sparkled on her finger.

“I finished college this year and now I’m an editorial assistant at Bellrose Publishing. That’s where I met my fiancé, Johnny.” Brown eyes glowed as she sipped her lemonade.

They chatted a while longer and then Maggie glanced at her watch.

“Gee, Becky, I’ve gotta run. Listen, give me your cell phone number. Maybe we can get together later tonight. I know Mom’d love to see you.” She pulled a pen and a small notebook from her purse and started writing. She ripped off the paper and handed it to Becky along with the pad. They exchanged numbers and promised to call later.

“Small world, isn’t it?” Becky said as they got up from the table. “Who’d have thought that in this crowd of people, I’d see Maggie? It’s been at least two years.”

They walked back down the aisle and took their seats as the first horse entered the arena.

\* \* \*

The hot sun beat down on the rows of small houses. Dusty flowers raised faded faces to catch the spray from sprinklers that served the dual purpose of watering the tired lawns and giving the neighborhood kids a way to get wet. There were no pools here.

Plastic shower curtains spread across the lawns became makeshift waterslides for the neighborhood children. Sounds of laughter and the occasional scream filled the air as they frolicked on the muddy grass.

Vinny stalked into the house, slammed the door behind him and flipped the newspaper in a vicious arc. It landed on the sofa and came apart on impact, scattering coupons and the TV section onto the worn carpet. He jerked the refrigerator door open so hard it slammed into the wall, almost knocking the glasses off the cupboard shelf next to it. He grabbed a beer out of the fridge and pried off the lid.

Throwing himself down in his favorite easy chair, he glared at the silent phone, willing it to ring. When he couldn't stand it another second, he snatched the phone from its cradle and dialed seven quick numbers.

The expected voice answered. "Hello?"

"S'me. Do ya' got the stuff?"

"Yeah."

"So when were ya gonna call me? I been sittin' around here all day waitin'."

"If ya get a cell like everyone else, Vinny, ya wouldn't have to do that. I been tellin' these things forever."

"Oh stuff it, Bernie. Why didn't ya just call since you got the cell phone? You don't give a hoot about what I might have planned, do ya? I wanted to go play the ponies with some of the guys earlier, but *nooo*, I had to sit around

here instead ... ain't been out the door except to get the mail ... don't say it, Bernie."

"Well, if the shoe—anyway, whatever."

"Hey, about the stuff? You're sure the deal is kosher, right? We won't have no problems? I'm not happy giving Juan something that big, y'know? I mean, what if he screws up? What if he gets busted and narcs on us? Like what if he just plain gets caught? You trust him to go for us?"

"You're such a girl, Vinny. Juan ain't exactly a stranger, y'know. Besides, all you're doin' is deliverin' the stuff. Don't be such a sissy cat."

"Bernie, I'm sick a ya talkin' to me like I'm a little kid or something. Actually, I'm about to come over the lines right now and strangle ya. This is a big risk here even if the money is good. You don't know this kid from Adam, not really, and if he screws up or the cops find out, he's a direct link back to us. I don't like it and don't go callin' me no names."

Bernie made a noise that sounded like purring.

Vinny took another swig of beer and scowled into the phone. "What did I just say? Man, I'd like to slap the crap outa ya when ya do stuff like that." Vinny slammed the phone down into the cradle and uttered an oath.

The shrill ringing startled him. Beer splashed the front of his shirt. "*What?*"

"Vinny, I been telling ya this for all yer miserable useless life, and I'm only sayin' it *one more time*. If ya hang up on me like that again, I *am* gonna kill ya. Dead. *D'ya hear me?* One more time, ya little rat, and cousin or not, it's all over but the shoutin'. Now, ya do believe me, don't ya? Answer me, ya *idiot!*"

"Yeah." The response was submissive, the look on his face, anything but.

“Okay,” Bernie said, panting from anger. “Now, I got the stuff. When are ya gonna come pick it up? Yer ready, right?”

“Yeah. So when does she arrive?”

“When does she ... who cares? It don’t matter. Hey, come on over and pick it up now, would ya? I wanna get the stuff moved and I’m goin’ out in a little while. May be late gettin’ back.”

“No problem. I live to serve. See ya in about twenty minutes.” Sarcasm dripped from his lips. “G’bye, Bernie.” Vinny placed the phone in its cradle like a Faberge egg.

\* \* \*

The stadium surrounding the Grand Prix arena was packed to the rafters with more than twelve thousand fans that hummed with anticipation. The current of excitement built in anticipation as the first entrants began to line up at the gate.

Ardent fans, many trainers and riders in their own right, came to Las Vegas to see the final competition for the selection of the United States Olympic show jumping team.

Thirty-one horse and rider combinations vied for the eight open slots that led to placement on the Olympic Team. Equestrian competition at its finest level was about to begin.

Yoli Navarro looked at the course board once again, and glanced at her friend. “What a bear,” she said, pointing at the combination. “The two stride is short, the three stride is long, and what’s with that? All oxers, too. Great.”

She glanced at her companion and kicked her booted toe in the dust for emphasis.

“Shall I cluck for you, my little chicken?” Dark eyes glinted in his swarthy face. “Are you feeling

frightened, over-faced?” Juan glanced into the arena then back at Yoli. “What is your answer?”

“It must be obvious. After all this time with you, I am not afraid of Satan. I simply said that the ride was most difficult. What’s the matter, Juan? Don’t you trust me to get the job done?” She looked up at him, black eyes wide, all studied innocence.

“I am well past trusting anyone, Yoli. You’d better remember that. Do as you are told, perform as expected, and your reward will be great. Make a mistake and ... you figure it out. There will be nothing to lose at that point anyway. The game is over. There’s no more time for you.”

“What does that mean?” She struck a pose, lower lip in a pout.

“In simple words that even you can understand, idiota, it is the horse that wins. You cannot possibly believe you are the only one that can ride her. I should have had the ride in the first place and we both know it. You are expendable, especially if you cannot perform. If you cannot win you will be replaced ... by me.”

He looked into her face, as if to read her bland expression. “The choice is simple, Yoli, win the class or lose the ride. Does it need to be clearer than that?”

“No, Juan, I understand.” Dark eyes bored into his. “What’s going on with Senor Spinelli? He’s so nervous it makes me want to scream.”

“All in good time, Yoli, all in good time. You just concentrate on getting the mare through the courses clean and fast. There is no second place for us. First is the only place that is acceptable.”

Yoli stared up at him from under her lashes, a coy expression on her face.

“I’m hungry, Juan. Let’s go get something to eat, huh?” She turned away from him, heading for the food concession. She glanced over her shoulder. “If you don’t

want to have lunch with me, I'm sure I can find someone who does.”

“If you think I care, you're crazy.” He watched her walk toward the concession stand, shrugged his shoulders and turned away. Katrina had always held far more interest for him than Yoli. He hurried toward her stall.

## *Chapter 5*

Henderson is a quiet suburb located just outside of Las Vegas. It works hard at providing its residents with an atmosphere of family living, chain-store shopping, moderately priced restaurants and a good school system. Palm trees line the sleepy streets, weaving through neighborhoods of middle class, attractive, neatly cared for homes.

Strangely enough, the farther you get from Las Vegas the more upscale the neighborhoods become. The houses, much larger there and recessed from the road, have pools in back. Mature trees shade the winding streets and a proliferation of unique, drought-friendly gardens dominate as the landscape of choice.

Most of the homes sport colorful rock or sand-scape yards. Except for the golf courses that sprouted like mushrooms after a rain, there was virtually no grass in this desert.

Vinny pulled into the driveway of a sprawling ranch-style house and parked under a shady tree. He got out of the car and hurried across the driveway onto the shaded porch. Red-faced, he buzzed the doorbell and ran a hand across his damp brow. He was happy to see his cousin open the door so quickly. "Hey, Bernie."

"Come on in, Vinny. Ya look a little sweaty." Bernie shrugged and opened the door farther, an amused look on his face. "AC still on the fritz?"

Vinny entered the cool foyer, heaved a sigh of relief and mopped his forehead again, this time with a checkered handkerchief. He hated the heat and even after twenty years of living in Vegas, he still missed his old Brooklyn neighborhood. All summer long and well into fall, he dreamed of snow.

“Come on in, take a load off.” Bernie led the way down the hall into a spacious family room. He indicated the large sofa and said, “So, how’s by you? Ya wanna Bud?” He handed Vinny a can without waiting for a reply.

Vinny sat on the sofa, rested his elbows on his knees and rolled the cold can slowly across his forehead. “Thanks. It feels so much better than it tastes. So, tell me, how’s the stuff work, anyway?” He popped the top, took a long swallow of the icy cold beer and belched.

Bernie walked over to his desk and picked up a small vial filled with white powder. “Easy as pie, cuz. The stuff is tasteless. Pour it into her food, drink, whatever, just make sure she gets all of it. Goes into effect in about an hour, but for best results, make it two. She won’t feel a thing until she starts exercising. The effects escalate slowly, but they peak out pretty quick once the heart rate speeds up.” He handed the vial to Vinny.

“So what happens when the heart rate speeds up?” He clicked his index finger against the side of the vial and stared at the contents.

“It’s real quick, Vinny. Massive heart attack.” Bernie gazed at him, lips pursed. “And before ya ask me, it’s just about undetectable. There isn’t a test I know of that can find it and believe me, I would know. Just make sure ya wipe the vial clean before ya pass it. Better still, wear gloves.” He took the vial back, swabbed the outside and the cap with rubbing alcohol and wiped it thoroughly with a rag.

“Ya got a pouch or something to put it in? Don’t forget the gloves when ya handle it from now on. It’s only the prints that matter, because ya can buy these little vials anywhere in town. They’re untraceable.”

Vinny fished in his pocket and pulled out a small baggie. “What I said before about trusting Juan ... ya feel confident dealin’ with him, huh?”

Bernie dropped the vial inside. “Yeah, he’s okay. Works for Spinelli. Don’t sweat the small stuff, cuz, just finish up the brew. I gotta go.”

They chatted a moment longer and then Bernie walked Vinny to the door. “See ya later.”

“Yeah, g’bye.” Vinny got into his car, drove down the driveway and headed back to Vegas.

\* \* \*

The Grand Prix class was huge. It was first of several trials that would determine the Olympic Team placement and tension ran high. Flags from all over the world lined the walls of the covered stadium.

The DT team took their seats and gazed around the arena, picking out familiar faces. The twins had decided to play golf and would meet them at the hotel pool later in the day. The girls sat in the front row, checking out the course, the boys in the row behind them.

“Ye gods,” Jessi said “Would ya get a load of those jumps. They’re huge. What’s the height on these guys, anybody know?”

“They’re up there at five feet plus, Jessi,” Melanie said as she mentally walked the impressive course. “Plenty big enough.”

Blair felt a light film of sweat form on her forehead even though the climate-controlled arena was a comfortable seventy degrees. Just looking at the huge jumps made her breath come fast and she shivered. The oxers looked as wide as they were high. The arena was relatively tight, making the approach to half the jumps blind angles. Some did not come up until the horse was almost there.

She looked at the triple combination and gulped. *Talk about focus. Dear Lord. Betsy, my Mom, used to do*

*this. And win at it.* She knew she would not be following in her mother's footsteps at least not that close.

Becky glanced at Blair and then back at the jumps. They were massive. All the wings had been sponsored by some company or another and giant beer bottles, grocery bags, wishing wells and lattice tunnels, all painted in bright colors, bore the sponsor's name. It looked like a circus.

"Gosh," Shievon said, nudging Jessi. "Take a look at that vertical. It can't be four strides from the last oxer in the combination.

"I can't even imagine riding a course like that," Jessi said. "It gives me the creeps just looking at it."

Melanie, on the other hand, was in seventh heaven. This was where she planned to end up. *She and Benny.* They'd been doing so well in the Hi-Juniors she was confident they could handle the increased size and scope of the open courses. Blue eyes intense, she watched as the first rider, a girl from Canada, entered the ring. By the time she exited, she had acquired eight faults. The next several riders went with similar results.

Twelve thousand people leaped to their feet, screaming with delight as they recognized the rider on deck. The announcer said, "Let's give a warm Las Vegas welcome to Richard Spooner, The Master of Faster, leading PCHA Grand Prix money winner and Olympic hopeful, and Robinson."

Robinson trotted into the ring to the roar of the crowd, flicking his toes, tail high, lights glinting off his white coat. He glanced at the fences, snorted in derision and gave a light buck. Richard grinned, stroking the muscular neck.

"Here we go, ladies and gentlemen, 754, Richard Spooner and Robinson, on course."

The look of determination on Richard's face matched Robinson's. They surged forward as the whistle

blew and gunned for the first fence. Their goal was a seat on the Olympic team and winning this class was the first step to that goal. The pair surged over the course, slicing, dicing, making impossible turns and clearing the last fence in a record-breaking time. The breathless crowd saw the first clean round of the class.

Screaming fans gave them a standing ovation, coming and going. A tough team just triumphed over a tough course. They laid down the challenge and now there was someone to beat.

Billy and Larry looked at each other and grinned.

“One day I’ll be out there and you’ll be cheering for me,” Billy said. “I know Bitsy can do this, no problem. We’ll be ready in another year or three. How about you, got aspirations for this stuff?”

“Oh, yeah,” Larry said. “Now that things are pretty much back to normal at home, I’m going to continue riding and showing through college. I’m looking into getting some lessons with Richard. He’s at the LA Equestrian Center, you know. It can’t be ten minutes from school.” Larry looked at Billy and shrugged. “If he doesn’t take students, he may be able to point me to a good trainer in his barn.”

Larry looked down the row at Melanie and smiled as he caught her attention. She grinned at him, eyes alight. He sighed and turned back to Billy. “If Melly hadn’t talked to my mother, my future would be very different right now. I’ll never be able to thank her enough. She’s the best.”

“She sure is.” Billy glanced at Melanie. A slight flush crept up his neck, coloring his cheeks.

The announcer said, “Next to see, 656, Katrina, owned by Spinelli Industries and ridden by Yolanda Navarro; 656 on course.”

“Well, how about that,” Larry said as the large chestnut mare entered the ring. “That’s the girl that almost bought Connie. Gee, let’s see how she does.”

Yoli did a masterful job, making tight turns, slicing and dicing her way to a clean, fast round, but not fast enough. Spooner’s time held. In the end, she placed third, but the thunderous applause when she went into the arena for her yellow ribbon did little to make her feel better.

The look on Juan’s face as he stood off to the side was strange and she remembered his admonition about winning. She had done her best, used every bit of skill she possessed, but it was not enough to win. The mare had been there for her every step of the way. Katrina’s performance was perfect. Nonetheless, they placed third, not first. Yoli shivered.

Mr. Spinelli’s face looked like a thundercloud. Little flashes of lightning flickered behind his intense, black eyes. As she slid off the mare’s back he approached her, keeping his distance from the hot sweaty horse.

“Ya lost.” He virtually hissed at her. “How come?”

Yoli swallowed, glanced in his eyes, then away. Unsure what to say, she hesitated, wringing her hands.

“I did the best I could do, Senor Spinelli. The mare was right there for me every step of the way. I don’t know what happened. We made all the turns, I got the right spots every time. She was clean....”

Yoli swallowed again and extended the ribbon to him. “Our time was great and we’re still in contention....”

“Stop talkin’ gibberish at me ‘cause I dunno’ a word yer sayin’. And whatever you’re holding, keep it. I don’t do yellow, only blue.” He shook his head, eyes squeezed to slits. “What I *do* know is that ya lost.” He stepped closer to her. “And I lost a ton of money over it. You said you would win.”

“Senor Spinelli, I tried my best. There is never a guarantee except to lose. That you can control. Winning has much to do with luck.”

“Looks like yours just ran out,” he growled. He turned on his heel and walked away from her.

Juan glared at Yoli from across the aisle, hands jammed in his pockets. He turned and strode in the opposite direction, shaking his head in disgust.

The groom reached for the reins and led the mare back to the barn, stroking her neck in consolation.

Yoli stood in the aisle, alone, a yellow ribbon fluttering from her hand. Tears gathered in the corners of her eyes. She banged her fist against the wall, threw the ribbon on the ground and stomped out of the arena to the parking lot.

\* \* \*

The kids gathered jackets and purses and joined the crowd exiting the stadium.

“Gosh, that was so exciting,” Becky said, squeezing Steve’s hand. “I don’t know, though. I might have to rethink this Grand Prix stuff.”

He smiled down at her and nodded. “Whoa, I have to agree with you, it’s too high for me.” He pushed a stray red curl from her cheek and kissed her.

“Hey,” Steve said, turning around and raising his voice so the rest of the kids could hear him. “Do we have plans for tonight?”

Billy nodded, a grin on his face. “Well, there are tons of things to do. Have you guys ever heard of Fremont Street? They have the most fantastic light show I’ve ever seen and fab shopping. It stretches for several blocks and the music is awesome. Classic rock. Great food, too, all kinds of ethnic stuff.”

“I’m up for anythin’,” Melanie said, “as long as Billy isn’t payin’ for it. And somethin’ a little more reasonable than last night might be in order.” She grinned at Billy. “I’m sayin’, dude. The tickets, the ride up here, the room, supper last night and then breakfast this morning. I’m beginnin’ to feel like a freeloader. We need to pay your freight for the rest of the trip.”

The kids agreed, elbowing each other and chuckling. Cries of pick-o-the-chick, burger biggie, pizza and fish filet rippled through the group. Laughter and a lot of kissing and hugging happened, followed by more dinner suggestions. Reduced to hysterics, they got into the waiting limo and headed back to the hotel.

## *Chapter 6*

The sun had not yet set. Like a scorching ball of flame, it inched toward the far blue horizon then disappeared in a poof, leaving an empty, cloudless blue sky. Soon the stars would try again to compete in their losing battle with the blazing lights of the city.

Bob parked the limo in a nearby lot one block over from Fremont Street. He'd told Billy earlier there was no way he would let them walk around in this area alone. He promised to remain in the background, but he was ready for anything that might happen. They didn't talk about it all that much, but the kids were more than happy to have him around. His quirky sense of humor and ability to virtually blend into thin air often made them giggle and his stories of past adventures as a Navy seal gave them the shivers. They seemed to find trouble wherever they went and in a place like Las Vegas, trouble wasn't hard to find. His company was a welcome addition.

Thronges of people from all over the world came to enjoy this free outdoor extravaganza and family groups walked in the street, looking at all the goodies. Little kids strapped in their strollers screamed at their older siblings, frantic to get out of the confining harnesses and join in the fray. They bounced around in their rolling jails, wails unheard in the loud music and general melee and ignored for the most part.

Every once in a while, one would flip over the bars, sure that landing on the hard blacktop would ensure freedom. One parent or the other scooped the unhurt urchin from the ground, plopped it unceremoniously back into the buggy and shortened the length of the harness. No amount

of fit-throwing would induce the parent to let it out onto the street.

Small boutiques lined the street and vendors set up booths at the curbs, selling everything from tacos and burritos to burgers, barbecue and ice cream.

The girls entered a charming store filled with beautiful leather goods. Melanie squeaked when she saw a knock-off Gucci bag just like one her mother had been wanting for ages. Every purse in the store cost twenty dollars. She picked up a little faux-Prada number she just had to have for herself. She could not believe the prices and pulled her wallet from her pocket with a grin.

The salesman slipped the soft leather purses in a bag and handed it to her. "Even Mr. Gucci can't tell the difference." He grinned, pocketed the money and then turned to his next customer.

Blair held a darling Coach bag similar to Melanie's, a wide grin on her face. *Talk about a confidence builder for your first day of college. Oh, yes.*

Shievon clutched a miniature Hermès purse of dark brown leather designed to look like an English saddle, complete with small stirrup irons and a bucking strap. "Look at this one," she said, flipping the tiny stirrups back and forth.

"That's a definite *must have* in my book," Jessi said, selecting one just like it in yellow leather. "It's the same color as my car."

Becky found one in tan. "I guess this is as close to Hermès as I'll ever get." She turned the purse over in her hands, hesitating, wondering if she should splurge and get it. *Old habits die hard. I have the money now. I can afford this purse. I can afford two.* "I've gotta have it," she said, pulling money from her pocket. "We'll be like the three

musketeers.” The girls grinned as they got in line to pay for their purchases.

The boys waited for them on the sidewalk, chuckling at the girls and making the requisite remarks about the new bags. They stepped back into the jammed street and headed for the light show.

Smells of roasting meat assaulted their nostrils as they walked and their mouths watered. They stopped at the gyro stand.

Becky watched, fascinated as the vendor cut paper-thin slices from the lamb shank roasting on a rotating spit. He arranged them in a deep pile on a huge slice of pita bread, covered it liberally with a dressing of sour cream, cucumbers, onions and mint and handed the plate to a young man.

“Doesn’t that look great?” Becky swallowed and nudged Steve. “Would you like to split one? We missed lunch and it looks like we won’t be eating dinner for a while.”

“Sure.” Steve nodded at the man. “We’ll take one, please.”

Shievon crowded next to Jessi, whispering, “You think they’re safe to eat? Mom is always talking about getting food poisoning from street vendors, but that looks so good. You gonna get one?”

Jessi wrinkled her nose and shrugged. She turned to Jeff. “I don’t know if I like lamb, but it smells good. What do you think? You want to share one?”

He grinned at her and nodded. “Not to worry. I’ll finish what ya don’t eat. I love gyros.”

“Well then,” she said, turning to Shievon. “That settles it. Gyros it is.”

The kids put in their orders, licking their lips in anticipation as the slicing knife whirled through the air.

“Oh, man.” Becky held a napkin to her mouth as her eyes watered. “That’s hot. And so good, umm.”

Steve nodded in agreement, his mouth too full to speak.

Blair grinned at Kenny and took another, bigger bite. “I didn’t know I liked lamb,” she mumbled, licking the sour cream off her lips. “We have to tell Lena about this.”

Jessi could only nod, her cheeks puffed out like a squirrel. Gyros made a definite hit all around.

They strolled along with the crowd, stopping from time to time to window shop. Melanie and Blair, intent on filling out their college wardrobe, bought several tops with matching slacks and several light sundresses.

“I feel like a pack mule,” Kenny said, accepting yet another bag from Blair. She grinned in response and gave him a kiss. “You’re my big strong hero, yes you are!” Bright green eyes twinkled.

High overhead stretched what appeared to be a long white canopy. Rock music played in the background. Suddenly, lights flashed on and they looked up to see whales, seals, sharks and all manner of marine life swimming above them.

The sound of flutes, drums and strident guitars supplied by Jethro Tull’s *Locomotive Breath* blared and the whole ceiling started moving, or at least that’s what it looked like as the cameras gave the illusion of animals swimming past them overhead. The extravaganza of sight and sound beguiled the audience, young and old alike.

The little kids, caught up in the pounding music, twirled and danced in the middle of the street. Teenagers showed off the latest moves, while their parents joined in, a more dignified bounce to their steps.

When the show ended, they trooped back to the limo, Bob falling into step behind them.

Melanie settled in the seat next to Larry and yawned. "Oh, I'm bushed." She glanced around at the other kids and shrugged. "I'm just about outa gas. I don't want to go to sleep yet, but a nice relaxin' chair by the pool sure sounds good."

Larry nodded in agreement. "That gyro was great, but I could use some dinner."

Shievon snuggled closer to Billy, looking at him in question. "What do you think? That sounds like fun. We can get a bite to eat ... watch the fireworks if we can stay awake that long. When do they start, around nine?"

"Fireworks sound great. I bet the pool is heated. Anyone else up for a swim?" Jessi glanced from Jeff to the other kids.

Becky chuckled. "I don't want to swim, but hanging out at the pool sounds fine to me." She nestled into Steve's arms and sighed. "I have to admit, though, I'm not long for this world. I'll never make midnight."

\* \* \*

The restaurant was all windows on one side with wonderful views of the pool and beach and a spacious patio for outdoor dining. Although it was as dark as it ever got in Vegas, perimeter lights made it easy to see people swimming and playing in the water.

As the host led them across the patio to their table, Kenny draped an arm across Billy's shoulder, pulling him into a headlock.

"I just want ya to know dinner is on me tonight. I'm gettin' off dirt cheap compared to last night."

Billy chuckled and dug an elbow into Kenny's side. "We'll just call you quick draw McGraw." His voice rose. "Kenny's buying, everybody, so the sky's the limit."

The kids chuckled as they settled at their table, menus in hand. Famed for its signature salads, stacked sandwiches and super burgers, the kids vacillated over what to order.

"Well, I'm getting a burger with the works." Jessi licked her bow-shaped lips and grinned up at Jeff. "Crispy fries with tartar sauce."

Becky glanced at her friend and shook her head. "You should weigh a ton, Jessi. All that fried stuff will give ya zits. It's time for a salad or some fruit."

"That's just an old wives tale, y'know," Blair said. "Studies show it isn't what you eat. It's hormones and clogged pores."

Melanie nodded. "Well, I've always found that a nice salad just seems to clear my...."

"Eeuw!" Shievon said, staring at Melanie. "That's more information than I...."

"Shut *up*," interrupted Jessi. "Do we really need to go into bodily functions at dinner? I'll have a salad, okay? Good grief."

The kids finished their dinners, rehashing the show and going on about Richard Spooner's smashing performance and the great job Yoli did. It was a surprise to them all to see her there, and even though they really didn't know her, they felt a *hometown* connection and wished her the best.

The twins talked about their golf game, the super course they played today and their anticipation about the new course they'd play tomorrow.

"It's almost like Palm Springs," Kenny said. "Great courses." Jeff nodded at his twin in agreement.

It made Billy jealous. “Man, I wish I could clone myself. I love to golf. I’ve heard a lot about that course. Is the 7<sup>th</sup> hole as rough as they say?”

“Worse,” Jeff said. “If that’s a par five, I’m Tiger Woods.” He reached for Jessi, pulling her toward him. “Or maybe Richard Spooner. Now that would be interestin’.”

Conversation waned. They leaned back in their chairs and decided to call it a night. The show started early in the morning and they didn’t want to miss a minute. Thanking Kenny for dinner, they headed for their rooms and sleep.

A little before three, Becky heard her cell tune. She blinked several times and fished around in the darkness, trying to find it. Finally, she flipped it open and whispered, “Hello?”

“Hi, Becky, it’s Toni. I’m sorry to call this late, but Maggie had an accident earlier this evening and broke two fingers so she can’t braid. As if that’s not bad enough, I’m swamped with massages. I had to run her over to Urgent Care and it took forever. Anyway, she said she bumped into you at the show and thought you might be able to help us. Can you come to the barn and braid three horses for me?”

“Sure Toni, glad to help out. I’ll have to call a cab to get to the barn. I don’t have a car. It’ll take me about half an hour.”

“You’re just the best, Becky. I owe you one, not to mention you’ll get a nice spot of cash ... one hundred per horse. Sure will be good to see you again.”

“I’ll need a pass to get in the gate, Toni. Can you meet me?” Becky asked.

“You bet. Just give me a call on the cell when you get to Gate A and I’ll meet you there. Man, what a night. I can’t thank you enough, honey. See you soon.”

Becky slid her feet into her shoes, grabbed up her shirt and shorts and tiptoed into the bathroom. She closed the door and turned on the lights. She dialed the cell and soon a sleepy voice said, "Hello?"

"Steve, it's me. I have to go over to the barn and braid three horses for Maggie. She broke some fingers and can't do it, so I told Toni I'd help them out. Listen, how do I get a taxi? Just call the front desk?"

"I'll take care of that, Becky. I'm going with you. Let's meet in the hall in a minute."

Steve called the front desk and asked them to hold a taxi. He dressed in a hurry, and met Becky just as she came out of the suite.

"You sure you want to come? It's going to be so boring." Becky gazed up at Steve as they entered the elevator.

He looked down at her and grinned. "You can't think I'd let you wander around out there by yourself. The barn is deserted. You can't go alone at this time of night. Besides, I crashed the second my head hit the pillow. We only missed, what, three hours, max?" Steve hugged her to him and smiled. The doors slid open with a hiss.

Steve stopped at the coffee bar and ordered two large containers and a couple of pastries. Balancing the coffee tray and the bag, he said, "Your chariot awaits, m'lady."

The taxi entered the empty parking lot of the Thomas and Mack Center and stopped in front of Gate A.

Steve handed the driver the fare and asked, "Do you think you can come back for us later? Do you have a card or something?"

The driver said, "555-taxi. Easy to remember. Someone's always available. Give us a call when you're ready." He accepted the tip from Steve. "Thanks."

They got out of the taxi and watched as he drove back through the parking lot and disappeared into the night.

“Becky? Over here,” called Toni, waving her arms as she came through the gate. She walked up to Becky and gave her a hug. “I can’t thank you enough for doing this. Gee, it’s good to see you. How’ve you been?”

Becky introduced Toni to Steve, and taking the passes, followed the older woman back through the guarded gate.

“They’ve got us split up a bit,” she said, leading the way down the aisle. “The horses I’d like you to do are over there. They’re not from our barn, just some extras that Maggie picked up. I’m five aisles over.” They made another turn in the maze and stopped in front of a row of stalls.

“Here we are.”

A dark brown gelding with an adorable head poked an inquisitive nose over the door. He gave a low, genial nicker to his visitors, exhaling in deep, chuckling breaths.

“I brought Maggie’s braiding kit and ladder for you to use.” Indicating a plastic box on the floor by the stall door, she laughed. “I didn’t think you had yours with you.”

Becky tossed her a grin. “Good thinking, Toni. So who do these horses belong to?”

“Shoot, I don’t know.” Toni glanced down at her watch and made a hissing sound. “You know how it is. You put your sheet out there on the board, and they just tell you the stalls the horses are in and what they want.”

She glanced at Becky with a grin. “Maggie wants to buy a young horse and she’s trying to save up every bit of money she can before she gets married. That’s why she took on extra jobs. Poor kid, she works so hard. Then that dumb pony kicks her. She’s in a lot of pain. Well, I have to get back to work. I’m glad you’re not alone here.”

Turning to Steve with a smile she glanced at his coffee container. "If you want refills, there's a hospitality area over there." She waved in the general direction of the far end of the tent.

"All they have right now is coffee, but it's free."

Toni hugged Becky again. "I'll have my cell on if you need me. Go ahead and keep the passes. I'll get them when I see you tomorrow."

She glanced down at her watch again, dismayed. "Gosh, it's getting late. Thanks so much, sweetie. You're the best. I'll buy lunch tomorrow and give you a nice fat envelope. They pay in cash." With that, she left them alone.

Becky picked up the short stepladder and the plastic box and went into the first stall. The dark brown gelding nosed her side, snuffling for treats.

"I'm out of goodies, buddy." She looked over the stall door at Steve. "Do you see a halter and lead shank out there?"

"Yes, there's one right here." Steve opened the door and handed them to Becky.

"You don't mind if I sit in here, do you?" he asked as he entered the stall, pulling the door closed behind him.

"Of course not." She blew him a kiss. "You're gonna be bored silly real soon. Might as well try to catch a nap."

Becky slipped the halter over the horse's head and snapped the lead shank in place. She tied him to one of the stall bars next to his hay net and got to work.

Maggie's braiding box contained everything she needed. Pulling out a plastic bottle already filled with water, Becky sprayed it on his mane. Several quick swipes with the comb and she was ready to go. She separated it into even sections and started at the top of his neck, making quick work of the braids.

Unlike thoroughbreds, warmbloods like this one tended to have full, coarse manes and thicker necks. The trick to good braids was to make them tight and even.

While they braid hunters with an eye to enhancing the overall beauty of the neck, jumpers weren't as particular and some didn't braid at all.

Steve curled up in the corner of the stall. "Are you having a good time so far, Becky?" He'd found a clean spot to rest in and leaned against the wall, knees drawn up to his chest.

She glanced over her shoulder, eyes alight. "It's been fantastic. I never imagined anything like the dinner we had at the Eiffel Tower. My mom is gonna think I'm putting her on. And wasn't that light show fantastic? And those gyros ... you ever have one before?" She tucked the braids up into thirds and sewed them into place.

"Our suite is so beautiful I can't believe it. I mean, just attending the horse show is like fantasy land, but all these extras." She chuckled and turned back to the horse. "As if that's not enough, I'm gonna make three hundred bucks tonight doing something I enjoy anyway. Now how cool is that?"

Dark eyes half closed in sleep, he nodded. "It's way cool." He glanced at her, smile vague. "You're such a hard worker. I'm proud of you." He yawned then stretched long legs straight out in front of him. "Yoli did a good job today, don't you think? Third behind Richard Spooner and Vicky Shipley? There's hardly much to complain about with that ribbon." He chuckled. "Those fences were huge. Man, no Grand Prix for me."

Becky shook her head and harrumphed in agreement. "And the worst part is the courses get more difficult with each day. Lord knows what tomorrow will bring. That one big combination ... all oxers, I held my breath each time."

Quick, practiced fingers flew through the gelding's mane as Becky continued down the neck, reaching the last tuft by his withers. She slipped off the halter and pointed an admonishing finger at him.

"No rolling, dude, and no rubbing, hear that? If I see you scratch 'em, I'm gonna tie you back up. Be a good boy, okay?"

Steve rose from his corner seat and reached over the door to unlock the latch.

"Next," Becky said, a grin on her face. The next horse was also a warmblood and Becky hauled the step stool close to his neck, haltered him and secured him to the rail. Reaching up, she sprayed his mane and repeated the procedure.

She was half-way through when Steve said, "Whew, I'm going to get another cup of coffee. I need to move around. You want one?"

"That'd be great. You know how I like it."

"I'll be back as soon as I can. I hope I don't get lost."

She chuckled at him and nodded. "My phone's on. I'll guide you through the maze. See you in a little bit."

## *Chapter 7*

Becky finished the last braid, gathered up her stuff and headed for the final horse on her schedule. She haltered the mare, tying her next to the hay net so she'd stand quiet and eat.

As often happens during summer in the desert, a strong breeze began to play in the tops of the show tents, slapping the canvas against the uprights that supported the portable stalls. It spooked the nervous mare, making her dance in place. Unlike the previous horses, she was a thoroughbred and very attuned to her surroundings.

When a particularly hard gust made the ties slap the tent in sharp, whipping sounds, the nervous mare crouched, trembling.

The barn, dim lit so the horses could rest, was in shadows. Bare light bulbs swayed now, swinging fifteen feet high above every third stall. They cast dim light on the aisles as shadows rose and fell with their arc. It was eerie, increasing the anxiety in the mare.

Becky crooned to the horse, her voice soft and low, hypnotic. She turned her attention to the girl and began to calm. The wind died down as quickly as it rose. The mare drew several deep breaths and sighed. She relaxed her hip, turned to the hay net and began eating.

The sound of approaching voices came to Becky from a couple of stall rows over. Two men speaking in rapid Spanish walked down the aisle. Deep in thought, she didn't register their words or conversation at first. One voice seemed vaguely familiar and without really meaning to, she started to listen.

"Do you have a hard time getting the drugs?" asked one of the men, his voice just above a whisper.

“No problem, this stuff is easy to get,” was the soft reply.

Without conscious effort, Becky’s mind routinely began to translate their sentences as the voices got closer.

“Which one is it?”

“Row three, stall sixteen.”

“Is the syringe ready?”

The men rounded the end of the row and walked right past Becky’s stall to one halfway down the aisle. They never saw her standing behind the huge mare.

Syringe? Becky’s ears perked up. How strange. She heard a stall door open, slight rustling movements in the shavings and then the door closed again. She heard the men continue down the barn aisle. Then nothing.

She finished the final braid and took off the halter. She peered over the stall door, uneasy. *Where in the world is Steve?*

Packing up the braiding gear, she closed the stall door behind her and secured the lock. She leaned the stool up against the wall and placed the braiding box under it.

Curiosity piqued, Becky walked down the aisle, stopped at number sixteen and peered inside. A huge warmblood mare, well over seventeen hands, stood in the back of the stall, resting. The dozing horse pricked her ears when she saw Becky and nickered a soft welcome. She crossed the stall and approached the door in curiosity.

Becky stroked the inquiring nose. “Hello, big girl, you okay?”

She ran a trained eye down the horse’s glossy neck. No signs of sweat or agitation and her breath came in soft, steady puffs, large eyes clear and alert. The mare sniffed her fingers once again then went back to her hay net.

“Becky? Where are you?” Steve’s voice, although just above a whisper, carried in the eerie silence of the deserted barn.

“I’m right over here.” She retraced her steps up the barn aisle.

“Hey, what’s up? Are you all done?” He handed her a container of coffee. “Sorry that took so long. They were just starting a new pot. Hope it’s worth the wait. One thing for sure, it’s hot. Man.”

Becky smiled at Steve and pried off the lid. “Smells great, thanks.” She blew on the steaming cup and nodded in gratitude. “I was just looking at a horse.”

She sipped the hot liquid and felt the caffeine do its wake-up job as it hit her empty stomach with a jolt. “Gotta tell ya, Steve, something strange just happened. Two guys, probably grooms, came down the aisle, talking. One asked the other if he had trouble finding drugs and where was the horse.”

“Drugs?” Steve’s eyes widened. “You’re kidding.”

“Yep. They went into a stall just down from us, number sixteen. At least, they mentioned that one. I didn’t want them to see me, so I didn’t get a look at either of them. They left just seconds later and walked away. Did you pass anyone on the way back?”

“No, not a soul. I don’t think anyone’s here in the whole barn but us.” Steve said. “I only saw the gal that made the coffee and the guard and he looked asleep to me.”

They strolled back down the aisle and stopped in front of stall sixteen. The mare dozed again, still calm and relaxed. Her coat remained cool and dry and her steady breathing was peaceful and unlabored.

“Seems fine to me. Who is it?”

“I don’t know, but she sure looks familiar, doesn’t she? Is there a stall sign or anything?”

Steve moved a day-sheet aside and read the nameplate underneath it. *Sirocco*.

“Gosh, I know who this horse is,” Becky exclaimed. “I thought I recognized her. She’s one of the leading Grand

Prix horses on the circuit. That mare won all kinds of stuff at Showpark last year. Can't remember who the rider is, can you?"

Steve shook his head and yawned. "Well, she looks fine to me. Shoot, maybe it was just some Bute or vitamins, something like that. Doesn't have to be sinister."

She took his arm as they turned to leave. "And yet wouldn't you think her groom would know where her stall was? And why would the other one ask if it was hard to get the *drugs*. And why say drugs if you mean vitamins? *Vitamins*? It sure is strange, you have to admit."

They retraced their steps and Steve took out his cell. "Hello? Yes, could you please send a taxi to Gate A at the Thomas and Mack Center? Oh, that's great. We'll be waiting."

## *Chapter 8*

The sun rose over the city, bouncing off the glass buildings and glittering in defiance of the man-made lights. A gold-tinged rose painted the east facing walls, splashing out in all directions and thus began another spectacular day in paradise began.

Yoli and Juan sat on the balcony of their hotel room, sipping coffee in the bright morning sunlight. They watched the unending, bustling activity of the strip below. Even at this early hour, tourists filled the streets, heading for the casinos and an all-you-could-eat breakfast.

Their balcony, directly across the street from the Belliago had a fantastic view of the famous dancing fountains. Although always impressive even in broad daylight, it was the nighttime display as thousands of lights splashed them with rainbow colors provided a spectacular sight for all.

Juan poured himself another cup of coffee and shrugged at Yoli. "Want some more?"

She smiled up at him and nodded, extending her cup. "It's really good, gracias." Yoli leaned back in her chair, a cocky, knowing look on her face. "I feel very good this morning, my husband. I also feel very lucky."

Juan looked at her with cold, black eyes and wished it wasn't so. He'd regretted marrying her before the ink was dry on the license. Why had he done it? He was such a fool, and remembered his father's comments about marrying in haste and repenting at leisure and grimaced. True words indeed.

Yoli raised her arms above her head and stretched. "The mare went very well yesterday. Third still keeps me in the running for the team. I know Senor Spinelli was not happy, but perhaps today will be my lucky day and we will

win. I'll still get a spot on the team, even with no better than another third."

"First is all that counts," Juan said. "Senor Spinelli doesn't care a fig about the Olympic team or whether you make it. He is placing heavy bets on the mare and winning is a point of honor for him. He has some stupid competition going on with one of his horse friends. If he loses again, well—this is your last chance." He shrugged and looked down at his hands. "It won't be good for you."

She ignored his comment and left the table, leaning against the balcony rail. "We don't have to be at the show grounds for another couple of hours." Yoli turned to him with a flirtatious grin. "Let's go down to the casino. Like I said, I feel lucky."

Bending down, she placed a hand on either side of his face and kissed him. "Besides," she pouted, beautiful black eyes alight. "I'm hungry. I have to keep up my strength, no?"

She didn't notice the stiffness in his body as he leaned away from her.

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"Where the heck have you been?" Shievon asked as Becky came in the door. "We knew Steve was with you, when the boys said he was gone, too, but we were still worried. Where'd you guys take off to?"

"Sorry about that. I should have left a note." Becky glanced at the other girls and shrugged. "I just didn't want to wake anyone up. It was so early, like three in the morning. I had to go over to the show barn and braid a couple of horses for a friend."

"Well, y'all're okay, so that's all that matters," Melanie said. "How'd ya get the braiding job?"

"Oh, I ran into an old friend at the show the other day. Maggie. Her mom was the trainer at a barn I worked in near San Jose. They're here doin' massage and braiding for

their barn. Some stupid pony kicked Maggie ... broke two fingers, so Toni asked if I could stand in for her."

She shrugged, pulling her dirty shirt over her head. "Really didn't have a choice. Toni's the one that taught me all I know about massage and braiding so I felt kinda obligated. Not to mention I made three hundred bucks, so it wasn't exactly a favor."

"Kind of a busman's holiday," Blair said. "Are you going to need a nap or will you be ready soon? The show starts in another hour or so."

"Oh, I'll be ready," Becky said with a grin. "I just need a shower and something to eat." She glanced at the other girls and chuckled. "I'm gonna order room service. You guys want anything? This one's on me, my turn to treat." She grinned at her friends and shrugged. "I'm feeling flush."

They giggled at her offer and scanned the room service menu, selecting their favorites.

"I'm getting the works if you're buying," Jessi said with a laugh. "Oh, how about a bagel with cream cheese and *lox*." She made a gagging sound. "That sounds tasty. I'll take two."

Blair gave her the elbow and Jessi squealed in pretended pain.

"Get on in there and shower, Becky," Melanie said. "I'll call the room service order. Should be here by the time ya finish." She cast a mock glare at Jessi. "I'll try and rein in the wild spender, here. Ya want the usual?"

"Yes, please."

Becky pulled a fresh shirt and a pair of shorts out of her suitcase and headed for the shower. Turning the tap on full blast and hoping it'd refresh her, she yawned and stepped under the warm water. She applied a handful of shampoo to her auburn curls and scrubbed while her mind replayed the events at the barn.

*A syringe full of what if not drugs?* She shook her head, lips pursed. *Come on, get real. It had to be a vitamin of some sort, or Bute, something legal. What else could it be?* Every horse that placed submitted to a urine analysis. Random testing happened on a regular basis throughout the show to winners and losers alike. Drug testing was common knowledge throughout the horse show world and no one would even consider trying to get away with it.

The international games came with so many rules and regulations about drug testing that the idea of doping a horse to enhance its performance was virtually unheard of anymore, especially at this level. It still happened from time to time at the lower levels, usually steroids or light tranquilizers, but they never got away with it, especially if they won.

At least, Becky didn't think so. Besides, the consequences far outweighed the possibility of succeeding and the penalties were staggering.

With the integrity of the sport at stake, the FEI turned rabid when it came to rule infringements, especially drugs. Not only were the trainer, rider, owner and horse barred from further competition at that event, they forfeited all monies, ribbons and points accumulated at the show.

In addition, the FEI often banned them from showing for several months and levied huge fines on all concerned. At management discretion, they could even be banned from a particular venue for life, depending on the circumstances. The price was just too high to pay.

It was devastating to the trainer in particular. Disbarment included every horse and rider that rode with them, effectively putting the whole team out of the running when it came to accumulating year-end points. An empty barn resulted as appalled owners bailed, anxious to distance themselves from such unsavory and unsportsmanlike conduct.

Becky wrapped a towel around her body and stepped out of the shower, thinking about the repercussions. No owner or rider would take a chance with a trainer like that. What were they supposed to do if he cheated again? In one broad stroke, the entire barn went out on suspension.

*Nope, it has to be vitamins. But why a syringe? Why not simply put them in her feed? And why would that one guy refer to it as drugs and why in the world would vitamins be hard to get?*

She toweled herself off, squeezed some toothpaste on her brush and scrubbed her teeth. A quick comb through damp curls and she was ready. Becky peered in the mirror, smiling at her reflection. Aqua eyes took in the burnt nose and additional freckles. She sighed.

“Where’d I put the sunscreen?”

She rummaged through the medicine cabinet but came up empty. Picking up a tube someone else had left on the counter, she squeezed out a helping, rubbing it into her nose and cheeks.

*If they were vitamins, they would n ever be hard to get. That’s just plain ridiculous. There’s more to this than vitamins, I just know it.*

Breakfast arrived as Becky joined the girls. They dove in, finishing every bite as they raced against the clock.

A knock on the door told them the boys were ready to go.

Jessi finished her last swallow of milk and picked up her new purse.

“Let’s see if we can get a chance to talk with Richard. Man, he rode so well yesterday. I tried to congratulate him, but he left in a hurry. I really thought he saw me wave, too.” Dreamy brown eyes half closed in delight. “He’s so cute.”

“I’m tellin’,” Melanie said. “Besides, ya might say he’s spoken for, bein’ married an’ all that. What would Kalen say?”

Jessi turned to Melanie with eyes crossed and stuck her tongue out.

“Ya might be gettin’ too old for that, Jessi,” Melanie scolded. “One minute ya talk about gettin’ married, and....”

Jessi bent toward her, stuck her index fingers in the corners of her mouth and pulled. The tip of a pink tongue waggled.

The girls burst into laughter, clapping Jessi on the back.

“Pretty succinct, if I say so myself.” Blair grinned at Melanie.

With a wintery gaze, Melanie patted Jessi on the top of her head. “It’s a good thing y’all’re so cute, ‘cause a little of that goes a long way.”

Just then they heard a knock on the door.

## Chapter 9

The parking lot teemed with life as the limo pulled up to the front steps of the stadium. The kids hurried across the patio and entered the building. They started to take their seats when Shievon said, "Hey, Billy. How about if you guys sit together for a while? We need to have a little girl talk."

Billy shrugged. "Sure, Shievy. Hey, Steve, stay here with us. The girls need some private time."

"What are they up to?"

Larry shrugged at Steve. "Who knows? Just being girls, I guess."

Shievon sat between Jessi and Becky with Blair and Melanie on the end. "Hey, I want to get my belly button pierced. I saw a place in the hotel that does it. Anyone else game?"

"I've been thinkin' about that for ages. Let's do it."

"Sounds great to me," Becky said. "Count me in."

"Me too," Blair agreed. "I've been thinking about doing it for a while. No time like the present." She leaned forward and gave Shievon the thumbs up. "Sweet idea."

"Does it hurt?" Jessi asked with a frown on her face. "Is it safe? I'd like to do it, but I don't want to get an infection or something."

"I don't think it hurts any more than your ear," Shievon said. "My sisters never had any trouble and the salon looked real clean so I guess it's safe. They do bunches of folks every day and most everyone has one."

"Man," Becky said, starting to chuckle. "Can you imagine having your nose pierced? Or your lip?"

The girls giggled.

“Or your tongue?” Melanie cried. A ripple of laughter floated on the air. “Good grief, Mama’d have a cow, I’m sayin’.”

The girls howled, glad for the cover of the noisy crowd. They made plans to get them done before dinner.

Billy glanced at Larry. “What the heck do you think they’re planning?”

“You never know. Whenever my sisters get to doing that, they’re usually up to no good. I wonder if they’re after Richard ... oh boy, there it is. *The laugh.*”

Steve looked at Becky’s bright cheeks and chuckled. “It’s got them going, whatever it is.”

The boys watched in wary amusement.

\* \* \*

Yoli stared into the arena, following the course. After yesterday’s performance, only twelve of the original riders remained in contention for the team spots. Her round had made the top cut. Today’s winners would determine the remaining six. She would remain in contention if she pulled a fourth or better.

Sunday they’d go for the gold. Nervous, she reached for her bottle of water and drained it in a series of long swallows. If she won today, it would secure her spot on the team. They had to win.

Juan watched her wipe her lips and felt his stomach turn over. *I should have been the one. I deserved the ride and you knew it. You stole my place. Then you trapped me into marriage.*

Standing up with such force that his chair almost tipped over backwards, he said, “I’m going over to the board and learn the course. Have you seen it yet? Might be a good idea to check it out before we walk.”

She rose and nodded at him. "Let's go."

Juan allowed her to link arms with him as they threaded their way through the groups of riders. He had to maintain the illusion of normalcy. They joined the group in front of the course board, eyes wide. As befitting a competition of this caliber, it was truly an awe-inspiring test of horse and rider.

Sixteen fences, counting the combinations, jammed the arena. They stood close together, at odd angles, some of them not visible to horse and rider until they were almost upon them.

The course designer had outdone himself this time. Every possible jumping question you could ask was out there waiting for an answer. Do we leave out a stride here? Slice this one off a blind turn? Take a chance there at the wall and try for two strides to the vertical?

This was not the time for a soft, conservative ride. This was the day for taking risky chances, for pushing horse and rider to the utmost. The only word on their minds today was *win*. Twelve competitors scanned each other with the same burning desire in their hearts.

Today, one of them would walk out of this ring with the blue ribbon and a sure spot on the team.

"Look at that," Yoli said, her voice tense as she pointed at the fences she'd soon jump. "Look at the water feature."

"Can you believe the turn to the combination? It can't be three strides," said someone else in dismay.

"Well, what did you expect today? A piece of cake?" snapped an irate trainer. "Don't you remember where we are? Tomorrow will be even more challenging."

The talk ceased as the steward opened the course for walking. Riders and trainers entered the ring, measuring off strides. They checked out focal points, deciding which fences to jump at speed and where they could leave out a

stride. Winning at this level was a mind game. Fractions of seconds separated the winner from the rest of the pack.

Juan balled his fists as he followed Yoli into the ring. *It should have been me. I'm the better rider. Damn Spinelli for falling for her charms and giving her the ride.*

The fences stood so close together there was just enough room between some of them to accommodate a horse and rider. The horrendous triple combination, an oxer, two strides to a vertical and then a long three strides to the last oxer, followed by a rollback turn to the wall, was awesome. The winning rider would be strong, fearless and accurate, mounted on a brave and very talented horse. Anything less would fail.

Yoli grabbed Juan's arm as they walked toward the diagonal combination, a two to a two. She looked up at him, lips pursed. "This is the hardest course I've ever seen. Man, I don't know about that triple...."

"Yoli? Still afraid?" Juan leaned close to her, dark eyes boring into hers. "I should have had this ride. It's true and you know it."

"Well, true or not, it's too late to do anything about it now." Her voice rose as she returned his stony gaze. "Senor Spinelli chose me to ride her. It is done."

Juan looked at her, eyes hooded. *It's not the only thing that's done. You're done, too.*

Yoli concentrated on the turns. She had complete confidence in the mare. If they got to the fence, Katrina would jump it. The turn from the combination to the wall was very tight. The oxers, as wide as the height of the fence, were intimidating and Yoli felt a trickle of fear as her heart increased its tempo. The wall was huge, overwhelming. Several other riders stood before it, gazing at the top of the daunting obstacle.

Some horses liked jumping solid fences. It seemed to bring out the hero in them. Others preferred poles or

panels they could see through. The rare few jumped for joy, tackling whatever they faced with equanimity. Katrina was such a horse.

The mare stood in the cross ties as they adjusted her belly-guard. The groom tightened the girth and checked the splint boots one more time. She was ready. He led the mare into the aisle and gave Yoli a leg up.

“Vaya con Dios, Yoli. Buena suerte.”

She smiled down at him and crossed her fingers, nodding.

Juan stood by the warm-up ring, his mind whirling and churning along with his stomach. He watched Hernando school Yoli for a few minutes, raising the height of the fence until he had to stand on tiptoe to pop the rail in the cups. Juan grimaced then and turned away from the arena.

\* \* \*

“Ladies and gentlemen, we are about to start the class you’ve all been waiting for. There are twenty contestants to see today, ten of whom are vying for a spot on the team. Please welcome our first challenger.”

The kids watched an entry from New Jersey proceed on course. As the whistle blew, all eight of them leaned as far forward in their seats as they could get. Blair had her video cam with her, ready to record certain riders, but it wasn’t this one. The rider had a rail down in the combination and a refusal at the wall. The kids looked at each other in amazement.

“We’ll see a lot more of that before this class is pinned,” Melanie said. “That’s the toughest course I’ve ever seen.”

Blair nodded, studying the turn from the combination to the wall. “You have to really half-halt over

the oxer and hope you don't run out of gas on the turn. Whew, makes the hairs on my head stand up."

Melanie grinned at her. "This is the cream of the crop, ya know. The course designer's gotta make it interestin' for the horses." She chuckled and turned back to the arena as the next entry picked up a canter.

Today they rode in reverse order of placement, so Richard Spooner would go last. The next few horses had rails, and several, as predicted, stopped at the wall. One rider took a header into the wing as his horse ran out of jumping room in the combination. He shook his head as he got to his feet, waving off the EMT.

His horse stood next to him, a quizzical look in his eyes, as if to say, 'What happened there?' They walked out of the ring side by side, the rider stroking the horse's neck.

The next dozen or so rounds improved considerably and several clean fast times posted on the reader board. The times got faster and faster as the higher rated horses entered the ring.

"Next to see, 595, Sirocco, owned by Ditileo Warmbloods and ridden by Frank Ditileo. This is 595 on course."

Becky nudged Steve. "This is the horse from last night. Let's see how she does." She turned to Blair. "Can you get this round?"

"You bet," she said, flipped the camera switch to on and started filming.

Frank was an outstanding rider and he had a good plan. He galloped for the first fence, keeping the horse ahead of his legs, forehand elevated. They cleared the vertical with ease, following the broken line to the two-stride combination. The next several fences were equally good and as they came around to the diagonal combination, the crowd gasped. Frank left a stride out coming in, landed

going away, and drew a smattering of early applause as he set up the giant mare for the triple.

Enormous, ground-covering strides ate up the combination, and a light half-halt, followed by an opening rein brought Sirocco to the perfect spot for the wall. They galloped down to the last fence, a paneled vertical, and cleared it with ease.

The crowd went ballistic, cheering them on, applauding the fastest clear round of the class thus far. “Now 595, Sirocco, moves into the lead with a blazing time of 54.444.”

Becky looked up at Steve and shrugged. “Well, that was an outstanding round and whatever they gave her it sure didn’t hurt. She didn’t act drugged, high or low. Wonderful round, yep.”

In a box not far from the kids, Bobby Ditileo sat with his friends, accepting congratulations from those seated around him. It was still early in the game and he knew the big boys had yet to go, but so far, his kid held the lead. Bobby glanced at the in-gate where Ernie Spinelli stood off to one side, talking with his trainer.

He narrowed his eyes as Spinelli approached his rider and wished he could be a fly on the wall. The girl nodded and picked up her reins. Grinning, Bobby wished he’d made a bigger bet with Ernie.

Yoli shivered as she heard the announcer. “Next on course, 656, Katrina, owned by Spinelli Industries, Yolanda Navarro in the irons. Number 656 on course.”

She took the huge horse to the first fence at a controlled gallop. The spot was there and Yoli closed her legs, pressing the mare. She followed the broken line and got through the two-stride combination with ease. On the

muscle, now, the strong mare fought for her head in the turn, snaking her head down, anxious to gallop.

Panting and suddenly lightheaded, Yoli felt her grip loosen as her legs turned to jelly. Her breath came fast as they headed for the panels. Burning rivulets of sweat flowed into her eyes, blurring her vision. Her heart beat so fast it felt like her chest would explode.

White noise pounded in her eardrums and she momentarily lost consciousness as pain crushed her chest. The pressure on her constricted heart made breathing difficult and her face turned a bright, fiery red. Through blurred eyes, Yoli saw a long spot to the diagonal combination. Katrina saw it too and left out a stride, popping her rider right out of the tack.

Yoli regained her seat, but could not find her lost outside iron. She made a mighty effort and grabbed mane over the upcoming vertical. She glanced down at her right foot in frantic search of her lost stirrup.

They straightened for the triple combination just as her foot slid into the iron. As they flew through the triple, her heart stopped, her vision blurred again and she could barely see.

Yoli began to lose consciousness. A searing pain shot up both arms and her hands released the reins as her legs turned to butter. Mind numbed and almost blind, Yoli misjudged the turn to the wall and her approach left them no choice. They crashed into it.

The mare fell on one knee and with a valiant effort, threw her head up, seeking support from her rider. The reins flopped and the mare went down on her side, skidding to a stop under a tangle of poles as the nearby oxer crashed down on top of her.

Yoli lay motionless at the bottom of the wall, her head at a strange angle. The EMT grabbed his bag, made a

circular motion with his hand at the steward and ran to the fallen rider.

The steward pulled a cell phone out of his pocket and started dialing. This one was bad.

The crowd sat stunned, watching the EMT work on Yoli. The silence was profound.

## Chapter 10

Juan watched from the highest spot in the balcony as Yoli slammed head first into the wall. His hand flew to his mouth and he cried out as he saw Katrina fall to her knees, twist to one side and slide under the oxer. Ashen faced, he bit his knuckles, helpless as the poles and one wing crashed down on the struggling mare. Twice she fought to rise and twice she fell, stumbling on the scattered rails.

*No, no, no! That wasn't supposed to happen.* He gasped and felt tears of relief start in his eyes as he saw Katrina lurch to her feet and shake herself off. A moment later, his heart plummeted as he noticed the mare resting her right foreleg. Juan charged for the stairs.

Hernando raced to Yoli's side, white-faced with fear.

The EMT sat back on his heels and waved the trainer away. "I don't think you need to be here right now," he said to the man.

"Why no?" Hernando said. "She ride por mi."

"Because there's nothing you can do for her. She's gone."

With a sob, Hernando knelt next to the EMT, looking at the still body before him. He saw the blood pouring from her nose and mouth and blinked. She wasn't breathing. "Wha' happen?"

The EMT looked at him and then away. "She broke her neck."

Hernando sat back on his heels and put his head in his hands.

The audience, shocked and silent, listened to the wail of the approaching ambulance as it raced across the parking lot. The gates at the end of the arena stood open and the ambulance roared into the ring, stopping next to the prone and lifeless body, swirls of dirt rising into the air.

The medics knelt next to the motionless body a moment, checking for vital signs and conferring with the EMT. They returned to the ambulance, pulled out a stretcher, positioned it next to Yoli and then lifted and settled her body.

The EMT snapped his bag closed and stood. He watched them put the body into the ambulance and close the door. They left the arena in silence, no lights or sirens this time. He trudged out of the ring with the steward and returned to his table by the in-gate. He stared into space for several moments and then began filling out some papers.

Ernie Spinelli jumped to his feet, fear in his eyes. He, too, watched with relief as Katrina got to her feet. One of his grooms hurried to the mare's side. Loosening her girth and removing the saddle, he bent down, checking for damage to the foreleg. He shook his head as he touched her cannon bone, lightening his contact as Katrina flinched. The right fetlock, already hot to the touch and beginning to swell, needed immediate icing. Time was of the essence.

"What the hell happened?" Ernie asked, looking at the groom as he led the limping mare from the ring.

An anxious shrug was his only reply. "I must care for leg, Senor. Por favor." He pushed past Spinelli, heading for the barn.

Ernie paced back and forth in front of the in-gate, chewing his nails. He saw Hernando get to his feet and walk toward him. The haggard face put him in another panic. Grabbing the trainer's arm, he said, "What the hell happened? Where did they take Yoli?"

Hernando shook his head and raised agonized eyes to Ernie. He gulped twice, trying to recover his voice and the few words of English he possessed. “Yoli ... she es no mas. Brokit the neck. *Muerta*.” He shook his head, blinded by tears and walked down the aisle toward the barn.

Ernie hurried over to the EMT station and identified himself.

“Will you *please* tell me what just happened?” He stared at the man, eyes wild.

“I’m sorry, sir. She broke her neck when she hit the wall. She died instantly. There will be a full report from the hospital and I imagine the police will order an autopsy. You need to contact her family if you know the next of kin.” He shrugged, a sad expression on his face. “Sorry, sir. That’s about all I can tell you. She was gone before I got there. I’m sorry.”

Ernie nodded, stunned. He headed toward the barn area, mind reeling.

“Family,” he muttered as he entered the restricted area, nodding his head several times. “Family.”

“Where’s Juan?” he asked one of the grooms, who soaked Katrina’s leg in a bucket of ice. A shrug said he didn’t know. Spinelli continued down the aisle.

*That poor kid, what a blow. He and Yoli had only been married a couple of weeks and now this.* He flipped his cell open and dialed.

Juan answered on the first ring.

“Juan, where are you?”

“I’m, ah,” he cleared his throat several times. “I’m in the parking lot waiting for a taxi. By the time I got to the ring, the ambulance had already left.” He hesitated, taking a deep, audible breath. “I’m going to hospital. How’s Katrina?”

“Dunno, Juan, vet’s on the way. I’m so sorry about Yoli.” Ernie’s forehead creased with concern. “Are ya all right? Do ya want I should drive ya to the hospital?”

“No, Senor Spinelli, that’s not necessary. The taxi approaches. Thank you.” Juan disconnected.

## *Chapter 11*

The show announcer called for a fifteen-minute break and the audience, unnerved and still unsure at this point, shifted in their seats, glancing surreptitiously around at their neighbors. The silent ambulance had said enough.

The jump crew hurried into the ring and reassembled the oxer and the wall, replacing the broken wing and pole. Before long, they restored the course and the next horse entered the arena, ready to compete.

Speechless, Becky looked up at Steve and then at the other girls. They were white around the lips, brows furrowed in concern.

“Gosh,” Blair said. “How’d you like to be next on course? What a terrible accident to follow. I’d have the willies, for sure.”

Melanie rolled her eyes and ran a hand through her short blonde hair. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anythin’ like that before in my whole life.” Her brow furrowed with pity. “Mercy ... that poor gal. But y’know, guys, somethin’ was wrong with her from the get-go.” She looked over at Blair, who returned her glance wide-eyed. “I mean, for a gal who came into the ring in third place, her ride was, well, ragged at best. It got downright scary toward the end.”

Nodding, Shievon shrugged. “Yoli never seemed to get it together.” She stared at her friends, eyes puzzled. “She was, I don’t know, wobbly or something. Weird riding for this level.”

Becky leaned toward her and nodded. “It was weird for any level, Shievy. Her round was so bad I thought she was comin’ off a couple of times before she actually did. I mean, that ride through the combination was downright hairy. And she lost her stirrup, for pity’s sake.” Her

eyebrows elevated as she glanced at her friends. “Shoot, how many times do you see *that* happen at an Olympic event?”

Melanie shook her head, lips pursed. She cocked her head in disbelief. “Good grief, girl, ya don’t, ever. Somethin’ was wrong with Yoli from the start.”

They watched the next rider take the course. He seemed able to put the accident behind him and did a credible job, going fast and clean, but not fast enough to beat Frank Ditileo’s time for second place.

Then there was only one more horse to see. The crowd leaped to their feet with a roar, eager to welcome Robinson and Richard Spooner. The proud grey gelding entered the arena with a flourish, neck arched and tail high. A born show-off, he preened for the crowd, wagging his tongue out the side of his mouth, shaking his head and playing with Richard, who gave his pal a swat on the neck as they prepared for business.

The whistle blew and they surged into his huge, ground-covering stride. The dynamic duo made it look easy and Robinson’s long white tail floated behind him like a banner as they sped through the timers.

Another win for the Master of Faster and the horse that could do it all. The crowd went ballistic as they walked into the ring to receive their blue ribbon.

Jessi and the kids screamed with delight as their idols did their victory gallop around the arena, the ribbon fluttering from Robinson’s bridle. He gave a playful buck and squealed, causing Richard to chuckle at his antics. Robbie always knew when he won.

\* \* \*

The show steward accompanied the official vet tester to the holding area. He was ready to collect urine

samples from the horses that had already competed. He withdrew his specimen holder and motioned the first horse into the stall.

The deep shavings proved inviting to the horse and he prepared to deposit his specimen. The vet capped the vial, labeled it and waved the next horse into the fragrant shavings. He was equally cooperative, making a hasty deposit.

Next in line was Sirocco. She walked into the stall and looked around for something to eat. It was often like that with mares. They needed a little more time to get comfortable with their surroundings. She nickered softly to her groom, searching for something to chew on. Before long the shavings worked their magic and she, too, made her contribution.

The steward secured the vial and nodded to the groom. Sirocco returned to her barn where a cool drink of water and a flake of hay awaited her.

Ernie Spinelli stayed in the background, looking on as Sirocco left the holding stall. Face expressionless, he stared at his groom. The man returned the stare, inscrutable.

\* \* \*

“Oh no, did you hear that?” Blair looked from Melanie to Jessi. “I just heard someone say Yoli died.”

Melanie turned to Blair and nodded, her voice low, eyes downcast. “I heard it too. What a shame. She hit that wall so hard I knew she was hurt bad, but I never ... poor girl. Good grief, can ya imagine?” Her voice drifted off as the kids digested the bad news.

Becky held Steve’s arm tight. “Oh, gosh, that’s terrible.” She stared into his dark eyes. “What do you think caused it?”

“Who knows? I agree with what Melly said earlier. Yoli was off from the moment she entered the ring. I mean, shoot, rocking back and forth in the saddle like that. I thought she’d fall at the vertical. Actually, I think she lost it *before* the wall. That turn ... what a pity. And she was so young.”

Billy glanced at Blair and nodded at her camera. “I bet if we got a look at the tape, we’d be able to tell a lot more.”

Blair shook her head. “I checked mine out already. We had a bad seat for the wall. Couldn’t see a thing once she made the turn. How about the show tape?”

“What show tape?” Shievon asked.

“Like the ones I send up to Mom. That’s how I keep them up to speed. They always make at least one of each round.” Billy nodded at Shievon. “I’ll be right back. I want to see if I can buy it.”

Billy returned with a tape in his hand and a triumphant look on his face. “I got it. We can check it out when we get back to the hotel. Maybe this tape will show a different angle and we can see what went wrong.”

\* \* \*

The kids gathered around the TV in the boy’s suite, holding their breath as Billy inserted the tape into the VCR. Just then, the twins burst in the door excited from playing an excellent round of golf. They talked about their game for a minute, sharing their adventures with Billy and then Jessi pointed at the TV. She beckoned Jeff to the sofa, patting the seat next to hers.

“Show tape?” he asked as he sat next to her. He shot a grimace at Kenny and shrugged. “Richard?” he asked, glancing at Melanie.

“No,” Jessi said, kissing his cheek. “Wait until you get a load of this. Watch.”

The kids grew quiet as the tape began to play.

“Now there, look at that.” Billy rolled the tape back. “Right from the beginning, she’s loose. See her legs swing? And what a strange expression she has on her face. Now check this out.” He started the tape over, and they watched as Yoli made the turn to the diagonal line, this time in slow motion. As she lost her balance, she lurched to the outside far enough that even the twins caught it. At regular speed, it was more difficult to notice. Slow-mo made all the difference.

“Then she gets popped here and see, there it goes. She loses her stirrup.” Billy looked at Shievon. “What do you make of that?”

The kids watched in amazement, unable to believe the TV. Yoli rode like a novice, unable to get with the motion of the mare and left behind at each fence. When she grabbed mane, frantic for something to hold onto, the kids looked at each other with eyes wide.

“Good grief, watch this,” Melanie said, her memory affording her the next scene before it happened. “See there? I thought she was goin’ off right there. Then that ride through the combination ... oh, my gosh. Roll that back again, Billy.”

He rolled the tape back to the beginning of the combination and they watched, spellbound. From their seats in the stadium, the kids had seen a side view of her fall, but the show photographer, positioned at the bottom of the ring, had a straight-on shot of the wall.

The TV screen featured Yoli’s face and upper body as she and the horse approached the jump. The photographer panned back, now showing the whole horse, including the wall.

“There, check out the close-up when she makes the turn to the wall. Am I seein’ things here or does it look to y’all like she, like ... fainted?” Melanie, blue eyes huge, scooted closer to the TV screen. “*What* am I seein’?”

“Roll it back again.” Jessi joined Melanie, their noses inches from the screen. The slow motion ride was agonizing. Billy stopped the tape two strides out from the wall. Click by click, the tape advanced.

Melanie was right. Yoli closed her eyes, head lolled down to her chest. They watched the reins slip out of her hands as her fingers opened. The horse lurched to one side as she lost contact with her rider.

They gasped as the mare cut sharply to the side and then went down on both knees, catapulting Yoli into the wall. Horrified, they shuddered as her head hit the solid framework and snapped to one side.

The tape ended with Katrina skidding under the oxer, rails and one wing cascading down on the helpless animal. The kids shot sidelong glances at each other, unable to believe what they’d just seen.

“Holy Toledo, what *was* that?” Kenny asked, aghast.

“We don’t know. I’m beginning to think Yoli was sick or something,” Blair said. “What else would account for a ride like that? She came into the ring in third place from yesterday.”

“Had to be something like that,” Becky agreed, a baffled look in her eye. “Her ride yesterday was excellent. Strong, forceful. Heck, when you divvy up the times, you’re talking bare seconds behind Richard Spooner. That’s some darned fancy riding over a big, rough course. Did you see her lose her stirrup and then take forever to find it? I mean, that’s low-level riding, not Grand Prix stuff. Yep, something was off, that’s for sure.”

“Well, I don’t know *what* you could call that ride except strange.” Billy was quiet a moment and then he turned to Larry. “When Yoli rode Connie down at Showpark, how did she do?”

“She was great, just like yesterday,” Larry said. “Very competent and simpatico with the horse. Yoli got on with Connie just fine. Nothing like what we just saw. Why?”

“I don’t know, just wondered.”

Billy shut off VCR and pulled the tape out of the slot just as the local news came on.

“Tragedy and scandal rocked the U. S. Olympic Team trials at the Thomas and Mack Center today. Yolanda Navarro, one of the finalists in today’s competition, died because of injuries sustained when she fell into a jump. Early reports state she broke her neck in the fall although the exact cause of death awaits autopsy results.

“In addition, high ranking finalist, Sirocco, owned by Robert ‘Bobby’ Ditileo, was disqualified from the games after testing positive for steroids. Mr. Ditileo was unavailable for comment. Known for his close ties to Las Vegas organized crime, Mr. Ditileo is under investigation for betting irregularities. Stay tuned for updates on this breaking news.”

“Holy cow.” Becky leaned back against the sofa and looked over at Steve. “I bet ya a buck I know when that happened. I never felt comfortable thinking they were grooms taking care of their horse. It just didn’t fit.”

“Gangsters.” Steve nodded, taking her hand. “Someone drugged that horse last night. I think we need to talk with the police about this. At the very least, we should talk with the steward tomorrow.”

“What do ya mean, Steve? *Gangsters?*” Jeff arched his eyebrows, still out of the loop. “What horse?”

“Yeah,” echoed Kenny, looking at his friends in question. “What’s goin’ on? I never heard about any gangsters.”

“Sorry about that, guys,” Becky said, “I guess you two didn’t hear about this. While I was down at the barn braiding those horses last night some guys came into the area ... walked right by the stall I was in. I thought they were grooms because they spoke Spanish, which goes to show you about assuming. Anyway, they talked about drugs and a syringe they had for some horse. They went into a stall for a minute, came out and then left.”

She looked at Steve and shook her head. “It was Sirocco they were talking about, the one that just got disqualified. They were only in her stall for a moment but it was long enough. I checked her out after I finished braiding and she seemed fine, but of course, she would. Steroids don’t cause them to hot up or anything physically obvious.”

Becky glanced around the room at her friends. “What should I do? I guess I have to go to the police and tell ‘em what I know.”

The kids contemplated their options in silence.

“Well,” Jessi said, scrunching up her eyes. “Do you want to get them involved, y’know, have the police up here and all?”

“Jessi,” Melanie exclaimed. “Of course she has to tell the police. She has some vital information to give. At the very least she needs to report it to the steward. Imagine if it was Foxy they drugged and ya got eliminated for it. Frank’s been disqualified, y’know.”

Jessi frowned at Melanie. “I didn’t mean to *ignore* it, guys. What I meant is maybe we can dig up more info first, check it out on our own and *then* tell the police. As it is right now, we don’t have much to share, do we?”

Melanie nodded. “Well, that’s for sure. Any ideas?”

The girls leaned toward each other, whispering and glancing from time to time at the guys.

Billy nodded at the other boys and shrugged. “Ah, crud, here we go again.”

## *Chapter 12*

The show photographer put away the last of the tapes and prepared to call it a night.

“I’m wondering if it’s too late to pick up a tape.”

Startled, she glanced up at the young man standing before her. “Well, I’ve got almost everything packed away. Which one do you want?”

“Entry 656. Both rounds, please.” Juan glanced around the almost empty area. Only the photographer and the couple cleaning the food concession remained on the floor. He didn’t want anyone to remember him or wonder what he was doing.

The woman scanned through the box of tapes. “Here’s yesterday’s round, right here,” she said, putting it on the counter. She searched further and then shook her head. “I’ll have to make another copy of today’s round. I can’t find it. Guess somebody bought it already.”

“It’s been sold?” Juan’s eyes popped wide open. “Who bought it?”

“I don’t know. We don’t keep records.” The woman shrugged. “All I can say is it’s not here, so I assume it was purchased earlier. Best I can do is have another ready for you tomorrow, first thing. Will that be okay?”

“I suppose that will have to do. How much do I owe you for this one?” Juan brought out his wallet.

“They’re twenty dollars each. I’ll have the other one for you tomorrow morning.” She handed Juan the tape and accepted his money.

Juan walked back into the night, the tape secure under his arm.

Frank and Bobby Ditileo sat at a small table in the back of the busy restaurant. Eyes bright with unshed tears, the young man turned to his father. “We gotta find out who did this,” he said, red-faced and furious. “We don’t use steroids. Everyone knows about the testing, it’s automatic. Why would we, why would anyone do that? I got set up. Someone did this on purpose to put me out and get me disqualified. Oh, God, I don’t believe it. Who would do this to me?”

The younger man stared at his glass of beer, fingers gripping the handle of his mug. “All my life, Pop, all I ever wanted was to ride on the Olympic show jumping team. I worked so hard for this. Today, we....”

His voice caught in his throat as he cast an agonized glance at his father and gulped. “I was so close, almost there. Our round today was exceptional. My ... my time--” he uttered a strangled sob, dashing a hand across damp eyes. He downed his glass and shook his head. Flashing black eyes bored into his father’s. “I was second to Spooner, can you believe it? Oh, man, when I find out who did this, I’m gonna kill ‘em.”

“It kills me to say this, but think I already know who. It was Ernie,” Bobby said.

“*Ernie?* Get outa here. He’s a fellow horseman and he’d never ... Pop, do you mean it?” Frank looked at his father in outraged disbelief, dark eyes wide. “Why? Why me? He didn’t do it to anyone else. You can’t be serious.”

“Yeah, Frankie, I’m serious, all right. It *has* to be him.” Bobby took a long sip from his glass and looked at his son, sorrow and something akin to fear in his swarthy face.

“But why, Pop?” Frank asked, voice beginning to escalate. “Why would he do that to me? I’ve known him all my life.” Furious black eyes stared at his father as a monstrous idea blossomed.

Bobby took a deep breath and held it a moment. “To win, to beat me, that’s why. You had nothing to do with it and neither did gettin’ on the team. It was only this particular show is all. He wanted to beat *me* on home turf, Frank. We had a bet goin’.”

The blood drained from Frank’s face as he listened to his father’s words.

“Oh, no. You can’t ... you guys had a *bet* going? And for that, he drugs my horse and steals my dream?” He covered his face with both hands, shaking his head back and forth, low moans barely audible.

Finally Frank looked up. “Oh, God, I don’t believe it. How could you do that to me?”

“*Me?* I didn’t do nothin’. How am I supposed to know he’d stoop so low as to drug your mare? Who the hell would even *think* of something like that except for Spinelli, that dirty little weasel? Stinkin’ cheat.”

Frank pounded the table in impotent fury and glared at his father.

“Cheat! All you can call him is a cheat? Well, if you’re right, we gotta tell the cops, get ‘em to bring Ernie in, make him confess. Not only am I out of contention for the Olympic Team, I’m carrying a three-month suspension because of this. You do know about that, right? They could disqualify Sirocco and pull her points and winnings for the entire year. Oh, God, I can’t believe this is happening. Pop, you gotta do something.”

“Settle down, Frankie and lower your voice. Ya got everybody in the room lookin’ at us. What’s with all the drama here, kid? Chill out.”

Bobby signaled the bartender for fresh drinks and cast a wary eye on his distraught son.

Frank ran strong, slender fingers up the sides of his face, grabbed his throbbing temples and began massaging in quick circular motions. Voice pitched low, he said,

“Drama? You call *this* drama? You just wait. This is just the beginning and by the time I’m.... Pop, are you goin’ to the cops or am I? ‘Cause *one of us is*. I’m not sittin’ still for this kinda crap.”

Quick tears glazed his eyes and he swallowed again, glaring at his father. “I’m gonna beat Spinelli at his own game and let the cops do it for me. And just gettin’ Ernie isn’t enough, Pop. I gotta be exonerated by the FEI.”

“Well, that’s the important thing. What you really want is for them to clear you, right? Get you reinstated? I mean the cops ain’t gonna do squat, y’know that. Even if we could prove it with an eyewitness, even if Ernie confessed, I don’t know what kinda law he broke. He won’t do no time or nothin’. It’s a waste goin’ to the cops. He’ll get a fine at best. But if ya wanna go to the steward, he carries clout in this area, right? Get them to investigate, I’ll back ya up. Hell, I’ll back you up no matter what you decide, Frankie, always.”

Frank jumped up from the table. “I gotta make a decision by tomorrow ‘cause if I don’t get this fixed so I can ride, I won’t make the team, Pop. Catch ya later. I’m goin’ home to stick my head in the oven.”

Bobby leaned back in his seat, twirling the ice in his dwindling drink, deep in thought.

*It has to be Ernie. Who the hell else would do it? And why?*

The bartender, who looked like he might have been a jockey in his younger days, brought a fresh drink to the table. He exchanged the overflowing ashtray with a new one and gave the table a swipe with a damp rag.

“So, Al,” Bobby said. “Ya heard what happened today, huh?”

Al nodded and leaned up against the back of the booth. “Yeah, what a bummer. It was on the TV.”

“Ya heard anythin’ about it, people talkin’, stuff like that?”

“Nah, boss, I ain’t heard nothin’. If I do, I’ll be sure to let ya know.”

“How about Ernie? He been in today?”

Al shook his head. “Came in for lunch the other day, ain’t seen him since. ‘Course, with his rider dyin’ like that, he’s probably stickin’ close to home.”

Incredulous, Bobby’s mouth dropped open and he stared at Al. “Dyin’? What’cha mean, his rider dyin’?”

“You didn’t hear it come over the news?”

“Nah, I been consolin’ Frankie all afternoon. He’s gone ‘round the bend. I ain’t seen or heard nothin’. What happened?”

Al’s voice rose with excitement. “Boss, she got killed today, right in the ring. Got tossed into a jump or something and broke her neck.”

Bobby leaned back in his chair and shook his head. After a moment he said, “Good God, what a day. Okay, Al. Keep your ears open and bring me another drink, would’ya?”

\* \* \*

“Well,” Becky said. “Do you guys want to come with me? It shouldn’t take long. Then maybe we can get a bite to eat. I’m starved.”

Jessi nodded in agreement. “Me, too. After Yoli’s accident, I kinda lost my appetite for lunch, but I’m hungry now.”

Billy flipped open his cell and dialed. “Hey, Bob. Could you bring the car around? We’re going out. Oh, and can you find out where the local police station is? Thanks.”

“How long do I have?” Blair asked, heading for the hall.

“No sweat. We’ll give him about ten minutes and then go,” Billy said. “Take your time.”

“Where do ya want to eat?” Jeff asked as he slipped an arm around Jessi’s waist. “It’s Saturday night, y’all. We’ll need to make reservations even though we’re early birds.”

“Let’s go back to Paris,” Becky said, blue eyes dreamy with the memory.

All the kids groaned and she laughed as she saw the expression on Steve’s face. Remembering the prices at the rooftop restaurant, she snuggled closer to him. “But this time, let’s try one of their other restaurants. They’re much cheaper. I checked. And the shops around there were so cool. I need to find something special to take home for my mom. I know I’ll find the perfect gift there.”

“I wish it was the middle of the week,” Larry said, smiling at Melanie. “I think it’d be great fun to get one of those tables on the sidewalk and just get all kinds of pastries and croissants to share. But Jeff’s right, Saturday night means reservations.”

“Hey,” Blair said, “the show doesn’t start until noon tomorrow ... smaller field and all. Maybe we could go down to Paris and have breakfast there on the sidewalk just like you said. How romantic that would be.”

“Sounds great to me, y’all.” Melanie glanced at her friends. “Has anyone seen a scale around here?” She rose from the chair, glanced in the mirror and sighed. “We can diet when we get home, I guess.”

Billy flipped through the pile of glossy brochures on the table. He found the one for Paris, pulled out his cell and made reservations at the buffet. “Well, that was easy”

The pager went off in his pocket. Billy checked it, hit the reset button and said, “Let’s go.”

They trooped out to the waiting limo, smiling hello at Bob. He did not return the smiles as he held the door for them.

“Billy,” he said, holding the boy’s elbow. “Why are we going to the police station? What’s up now?”

Billy gave Bob’s arm a light cuff and smiled. “Nothing to worry about. Becky just has to give a statement to the police.”

“A statement about what?” His reply crisp and terse, he stepped back so Billy could join the kids.

“I’ll tell you later, Bob. I promise.” Billy got into the limo.

Bob shut the door with a shake of his head and got behind the wheel. He engaged the locks and started the engine. *Something’s up with the kids, I just know it. We’ve hardly been in town two days and already we’re off to meet the Las Vegas police. Great. Mrs. Martin is going to love this.*

The rest of the kids decided to stay in the car while Becky talked to the cops. Steve went with her for moral support and took her arm as they entered the busy precinct.

The hum of activity rose as officers took statements, nodding at the wide assortment of people they questioned. Some were handcuffed, sullen and angry. Others gestured wildly, pointing fingers and talking in high, ragged voices as they gave their statements.

A uniformed officer sat behind a desk in the busy lobby, filling out papers.

Becky walked up to him and nodded. “My name is Becky Edwards. I need to speak with whoever is in charge of investigating the horse drugging incident at the games today.”

Cool gray eyes appraised her and then he nodded. "Come with me." He turned to Steve. "Who are you? Are you involved as well?"

Steve nodded and introduced himself.

They followed the cop down a long hall to a cubicle on the left.

"Detective Anders, this is Becky Edwards. She has some information for you." He ushered them into the room.

The detective rose from his chair and stared at Becky and Steve. What hair he had left was dark and very short. Piercing blue eyes looked them over. "What can I do for you?" His voice was rough and harsh when he indicated they should take a chair.

"Well." Becky, suddenly nervous, clasped her hands. "I have some information on that horse drugging that happened at the show ... the Olympic Trials. I was at the barn when it happened, and I don't think the owner did it. In fact, I'm sure he didn't."

The detective leaned back in his chair, tenting his fingers in front of his lips and assessing her words. "Please, both of you have a seat." He pointed at the chairs in front of his desk and nodded as they finally sat. "Okay, now start from the beginning. Why were you at the barn and when?"

"I got a job braiding some horses, y'know, their manes and tails and stuff? It was early this morning, around four, maybe four-thirty. I'd just finished off the last horse when I heard these two guys walking down the aisle, talking."

"Which two guys?" he interrupted.

"I don't know. I didn't see them. At first, I thought they were grooms, but I don't think so now. They didn't seem familiar with the area or the particular horse in question."

"Why not? What made you think they were grooms?"

“Well, because they spoke Spanish, for one thing, and they were *looking* for the horse, they didn’t actually know where her stall was....”

“Wait a minute,” Anders interrupted again, “If you didn’t see them, how do you know they didn’t know where her stall was?”

“Because of what they said as they came down the barn aisle. One asked the other which stall was hers and he answered with a stall number. He had the number of a particular stall, but they didn’t know the exact location. They were looking for it.”

“Okay, go on.”

“Well, they walked right past the stall I was in and went about half way down the aisle. They stopped in front of a stall, opened the door and went in for just a moment. Then they came back out and left the barn.”

“I take it you speak Spanish. Do you remember what they said?”

“Yes, I’m fluent. They talked about how easy it was to get drugs. One asked the other if he had the syringe. He said yes. When one asked where the stall was, the other responded with the number, but not, like, *oh, it’s just down this row* or anything. That’s why I said they were looking for it. That’s all I know. I never saw them, but I thought I recognized one of the voices. I still can’t place where, though.”

“The stall they went into, it was near you, right? You heard the number clearly?”

“Oh, yes, I heard them loud and clear. They’re all numbered and the stall they mentioned was just five or six down from where I was. It was Sirocco, you know, the horse that turned up positive.

“You don’t think the owner was involved? Why?”

“Well,” Becky said as she leaned toward him, “it just doesn’t make sense. Every horse that places is drug

tested. That's a rule and it's common knowledge. Besides, steroids are easy to find in a drug test. Why would the trainer destroy his reputation and take down every horse and rider in his barn like that? He couldn't get away with it. He'd have to know they'd catch him red-handed. I think it was set up. They knew the horse would be tested and then eliminated."

"Why do you say trainer? Couldn't it be the owner?" Anders looked at Becky, blue eyes boring into hers.

"Well, I suppose it *could* be anyone. Depending on the owner's familiarity with drugs ... but usually it's the trainer. They have the knowledge and the connections, y'know. Owners usually don't although there could be exceptions, I'm sure." She shook her head and glanced at Steve.

"On the other hand, Detective, if the whole point was to disqualify the horse then it could be anyone. A fellow competitor, another trainer, shoot, anybody could do it ... as long as they had access into the barns. You need a pass, y'know."

Anders tapped his fingers on his desk and drew a deep breath. "Do you know who owns the horse?"

Becky shrugged and shook her head. "I don't remember, but the horse is well known. We saw her show at Showpark earlier this year. That's where they qualified for this show."

His eyebrows shot up to where his hairline would be if he had hair. "Showpark? Where's that?"

"It's in California. We live in Del Mar. We're all show riders."

Anders leaned back in his chair, digesting everything. "Okay. So, do you think you could recognize the voice again if you heard it?"

“Well, I guess so. Yes, I think I would. I’m trying so hard to remember why it’s familiar, but I can’t place it.”

“Anything else you can tell me, Becky?” Anders asked, sliding a pen and a piece of paper across the desk to her. “Please write your local phone number as well as your cell and home address. We may need to contact you again. How long will you be here?”

“We’re supposed to leave on Monday. Early morning, I’d think.” Becky gave him back the paper and rose to leave.

Anders stood too, extending his hand. “Thanks for the statement, Becky. If we have any more questions, we’ll call you. And if you remember who belongs to that voice, you call us.” He walked the kids to the lobby door, said good-bye and closed it behind them. He returned to his desk, picked up the piece of paper Becky filled in and gazed out the window, lost in thought.

“Horse drugging.” He chuckled, scratching his chin. “Well, it’s a first.”

If it hadn’t involved Ditileo, he’d never give it a thought. A situation like this would only become a police issue if the owner lodged a complaint. So far, no one had come forward to file charges, but the night was young.

This revelation plus the death of Spinelli’s rider gave Anders pause. The odds of something like this happening had to be huge.

*This could be the start, the harbinger of things to come, bad things. Ditileo wouldn’t sit still while someone put his kid out of the games, especially if he knew who did it. I wonder ... are the home-boys feuding?*

Anders picked up his phone and punched in three numbers.

“Hey, Joe,” he said, “can you get me the Ditileo file. I need to check something.”

## *Chapter 13*

“Well, that wasn’t so bad.” Steve held the door as they got into the limo.

“What happened?” Kenny asked.

“Not very much, actually.” Becky glanced at them and shrugged. “I told them what I heard and the detective asked me a couple of questions, but that was about it.”

“Hmm,” Melanie said. “Did ya tell him one voice was familiar? What did he say about that?”

“I don’t think he was all that interested, tell the truth. Probably not really police business. He told me if I remembered the voice, I should call him right away. Other than that, not very much interest in the story.”

“Well,” Blair said. “I guess all that’s left to do is notify the steward. He’ll file something with the FEI and at least Frank will get a shot at clearing his name.”

“I’ll do it early in the morning. It’ll give the Stewards the chance to reinstate him and let him ride tomorrow.” Becky shrugged. “I don’t know if it will matter, but it can’t hurt.”

Billy flipped the switch on the intercom. “Hey, Bob, can you take us to the Paris hotel, please?”

The limo eased away from the curb and merged with traffic, inching its way along the boulevard. They pulled into the hotel’s busy driveway and stopped under the portico.

“We’re about half an hour early for our reservation,” Billy said, glancing at his watch. “How about if we shop for a while?”

The kids were all for that and headed down the street arm in arm, weaving between other sightseers and gazing in the store windows.

Becky stopped to peer into a jewelry shop window. “Oh, Steve, look at those.” She pointed at several crystal horse figurines. One of them appeared to be jumping. The lights of the showcase glittered on the horse, blue and red streaks set it on fire. Yellow flashes animated it.

“Oh, I think that’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.” Becky bent down to get a closer look. “Whew. I have good taste. Pricey.”

Steve smiled at her, brushing a fiery red curl from her cheek.

“Hey, Becky,” Jessi called from a shop farther up the street. “Come here and get a load of this.”

She hugged Steve’s arm, gave one more reluctant look at the jumping horse and walked over to the giggling girls.

Steve went into the store, gave the clerk his credit card and mailing address and pointed at the horse. He smiled at the clerk and glanced across the street, hoping the girls wouldn’t spot him and spoil his surprise.

Becky and the girls pointed at something in the window of a jewelry shop, faces animated. They charged into the store, leaving the boys standing on the sidewalk. Steve got his card back, asked the clerk to ship the box express and rejoined the group.

“Hey, guys,” Larry said, “I’ve been thinking about Yoli, how she died and all? It’s got me wondering if there might be more to it than a broken neck.”

“I know what you mean,” Billy said. “The drug incident with Sirocco started me thinking and I’ve been curious ever since. I mean Yoli could have been sick or coming down with some flu thing, I suppose, but it does make you wonder if there isn’t more to it than that.”

“Do you think they’ll do an autopsy on her?” Steve asked. “I mean, she broke her neck. Will they let it go at that, or what?”

“They’ll do an autopsy on her,” Jeff said with conviction. “Especially in a high profile case like this. The media is eatin’ it up, violent death at a sports event and all. I bet they do toxicology tests and check to see if she had any drugs in her system.”

“Yeah,” Kenny said, “you’d think they would. After seein’ that tape, I mean, I’m no rider, but I’ve been watchin’ it done right my whole life. Yoli made one mistake after another.” He looked at Jeff and shrugged. “Even I could see it.”

“See what, Kenny?” Blair asked, as the girls came out of the store with little plastic shopping bags and mysterious looks on their faces.

“We’re speculatin’ about Yoli’s death and that tape an’ all. We can talk more over supper.” He checked his watch and grinned. “It’s time for supper.”

The couples linked arms and followed their noses to the buffet.

The host led them to a large table set back in what looked like a grotto. He explained the food located at each station and told them to have a good time. The waiter followed right behind him, took their orders for sodas and iced tea and then the kids hit the food stations, separating according to their culinary desires.

They grazed for quite a while, trying little bites of this and that, determined not to waste any more food than necessary. They looked with dismay at a dish-tub filled with plates of uneaten food, some untouched. It was the one downside to buffets ... piggery came out in most diners and the waste was atrocious.

About half way through their dinner, Becky gasped. “Oh, my God. I know who the voice belongs to, guys ... Leon.”

“Get outa here. No way,” Jessi said. “How could that be? What’s he doing at the Olympic trials?”

Melanie put her fork down on her plate and stared at Becky. “As in Kelly and Leon? *That* Leon?”

“Yep,” Becky said, nodding her head vigorously, “I’m positive.”

“Whew, I thought we’d seen the last of them.” Blair shook her head, a stunned look on her face.

“Leon who?” Kenny asked, popping a bite of salmon in his mouth. “Do I know him?”

Blair gave him the eye and grimaced. “You remember when all our tack was stolen? Well, Kelly’s cohort in crime was Leon. Can’t remember his last name.”

“But I thought they were in jail,” Jeff said. He slid a slice of filet into his mouth and glanced around the table.

“No, not Leon. He didn’t get caught. Actually, we don’t know for sure he was involved.” Becky looked from Kenny to Steve. “We figure he had the truck they were gonna transfer all the tack to, but we don’t know. The police caught Kelly and the rest of the gang before Leon got there, so he was never arrested.”

“I wonder if Kelly is involved in this.” Shievon asked. “She’s probably long out of jail by now. We have to keep our eyes peeled, see if they’re at the show. That Leon, I’d recognize him anywhere.”

“You know what, Shievy?” Billy leaned back in his chair and pursed his lips. “Now that you mention it, I think I did see Leon, but it wasn’t at the show, it was on Fremont Street. While you girls were buying those purses, we stayed outside, remember? I saw him, at least I think it was Leon, talking with a couple of guys. They were down the street a bit, but I’m sure it was him. It just didn’t register at the time.”

“Hey, Billy, you’re right,” Steve said. “I saw him too. It didn’t click until you mentioned it, but yes, that was Leon.”

“Can anyone remember his last name?” Shievon furrowed her brow in effort and turned to Melanie.

Now they all looked at her. “I don’t think we ever knew it, y’all. Kelly was so off-handed and secretive about him, plus he was such a loner, always kept to himself.”

Blair looked at Jessi. “Do you think Mom might remember?”

Jessi just shrugged, but Becky said, “Nah, I doubt it. I don’t think Karen exchanged five words with him and I would know. We pretended we couldn’t speak Spanish, remember? Besides, he wasn’t around her that much.”

“Can you remember whether he was the one asking if it was hard to get the drugs?” Blair asked. “It’d be interesting to figure out whether he’s the drug connection or just someone along for the ride.”

“That’s sure true. If the other guy had the syringe and all, maybe Leon was just a friend or co-worker or something.” Shievon leaned forward so she could see Becky at the other end of the table. “Can you remember?”

## *Chapter 14*

The phone rang just as Vinny walked in the door. He dropped his newspaper on the table and reached for the handset. “Yeah?”

“Ya catch the news, Vinny?”

“I just walked in the door, Bernie. Let me turn on the TV. Did they give the cause of death?”

“Yeah,” he chuckled. “They think she broke her neck.”

“She did, Bernie, says so right there on the crawl line. She broke her neck. You are such a weirdo. What the hell’s so funny?”

“Well, that was just lucky. She had a heart attack just like I said she would.” He chuckled again. “Not that it matters. Like I told ya, the stuff’s undetectable, but it sure cuts down the heat and that’s a good thing.”

“So what’s the deal with Ditileo’s horse?”

“Didn’t have nothin’ to do with that one, Vinny. It’s not smart to mess with them guys.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Frankie’s goin’ wild and if Bobby ever finds out who fed them ‘roids to his horse, they’re dead. He’s a mad dog where the kid’s concerned. According to Joey the Snitch, the kid’s about to come unglued. Word is he spent a couple of hours cryin’ over at the cop shop. I don’t think he’s a very happy camper. Ya gotta admit it’s strange, though. What a coincidence. Spinelli and Ditileo in one day.”

“Hey, all this talk about Bobby and Frank made me hungry. Ya wanna go over and get a pie? We could just kinda hang out, have a couple a brews and see which way the wind blows. I bet if Bobby’s there he’ll spring for a brew just to see what we know. What say?”

“You’re on. Besides, they got the best pie this side of Brooklyn so I’m always up for that. Meet up in about twenty minutes.”

\* \* \*

“Hey, Al,” Vinny said as he slid onto the barstool, “how goes it?”

Al pulled a bottle of Bud out of the cooler along with a cold mug. Placing them on the bar he replied, “It goes, Vinny, it goes. So, where’s your sidekick? Ha, speak of the devil.”

He went back to the cooler for another beer, sliding the mug and bottle across the bar as Bernie sat down.

“Hey, Al, thanks.” Bernie stuck his elbow into Vinny’s ribs, earning a scowl from his deceptively sweet-faced cousin, and proposed a toast.

“Salute.” Echo. Mugs cracked together and foam slid down their frosty sides.

“You guys eatin’?” Al asked. “Ya need a menu?”

“Nah,” Bernie said with a grin. “We know what we want. Large pie, double cheese, sausage, pepperoni ... onions, right Vinny? Yeah, and onions. Thanks, Al.”

“Ya know I don’t like onions on my pie,” Vinny said, scowling. “Ya do it every time, Bernie. Ya make me wanna scream. I hate onions.”

“So pick ‘em off.”

They drained their mugs and signaled for another round.

Al replaced the empty mugs with full ones, struck again by the cousin’s strong family resemblance. Vinny was a feminine, almost pretty version of Bernie. They looked so much alike they could be twins. They had blue-black hair, eyes to match, olive skin and full, well-defined lips. The slight hook to their noses gave them a hawk-like

appearance. Bernie had a permanent five o'clock shadow. They looked like extras in a gangster movie.

"So what you guys up to?"

"Not much," Vinny said with a shrug. "How's by you?"

Al returned the shrug with one of his own, head cocked to one side. "Ya hear about Spinelli's rider dying at the show today?" He gazed from one to the other.

"Crazy thing, huh? I'm always sayin' to Vinny, ya gotta watch out for them ponies," Bernie said, a smirk on his face.

"S'matta f'you? That's not really so funny, y'know? Young kid like that." Al scowled. "Ya seen Ernie around?"

"Two, maybe three days ago. I seen him in here." Vinny shrugged again and glanced at Bernie. "How's about you?"

"Yeah, 'bout that long. Why?" The cousins turned to Al, bland, identical looks on their faces. "Anything in particular?"

He continued to wipe down the bar, then glanced at Bernie and pursed his lips. "Nah, just makin' small talk. I figured with his rider dyin' and all, he'd be in here looking for a shoulder to cry on. Weird goin's on, for sure."

Long even swipes carried him out of earshot to the other side of the long bar. Al bent down to the triple sink and turned on the hot water. Curious, he turned on another switch. Now he listened to every word Vinny and Bernie said.

"Why do ya even ask me and then get 'em anyway? You know I hate onions on my pie. For what's it been, like what, twenty years, and every time it's the same deal. I don't like onions on my pie, Bernie."

"Ah, quit griping, would ya? Ya sound like a broken record."

“But you always order. How many times I gotta say it?”

Al filled the first sink with hot soapy water. He squirted iodine into the second for rinsing. The third contained cold, clear water. When they were full, Al turned off the water and listened a moment as Vinny and Bernie bickered like an old married couple. He flipped the switch in disgust and headed back up the bar.

Trixie walked out of the kitchen carrying two plates and a steaming pizza. She put the tray down on the bar between Vinny and Bernie. “Hot stuff, boys. Watch your fingers.” The plates and a pile of napkins followed. She slid a spatula between the pie and the pan, grinned at them and chirped, “Mangi.”

Bernie frowned at Vinny. “Hey. Lookit what they done. Onions on one side only.”

Vinny turned quickly on his stool and gave Trixie a thumb’s up and a grin. She winked at him and returned to the kitchen. “Well, would ya look at that. Guess they finally caught on.” Vinny helped himself to a slice and grinned. “I don’t like onions on my pie, Bernie.”

“Ah, shut up.” He took a bite of the steaming pizza and began chewing.

“So Al,” Vinny said, accepting his next beer, “how did Frank do today? Ya never did say.”

Bernie glanced across the bar in mild curiosity and then back down at his plate.

“Ya ain’t heard?” Al asked as a look of disbelief filled his face. “Where ya been all day? Frankie got disqualified ‘cause his horse tested positive for steroids.”

“No kiddin’,” Bernie mumbled around a mouthful of hot pizza. “So Frankie been druggin’ his horse? That’s not smart.”

“*What?*” Al said, indignant. “No, I didn’t say that. I said his ... hey, you jerkin’ my chain?”

Bernie looked at him with such innocence that Vinny had to grin behind his slice. "We still don't know what you're talkin' about, dude. Start at the beginning."

Al stared at him wide-eyed, still not sure Bernie wasn't playing with him. Three men sat down at the other end of the bar and signaled for drinks. "Later." Al went to the men and took their order.

"Clever boy," Vinny muttered.

"Who, me?"

They both started to laugh.

\* \* \*

The girls sat on the sofa and chairs in their suite, staring out the window at the lights, trying to decide what to do. The boys were downstairs at the hotel store looking for movies they hadn't already seen. Either that or a new game. They were sick of Blair always winning at monopoly.

"Ya know, Larry and the twins think there might be a lot more to Yoli's death than an accident." Melanie glanced at the kids and shrugged. "I do too. At the very least I think she was usin' drugs of some sort."

They nodded in agreement.

"Do you think we ought to tell the police about the tape, maybe show it to them?" Becky asked. "If they see what we saw, and they will, they may do more investigating. I mean, there's a strong chance drugs of some kind were involved." She looked at Shievon. "Did Billy say anything to you?"

"Nothing to add to what we've been talking about, really, but he agrees with Larry. The ride she put in yesterday compared to today ... well, there was no comparison. He thinks something's fishy."

"So does Jeff," Jessi said. "He's pretty sure they'll do an autopsy, so if she was drugged, it'll show up. Right?"

“Well, that should turn up any drugs.” Blair shrugged and glanced at her friends. “If the test shows negative then I’m inclined to think she was sick. I mean, I get light headed sometimes when I take antihistamines for a cold. It might be something like that.”

Her eyes wide, Jessi leaned forward, glancing at Melanie. “Thing is, won’t we be back home before the lab tests get back? How will we ever know what they found? It’s not exactly an earthshaking case, is it? I’m beginning to think we should show the tape to the police while we’re still here. If it turns up she did have drugs in her system, they’ll already be on the alert.” She glanced at the other girls, a question in her eyes. “I mean, I doubt if they’re show riders. They may not see what we did.”

“Well,” Becky said, “isn’t that the time when they’d call in the experts? Like us?”

Shievon leaned forward and smiled, beautiful white teeth gleaming. “We’d sure qualify as experts, but there are plenty of other riders here that they could get to give their opinion if ours isn’t good enough.”

“There’s trainers galore all over the place right now, y’all. No doubt they’ll agree with our opinion of her round. I guess it’s time to lay our cards out. Are we sayin’ that Yoli was doin’ some recreational drugs, or are we sayin’ she was murdered?” Melanie gazed at her friends. “Sounds like those are the two choices in front of us. And if she was murdered, who and why?”

“Murdered?” they chorused, eyes wide.

“You think she was murdered, Melly?”

“Well, if she took the drugs deliberately, whatever they were, they didn’t improve her ridin’ one little bit, that’s for sure.” She looked at Blair and shrugged. “And we all sweat when we show, but it was just pourin’ down her face and it couldn’t have been seventy in there.”

“You’re right, Melly, I saw that too,” Becky said. “I just chalked it up to nerves, but now that I think of it, yep, that was ... excessive.”

“Did Larry mention seeing John around at the show?” Blair asked.

Melanie shook her head. “Not to me. He may not even be in Vegas. If he is, I wonder how he’s takin’ this. Poor guy. Larry thinks they were close.”

“What do you mean, close how?” Shievon asked.

“Well, ya know, like us. Teammates ride together, travel around to different shows and compete together, stuff like that.” Melanie shrugged. “Why, Shievy?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’m just trying to connect the dots.”

Blair nodded. “Well, I agree with Melly. We need more evidence, something concrete before we go to the police with this. If they weren’t impressed with what Becky already told them she heard, what will they think of the tape? We need them to take us seriously.”

“What do we know about the guy that owns Sirocco?” Jessi asked.

“Name’s Frank Ditileo,” supplied Melanie. “Why?”

“He’s down for a minimum three months suspension over this.”

“But Jessi, what’s that got to do with Yoli?” Blair stared at her sister in question.

“Maybe nothing. Just thinking aloud, really. It’s the drug thing I wonder about, just so strange.” She shook her head. “I mean maybe there was a time way back when you could get away with drugging your horse, but not any more. We all know that. Frank was set up without a doubt.” She snickered in derision. “No one but the FEI could honestly believe he drugged his own horse and expected to get away with it.”

“And now there’s Yoli,” Melanie added. “We’re only guessin’, for sure, but I think there’s a good chance drugs were involved there, too. I think it needs checkin’ into.”

She got up, went to the kitchen and returned with the Las Vegas phone book. She flipped through the pages, stopped and scanned down the column. *Ditileo, Bobby, Frank*. Below it she read, *Ditileo’s Restaurant, Italian Cuisine*. The second number referenced Bobby Ditileo.

“Okay, y’all, we got the address of the guy that owns Sirocco. And believe it or not, they own a restaurant.”

They heard noise in the suite next door, followed shortly by a knock. Becky opened the connecting door and the boys walked in carrying bags. Billy held up a game of Clue, chortling.

Melanie took it from his hand with a grin. “Y’all’re right on time. We just had a great idea. We decided we’re gonna to do whatever we can to find out about Yoli’s death. We think she was murdered.” She glanced at her watch. It was just before eight. Still plenty of time. Her beautiful face took on a strange expression, blue eyes brighter than usual. “How about we see if Ditileo’s restaurant has good pizza? Kinda check the place out. Maybe we’ll hear somethin’ interestin’. Might even run into Frank.”

The girls groaned as Melanie memorized the address. Billy put the game on the counter and reached for his pager. He put in the call and turned to the girls. “We’ll be ready to go when you are.”

Astonished, Blair stared at Melanie. “You’ve got to be kidding? We ate just about everything in sight less than two hours ago.”

“Forget the food. We just have to order something not to look suspicious. Whatever we don’t finish we can take home for breakfast tomorrow. What I hope we can do

is meet Frank. It's a great idea, y'all," Melanie said, eyes alight.

"On one condition," Jessi demanded, hands on her hips. "No garbage pizza."

"So, Melly, what's your plan?" Larry asked, refusing to pick up Jessi's gauntlet.

"Well, like I said, I hope we run into Frank Ditileo. He and Becky need to have a chat, for sure. Other than that, I don't have a real plan. We just need to keep our ears open." Melanie glanced at him and shrugged. "See what people are talkin' about, do some talkin' ourselves. Y'all know what I mean ... feed each other lines. Blair and I do it all the time. I mean, if Yoli died due to some kind of drug overdose there may be a connection somehow. Can't say it's commonplace to have your horse drugged without your knowledge either."

## Chapter 15

Ditileo's restaurant was just far off enough from the strip to make parking comfortable. A large red awning extended from the front door to the curb. Bob stopped the limo and opened the door for the kids.

"Hey, Billy," he said. "I didn't get a chance to eat yet. I was just about ready to get a bite when you paged. You don't mind if I come in and get something, do you?"

Billy grinned and shook his head. "Heck, no, that's fine with me. Keep your ears open. See if anyone's talking about Yoli's accident or the drug thing with that horse."

Bob's expression changed abruptly as he studied Billy's face. He frowned. "Come to think about it, why are we here? Didn't you eat at Paris?" He made a face, a wry grimace on his lips. "I take it we're on a fact-finding mission. Sleuthing?" Correctly interpreting the situation, he stared hard at Billy. "Are we about to do something your mother wouldn't like?"

"Nah," he replied, grinning at Bob. "Like you say, we're just doing a bit of sleuthing. No sweat, we're cool." He followed the kids into the restaurant.

Bob drove the limo into a parking lot down the street, got out and locked the car. *Sleuthing. That's what he calls it now. I wonder what I'll call it when his mother grills me to a crisp.*

He shifted his jacket, patted the bulge under his arm and snickered. Never in his wildest imagination had he thought being a bodyguard for a seventeen-year-old boy would be so entertaining. *Here we go again. I just feel it.*

Bob sighed and hurried across the street to the restaurant.

The dining room was dimly lit and intimate. Dark red wallpaper and red carpet set off the crisp white linen

and small vases of fragrant flowers that decorated each table. Black hurricane lamps cast soft light over the tables. It was very romantic and the kids wished they weren't here with a purpose.

Jeff slipped an arm around Jessi and kissed her. "Too bad we're not alone," he whispered, smiling down at her.

Her eyes melted into his. "I love you too," she said.

The only table large enough to accommodate them was right next to the bar. The kids slid into the huge red leather booth, giggling. They weren't loud, exactly. They just weren't being particularly quiet. Several people in the bar turned to look at them.

Billy glanced around the room and whispered, "When Bob comes in just ignore him, pretend you don't know him." He gazed at the paintings on the wall and raised his voice to normal. "Reminds me of a restaurant I like in New York. You guys ever been to Manhattan?"

Becky chuckled, "No, but I've been to Paris. Umm, isn't this place darling?"

"Are you really hungry?" Shievon asked as she snuggled into the crook of Billy's arm.

He flipped a strand of her glossy dark hair and grinned. "I always have room for a good pizza and it makes a terrific breakfast. If the food is as authentic as the music and decor, you guys are about to eat the first real pizza of your life."

Trixie handed them menus and took their order for iced tea.

Soft violins played something vaguely familiar, masking the low buzz of dining room conversation and the occasional clink of silverware. Delicious smells wafted around the room.

Orders taken and tea refreshed, the kids leaned back, checking out the other patrons. They didn't know

what to look for, exactly, just something strange or suspicious. Many of the tables had families where young children wore colorful bibs with *Ditileo's* emblazoned across the front.

The couple over in the corner, oblivious to their surroundings, talked romance, feeding each other bites of some delicious looking dessert. Nothing interesting there.

The mirrored wall of the long bar faced back into the dining room, expanding the look of spaciousness and doubling the wide-open feeling. A group of men sat at the far end, studying their drinks and watching some ballgame on the TV. Random bits of conversation passed between them. They didn't look interesting, either.

The two guys sitting across from them at the bar drew their attention and held it. Becky leaned toward Steve. "They look like they might be your relatives. So cute."

Steve glanced at them then back to Becky. "Stereotypical Italian, huh? I'll take that as a compliment."

Handsome in an over the top way, they looked like they came from the cast of the Sopranos. The swarthy, attractive faces drew them, compelling in their similarity.

Melanie made a point of glancing around the room, eyes searching each corner of the restaurant. "Darn it, I don't see Frank around anywhere. Maybe he left already. I really wanted to talk to him tonight, but we'll catch him at the show tomorrow." Her voice was unique, musical. It wasn't just the lilting New Orleans accent, although that in itself was distinctive. Her voice just seemed to carry and although it was not loud, every word rang clear.

Two pairs of dark eyes watched her through the mirror. The kids thought nothing of it. Melanie had all their attention.

"When Becky tells the steward what she heard last night, he'll go to the FEI and they just might reinstate Frank in time for him to continue with the show." She

glanced around again and shrugged. "It's a chance. I'll be right back. Let me ask the bartender if he knows where Frank is." Melanie scooted out of the booth and approached the bar.

Al gave her an appraising look and a friendly smile as she drew near. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm wondering if Frank is coming in tonight."

"Frank? Oh, ya just missed him, left maybe an hour ago. Can I give him a message?"

"No, that's all right. I'll see him tomorrow at the show." Melanie went back to the booth, a scowl on her face. She nodded at the kids and winked as she slid into the booth.

"We missed him. As bad as this business with Frank is, how about the poor girl that died today? I still can't believe it." Her words, audible to the men sitting at the bar, got their attention. "Have y'all heard any more about it?"

"No, Melly," Blair said, "not a thing. It was just terrible." Taking the lead then, Blair turned to Becky. "When you were down in the barn last night, exactly what did you hear them say?"

Becky glanced at Blair and shrugged. "Pretty much what I've already told you. I can't remember anything more. They talked about drugs and one asked if the syringe was ready and which stall the horse was in. It was really weird."

The mellowing effects of three beers disappeared in a blink as Vinny listened to the kids' discussion. He slid a glance over at his cousin and leaned against the back of his stool.

"Ya hearin' this?" he whispered.

"Don't mean squat."

They looked in the mirror then down at their glasses. The kids sat right behind them, clearly audible, deep in conversation.

“It sure sounded like they were up to no good.” Grinning, Becky continued the charade. “Two Mexican guys. I figured grooms, but that’s just an assumption, especially at an international competition.”

Shievon prepared to drop the first bomb. “Can you remember the voice yet?”

“Not yet, but I know it’ll come to me. Just a matter of time.”

Vinny’s arm stopped in mid lift as he snaked his eyes over at Bernie then back at the mirrors.

“Squat, huh?” His voice a low hiss, he said, “You sure you didn’t have nothin’ to do with druggin’ Frankie’s horse?”

Bernie refused to answer, instead fixing black eyes on the kids.

Billy chimed in. “You know the FEI will do a full investigation. It sounds like someone set Frank up, don’t you think?”

A tall, muscular man in his early forties walked in just then. He approached the bar, nodded at Al and ordered a draft. He sat three chairs from Bernie, unbuttoned his jacket and shifted in his chair.

“I’m starved,” Bob said, smiling at Al as he accepted the menu. “What do you recommend?”

“Got the best pie in the world. Can’t beat it.”

“Nah, I don’t want anything sweet. How’s that meatball sandwich?” He looked down the menu further.

“Oh, wait, how about a personal pizza with the works? Yeah, that sounds great.”

“A personal pie, loaded,” Al said with a grin. “Good choice. Thin crust or regular?”

“Regular’s just fine with me. Thanks.” Bob sipped his beer, making it last. Glancing down the bar, he made eye contact with Bernie. He lifted his glass, nodded, and took another sip. In the mirror in front of them, dark eyes scrutinized Bob as the cousins returned his nod.

Vinny pulled long, black-clad legs from under the bar, turned sideways in his chair and stretched, rotating his ankles. He crossed them, face casual, eyes scanning the room. With studied nonchalance, his gaze came to rest on the kids. Cold black eyes slid over each face he was able to see. They came to rest on Melanie.

Vinny turned back around in his chair and stared at his cousin. Their eyes returned to the mirror as they continued to eavesdrop on the kids.

“I think you ought to go to the police again, Becky. That’s important information, at least it could be,” Larry said.

Trixie interrupted their conversation as she deposited their pizza on the table. “Enjoy.” She passed out plates and left a pile of napkins next to the pizza.

“I can’t help it,” Billy said. “This looks great.” He slid a slice of pizza onto his plate and grinned at Shievon. He folded it in half and took a bite. “Oh, man.”

The kids threw surreptitious looks at the two guys at the bar. Unable to resist the delicious aroma wafting up into their nostrils, they began to eat, all the while sneaking covert looks at the men at the bar.

Bob watched the two men watch the kids. “Where’s the restroom?” he asked Al.

“Around the corner there, down that hall.”

Finishing his beer, he pushed the mug toward Al. “I’ll do that again. Be right back.”

Bob rose and turned around, walking past the kid’s table. They never looked up.

Al sauntered over to Vinny and Bernie. “New guy in town,” he said, voice low, secretive. “Dude’s packin.”

Vinny and Bernie nodded, watching as Bob disappeared down the hall.

Billy glanced at Melanie and shrugged. “The FEI always thinks the owner or trainer did it, kind of like the cops and the spouse.” He hesitated a moment, thoughtful. “Of course, what better way would there be to get rid of the competition?”

“Huh?” Thoughtful, Melanie leaned back into the booth and nodded. “Whoa, Billy. Now that makes sense.”

Becky pursed her lips then sighed. “What makes this so hard to track down is not knowing the motive or the connection, if there is one. Is it a place on the team? Is someone betting heavily? Maybe it’s a disgruntled former trainer? Personal revenge or something? There are so many possible reasons.” She nibbled at her pizza and shrugged. “And do we think there’s any connection between the girl dying and the horse getting drugged?” She glanced around at the other kids and then shifted her gaze to the mirror. Black eyes returned her stare, boring into hers. She blinked.

Larry said, “Until we figure out whether they’re connected, we’ll never come up with the answer. I mean, in Frank’s case, it could be anybody, maybe an ex-groom he fired or a trainer that just wanted to hurt him or, hmmm, what else, maybe someone with a grudge? But that girl dying like that. I think it takes a pretty strong reason to kill

someone don't you? Is a place on the team a strong enough motive?"

"Kill someone, as in murder? Who said that?" Shievon stared from Larry to Billy, eyes wide.

"Well," Billy said, "they think she died in the fall ... broke her neck, but what if she was drugged? What if that's why she fell and broke her neck in the first place?"

"Besides the obvious," Blair said, "who might want to do that? And who is the obvious? I wonder if there is any connection between Frank and the people who own Katrina. We need to check that out."

## Chapter 16

Melanie shivered. Lowering her long eyelashes she watched the men at the bar watching them. A cold premonition of fear swept her and she clenched her teeth.

The kids glanced at each other shaking their heads as they listened to Steve. He leaned forward, raising his voice slightly. "You have to admit it's a clever plan. I mean what better way to eliminate the competition than to drug it and let the vet do the job for you? Same with Yoli. They think she died because she was thrown into the wall."

"So you think it was another trainer or owner that drugged Frank's horse?" Shievon said, all innocence, her face as bland as a baby's. "Of course, that makes sense."

"Well, that's true," Blair said, "most likely it's the trainer or owner of one of the horses with mid-high rankings." Blair shook her head. "Can you imagine?"

"Well," said an indignant Jessi. "It sure wasn't Richard Spooner. He won today fair and square." Pink cheeks showed through her deep tan.

"Oh, Jessi," the kids chorused. "We know it wasn't Richard."

"Well," she said, mollified. "Okay, then. Not Richard."

"So, who?" Becky asked.

"Anyone have the standings memorized?" Billy asked, looking at Melanie.

"Well, yes," she said. "Of course, Richard came in with the most points. The wins yesterday and today kept him in the lead. Vicky pulled a rail, so that's one change."

She looked at Billy and something in her face told him she was about to drop a bomb. "Ya know the girl that died? Her horse ranked third in the standings. *If* she'd placed today, she'd have made the team. Same with Frank.

He was fourth comin' into the ring." Melanie paused for effect, large blue eyes flicked toward the bar a moment and then away. "Y'know, he placed second today before they disqualified him. So that's two spots on the team now open in really unique ways ... very interesting. Strange. Ya gotta wonder if there's a connection. We need to figure out who had anything to gain. Maybe it's not the obvious riders or trainers. Maybe it's someone else, someone with a different reason."

Larry leaned back in the booth and slanted his eyes from the bar mirror to Melanie and back. A sharp dart of fear hit him as he made inadvertent eye contact with Vinny. He noticed their tense expressions as the men listened, faces engrossed, uptight. He tried to catch Melanie's eye.

Bob returned from the restroom and took his seat at the bar. He sipped his beer, moving to the right as Al placed the steaming pizza before him. The delicious aroma wafted up to his nostrils and he swallowed involuntarily.

"Man, that smells great," he said. "So, what's happening around town?" Taking a bite of pizza, he shifted the hot cheese off his tongue and drew air into his mouth. "Whew, that's hot."

Al grinned. "Well, are ya lookin' for some betting action? Stuff like that? Ladies? Something to smoke?"

Bob coughed slightly and blinked. "Ah, betting, I guess. What do you recommend? I'm in town for another couple of days."

Al looked right into his eyes and shrugged. "Well, what's your game? Ya like cards? The slots? Maybe some roulette? Got a great table over to Bingo's. Kinda outa the way place. Great odds."

Bernie turned to Bob and smiled. "Like the ponies? They got some good off-track betting at Bingo's, too." He smiled in encouragement and elbowed Vinny.

“Yeah,” Vinny said, leaning forward so he could see Bob. “Ya know anything about horses?”

“Nah,” Bob said with a shake of his head. “I stay as far away from them as I can.”

“Oh,” Vinny said. Losing interest, he leaned back in his chair. He returned his attention to the mirror, eyes narrowed to slits, straining to hear the kids.

The chat Bob had with Bernie was as audible to the kids as what they said to each other. They sat rigid in their seats trying to catch every word, like actors in a play waited for their cues.

“Don’t stare,” Melanie said, hand covering her mouth, voice a whisper. “I think we hit pay dirt. They’re sure very interested in what we’re sayin’. I mean, considering we’re strangers and all. Look at the expression on that one guy’s face. Cool it, y’all.”

Kenny nodded at Melanie and whispered, “I think you’re right. They’re payin’ a lot of attention to us. Way more than two guys would to a bunch a kids they didn’t know. Be cool, y’all.”

Their eyes shifted from the mirror to their plates. Not a single slice of pizza remained. They looked at each other and chuckled.

Jessi dropped the next bomb. “I still can’t get over what we saw on that tape. That poor girl, Yoli, was it? Sure looked like she passed out before she hit the wall.” She glanced at Melanie with a gleam in her eye. “Can you pass me the tea, please?”

Vinny’s foot tapped faster as he listened to the kids. He ran a hand through his hair and cursed under his breath. “Tape? Are you hearin’ this?” Raising his voice a bit he said, “Hey, Al, I’ll have a shot a Chivas.”

“Make that two.” Bernie watched the kids, eyes intense, fists clenched.

“No doubt about it,” agreed Billy, eating the last crust on his plate. “She was gone before she hit the wall.”

Bob watched the men’s reaction to Billy’s last statement and wolfed down the last of his pizza. He slid the plate out of his way and reached for his wallet.

*Looks like that’s not all that’s going to hit the wall.* He glanced over at the cousins, noting their obsession with the kids, the intense expressions on their faces. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up as he motioned to Al.

“Hey, buddy, how much do I owe you?” Bob threw several bills on the bar, drained his glass and rose to leave. “Great pizza, best I ever ate”

“Brooklyn,” Al said with a smile as he picked up the money. “Only place to get a real pie ... here and Brooklyn. Take care.”

Bob strode down the aisle and made direct eye contact with Billy as he came abreast of their table. “*Out. Now.*” He walked to the door, pulled the keys from his pocket as the door closed behind him and sprinted for the limo. Hitting the remote button that unlocked the doors, he slid behind the wheel.

The engine roared to life as he rolled down the security window. He stopped at the curb just as the kids got there and let the boys get the doors. They were barely seated when Bob pulled into the street, made a quick right turn and disappeared into the night.

Vinny and Bernie came out of the restaurant just moments later to a street empty in both directions.

“Where’d they go so fast?” Bernie asked.

“Beats me. Hey, we gotta talk.”

They headed to the parking lot, never noticing the limo stopped at the light down the street.

\* \* \*

Bob turned left and headed back to the hotel as fast as he could legally get there. He pulled to a stop in the driveway and turned around to the kids.

“Billy,” he said, turning to the boy, a stern look on his face. “I want you guys to take the girls up to their suite and stay with them until I get the car parked. Right up, Billy. No stops, no detours along the way. Do not answer the door, no matter what. I have my key. Now go.”

Billy nodded. The kids scurried through the doors of the hotel and disappeared into the crowded lobby. They took the penthouse elevator non-stop, burst out the door before it fully opened and rushed down the hall to their suites.

Shievon had the key card out of her purse, ready. She slid it into the slot and pushed the door open. The kids rushed in, closed the door and locked it behind them.

Heaving a sigh, they collapsed on the furniture and glanced warily at each other.

“Well,” Billy said, “Bob’s spooked and he doesn’t spook easy.” He glanced at Melanie and grinned. “Looks like your idea paid off.”

Shievon flopped down on the sofa and looked at her friends. “I wonder who those guys were. Man, talk about weird.”

“I don’t know, but they sure did get interested in what we were saying once we started talking about the show.” Blair settled back into Kenny’s arms.

“From where I sat,” Jeff said, “I couldn’t see the mirror. What did they do?”

“Yeah,” Jessi added, “I couldn’t see them well either without staring.”

Melanie grinned at Jessi and shook her head. “When you went off about Richard, I had to laugh. Sure made the whole thing look spontaneous. For a while there, I was afraid we were pourin’ it on a bit thick.”

You know me,” Jessi said, “always good for a laugh.”

There was a knock on the door and Billy got up to peer out the security hole. He flipped the deadbolt and Bob walked in.

“Okay,” he said, “what’re you kids up to now? You really had those guys at the bar going. Someone please tell me what we’re doing this time.”

They brought him up to speed, including the purpose of their visit to the police station earlier. They played the tape for him in slow motion, pointing out Yoli’s riding errors, culminating with her headfirst impact with the wall. He winced and looked at Billy. “Roll it one more time in slow-mo.”

As the tape proceeded he got very quiet. “What happened there?” he asked, watching Yoli lurch to one side of the horse. “I thought you guys didn’t do that any more.”

“That’s where she lost her stirrup,” Billy said. “Now, watch this. See the look on her face and ... she closes her eyes and let’s go of the reins. See?”

“Where did you get this tape, Billy?”

“It’s from the show photographer, you know, like the ones I send to the folks. They tape each round. Why?”

“I’m just trying to figure things out,” he said. “Those thugs didn’t seem upset about the horse at all. Even with the girl dying, they didn’t seem overly concerned ... until you mentioned the tape. That really got their attention.”

Becky looked from Steve to Bob. “What do you think that means?”

“I’m not sure.” Bob glanced at the kids. “Why did you pick that restaurant?”

“Well,” Blair said, “Melly looked up Frank Ditileo in the phone book. He’s the rider whose horse was tested and disqualified, you know. Anyway, she saw the restaurant’s phone number was connected to their home phone so we figured it was the same Ditileo.” Blair shrugged. “We thought maybe we’d run into Frank. It was a long-shot.”

Bob turned to Becky then, a speculative look in his eyes. “The guys that drugged the horse, you never got a look at them, right? No idea who they were? Couldn’t have been one of the guys from the bar?”

Becky shook her head. “Nah, they were talking in Spanish. I’m almost positive one of the guys was Leon.”

“Leon?”

“Yeah,” Billy said. “Remember when our tack was stolen last year? He hung around with Kelly ... she was the ringleader. The cops busted the gang before Leon showed up with the other truck, so he escaped arrest. At least, that’s what we *think* happened. No one ever saw him again, so we’re not sure if he was even involved. We’re just assuming.”

“Hey, Bob, do you think we ought to tell Frank Ditileo what Becky heard? He’s under suspension now, his whole barn is. We figure he should know about this. What do you think?”

He shrugged and glanced at Becky. “When you went to the police, you told them everything, right?”

Becky nodded.

“So they’ve probably already talked to Frank about it. I don’t think you need to get involved with that unless

you want to. But this,” Bob glanced at the tape, “this is different. We have to take this tape to the police.”

Billy nodded in agreement. “That’s what we thought. Do you think they’ll see what happened? We can explain it, I guess, but they may not believe us.”

“They’ll figure it out, Billy. Do you happen to have a blank tape with you? I want to make a copy before we give it to the police.”

The kids shook their heads. No tape.

“Okay then.” He got to his feet. “I’m going down to that store in the lobby and get one. You kids stay put, I’ll be back as fast as I can.”

Bob walked over to the door, motioned Billy to him and lowered his voice. “Do not leave this room, I mean it. I don’t care if there’s an earthquake. Ride it out. And do not let anyone in until I get back. Do you hear me? I’m serious here. You kids may be in danger.”

He closed the door behind him, waiting to hear Billy flip the security lock. Bob nodded grimly to himself, walked down the corridor and pushed the elevator button.

## *Chapter 17*

Vinny paused just as they were about to get into his car. He looked at Bernie. "Hey, ya think maybe the valet over there, what's his name? Sammy? Ya think he mighta seen 'em?"

Bernie nodded. "Let's go check it out."

They closed the car doors again and walked across the lot.

"Hey, guys, what's up?"

"Hey, Sammy," Vinny said. "We're wonderin' something. Did ya happen to see a bunch a kids come outta the restaurant a bit ago?"

Sammy grinned. "Yeah, musta been eight or ten of 'em. Why?"

"Did you bring 'em their cars?"

"No. They left in a black limo. Why?"

"Ya didn't happen to catch the plate or nothin', did ya?"

"Yeah, sure. Private stretch. MARTIN2. Why?"

"Oh, one of the kids left her purse behind and we wanted to get it back to her. Thanks Sammy." Vinny handed him a twenty and a wicked grin. "Forget I asked."

They waved to the valet and headed back to their cars.

"We need to get to a computer, Bernie. Your place or mine?"

"I'll follow ya home, it's closer."

\* \* \*

"God, Vinny, what a crummy little joint ya got here." Bernie shook his head, gazing around the small living room with distaste. "Good lookin' dude like you, I

can't understand it. Why don't ya lose this dump and get ya something nice? Ya make plenty a dough. Yer never gonna find a nice lady living in a dump like this."

"Shut up, Bernie. I'm savin' up and then I'm outa this God forsaken oven. Hate it here." Vinny turned on his computer. "I'll go back to Brooklyn and find me a nice gal. Sit down. Take a load off." He glared at his cousin. "Better yet, make yourself useful and get us a couple a beers."

Vinny's fingers flew over the keyboard and soon the DMV site popped up. He played around for another minute or two and then leaned forward. "Bingo. Limo belongs to the Martin Group. Thomas Martin, Bel Air *and* Del Mar residences. La-te-da. We got us a mucky-muck." He leaned back in the seat. "What'd'ya make of this? Name ring any bells?"

Bernie shook his head and shrugged.

Vinny exited that site and entered another. A list of names appeared on the screen and he hit *Martin Group*. The screen blinked again and another list popped up. He hit *Thomas Martin* and drew in his breath as the site opened.

"Dig this, Bernie," he said. "'Industrialist Thomas Martin, owner' ... blah, blah, okay, here we go. 'Married to Tracy Ruston, TV star, one son. *One son.*'"

He clicked an icon and a series of photos appeared. There was one of Billy and his parents at the Emmy Awards presentation.

Two pairs of black eyes looked at each other over their beers.

"That's one of them kids, Bernie. Now we gotta find out where they're staying." Vinny turned back to the computer. Before long, he found what he was looking for.

"They got good taste ... own two suites in the Mandalay Bay Towers. Penthouse, naturally." Vinny logged off and turned to Bernie. "Ready?"

They walked back out the door.

Vinny and Bernie strolled across the parking lot and entered the hotel lobby. Unfamiliar with the layout they separated, checking out the shops and restaurants. They knew the kids couldn't get into the casino so they gave it only a cursory look.

They had just met again when they saw Bob walk across the lobby and enter the gift shop. Turning their backs to him, they melted into the crowd, watching from a distance as he made several purchases, including a video tape. They watched him take the express to the penthouses.

"Betcha' he's their driver, probably their body guard, too." Vinny looked at Bernie, dark eyes narrowed. "Knew there was somethin' fishy about him. That was no coincidence with them kids tonight, either. They were lookin' for us. But why? What could they know?"

"Know? That's ridiculous, Vinny. They don't know nothin'. What do ya mean, lookin' for us? And why? They're just a bunch of rich kids in town for that show and some fun." Bernie shook his head.

"Okay, so if you feel like that why are we standin' in the middle of a hotel we've never been in before followin' kids we don't know?"

"It's called hedging your bets, dude. Come on, let's do it."

Bob slipped the tape into the VCR and hit record. When it finished, he took it and the original and handed them to Billy. "Put the copy away somewhere. Here, label it." He handed him a pen.

Billy scribbled something and gave the pen back to Bob. "Now what?" he said.

Bob looked at the clock on the wall and shrugged. "We're staying together tonight. We'll go to the police first

thing tomorrow. You kids are going to have to double up. I'll take the sofa."

Jessi and Becky giggled. The giggles died as Bob tossed them a cool look.

Face flaming, Jessi said, "I was only kidding, Bob. We've all taken the virginity pledge."

"So I heard. When and if any of that changes, it won't be on my watch."

He took off his jacket and loosened his collar. The kids glanced at the gun under his arm and then quickly away. They all knew he had it, but looking at it sticking out like that just morphed them back to the last time they'd seen it. *Pirates and the Sea Nymph*.

Melanie gave an edgy, nervous chortle and stood. "We'll get our stuff moved. Come on, Blair."

The girls, now clumped in together, settled down in the beds. They heard the boys doing the same thing. Extra blankets and quilts retrieved from the hall closet and the bedrooms in the other suite provided a comfortable place on the deep carpet. Before long, the lights went out and the kids slipped into dreamland.

Bob sat in the darkened living room, waiting. It would be a long night. He stared out the window, remembering the tape and the looks on the faces of the men in the restaurant as they listened to the kids. With all his heart he wished they were on the way out of Las Vegas. He had a bad feeling and it wouldn't go away.

## *Chapter 18*

The limo stopped in front of the police station just a bit after eight. Becky and Steve went in alone. As they mounted the steps, Steve took her hand.

“You okay?”

“Yep, no problem. I do this kinda thing every day.” She chuckled as they walked up to the reception desk. Familiar gray eyes widened in recognition.

“Can I help you?”

“I’d like to speak with Detective Anders.”

“He’s busy right now. What do you want?”

“I have something to give to him. I saw him the other day about the horse drugging incident.”

“I can get it to him,” he said, extending his hand.

Becky backed away and shook her head. “I want to talk to him. We’ll just wait until he’s free.”

“Well, it might be some time.” He looked from Becky to Steve as they headed toward a row of chairs lined up along one wall and shrugged.

“I’ll see if I can interrupt him.” He picked up his phone.

Detective Anders rose as they approached his desk. He nodded to the chairs. “Take a seat. I understand you have something for me.”

Becky handed him the tape. “It’s the round of the girl that died at the show.”

Anders flipped it over once or twice. “What’s on it that would interest me?”

“Do you have a ... yes, there in the corner.” Steve nodded at the TV and VCR. “Play it, sir, and you’ll see.”

Anders leaned back in his chair, shifting his gaze from Becky to Steve. "I'm kinda busy, kids. What's this about?"

"We think it shows that something was wrong with Yoli before she came off the horse." Becky leaned toward him, blue eyes wide. "It's very short. Please, just look."

"Last night," Steve said, "we went to Ditileo's restaurant for dinner. We were kinda fishing and we started talking about the drugged horse and the girl dying. These two guys at the bar seemed really interested in this tape once they knew we had it, which we made sure they did, and..." Steve shrugged, looking from Becky to the detective. "We just thought you should know. We aren't sure what it means, but most strangers don't pay much attention to a bunch of kids talking about horses."

Anders sighed and slipped the tape into the VCR. He pushed the play button and watched Yoli's ride. When it was over, he turned to the kids. "I don't know anything about riding a horse. What was I supposed to see?" he asked. "She fell off and hit the wall. It broke her neck. We knew that already."

He started to eject the tape when Steve said, "No, stop. Watch it one more time, in slow motion. Watch her face when she turns for the wall. And her hands."

Anders rewound the tape and played it in slow motion.

"Now watch."

The detective adjusted the tape to agonizing slowness. Anders saw her eyes close, watched her chin fall slowly to her chest and her hands open wide as her fingers lost contact with the reins. When it was over, he hit the rewind button again and looked at Becky, a smile of respect on his face.

“Thank you for persisting. That’s some tape.” He stood and nodded at the kids. “It asks a lot of questions. I’ll get to the bottom of them.”

The detective walked them to the door. “Thanks again, and say, what did those guys look like? The ones you saw at Ditileo’s last night.”

“Gangsters,” Steve said succinctly. “Just like me, actually, only lots older.”

Becky chuckled and nudged him in the ribs. “They were in their thirties. One was tall and both very good looking, dark, probably Italian ... not Mexican. Real sharp dressers, all in black. Brothers, maybe.”

“Okay,” Anders said, nodding. “Thanks again.” The detective escorted them back to the waiting room and nodded good-bye.

He sat at his desk, hesitated a moment, then picked up the phone. “Hey, it’s Anders. Listen, tell the coroner I want a full tox screen done on that Yolanda Navarro, the one that died from the horse ...” he paused, “yeah, that one, and check out her heart, see what he can find. I think maybe she died before she broke her neck. Thanks, Sid.”

He pulled a small tape recorder out of his desk drawer, set it in front of him and hit the button. The detective leaned back in his chair, tented his fingers next to his mouth and began to record his thoughts aloud.

“From Becky’s statement yesterday, it looks like somebody deliberately drugged Ditileo’s horse to put the kid out of the Olympic Trials. Okay, the finger for that one points right at Ernie Spinelli. He and Bobby started feuding when they arrived in town years ago and the older and richer they get the more chances they take. I could definitely see Ernie for that one.”

Anders got up and started to pace. “How strange, how far out is it that Bobby and Ernie are involved in something like this? One loses his rider and the other gets

kicked out of the games for doping his horse. Talk about pushing coincidence to the limit.” Anders paused then sat at his desk, index fingers massaging his temples.

He resumed speaking. “And murder? Would Bobby murder some girl just so his kid could win a spot on the team? Moreover, would knocking off Ernie’s rider guarantee Frank that spot? Nope, it sure wouldn’t. So what then?”

The detective got to his feet again and began pacing the small room. “And bearing all that in mind, what could be his motive? Simply because she rode for Ernie? Ridiculous. To win a bet? So Frank could win the class? Nah, those aren’t motives for murder. Something is definitely missing. But what, *what?* Maybe it *is* just a coincidence. Maybe the connection is missing because there is none.”

Turning off the machine, he leaned over his desk and hit the intercom. “Hey, Eric, did we find Spinelli yet?”

“Yeah, boss, they’re bringing him up now.”

\* \* \*

The crowd in the Center waited patiently for the show to begin.

Juan walked over to the photography booth. A different clerk, a younger woman, stood behind the table categorizing the tapes in front of her.

“Hi,” Juan said, smiling. “I came by last night for the tape of 656’s round yesterday and the clerk told me it’d already been sold. She promised to make me a copy. Is it done by any chance?”

“Sure is. Got it right here.” She went through a small stack of tapes, selecting one. “Sorry about the delay.” She handed the tape to Juan. “That’ll be twenty dollars, please.”

Juan handed her the money and said, “Do you happen to remember who bought the first tape?”

“I sold it, but we don’t keep records of who buys them. I’d recognize him again, though.”

“Okay. Thanks anyway.” Juan headed back to his hotel. Ten minutes later, he sat in front of the TV, fascinated. He couldn’t believe what the tape showed. It was so different from what he’d seen standing at the other end of the stadium it looked like a different round.

The photographer stood at the bottom of the arena with a face-on shot of Yoli as she approached the wall. Juan’s stomach tightened as he saw her pass out. He blinked as she slammed into the wall and gasped again as the mare slid through the oxer, bringing it crashing down on herself.

Juan turned the TV off with a snap and leaned back in his chair. Whoever got the other tape would see the same things he did. Pulling out his cell, he dialed a number. He got voice mail and tapped his foot in frustration, waiting to leave his message.

“Bernie, it’s Juan. Hey, we got a problem. I’ll be at the show all day. Give me a buzz when you get this message, we have to talk.” He slipped the cell into his pocket and headed back to the show grounds.

\* \* \*

Vinny and Bernie sat high in the balcony, looking down at the arena. They had an excellent vantage point and saw the kids as they took their seats in the box.

“They’re alone this morning,” Vinny said. “No sign of the big guy.”

“Life just gets easier and easier, don’t it?” Just then, his cell beeped. He pulled it out of his pocket and checked the number.

“Who is it?” Vinny asked.

“Ah, just Juan. No big deal. I’ll get it later.” He closed the cell and stuck it back in his pocket. “This is much more important.”

\* \* \*

Becky stood to the side of the ring, talking with the show Steward. As she spoke, he took notes, raising a hand for her to slow down as he scribbled on a pad of paper.

“You are positive it was Sirocco’s stall they entered? You’re sure?”

“Absolutely, yes I am. They talked about drugs, went into her stall for a couple of seconds and then left. I don’t know that it matters, but they were Mexicans, so I assumed grooms. I think the owner of Sirocco got set up.”

“Do you know Frank Ditileo? Are you two friends?”

“No, we’ve never even met.”

The Steward continued to write, asking Becky other questions, ending with her cell number in case the FEI committee had more questions.

“Thank you for coming forward with this information. I’ll get your statement to the committee right away.”

Nodding, she turned away and made her way back to the other kids.

“What did the Steward say, Becky?” Melanie nodded in encouragement, blue eyes wide.

“He took my statement and I really think you’re gonna hear an announcement pretty soon that Sirocco has been reinstated. I mean, the whole thing was ridiculous from the get-go.”

Jessi grinned. “Good deal. I like it when things go right for a change. Besides, he’ll never catch Richard.”

Melanie stared at Jessi, started to say something and changed her mind.

“What did the detective say, Becky? They have any suspects yet?” Shievon asked.

“I don’t think he’s spending much time on it,” Becky said. “Not high on his priority list.”

“It could all be a coincidence, I guess,” Billy said. “Maybe there’s no relation between Yoli’s death and the horse drugging, but the timing is wild. Are there any connections between the riders? Or maybe the owners ... they might have some common thread? Trainers?”

“The detective didn’t say anything to us one way or the other,” Steve said as he took Becky’s hand. “He just promised to keep in touch if something came up.”

“Well,” Melanie said with a shrug, “I guess we’ve done all we can. Oh, boy, here we go.”

They came back to the present as the first horse started on course.

## Chapter 19

If you're into short, dark and flashy, Ernie Spinelli filled the bill and then some. He looked like a forty-five year old Fonzie, complete with black, slicked-back hair, large dark eyes and olive skin. He had a ready smile that displayed his dimples and made his eyes tilt up at the corners. He looked almost angelic as he grinned up at Anders. He was anything but.

"So, Ernie, how's tricks?" Anders took a seat at the table opposite the little man.

"Great, Detective, just great. Been quite a week. Let me see. My horse was just about to win a spot on the Olympic Team when my rider dies right in front of thousands of fans. Right there on the TV, uh huh, and to top it all, the horse is now dead lame. So, me? I'm just peachy. How's by you?"

"Been a bad day for Bobby Ditileo, too," Anders replied. "Did you do his kid's horse?" The detective took in the look that crossed Ernie's face.

"*Do* 'em? What'cha mean by that?" He blinked. Both fists clenched involuntarily.

"You know as well as I do they disqualified Frank after they found steroids in his horse. It has your name written all over it, Ernie. Hear ya got a bet goin' with Bobby as to who makes this team or whatever. So like I said ... what?"

"I want my lawyer," Ernie said, scowling. "I don't know nothin' about drugging no horse. Ya got the wrong guy."

"Yeah, I got it. That's why ya need a mouthpiece. 'Cause you're in the clear, right?" Anders slammed his hand on the table for emphasis, but Ernie never even

blinked. "We can maybe cut a deal, Ernie. Besides, I got some info that may be of interest to you."

Large, dark eyes, full of studied innocence, looked at Anders. "What info?"

"Oh, well, I got news about your rider."

Ernie leaned forward now, interested. "What about my rider?"

"Well, it looks like maybe she died of something other than the fall. Looks like maybe drugs or something."

"Get outta here," Ernie exclaimed, leaning even farther forward, exuding minty breath. White, gleaming teeth showed in what might have passed for a smile. "That kid didn't do no drugs. Squeaky clean. All she wanted was to win a spot on the team. You're nuts."

"I don't know, Ernie," Anders said, ready to fire the first salvo. "I got a tape that makes me wonder. Got the coroner doin' every tox test he can think of. We'll turn it up if there's anything to find. We're bein' very thorough." The detective leaned back in his chair, watching the emotions flit across Ernie's face like a movie screen.

The little man blinked a couple of times then made direct eye contact with the detective. "I know she wasn't no druggie, so spit it out. Ya think someone slipped her something? Something that killed her? Who, *why* would ... what tape?" He clamped his lips shut and took a deep breath. His complexion slid from florid to ashen and back again. "Are you telling me you think someone offed that poor kid?"

"Could be, Ernie. Any candidates?"

Ernie leaned back in his chair, a calculating look on his face. "No comment. So, are ya gonna book me or what? I'm a busy dude. I got things to do."

"Yeah," Anders said, "I just bet you do." The detective rose from his chair and walked behind Ernie. He placed both hands on his shoulders.

“You’re free to go, but keep in touch. No trips out of town, nothin’ like that, right?” He rocked Ernie from side to side ... the movement gentle, almost affectionate. The fingers tightened. “Be a good boy.”

Ernie shrugged him off and rose. He walked to the door, opened it and paused.

“Catch ya later, Detective.” The door closed behind him with a light hiss.

Anders walked back down the hall to his office, deep in thought. He sat at his desk and picked up the phone again. “Hey, Eric, get somebody to bring Bobby Ditileo in. I got a couple of questions he might be able to answer.”

\* \* \*

Spinelli got into his car and pulled out his cell. Quick fingers dialed a familiar number. “Hey, where ya at? Okay. Meet me at the food court in ten minutes.” He put the car in gear and drove out onto the strip. A bit farther down the road he merged with traffic lined up to enter the Thomas and Mack parking lot; he cursed under his breath at the delay.

Juan saw him first, waving to him from a corner table. “What’s up, Senor?” he asked as Spinelli approached.

The older man scowled and took a seat. “I just been to the cop-shop and you ain’t gonna believe it, but they think Yoli was doin’ drugs or something. They don’t think she just broke her neck in the fall. They think maybe somebody offed her.”

“Offed?” Juan repeated, struggling to translate the word. “What’s *offed*?”

“Killed her.” Ernie waved a hand with impatience. “Got some tape or other that’s got ‘em wonderin’. You know anything about it ... did she use drugs?”

Eyes wide, mouth ajar, Juan shook his head. “No, sir, she did not. Yoli wasn’t into *drugas*. She was totally devoted to her riding, you know that.” He paused and took a sip of his soda and tried to keep his stomach from rolling. “That’s crazy, *Senor, loco*. Why would ... what tape? Do they suspect someone? And why? Why would someone do that? Who would want to kill my wife?” Juan’s voice rose.

“The cops didn’t say nothin’ about it to me other than they’re gettin’ the coroner to do every drug test out there. If someone drugged her or if she was playin’ around, they’ll find it.”

Ernie looked at Juan in speculation. For a guy that’d just lost his new wife, especially under such catastrophic and heartbreaking circumstances, he didn’t seem all that upset, at least not like you’d think. But then, people reacted to tragedy in different ways. Still, to be honest, it was Katrina that consumed him and his concern centered on the mare. Spinelli leaned back in his chair and relaxed a bit. “Okay. So, how’s Katrina? Her leg any better?”

Juan shook his head in sorrow. “The leg is hot and the tendon is filled with fluid. We have her standing in ice, but I don’t know. The vet thinks she’s pulled a suspensory ligament.” He pursed his lips and shrugged, pain and anger clear in his face. “Our chances are over for the year at the very least. If only I’d had the ride, Katrina and I would have made the team. I’m the better rider.”

“What?” Ernie said, flabbergasted. “If the cops are right and someone drugged Yoli, then you’d be dead. Whoever got her would’a got you, too. Count yourself lucky, kid. Whoever done this wanted the horse out, not the rider.”

Juan's expression never wavered, bland and indifferent. *You just keep on thinking that, Senor.*

"Si, I suppose you are right. Whoever did this wanted to get Katrina out of contention for the team because she is a great mare." He leaned back in his seat and allowed himself a deep, pitiful sigh. "Poor Yoli."

Just then, his cell rang. "Hello? One minute, please." Juan turned to Ernie.

"I have to take this, Senor. I'll see you back at the barn. We can talk more then and make future plans."

Spinelli got up. "Yeah, see ya later."

Juan watched him blend into the crowd and then lifted the phone to his ear. "Where are you? Okay, I'm in the food court ... meet me here. I'm in the back corner."

## Chapter 20

“Wow, that round was great. I’m parched. Anyone want a soda?” Larry stood and stretched.

“I’ll come with ya. I need to make a trip to the ladies. Y’all want somethin’ from the food court?” She glanced at the kids.

“Thanks anyway.”

Larry got in the long line, resigned to missing the next two or three rounds. People jammed the food court and his attention wandered to his fellow horse enthusiasts. As the line inched along, he glanced around the room, almost stumbling when he saw John sitting at a back table.

Larry started to wave when he saw Bernie join him. Frozen to the spot, he stopped short, mouth open in surprise. *How in the world did John know that guy?*

Melanie got in line behind Larry just then. “Boy, the place is—”

“Melly,” he interrupted. “Check out that table way over in the corner. Do you see John? Do you....”

Melanie grabbed his arm and whispered, “John ... and the guy from the bar last night. What in the world are they doin’ here together?”

Bernie looked out of place in the food court with his black slacks and long sleeved, black silk button-down shirt. He glanced around at the throngs of people, adjusted his cuffs and took a seat next to Juan.

“What’s up?” he asked, voice terse. “This is definitely not cool.”

“You’re sure that stuff you gave me cannot be detected in a drug test?”

“Absolutely. Relax.”

“The cops think someone drugged Yoli. Is there any chance they’ll turn it up?”

“Nah. Just stay cool and you’ll be fine. Anything else? This is too public a place for this kinda talk.” He rose to leave. “Keep me posted.”

Larry and Melanie watched in fascination as the man walked away from John and back to the stands.

The kids weren’t the only ones to witness the brief meeting.

“What the hell?” Spinelli muttered as he came out of the restroom and saw Bernie join Juan.

“How do they know each other?” He stood in the background, wishing he could be a fly on their table. Spinelli followed Bernie back into the stadium, curious to see what he did next. Neither of them noticed Larry and Melanie get their drinks and walk over to Juan’s table.

“Hi, John.” Larry nodded a solemn expression on his face. “We’ve been looking for you. Terrible about Yoli. How’re you doing?”

“Hey, John. I’m so sorry about Yoli,” Melanie echoed.

“Well, hi, how are you guys?” A smile of genuine pleasure lit his face. He rose from the table and indicated chairs. “It’s good to see you again.”

They sat next to him, unsure how to say what had to come next.

“We were here when Yoli ... that is, ah, when she had her accident.” Larry looked at him, eyes full of pity and compassion. “I’m so sorry. Is there anything we can do for you?”

John stared down at the table and shook his head.

Melanie reached out and patted his arm. “I declare, that was the most terrible thing I’ve ever seen. I’m so sorry.”

After a moment, he said, "It was a horrible shock. She broke her neck in the fall. By the time I got to the ring, she was gone." He drew a ragged breath and went on.

"I can't understand how it happened—for her to come off like that. She was such a good rider. And poor Katrina. She's the best horse in the world, all heart. To be hurt like that, to lose out of the competition for something so stupid, it breaks my heart. Such an unnecessary accident."

Melanie shot a quick glance at Larry and leaned toward John. "Well, maybe there's a lot more to it than that. We bought a tape of her round and from what we could see it looked like she was sick, maybe even drugged or something. Was she sick? Takin' some meds or something?"

John coughed on his soda and tears filled his eyes as they darted from Larry to Melanie. "What tape?" His voice was a croak.

"Oh, you know, the one the show photographer takes. Billy got it yesterday. We played it in slow motion, and I'm sayin', it looked like she passed out or somethin' before she even came off the horse. Very strange."

"Another bizarre thing," Larry said, lowering his voice in confidentiality. "The other night Becky was at the show barn real late braiding a couple of horses, and she heard two guys talking about drugging a horse. The next day they eliminated Sirocco from the games for steroid use. She was the horse the guys talked about."

"Becky swears she recognized the voice. She can't place it yet," Melanie added, shooting a warning glance at Larry, "but she will." His nod was imperceptible.

They both noticed a light film of sweat pop up on John's face. He ran a hand across his forehead and took a deep breath, unable to decide what to say next.

Finally, he shrugged, shaking his head. “That’s really weird, isn’t it? Who could it be?”

Melanie made eye contact with Larry and shrugged. “No tellin’, but she’s never been to Vegas before so we figure it has to be someone from home.”

“Is it just the three of you here?”

“Nah, the whole team came. Listen, maybe we could get together later and grab a bite to eat or something.” Larry slanted a glance at Melanie. “How long are you here for, John?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “It depends on Senor Spinelli. The mare is lame, out of the competition, so we may be leaving soon.”

“Oh,” Melanie said, concerned. “Was she hurt bad when she fell? I almost had a heart attack when I saw her slide under the oxer.”

John blinked, his voice bitter. “Her front leg is puffed up real bad. Vet says maybe a pulled suspensory. She’s off for at least three months. We have to give it time to heal. Then we’ll see if she can go back to competing.” He shrugged and sighed again. “She may never be the same.”

They chatted for a bit longer and then John said, “I have to get back to the barn. Hey, where are you guys staying? If I’m around tonight, I’ll give you a buzz. I’d like to see you again before I go.”

“Oh, we’re over at the Mandalay Bay Towers.” Larry pulled a piece of paper out of his wallet, along with a small pen. He started to scribble. “Here’s my cell number and Melly’s.”

“Well,” John said as he turned to go. “It sure was good seeing you again. I hope we can get together before I have to leave.”

“Be sure to give us a buzz if ya can make it tonight. Supper would be fun,” Melanie said, waving good-bye as he blended with the crowd.

She turned to Larry then, eyebrows raised. “Well, I declare, that was the most ... absolutely the *strangest* conversation I’ve ever had. What do ya make of it?”

“Weird.” He finished his soda. “Everyone handles their grief differently, but that was just cold.”

“I’m sayin’, and it’s not like she died in her sleep or somethin’. That was a dreadful wreck. Oh, shoot.” She nodded at the chair John had used, then back at the crowd, searching for him. She picked up a light cotton barn jacket and turned to Larry.

“Look what John forgot.” She tucked it under her arm. “We’ll have to give him a call when the show is over.”

Just then, they heard the crowd in the stadium erupting in a pandemonium of cheers and applause. “Well, that’ll be Richard.” She rose. “Ya ready to go back?”

He nodded and took her arm. “Why didn’t you tell him Becky recognized Leon’s voice?”

Soft blue eyes searched his. “I don’t really know, tell ya the truth. I just wanted to see his reaction. He didn’t seem to care, do ya think?” She paused, candid as always, and shrugged. “I couldn’t tell for sure what he was reactin’ to. Stressful conversation all ‘round. Maybe it was nothin’. When the show’s over, we need to get together with the rest of the kids and go over this conversation again. Very strange, for sure.”

\* \* \*

Juan felt his head swim as the full impact of what they said hit him. *They* had the tape, which was bad enough, but Becky had recognized his voice. The minute

Melanie mentioned that they'd run into each other in the food court, she would remember.

When she put the voice with his name, she'd tell the cops and he'd be done for. He reached for his cell phone.

## *Chapter 21*

Bobby Ditileo swaggered into the police station, his shoulders back and a belligerent look on his handsome face. He ignored the uniformed officer behind him and took a chair in front of Anders desk.

Leaning forward, he placed both elbows on the desk, gave the detective a piercing look followed by a wide, generous smile. “Ya don’t need ta send the goons around when ya wanna talk to me, Detective. Glad to come down and visit anytime. Ya find out anything about who drugged my horse?”

Bobby never took his eyes off Detective Anders. He considered himself an expert at reading faces. There was no doubt in his mind something big was going down. He didn’t get picked up for nothing. Leaning back in his chair, he crossed his legs and nodded at Anders. “So, talk.”

Detective Anders chuckled. He shook his head back and forth, a genuine smile of pleasure on his face. You couldn’t help liking Bobby no matter how hard you tried. Good-looking, larger than life and oozing with the self-confidence of a stereotypical, small-time Mafia boss, he and Ernie came from the same mold. In the ancient chronicles of Brooklyn mob lore, they were related ... they had to be.

“Actually, it doesn’t go that way. It’s my show, Bobby, so I usually I get to ask the questions.” Anders tapped his fingers on the desk. “But you’re right. I got some news for you. A kid came in here the other day, said she heard two guys, maybe Mexican, talking about drugging your horse.”

Bobby shot forward in his seat, his fists clenched. His voice rose with emotion and his face turned bright red.

“She seen ‘em, knows who they are? What’d they say? Where is she? *Who* is she?”

Anders shook his head and raised a cautionary hand. “Yo, Bobby, take it easy, man. You’ll have a stroke here. She never saw them, but she was in the barn, working, and heard one ask the other if he had the syringe. Then he asked which stall the horse was in. She heard the number, heard them go into the stall and then leave. Took about two seconds.”

Bobby’s eyes narrowed to pinpoints. He clenched his teeth so tight, little balls of muscle popped out by his jaw. Realizing he had Anders full attention, he took a deep breath, relaxed and sighed. “I’m sorry, detective, but this whole thing’s really got me stirred up. My poor kid is a basket case over it. I got no idea who those guys could be, not a clue. Will this gal file a statement with the FEI, maybe get Frankie reinstated?”

“She planned to make a report first thing this morning so that could be some good news for Frank. He might have been reinstated already. Ya heard from him?”

Bobby nodded several times. “Nah, I been at the restaurant since early. We got capacity crowds for the last two weeks and my chef is about to slit his throat. I ain’t heard from Frankie all day. How about you, Detective? You got any ideas who mighta done this to my kid?”

“I’ll ask the questions, Bobby. Remember, it’s my show.”

“Hey, I thought we was networking here.” Bobby’s voice, indignant at first, mellowed. He looked at Anders and shrugged. “I don’t have a clue who would do something like that in this game. People in the horse business, they’re more ... like, refined, y’know? Don’t usually pull this kind of crap. I never heard of it, anyway.”

“See, Bobby, that’s what I thought,” Anders said, nodding. “And yet, here we are. Do you think any of the

homeboys got an axe to grind? If not with you, how about with Frank? Talk on the street is that you and Spinelli have a heavy bet going with the horses. You see him for this?"

"Listen up, huh? True story here. Ernie and me, we go way back. And yes, we bet over what day it's gonna rain next. This time here is just another one of them bets for both of us. Don't read nothin' more into it, 'cause it don't mean squat either way. Ernie didn't have nothin' to do with this. It's not his style."

Bobby leaned toward Anders, dark eyes boring into the detective, pleading. "But *someone* did and this situation is killin' Frankie. He ain't like me, Detective. Kid takes after his mother, God rest her soul. He's honest as the day is long and he's wiggin' out over gettin' disqualified. It's the only thing in the world that matters to him. If ya know who done this to my kid, I can expect ya to nail his butt to the wall, right?"

"So you don't think it was Ernie?"

"Nah, not for a minute. He didn't no more drug Frank's horse than I offed his rider. But someone did, Detective, and that's the point. Ya need to find out who done it."

Anders noted every movement, every vocal nuance, looking for body language that would give Bobby away. There was nothing. He shook his head again and leaned back in his chair, eyes almost closed, speculating. That was the thing about homeboys. They stuck together no matter what happened and always settled their differences in private. Cops were not an option. They had better ways of dealing with each other. His silence went on long enough to cause Bobby to squirm in his chair. Finally Anders said, "If not him, who?"

"Look, dude, I swear. I don't know, but if I did I'd tell ya. My kid had an excellent chance of makin' that stinkin' team, y'know. It was his dream, all he could ever

talk about from this big.” He placed his hand two feet off the ground and then made eye contact with Anders and shrugged. “Ask me where it comes from, who knows. I still can’t figure, but there it is. And because of them ‘roids, not only does he lose any hope of *that* happening, he can’t even show his other horses for the next three months. That’s like the rest of the season if you’re into this thing. Dumb, man. Believe me, if I knew who done this, I’d tell ya. Boy’s suicidal and his reputation is ruined. I hope this gal can turn things around for him. She’s our only hope.”

Two exquisitely manicured hands closed over his eyes. Bobby shook his head and shuddered.

Anders continued to stare, waiting for him to say more. When he didn’t, he rose, cleared his throat and nodded.

“You’re free to go, Bobby, but keep in touch. Okay?”

“Hey, Detective, it’s always a pleasure, y’know? And don’t be a stranger. Come on in for a pie, or bring a lady and I’ll show ya a New York moment. It’s on me. And please, keep me posted about the case, huh?”

Bobby smiled, a twinkle in his eye, and extended his hand to the detective. The smile died as their hands clasped and coldest pair of eyes Anders’ ever saw stared him down. He expected to see those eyes above a dueling pistol. A moment later, as quick as that, they smiled. “By the way,” he said, lips soft and loose. “The next time ya need to see me, drop a dime, huh? I don’t need no escort, ‘specially out the front door of the restaurant at high time. Huh? Ain’t good for business, y’know? What’s say?”

“I’ll se ya soon, and I’ll keep ya posted, for sure.”

Nodding, Bobby turned on his heel, shrugged at the other cops and walked out of the office, his step not quite as jaunty as it was when he entered.

Anders couldn't see it, but the look on Bobby's face, murderous and black with rage, made the clerk at the front desk sit up and take notice.

Bobby hit the door so hard on his way out, it slammed into the rubber guard behind it, rattling the glass in its heavy frame.

\* \* \*

The vet straightened up, ran his hand down the mare's leg one more time and nodded to Spinelli in satisfaction.

"I'd give her another month stall rest," said Dr. Swiers, "maybe six weeks, and then start her back slow. The heat is down and the swelling is almost gone. I think we caught it in time, thanks to Juan."

Kind, tired eyes looked at the young man with pity and compassion. "You've done a great job nursing her. Cut her feed down to one flake of grass hay, morning and evening plus a daily bran mash. She's fit and we don't want her coming out of her skin and re-injuring the leg. If she gets high, give her a couple of cc's of Ace. It should only take a week or so for her to come down. After a month, then, if the swelling stays down, you can hand-walk her. Ten minutes, morning, afternoon and night. Not the hot walker, we do not want her going in circles. Just a leisurely, straight ahead walk on level ground."

Dr. Swiers gave the mare an affectionate pat, stroking the silky muzzle that snuffled for a treat. Peeling two dusty sugar cubes from his jacket pocket, he grinned as dainty lips took them from his cupped palm.

"Keep her wrapped, check for heat, use the cold packs after you walk her, and when you start back, keep it slow. If she stays sound after a month of hand-walking, you can flat her out. Depending on the progress, you could start

back doing low jumps in another five to six months. Have your vet come to the farm when you get home to check her out. Call me if anything comes up or he has questions about my treatment.”

He closed his bag and put it on the seat of his truck. “Her prognosis is very good. Give her the time she needs to recover and with any kind of luck, she’ll be back at the top of her form this time next year. I don’t know if you’re into that, but this would be a perfect time to breed her.” He nodded at Spinelli, handing him a business card and glanced again at Juan. “I’m so sorry about Yoli, it was such a shock.”

Juan nodded. “It was terrible. Thank you so much for caring.”

Dr. Swiers sighed and climbed into the truck. He waved goodbye and drove to his next patient.

Spinelli slipped an arm over Juan’s shoulder and gave him a momentary squeeze. “We need to talk. Let’s go get something to eat.”

Juan ran a hand across his brow, struggling to control his face and emotions. It was all falling into place. With Yoli out of the way, Senor Spinelli would give him the ride on Katrina and the rest of the young stock would supply him with top-level contenders for many years.

The money from the insurance policy guaranteed his comfort for the rest of his life. His heart sang as his plans fell into perfect place and he almost skipped across the parking lot as a self-satisfied grin parted his lips.

They got into the car in silence. Spinelli exited the lot, drove onto the busy street and merged with the endless traffic. Ten minutes later, he parked next to a small restaurant a few blocks down from Fremont Street. Before long, the light show would start and the place would be

crawling with tourists out for a night of fun, but now all was quiet.

Juan looked at Spinelli, his heart in his eyes as they sat in the quiet restaurant.

“Now that Yoli is, well, gone, what are your plans for the mare? The vet says she’ll be fine and I know I can get her back to top condition. I should have had the ride in the first place and now that Yoli....”

Spinelli raised a hand and waved it. “Look, Juan, that’s what I wanna talk to ya about. I’ve had enough, so we’re gettin’ out of the horse world. I’m gonna sell the mare, all the horses, actually. I got somebody interested already, so there won’t be no horses for you to ride, at least in my barn. I’m sorry, kid.” He shrugged. “You know how it is in this business.”

Juan’s face went blank as the words and their meaning, sunk in. “You’re going to sell? But why?”

“I’m sick of it. It’s gettin’ too damned expensive, for one thing. I’m tired of all the traveling around, I’m tired of ... everything. This thing with Yoli just broke me down. She was a nice little gal, I really liked her ... had high hopes for her, and for you, too.” He glanced at Juan, then down at his hands and shook his head.

“Anyway, I already sold the place in Mexico, and there’s a firm offer on the Rancho Santa Fe farm, too. I’m outa the game.”

The waitress took their drink order and returned with their beers almost immediately. She handed them menus, but Spinelli waved his away. He turned to Juan, “You wanna eat, order somethin’. I gotta go in a minute. Got a meeting I can’t miss.”

Stunned, Juan shook his head and handed her the menu, too blown away to speak.

*Sell Katrina? Sell the farms, the mares, and the young stock I worked so hard on? Both stallions?* His head

swam for a moment and then little bursts of light blew up behind his eyes and everything went black. He'd heard the expression before about seeing red.

*Actually, it should be black ... it goes black, not red.* Juan felt his stomach heave and took a couple of convulsive swallows, unable to make a sound. The look on his face turned deadly.

Spinelli caught his expression and shook his head. "Hey kid, don't be mad. It's just a business arrangement, y'know? Nothing personal. Besides, I got some great news for ya. I put you in a good word with the man who bought the TJ farm. He already said he wants ya to stay on with him so nothing will change. Your old job, the same money, maybe more, and the young horses and the breeding stock went with the place. It was a package deal. I told him you're very talented with the horses. Same with the other farm if ya would rather stay in the U.S. I'm hoping they keep the whole crew on, but I talked ya up big. They'll give ya a job, too. Either one can offer a better gig than you'd ever got with me."

Juan barely heard his words. His mind whirled as he saw his life go up in smoke. All his well-laid plans; Yoli. Everything ruined. It had come to nothing. He felt the bitter taste of bile as his stomach rolled over again.

Spinelli reached into his pocket and withdrew a roll of hundred dollar bills. He threw ten of them on the table and then stuck the thick wad back in his pocket.

"That should keep ya goin' until ya decide what to do. I gave the guy in TJ your cell number. He should be calling any time now. Sorry, Juan, really, I am. Look, I gotta go meet someone. Can ya get back to the hotel or wherever?"

Ernie got up to leave, throwing a twenty on the table for the waitress.

“Take care, Juan. I’m really sorry.” With that, he turned on his heel and walked out the door.

*Oh no, no you don’t. It’s not that easy, Señor.* Juan grabbed the money and shoved it in his wallet. He walked to the door expecting to see Spinelli’s car driving away. Instead, he glanced around the parking lot just in time to see him walking down the alley, away from his car, toward the street fair.

Juan sped across the blacktop. Heart pounding, he kept to the shadows. He closed the distance between them, teeth clenched, fists doubled, then almost jumped out of his skin as the flashing lights and ear-splitting music turned Fremont Street into a rock concert.

Recovering from his mind-blowing reaction and running quicker now, Juan pulled a small gun from his pants pocket. He was just a few feet behind Spinelli when he leveled it and pulled the trigger.

Spinelli’s head exploded. He crashed to the ground without as much as a twitch, landing in a motionless heap. He never knew what hit him and died in a dirty Las Vegas alley to the tune of *Born in the USA*.

Juan pulled the wad of bills from Spinelli’s pocket, melted back into the side of the building and ran down the alley. The music roared and deep shadows gave him cover as he headed for the bus stop. He collapsed on the bench and struggled to regain breath and composure. Frantic, he glanced around him, mind reeling as he considered what to do next.

His first priority was Becky. She might not have remembered his voice yet, but she would and he couldn’t risk it. Thanks to Larry and Melanie, he also knew they had the show tape, but that no longer mattered. Bernie guaranteed the drug was untraceable and he would know. The heart attack would stick.

It was his connection to Ditileo's horse that mattered. Juan tried to remember what he and Leon talked about in the barn that night. They'd only exchanged a couple of words, but if Becky could ID him, the cops would pick him up and ship him back to Mexico at the very least. Worse than that, the FEI would ban him for life from participating at horse shows, even as a groom.

The governing body for international horse sports took a dim view of drug usage of any form. They were fanatical when it came to rival barns drugging the competition. He'd never get to ride or train at international level again and that was all he knew. He couldn't just stand by and wait for his life to explode.

Taking long, deep breaths, John sought to calm his mind enough to make a plan. He had to get rid of Becky. The big question was how to get her alone. His mind raced back to that weekend at Showpark when Yoli had tried Larry's horse. He couldn't remember much about Becky except she had red hair. He remembered her like some kind of background music.

Nothing about her stuck out to him and he couldn't remember if they'd ever exchanged a word. He couldn't remember much but the flaming red hair. Remember or not, they must have talked, but when? He drew a blank.

*Well, she could have heard me talking to Larry about buying his horse. She didn't need to meet me to recognize my voice. Still, if she only overheard bits and pieces of us talking could she ever be sure enough to identify me? Would the cops believe her?*

What an absolute freak of circumstances that Becky would be at the barn when he and Leon drugged Ditileo's horse. He uttered a cynical grunt and shook his head. *What are the odds?* Fear and anger flooded his belly and he swore under his breath.

*I have to get her alone. I don't know how, but I have to. Either that, or lure her and whoever she's with to somewhere isolated.*

It was a simple choice and he chose himself. He flipped open his cell. "Hey, Leon, we need to talk. Meet me in the barn in about ten minutes."

## Chapter 22

Detective Anders turned on his tape recorder and started to dictate.

“Bobby’s got me stumped. He’s a much better actor than Ernie, lots harder to read, but I swear it never crossed his mind it could be Ernie.”

He started his usual pacing routine, letting the words flow, hoping for gems.

“Either that, or he’s thought about it *so* often, it doesn’t show. Maybe I’m barking up the wrong tree. All the evidence points to Spinelli, but maybe it was another competitor in the show. Someone that didn’t want either one of them to win. Now that may be the common thread I couldn’t find before. Let’s see who these other horses belong to.”

He sat down at the computer, signed on and accessed the national horse show site. Anders hit the Olympic Equestrian Trials/LV button and the site opened. He opened the section for *entry by rider* and scanned down the list of names. He hit the copy button and the list slid out of the printer.

Next, he hit *entry by trainer* and then *entry by owner*. When those lists printed, he stacked them together and went back to the home page for the competition standings thus far. He printed it and then returned to the home page.

Anders read ad blurbs about famous, high-ranking riders in the competition and made a copy of that article as well. The detective signed off and picked up his papers. He read the blurb again, crossing off the names of the long famous. No possible motive or connection. Then he crossed off the foreign riders. No tie there except for this particular

show, which made them very unlikely candidates for doping or murder.

Katrina and Sirocco ranked high on the standings, both within easy reach of a spot on the team if good luck and a fair set of circumstances occurred. With the exception of the next-ranking three, the remaining horses on the list had little chance of winning.

It was unlikely an owner or trainer would take such a huge chance at a long shot. He leaned back in his chair and glanced at the clock.

“No wonder I’m starved.” He hit the intercom. “Eric, can you come in please.”

A dark head popped around the corner of his cube. “Hey, boss. Eric’s been gone about half an hour. He left this note for you.” He handed Anders a piece of paper and continued, “What can I do for you?”

“Hey, Chris.” Anders nodded, his smile weary. He pocketed the note and said, “In your spare time, check out the net and see if you can find anything unsavory about the people on this list. I wrote the site name. See if they’ve ever been fined or suspended by any horse show association. Check the FEI site, too. It’s a long shot, but ya never know. Thanks.”

Anders put his desk in order and locked the drawers. He slipped the recorder into his pocket for later reviewing and headed for his car.

Ten minutes later the hostess in his favorite hangout greeted him.

“Jimmy, we thought you’d forgotten us.” She gave him a hug and led him to his usual table.

He slid into the booth, his back to the farthest wall and surveyed his fellow diners. It was not a cop hangout. On the contrary, it was quiet, intimate, just the kind of place to rest and unwind.

Rose minced over to his table, carrying his usual, a Beefeater's on the rocks. She smiled in delight as he took the offered menu.

"So, Rosie, what's the special?"

"Jimmy, you lucked in, let me tell you. How about the biggest piece of swordfish you ever saw? Grilled just like you like it with that caper sauce. To die for. Sound good?"

The detective grinned at her and nodded. "I gotta have a side of fries, Rosie. My body can only go so long without some grease."

She chuckled and then left him to relax and enjoy his drink.

Anders leaned his head against the seat and closed his eyes, going over his talk with Bobby. He sipped his drink and then remembered the note from Eric. He fished it out of his pocket and began to read.

'Hey, boss, I just wanted to tell you, Bobby was furious when he left here. I mean mad as hell. Almost took the door off the hinges. Thought you should know, Eric.'

Jim read it again, just to make sure. He thought back to their interview. Bobby hadn't been mad when he left his office. True, he was very excited, but he didn't seem mad.

*Maybe he's a better actor than I am a shrink and he just didn't show it. Maybe the whole thing was an act. Maybe he wasn't as cool as ... oh boy.*

He flipped out his cell and hit the button. "Hey, Chris, it's Anders. Put a tail on Ernie Spinelli, will ya? Better yet, ya know what? Just pick him up. When he gets to the station, call my cell." He listened for a moment and chuckled.

"Yeah, tell him it's protective custody. Watch him spin. Catch ya later."

Rosie arrived with his dinner and another drink.

“I may need to leave real quick, Rosie, so keep an eye on me, huh? If I disappear, just box this up and I’ll come back for it later.”

Anders began to eat, his hungry stomach thrilled with its first food option since a breakfast donut. He squeezed more lemon on the fish and took another quick bite. By the time he finished half the dinner he had slowed considerably, tasting and enjoying rather than gulping.

The detective glanced at his watch. Twenty minutes since his call to the station. He checked his cell again; no problem there. The rest of the excellent meal went down well, and he had just about finished when his phone went off. He snatched it up. “Anders.”

“It’s Chris. We found Spinelli, but you’re not gonna like it.”

Anders’ heart sank. He knew what came next. “Oh, man.”

“He’s dead, gunshot to the back of the head, close range. Found his body in an alley behind Fremont Street. So loud ya couldn’t hear the end of the world over there. Gaining in popularity, too. Third hit this month.”

“Okay, Chris. Thanks.” Crumpling Eric’s note into a little ball, Anders closed his cell and leaned back, eyes closed. *Looks like I underestimated Bobby. This is too much, even for coincidence.*

Anders laid some money on the table and glanced at his empty plate. He grinned at Rosie and walked out the door. He got into his car and drove the short distance to Ditileo’s restaurant.

He parked his car in a red zone, saw the smirk on the valet’s face die as he flashed his badge, and strolled in the door. Shrugging at the hostess, he pointed toward the bar. She gave him a stiff smile and waved him through the crowded lobby. He took one of the few empty seats at the bar and looked around. The first person he saw was Al,

who tossed him a grin as he served two other customers their food.

He expected to see them, and sure enough, Bobby and Frank sat in their favorite back booth near the kitchen door. It was isolated from the rest of the room, yet gave a full view of their guests. The noise from the kitchen and the service station made a great cover for any conversation happening at their table.

Frank and Bobby chatted, seeming to be at ease. No sign of tension or anger there. The half eaten pizza on the table between them told Anders they'd been here at least an hour, maybe longer. Giving themselves the perfect, public alibi or just par for the course?

## *Chapter 23*

It was late afternoon when the kids returned from the show. The twins lounged on the sofa, watching TV and playing a half-hearted game of cribbage. They called hello as the kids came through the door in a noisy rush, heading in all directions.

Blair plopped on the sofa next to Kenny, gave him a kiss and asked how their game went. Golf talk always bored her silly. Languid, jade-colored eyes moved over his face as he went on about some slice or another. She hardly heard a word he said, just enough to nod in the right places. Fascinated as always by the planes of his face, her gaze traveled slowly across his features, lingering on smoky blue eyes, and then moved to full, well-defined lips.

He'd forgotten the sunscreen again. Tiny freckles pinpointed his pink cheeks and the tip of his nose. His blond hair seemed even lighter than usual after three days golfing in the desert sun. She looked at him with love and then blinked as he asked her a question.

It was her turn to talk. She brought Kenny up to speed on current events, including the chance meeting with John, and Melanie's dinner invitation.

Jessi joined Jeff on the sofa and leaned back against his arm, giving him a detailed account of the show.

"Richard Spooner is just the most wonderful rider ever. I know I say it all the time, but you should have seen his round today. He was magnificent, and Robinson? Oh, that horse can fly." She gushed on, her voice dreamy. "They won, of course."

Melanie made eye contact with Jeff and grinned. She couldn't resist the opportunity to tease her big brother and good friend. "Well, ya know, Jessi's had a crush on

Richard since Indio. She talks about him all the time, Jeff. Probably dreams about him too.”

She glanced at Blair, a gleam in her eye. “I bet ya they’re X-rated dreams, too.”

Jessi crossed her eyes at Melanie and stuck out her tongue.

“And doesn’t she just have the quaintest way of expressin’ herself? I just love it.”

Jessi had been practicing for just such an occasion and gave Melanie a very credible version of the Bronx cheer.

The kids roared and the look on Melanie’s face was comical as she grinned at Jessi. “I must say, you’re developin’ quite a repertoire, Jessi. That was downright profound.”

“Okay, y’all,” Kenny said. “Cut the comedy. I want to get back to John. What’s goin’ on there?” As usual, the twins were out of the loop.

“Yeah.” Jeff gave Jessi’s hair a pull. “Cool it. We want to hear what’s going on.”

They got serious then, tossing comments back and forth, trying to figure out the puzzle.

Becky leaned toward Melanie. “How did John act? Was he very upset about Yoli?”

“Well, no, not like ya’d expect. At least, he didn’t seem to be, but we don’t really know him. Maybe he’s just a private kind of guy, y’know?” Melanie looked at Larry and shrugged. “Folks have different ways of reactin’ to a tragedy like that.”

“I was kind of surprised, too.” Larry shook his head. “It was bizarre ... he hardly mentioned her, really.”

“Strange thing was he had lots to say about Katrina.” Eyes distant, Melanie remembered each word of the conversation. “I thought Yoli and John were such close

friends, but he seemed way more concerned about the mare being unsound than his teammate dyin’.”

Billy picked up the newspaper and searched the back of the sports section for any mention of the show. He scanned the article about today’s classes, including an interview with Spooner. Buried in the middle was a blurb that got his attention.

“Holy cow, guys.” He glanced at the kids, eyes wide as he rattled the paper. “John and Yoli were married. Look here.”

“*Married?*” They cried in unison, bowled over at the news.

Billy spread the paper on the table and they gathered around to read it. There was nothing new until the bottom paragraph. “Her husband, Juan Gonzales, stated that he will take his wife’s body back to Mexico for burial once it is released by the coroner’s office.”

“Now this throws a new light on things, y’all,” Melanie said. “I mean, we may not have been friends with John, but you’d think he’d mention somewhere along the line that they were married, for pity’s sake. I’m sayin’, we must have spent close to half an hour talkin’ with him, yet he never thought it important enough to tell us he’d just lost his wife. How strange is that?”

Becky leaned forward and tapped Larry’s arm. “How well did you know him? Do you think they were married when they wanted to buy Connie?”

“Shoot,” Larry said, shaking his head. “I don’t know him at all. Not really. Our only connection was my horse. He and Yoli wanted to buy her when I thought I’d have to.... That was just a couple of months ago, but he didn’t introduce her as his wife then. All he said was she was one of the clients at his barn looking for a horse. I don’t know, talk about weird.”

“Hey, Melly,” Shievon said, hazel eyes wide. “What are you going to say if he calls and wants to meet us for dinner?”

“Gosh, I don’t know, but he’ll want to pick up his barn jacket. He left it on the back of his chair at the food court. By the time I noticed it, he was long gone. I brought it back for him, so another meetin’ is inevitable.”

“Does John know you have it?” Billy asked.

“Not yet. I wanted to talk with y’all and make a plan before I called him.” She glanced at her friends and shrugged. “Besides, don’t ya think we should see what we can find out?” She glanced around at her friends, seeing agreement in their eyes.

“Hey,” Jessi said, “maybe this is one of those insurance scheme thingys. Y’know, like you see on TV all the time?”

“Yeah,” Billy said, “maybe someone took out a big policy on Yoli.”

Larry got up from the sofa and walked to the window, running a nervous hand through his dark hair. He gazed out at the city. The monorail glinted silver in the lights. He turned back to the kids and shook his head.

“Can anyone just take out a life insurance policy on you? I mean, wouldn’t you have to know about it?”

“Well, there’d have to be some sort of physical, I’d think,” offered Shievon, her head cocked to one side. “The person being insured would know just from that, wouldn’t they?”

Jeff nodded. “It would depend on the amount of the policy. I doubt a little one would require a physical. But if y’all’re thinkin’ about someone killin’ her for the insurance, it’d probably be a big policy. In that case, the insurance company would want a physical. So whoever it was, Yoli knew them, and about the policy.”

“Well, that pretty much makes it John, huh?” Jessi asked. “I mean, except for parents, who else would do that but a husband?”

“Y’know,” Becky said, nodding, “John had access to her food and drink. I mean, I guess anyone in her barn could drug her, but John would have the means, for sure.”

“Well, but still.” Blair glanced at her friends, hesitating. “Would he kill her like that for money? Talk about cold blood. Could he have had another motive?”

Larry glanced over at Billy and shook his head. “This is ridiculous. We don’t know anything about John. Did he even have an insurance policy on her? And if he did, is that strange? As for the drugs, we don’t know one way or the other, let alone that John did it. We’re jumping to some wild conclusions ... just speculating. There’s not a shred of proof. I can’t believe we’re talking like this.”

“Well.” Jeff cocked his head at Larry and shrugged. “People kill for really weird reasons, but Larry’s right, we probably should cut him some slack. We don’t even know if they found drugs in her system yet, do we? She could have had a simple heart attack for all we know.”

“John is nobody to us, he’s a complete unknown.” Steve glanced at his friends and shrugged at their expressions. “Well, I don’t mean to sound harsh, but it’s true. What *do* we know about him? Except for that short time when it looked like he might buy Connie, we never saw him again. I don’t think we owe him any particular allegiance, especially since he didn’t even feel close enough to us to mention that he and Yoli were married. And that the girl who just died was his wife. Let’s not forget that, because to me, it’s way more than strange.”

Becky nodded, eyes narrowed. “Well, when you put it like that, it is way more than strange. I mean, how could he not mention it?”

“Oh, my gosh, guys,” Melanie exclaimed, frowning. “I just realized somethin’. We told John about the tape ... told him all our suspicions, and about Becky overhearin’ those guys talk about druggin’ the horse. If he did kill Yoli ... oh, boy.” She glanced at Billy. “Where’s Bob?”

Billy got a funny look on his face and glanced at his watch. “He’s down in the parking lot, sweeping the car. Our bug detector came on.”

“Bug detector?” Becky said with a laugh. “It detects bugs? Our limo has bugs.” Her laughter died abruptly. “The limo is bugged?” She glanced from Billy to Steve and back again, eyes huge. “Are you saying someone planted a bug in the limo?”

Billy nodded, a blush staining his cheeks crimson. “It happens sometimes. My dad is paranoid about spies. It’s part of his business. We have all kinds of gadgets in the car, covert surveillance devices ... stuff.”

“But here in Vegas?” Kenny asked, glancing at Billy. “Your dad isn’t even here. Why would anyone want to follow us?”

Blair nodded. “How long have we been bugged? And who would want to bug the car with just us in it?” She looked at Billy.

He just shrugged and shook his head. “The signal came on this morning, so it happened sometime after we parked last night. At least that’s what Bob figured. As for who did it, I haven’t a clue, but Bob will take care of it.”

“He’s sure taking forever to do it,” Jessi said.

Melanie nodded. “How long does it take to sweep the car?” She glanced at the wall clock.

They had been in the suite almost thirty minutes by that time and all the talk about murder made them apprehensive.

Billy followed her gaze and blinked. “It usually doesn’t take any time at all. Three minutes, tops.”

“So where is he? Was he goin’ anywhere else? Could he be in the other suite?” Melanie glanced at the connecting door.

“No. He knew we’d be going out for dinner soon. He said he’d be right up.” Billy’s face brightened. “Since he knows we want to go out, maybe he decided to get gas. It’s possible.” He paused a moment and shrugged. “Hey, I have an idea. My dad has a computer in our back bedroom that can access all kinds of places. Let’s see if we can find out if John did take out an insurance policy on Yoli. I don’t know where Bob is, but we can do that while we wait. Maybe he had an errand to run. He doesn’t check with me on every move he makes. Come on, let’s check out the computer while we wait.”

Just then, Larry’s cell went off.

## *Chapter 24*

The men sat in the darkened tack room, voices low in the hushed silence of the barn. Most of the horses had settled down for the night, enjoying their hay and deep bedding after a hard day's work. Light bulbs high in the ceiling cast sinister shadows up and down the aisles, distorting even simple objects into something ominous.

They spoke in Spanish, their muted voices adding emphasis to their fear.

Leon stared at Juan. "You said we have a problem. Now what?"

"We have to get rid of those kids. If we don't, it's a long stretch in jail for both of us or even worse, depending on who gets us first."

"But I didn't do nothin' really bad," Leon whined. "Nothin' worth hard time." Scared silly and in over his head, Leon had the distinct feeling Juan was manipulating him. He cast frantic glances around the tack room and tried to think.

"Why don't we just take off, man, get away before they figure out what happened."

Juan sneered. "Go where, back to Mexico? I'd rather die. I'll stay here and take my chances." The wad of money he'd stolen from Spinelli ensured his comfort for a long time to come if he could stay out of jail.

"We could get lost down there for a couple of years, man. At least we'd be free."

"Free how, Leon," he asked, voice low. "Free to live like hunted animals? To live in poverty and squalor?"

Leon threw his hands up in despair. "Well, I could go. Why would the cops come after me for such a small thing?" His lip quivered in spite of himself. "All I did was slip that horse some juice, man. You were right there.

Mother of God, I'm not gonna kill a couple of kids to cover what will probably get me a suspended sentence and deportation. You are crazy. I won't do it."

"Oh, yes, you will." Juan looked at him and shook his head. "You still don't get it, do you? If Senor Ditileo finds out you drugged his horse and put his kid out of a spot on the Olympic Team, you are dead. He'll kill you himself."

"But how would he figure it out?" Leon ventured a bewildered glance at Juan.

Juan shook his head and grimaced. "Because one of the kids recognized my voice that night, that's how. She went to the cops about it and if she remembers me, and they pick me up, my life is as good as over." Juan looked him full in the face, the light throwing cadaverous shadows on his chiseled features.

Leon recognized the expression and shivered. He was done for.

"If you don't help me do this, I'll tell the cops who my accomplice was and Senor Ditileo will find a most painful way to end your life. Believe me, I know."

Leon glared at Juan. "I ought to kill you right now."

Juan snorted, barely giving Leon a glance. "Go ahead and try. I've already killed two people and they can only hang me once, so I have nothing to lose. Besides, I'll kick your ass and you know it."

"Two people?" Leon squeaked, eyes wide. "Who else?"

"Senor Spinelli is no mas. He made a fatal mistake, what you might call an error in judgment. Don't you do the same."

Leon swallowed several times. "Have you talked to Bernie? What did he say?"

Juan cracked another beer and stared at him. "There's the other problem. He thinks we're the weak link.

If we don't take care of the kids pronto, he's gonna take care of them *and* us. Bernie is highly motivated. He doesn't want any connection to him and that's just what we are."

Juan took several long swallows and finished the beer, rolling the can back and forth in his hands. "Bernie knows I'll take whatever deal the cops give me, and when they find out he processed the drugs, he'll be in prison for twenty years, easy."

"Did he know your plans?"

"Of course he did. I'm not his only customer, not by a long shot. Bernie has drugs for all kinds of occasions ... he makes new ones they can't detect. They're very expensive, but they get the job done. You just have to tell him what you want and there it is. Vinny delivers, so no one ever connects Bernie." Juan's face took on a savage look that made Leon shudder.

"If that damned kid hadn't heard me, we'd be scot-free. Everything else went according to plan."

"How did they get involved in the first place? How do they know you?"

"I met them at a show in California. One of them had a horse for sale." Juan's jaws clenched as he glared at Leon. "He backed out on the deal. If the sale had gone through, Yoli would have shown that horse and I would have had Katrina. As it turned out, he copped out on the deal at the last moment and Yoli kept the ride. He deserves to die for that if nothing else." Juan tossed the empty can in the trash bin and nodded at Leon.

"Yeah, this is really all his fault."

"What's the guy's name?"

"Larry something, why?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen them yet. Guess I'd just like to know the name of the guy I'm supposed to kill. How many of them are there altogether?"

"Ten."

“What? Ten? *Impossible*. We’ll never pull it off.”

He stared at Leon, a combination of wonder and incredulity on his face. “You are too stupid to live ... dumber than a rock. *Of course not all ten*. Just Becky. If she happens to be with someone, that’s their misfortune, but she’s the only one we’re after.”

“And how do we get to her?”

“I’m not sure yet. I’m working on it. I have another day to come up with the answer. They usually hang around together, but if Becky worked at the barn that night, maybe she’ll be going again.” His eyes took on a hooded expression.

“We can hope. And if I find out who she worked for, perhaps I can make sure she comes back.”

He pulled out his cell and dialed. The ringing turned to voice mail and Juan clenched his teeth.

*Could they have left already?*

“Larry, it’s John. Listen, if you’d still like to, let’s get together for dinner. I’m feeling kind of down, you know, about Yoli. I’d like to see you kids again before I leave tomorrow. I know this great restaurant outside town. Maybe we could meet there. Call when you get this message.”

Juan jammed the cell into his pants pocket and shivered. He glanced around the tack room, then over at Leon.

“Have you seen my jacket? I can’t remember where ....” His jaw went slack and he leaned against the wall as though he needed help standing. “Oh, man, I left it at the food court.” His chest burned as his heart raced. The vial containing the drug that killed Yoli was in the pocket. He had meant to throw it in the stable dumpster after he’d put the stuff in her water, but in his agitation over Katrina’s unplanned injury, he forgot.

The barn jacket would be traced right back to him. With his name clearly scrolled above the pocket it would be guaranteed. Whoever found it would go through the pockets. They would discover the vial and he'd be dead.

"Oh, man, I have to find that jacket." Hope surged through him then. Chances were good that either a spectator or a fellow contestant found it, and in that case, they would return it. The jacket wasn't worth much to anyone and besides, theft was a rarity in the show world. No, the most logical thing would be to return it to the barn it came from ... if another rider found it. But what if it was a visitor?

*They would give it to the gate guard.* Sweat poured from his body as another thought struck him, giving him vertigo.

*What if the visitor turned it in to the steward or maybe a starter? Would they go through the pockets? With the barn name and my name on the front, would they bother? They'd check the pockets first thing, no doubt about it. He was dead meat.*

Chilled to the bone, Juan leapt to his feet and gave another quick look around the tack room. He hurried up the aisle to the grooming stall, hoping to see it hanging on a hook. No jacket. The last and most improbable place was the setup area. As expected, no jacket.

His heart began to race again and his stomach turned as he realized he would have to tell Bernie that the one and only connection he had to the murder floated around somewhere in the possession of a stranger. Bernie would kill him.

Juan collapsed on the bench and put his head in his hands, mind whirling. He remembered the wad of money he stole from Spinelli and pulled it out of his pocket. A quick, astounded count exceeded five thousand dollars

when he heard Leon walking down the aisle. He shoved it back in his pocket without continuing the tally.

“You find it?”

“No, it’s not here.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell.

“Hi, Larry, John again. Still hope we can get together tonight for dinner. Is everything okay? Give me a buzz when you get the chance.”

*Why is he not returning my calls? Did Becky finally recognize my voice? Oh man, are they at the police station?*

He tapped the phone on his palm several times, about to stuff it back in his pocket when he saw the missed-call icon. *How the hell...?* He hit the button.

“Hi, John, it’s Melanie. We hope we can all get together tonight. Oh, and we have your jacket, by the way. Ya left it at the table in the food court, but we didn’t notice it until we were ready to leave. Anyway, it’s in the limo. We can meet you or maybe leave it for you at your barn. Let me know.”

Juan cursed under his breath, heart pounding a crazy beat.

*They have my jacket. Those kids ... I can’t believe this, and yet, better them than the steward. Oh man, what ...I have to call Bernie. He’ll know what to do.*

He dialed Bernie, relieved to hear his voice mail come on. He was not looking forward to talking with him.

“I have bad news ... I don’t know how, but I left my jacket at the food court and the vial is in the pocket. One of the kids just called and they have it in their limo and we have to get it back, Senor. Please call me when you get this message.”

He had barely disconnected when his phone went off again. He looked at it, amazed.

“Hello?” he gasped.

“S’me,” Bernie said, voice oozing between clenched teeth. “What’cha mean the vial is in your jacket? And now it’s *gone*? Gone? Like ya lost yer *lunch*? S’matta’ f’you? *Idiot*?”

Juan winced as Bernie screamed at him in Italian. He didn’t know all the words, but he got the drift. He had to clear his throat twice to be able to talk.

“Si, Senor, it’s in the limo ... y’know, those kids. Anyway, it’s in the limo.”

Bernie panted his voice hoarse. “I ... am gonna wring ... yer scrawny neck when I get hold of ya. Where ya at?” He croaked and cleared his throat. “Youz guys stay put. Where ya at?”

“We’re at the barn. I ....”

“Never mind what. Just sit tight. We’ll get the jacket and meet’cha at the barn. Stay put, I mean it.”

The connection ended.

## *Chapter 25*

Bob bent over the back of the limo, squinting at the bug tucked into the roll on the bumper. Just as he was about to remove it he felt a sharp poke in his ribs. He had been so intent on the sweep he never noticed the man come up behind him.

“Stand up nice ‘n slow and don’t turn around.”

Bob got to his feet and kept his hands in plain sight. Vinny slipped an arm over his shoulder and moved into him as a group of people wandered down the aisle, searching for their car, gleeful at their successful and profitable night at the casino. They turned down another aisle and disappeared.

Vinny slipped a black hood over Bob’s head and bent him over. The gun bruised his ribs.

“Stay cool, man.” He shoved Bob into the back seat and got in beside him.

Bernie hurried down the aisle and slid behind the wheel. The keys hung from the ignition. He started the engine and glanced in the side mirrors.

“I don’t wanna drive this boat any farther than I gotta.”

“Would ya just go already.” Vinny grunted as he fastened Bob’s hands behind his back with cable ties. With his hands secured, he had easy access to Bob’s gun, his wallet and the beeper he and Billy used to stay connected. Ignoring the wallet, he pulled the gun from its holster and gave it a cursory glance of approval. Glock.

“Now, all we want from you is that jacket. Where is it?”

“What jacket?” Bob’s voice came from inside the bag, muffling his words.

“Don’t jerk me around, man.”

“I swear I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Vinny leaned into him, voice menacing. “We can do this the easy way or we can do it the hard way. But *either* way, we’re gonna get that jacket.” He drove the muzzle of his gun into Bob’s ribs. “Talk.”

His breath burst out in a puff. “What jacket? *Whose* jacket? Whatever you’re looking for, I don’t have it. You can check out the car, whatever. I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Vinny elbowed him hard. “I don’t believe you. Where is it?” Just then, the beeper went off in his hand. “What’s that mean?” He stared at it in surprise.

“It’s Billy,” Bob said, puffing from the blow to his ribs. “They want to go out for dinner and they’re waiting for me to pick them up.”

“Do ya answer it or something?” Vinny inspected the pager, turning it over in his hands.

“No, it’s just a signaling device. I’m their driver. I come when I’m called.”

Vinny chuckled in spite of himself. “What’s your name? Fido?” He looked closer at the pager. He was a first class techie and up-to-date on all the newest gadgets, but he had never seen anything like it.

“What’ll they do if you don’t show up?” He tossed the pager onto the seat.

“They’ll go out on their own. They’re probably hungry.”

Bernie said, “We gotta find that jacket if it’s here. Otherwise, we gotta get them kids before they go to the cop shop.”

They pulled into a large parking lot several blocks from the Mandalay Bay and parked in the darkest recesses.

“Pull him out,” Bernie said, “and let me check the whole car.”

Vinny jerked Bob from the limo and slammed him up against the trunk.

“Do not even think about moving ... it’ll be the last thing ya ever think.” Vinny checked Bob’s blindfold and handcuffs one more time and then said, “Ya find it yet?”

“Nah, I checked everywhere.” Bernie backed out the door and turned to Vinny. “It’s not in there. The kids must have it.”

Vinny pushed Bob back to the limo and threw him down on the seat. He slammed the door. “Let’s go find that jacket.”

\* \* \*

Bob had his shoes off in a flash. He shifted slightly, rolled his head down between his knees and worked the hood back and forth. It began to ride up his face and soon it lay on the floor. He opened the compartment under the jump seat in front of him with his toes. A series of buttons flashed. He hit the first one with his toe and waited.

“OnGuard, what is your emergency?”

“This is Martin2. I’ve been kidnapped. I think there is another kidnapping in progress at the Mandalay Bay hotel. Please notify hotel security and Detective Anders with the Las Vegas police and have them send officers to Suite 1200 of the Mandalay Bay Towers. It’s urgent.”

“Yes, sir, that message is being sent and we have located your position. We are working on ... your doors are now unlocked and a team should arrive shortly. If you have been harmed, they are EMT’s equipped to assist in minor wounds. Are you injured, sir? Do you need police support? Nevada law requires gunshot wounds and...”

“No, no police. Your team is all I need. I’m fine.”

“Thank you, sir, is there anything more I can assist you with this evening?”

“No, thank you.”

“Then have a nice evening, sir, and thank you for allowing OnGuard ...”

Bob hit the off button and scooted across the floor, manipulating a concealed handle under the other cabinet. The door slid open, revealing several small, black leather boxes. He was just about to pry one out with his toes when he saw lights pull up alongside the limo. He hit the knob again, and the door slid closed.

\* \* \*

Ditileo’s was jumping as Anders took his seat at the bar.

“Havin’ the usual, Detective?” Al asked.

“Hit me.” Anders flashed him a grin and winked. “And a small pizza, cheese only.”

“Gee wiz, Jim. After all these years—it’s a *pie*, man. Ya want a small pie ... plain.” Al smiled as he handed him the Beefeaters.

“Busy night?” Jim asked, making conversation.

“Been like this since five, same ole, same ole. Just another Las Vegas night.”

The detective looked beyond the bar to the large dining room. With every table full and another twenty or so customers milling about the lobby waiting for an opening, business was good.

The romantic sound of mandolins wafted through the air, whispering of love.

“Have your hands full?” Jim took another sip from his glass.

“Yeah, it’s always busy, but tonight, man. Beats me, this place. Rain, heat, cold, don’t matter. By five-thirty, there ain’t a seat in the house. Great for business, but it blows Chef away. He’s on his second bottle of Chianti and

he told Bobby if he came in the kitchen one more time, *he* could do the cookin’.” Al grinned and shrugged at his overflowing tip bowl.

“Emptied that twice already. After we close, I’m goin’ over to Bingo’s, ya wanna come? Got a new table.”

“What’s the game? Roulette?”

“Yeah, I’m gonna try my hand. Wanna go wit’ me?”

Over the years, Al and Jim had developed a profound respect for each other and if they were not exactly friends, they enjoyed spending time together.

“Gimme a rain-check, buddy. I gotta be at work early tomorrow.” Jim drained the contents of his glass and pushed it toward Al for a refill.

“Tonight I’m interested in horses.”

“Ponies?” Al grinned, his eyebrows elevated as he filled the glass with ice and splashed in the gin. “The ponies?”

“Nah, horses. Show horses, to be exact.” Anders looked out of sleepy blue eyes and smiled. He nodded toward Bobby and Frank. “His, in fact. How long they been here?”

Al grinned at him and shook his head. “Jimmy, it’s like this every night. Ya couldn’t get the boss outa here with a bomb. You know that as well as I do. Ya ever been here a night he wasn’t sittin’ in that booth?” He leaned forward and whispered, voice confidential. “Bobby’s convinced the girls are rippin’ him off. Imagine that.”

Laughing, Al headed down the bar to take drink orders from a couple that looked like they’d already had more than enough.

Anders waited patiently, planning his strategy.

Al came back, glanced over at Bobby, who watched him intently and said, “Don’t mind if I do.”

He removed a five-dollar bill from the small pile in front of Jim, rang up the cash register and grinned. He poured himself a shot of tequila and grinned again.

Jim gave him a smile of his own and nodded. "So, are the girls scamming him?"

Al chuckled and struck a pose. "It's like, Vegas, man. What do you think? Everything's always such a big production, even a shot." He poured a bit of salt on his hand, licked it, raised the glass to his lips, knocked it back and bit into a wedge of lime. He winked at Jim. "Thanks for the hit." Eyes squinted, he popped a handful of nuts in his mouth. and put the glass in the sink.

Jim looked at him and shrugged. "Ya seen Ernie tonight?"

"Nah, ain't been in for a couple'a days. Why?"

"Well, you've heard what's going down with him, right? His rider got killed in an accident at the show doin' the same stuff Frank does."

"Yeah, I heard. All kinds of crap is goin' down over there," Al said, lowering his voice. "The boss's been crazy ever since the kids' horse turned up positive for them 'roids. You should'a been here yesterday. Man, I thought Frankie was gonna lose it there for a while."

Al made a face and shook his head. "He's such a good kid, y'know; whole life's wrapped up in that ridin' stuff. Loved them ponies ever since he was a little kid. Him and Bobby are closer than close, especially since Celia died, so when Frankie gets upset, Bobby freaks. Things are much better now."

"Hmm," Jim said "When did it start to get better, Al?" He moved aside as Trixie slid the hot pizza pan in front of him.

Al shrugged. "They got some great news from the show people early this morning. Seems some girl working at the barn overheard a couple a goons talk about shooting

up the horse. The show people looked into it and Frank was reinstated or whatever. He got to ride today, placed third, so he's on cloud nine. Such an emotional kid, he's all over the place right now ... up one minute, down the next, afraid it'll happen again. It's in the blood, y'know. Italian on both sides, so it runs in the family."

He chuckled and then looked down the bar. "Back in a bit. We got more company."

Jim stared down at his pizza, unable to pick it up. The swordfish and fries had settled in nicely and were now vying for a truce with the gin. Morose, he looked from the pizza to his half-empty glass. Not only was he going to have to eat the pizza, he had to order another drink. His stomach rumbled in protest, but he had no choice.

He had to maintain the illusion of an off-duty cop relaxing after work. When you sit at a bar, you drink and when they have food, you eat it. Anders took a deep breath and picked up a slice of pizza.

"Heaven help me," he said with a sigh of resignation and took a bite, chewing the tasty hot morsel. "At least it's good."

Right on cue, Bobby walked over to him, a wide smile on his face.

"Good to see ya, Detective."

Jim just nodded, allowing a silence to develop as he chewed.

"Good pie?"

"Always the best. When I'm looking for pizza, I always come here." Anders took another small bite and glanced around the room. He nodded at the empty bar stool next to him and invited Bobby to sit.

"Busy night, huh?"

"Yeah, great night and it's not over yet. Look at the crowd in the lobby, would'ya? Gotta keep the bucks rollin' in."

They both did and then Jim said, “You been here all night, Bobby?”

He guffawed. “Got no choice, Detective. Can’t trust them girls farther than ya can throw ‘em. Keeps ‘em honest to see me sittin’ over there.” He shrugged. “Being a restaurateur is a demanding business. Ya leave, they rob ya blind.”

“Frank here all night with ya? Training him up right? Gonna step into your shoes when you retire?” Jim chuckled and gazed at Bobby.

“Nah, Frankie wants to be a professional rider, but me retire? Never. Ya retire, ya die.” A grin lit up his face. “But yeah, we been here all night. We’re celebrating. That gal you told me about went to the steward and they’ve agreed to reinstate Frankie, gave him credit for the ribbons he won and let him ride today. He got third and if he does well tomorrow, he’ll probably make the team. They made a real nice announcement at the show saying evidence come up that exonerated him from all complicity or whatever and they reinstated him with all privileges, however that goes. Frankie’s high as a kite.”

Bobby waved Al over. “Jim’s a guest of the house tonight. Let’s get us a round.” He smiled, looking at his bartender with such a face you wanted to pinch his cheeks. “You, too, Al. Ya been bustin’ yer butt all night. I been watchin’.”

On cue, Anders’ cell went off. He fished it out of his pocket and flipped it open. “Yeah?” He straightened up in his chair, his attention on the phone.

Bobby moved away to the corner of the bar, striking up a conversation with Al.

“You gotta be kidding me,” Anders said, talking into the dead cell. He glanced at Bobby and then away. “Oh, man, okay. I’ll be right over.”

Bobby's face never changed as he heard Anders talk.

"Everything okay, detective?" he asked when Anders hung up. "What's wrong?"

"Thanks for the pie, Bobby," he said, reaching into his pocket. He pulled out a five and left it on the bar, nodding to Al. "Gotta go. Something's come up."

Jim studied Bobby's face as he stood and pulled his keys out of his pocket.

*His expression is curious but not concerned. Not a sign, not a hint of fear or worry. Hmm.*

He turned, unsure, and then shrugged. It was time to go anyway and at least he didn't have to finish the pizza. He waved at Bobby and hurried across the restaurant floor, weaving through the throng of people. The detective disappeared out the door.

Anders waited in the shadows, unseen, expecting a tail. When no one came in search of him, he felt like a small boy who had played a trick and nobody joined the fun. *What is going on? I give up.*

Sliding behind the wheel of his car, he put the Ford in gear and headed for home. His cell went off again, just as he entered the strip. This time the call was real. "Anders."

"It's Chris. Listen, we just had somebody call in a minute ago. Very excited. He said someone kidnapped him and he has solid information that a couple of dudes are gonna snatch the girl that talked to you about the tape. About the horse thing, remember?"

"Kidnapped him? I take it he escaped?"

"He's headed to the hotel, penthouse 1200 of the Mandalay Bay Towers. He was talking real fast and then he hung up. I got a squad car goin' over to the Mandalay. Their security service is already on top of it. They've got the stairway to the top floor cordoned off, elevators

blocked, but I didn't know what else you might want me to do."

"I'm on my way over. Can't be more than three or four blocks. Who'd you send?"

"Farley and McSweeny were closest. They should already be there by now, and two back-up units are on the way. It's the top floor, boss. 1200."

"Okay, I'm almost there. Anything about that tox test come back from the coroner?"

"Yeah, nothing. Clean screen, no drugs, not even alcohol."

"Okay, thanks." *Well, there goes one theory down the drain.*

## Chapter 26

The shrill ringing of the hotel phone made Melanie jump. “Hello?”

“Hi, is this Melanie? It’s John. We still on for dinner?”

“Well, sure, John, I guess so.” Melanie nodded and the kids got ready. “Where are ya?”

“I’m right here, Melly.”

“In the hotel?”

“Outside your door. Look out the peephole.”

Melanie pointed frantically at the door and the kids slid into action.

“Give me a minute, John. I’m not dressed to receive.” She hung up the phone, ran a hand over her face and smoothed down her short, ash-blond hair. Looking over her shoulder once more, she took a deep breath and licked her lips. She put on her best smile and opened the door.

“Hey, John, so nice to see—*Leon*....” She blinked.

Leon’s eyes flew open as he recognized Melanie. “Juan,” he said in Spanish, “I know this girl. I know who she is.”

“You know her?” Incredulous, Juan closed the door behind them. “How? Where?”

“I know them from a while back. In Del Mar. I can’t be a part of this, Juan. I can’t do this.”

“I don’t understand Spanish,” Melanie lied, eyes wide. “Please speak English, John.”

“I didn’t know you knew Leon,” he said, glancing at her with a question in his eyes.

“Well.” Melanie backed slowly toward the sofa and shrugged. “I don’t, like, *know* him. A friend of his kept her horse at the DT for a while. I met him through her.” She

turned bland, cornflower blue eyes on Leon. “So how’ve you been?”

Leon’s hands shook. “I okay, *Senorita*,” he said in faltering English. He stared at Melanie, aghast. “How you?”

Juan shook his head in impatience, eyes darting from place to place, looking around and checking out the room. “Where are the rest of the kids, Melanie? Are you alone?” He continued to study the empty room, then glanced at the draped windows that cloaked the lights of the strip.

“Yes,” she said, “ya just missed them. They left for supper a while ago. Your jacket is in the limo if y’re lookin’ for it. I should have brought it up, I guess. We just figured we’d run into ya at the show tomorrow if we missed ya at supper.”

She pressed both index fingers to her eyes, rubbing softly, making a point of heaving a big audible sigh. “Y’all, I have a headache. That’s why I decided to stay in the hotel and get room service. I don’t mean to be rude or anythin’, but it should be here any minute. After I eat supper, I have to get some rest. Why don’t ya call Billy? I’m sure he’d be glad to meet up with ya and return the jacket.”

Juan hesitated for a moment. “Do you know where they went?”

Melanie stood by the sofa, hands extended. “No, I don’t. Like I said, I have a headache so I didn’t listen to them decide. Why? Is something wrong?”

“I need to talk with Becky. Did she ever remember the voice she heard talking about drugging that horse?”

Just then, a horrified look passed over Juan’s face as he realized what he’d said. Becky *had* recognized a voice all right, but it was *Leon’s*, not his. If he had just left

everything alone he'd still have a chance to get away with murder. *But what to do now?*

"I don't think so," Melanie said, "she's pretty much given up tryin'." She bumped her leg on the sofa and stopped, unable to move any farther.

Juan followed her across the room, face intent. He stood next to her, about two feet from the sofa.

Leon knew what Juan would do next and wrung his hands in fear, rooted to the spot.

"We don't want to hurt you, but we will if we have to."

Melanie blinked, eyes wide. "Hurt me? What a silly thing to say, John." Determined not to lose eye contact, she continued to stare at him. "Why in the world would y'all want ... I just don't see...?"

Kenny and Jeff leaped from their hiding place behind the sofa, and with a shout, pounced on John. Three more bodies slammed into the battle as Billy, Larry and Steve poured out of the connecting door and tackled Leon.

It was over in seconds.

Dazed, Juan and Leon got to their feet and the boys dragged them back to the other suite where they tied and gagged them. A quick body search revealed the guns stuffed in their pockets. Billy handed one to Kenny and kept the other for himself.

They were just about to dial the police when there was another knock on the door.

Melanie crept over to the security hole. Her eyebrows shot to her hairline. "It's the guys from the bar!" Her voice was a whispered hiss.

"Shall we do it again?" Jeff whispered, glancing at the other kids.

Kenny nodded. "Call hotel security first, Billy, they'll be here in seconds. Then the police."

There really was no choice. They resumed their battle stations.

“Who is it?” Melanie called, just as the girls flew back into the bedroom. Just as before, the connecting door remained open a crack.

“We have a message from Bob.”

“Bob?” Melanie slid a quick look at the twins and threw her hands up in dismay. She turned back to the door.

“He’s not here. What’s the message?”

“Lady, we know he’s not there. You need to call Tom. Bob’s in trouble and we are not gonna stand in the hall and shout through the door about it. Please open up so we can talk in private.”

Fear washed over Melanie as she cast another frantic glance at the boys. This was a huge step up from Leon and Juan.

Jeff bobbed his head and waved her on. *Tom?* He stared at Kenny, who just shrugged.

From the other side of the door came, “Bob is in bad shape. He needs you to call Tom.”

“Well.” Her eyes swept the room and she shrugged. *We’re as ready as we’re ever going to get.* Melanie opened the door a crack and squealed as they burst into the room, knocking her off balance.

Vinny grabbed her by both arms and spun her into the wall with a resounding smack. “Where’s that jacket?”

“I ... jacket? Who ... what jacket?”

He moved in on her until their bodies almost touched and brought his face to within inches of hers. Vinny stared into her eyes. “Girlie, I’m not playing any games here. I want Juan’s jacket and I want it now.”

He straightened slightly, discerning the impact of his physical closeness on Melanie. Her face looked like old paste. “Now I don’t wanna hurt a pretty girl like you, but I

need to have that jacket.” He leaned back into her space, lips just inches from hers. “Get it. *Now.*” His hold on her arms suddenly loosened and he moved away from her, giving her breathing room.

Melanie felt her stomach rolling and wondered in some detached part of her mind if one could vomit at someone in self-defense. She felt like she could do that right now.

*Oh dear Lord, help me.*

Her knees knocked as she pressed her body into the wall in a vain effort to put as much distance between herself and Vinny as possible.

*What am I gonna do? Breathe, girl, and then think.*

All those moves she’d learned over years of roughhousing with the twins ... the kicks, the throat jabs and punches. They came back in a rush of clear, vivid pictures. *I just have to outwit the enemy. He thinks I’m too afraid to fight. Would he be expecting retaliation? I’m losin’ my mind.*

No, you’re not. He expects a coward, a girl, and that will be too bad for him. Now think, Melly, think. You just have to ride this out, like stayin’ with an unruly horse. Do not let him get the upper hand.

Melanie gazed into his eyes, measuring her readiness, his preparedness. She glanced at the sofa, the tops of the twins heads just visible. They were ready. The door to the connecting suite had opened wider.

Powder blue eyes came back to his. *I’ve dealt with badder guys than y’all, and I’m not alone.*

With no warning at all, Melanie drove her knee up into his crotch with such force he let out a piercing scream of pain. As he doubled over, she caught him in the chin with the toe of her shoe, heaving him sideways. Vinny

crashed to the floor, curled into a fetal position and moaned. The twins converged on an astonished Bernie.

The door between the suites swung open wider and more kids poured into the room. They hollered at the top of their voices and everyone kept shouting as they wrestled to the floor. The gun, muffled by the silencer, made a quick, almost inaudible popping sound.

Melanie wasn't sure what she heard as she stared at the tangle of bodies. She got a stitch in her stomach and placed one hand over it as she gave another yell of support.

Just moments later, Blair stared at her friend. She raised a hand to her mouth and let out a low moan.. "Oh, no, Melly, you've been shot."

Just then, the door crashed into the wall and more people burst into the room, yelling. The noise level rose to new heights. Soon neighboring doors up and down the hall opened as hotel guests gaped in astonishment at the melee going on in the Martin suite.

The Mandalay Bay Towers, not normally known for rowdy parties and fisticuffs, would soon become the talk of a town that was not easily impressed.

"Nobody move!" cried a loud voice as security and police poured into the room, guns drawn. "Everybody up against the walls."

The panic and excitement cleared as the boys heard the cold voice of reason cut through the heat of battle. They climbed off Bernie, who was much the worse for wear. He lay on the floor, moaning.

Jeff held a half-conscious Vinny in a headlock, his lips just inches from the hood's ear. "Didn't your mama ever tell ya not to manhandle women?" He jerked on Vinny's neck again, causing him to gag.

Kenny had pinned both the would-be assassin's hands behind his back, taking grim pleasure in giving Vinny a rude twist.

They grinned like an identical pair of Cheshire cats and looked up to see Detective Anders standing in the living room.

Two more cops came out the connecting door of the other suite, shoving John and Leon in front of them.

"Okay," Anders said. "Read 'em their rights, take 'em downtown and book 'em. We'll sort everything out later."

Leon panicked, but John, Vinny and Bernie held their silence. Hands cuffed all around, the cops marched them out of the room and down the service elevator to the back parking lot. Three patrol cars and the paddy wagon waited.

The rest of the girls gathered in a huddle, panting. Melanie glanced at Blair and looked down. A trickle of blood oozed between her fingers, deep red against her white skin. She pulled her hand away from her stomach, amazed.

"I don't *feel* shot ... how could I *be* shot?" Melanie bent over a tad and looked at her stomach, amazed. "Oh ... my goodness, would ya get a look at that. They shot my belly ring clean off. Check it out."

Jessi peered at Melanie's stomach, her brow furrowed. "Looks like the bullet ripped the ring out. There's this little torn thingy of skin, but I don't think ... *Melly* ... you were wounded in battle. You deserve a purple heart." She started to laugh. "You're gonna get a purple heart to go with your Coast Guard commendation."

Melanie looked at Jessi and chuckled. "From whom?" She glanced around the carpet, searching in vain for the tiny ring. She looked back at her belly. "Now that I

see it, it does kinda sting, but it's no big deal. See, it's not even bleeding any more. I'm gonna wash it off." She walked to the restroom shaking her head in wonder, Jessi hot on her trail.

## *Chapter 27*

Anders sat wearily on the sofa and looked at the kids grouped on the floor around him. “So, who wants to go first?”

They looked at each other and shrugged.

“Come on, don’t be shy. Becky? How about you?”

She shook her head. “Nah, it should be Billy. It was all his plan.”

“Okay then, who’s Billy? Okay, start.”

The detective leaned back and gazed at the kids, trying to connect what just went down with the faces looking up at him. Impossible.

“Well,” Billy said. “Once we found out Yoli and John were married, we thought he might have killed her for insurance money.” He stopped, uncertain, glancing at his friends.

Shievon frowned and shook her head slightly.

“What?” Anders said in a coaxing tone.

“Well, my dad, he, ah, he has a very sophisticated computer he keeps here for business. He can access, ah...”

Shievon coughed and Billy stopped, unable to go on. He looked Anders in the eye and drew a deep breath. “I want to talk with my dad. I think I need our attorney.”

“What?” Anders said again. He leaned back into the sofa and ran a hand over his eyes.

“Look, Billy, I admire what you kids did. I am not going to involve you or your father in this. Just tell me what happened, what you know.”

Billy leaned back against the sofa, inscrutable, unsure.

Shievon took his hand and squeezed it, hard. “Maybe we should at least wait and talk to Bob,” she whispered.

“You know what immunity is?” Anders said, visibly agitated and ready to wring their collective necks. “Whatever you say here stays here.”

One of the kids tittered and someone else whispered, “What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.” The titter spread.

An unbidden grin flitted across Anders’ face. “You’ve got my word.”

Finally, Billy said, “Don’t make me sorry I trusted you, okay? I was able to locate files that showed Yoli had a million dollar policy on her life ... double indemnity. John—her husband, Juan, was the beneficiary.”

He looked over at Larry and Melanie with a nod. “They saw him at the food court, talked about maybe meeting up for dinner tonight. Juan left first and as Larry and Melly got ready to come back to the box she noticed he’d left his jacket behind. We have it now. Anyway, they sort of made plans to have dinner and we decided to smoke him out.

“Jeff and Kenny hid down behind the sofa. We pulled the drapes closed and turned the lights low so they couldn’t see the twins in the window. The girls came with us into the other suite. Melanie let them into the room.”

“She ... you let her meet them alone?” Anders voice rose a notch.

Kenny shrugged. “Well not exactly alone. Jeff and I were there.” He took a gun gingerly out of his pocket and handed it to Detective Anders. “Besides, I had this.”

“Me, too,” Billy said, also transferring his to the astonished detective. “We took ‘em off Juan and Leon.”

“So you guys let her be the decoy and lure them into the room?” Anders looked at Melanie, astonished, and then at the guns in his hands. He shook his head.

With her slender body and fragile features, she looked like butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth. She

reminded him of a delicate Lladro figurine he had long admired. He looked up at the twins, eyes cold, then turned to Melanie and smiled.

“Go on, young lady. I can’t wait to hear how you did this.” He leaned back into the sofa and nodded at her stomach. “I take it you don’t need any medical assistance for that. Not even bleeding now.” He shook his head as he hefted the guns in his hands and then handed them to one of the officers.

“Well, no sir. It doesn’t even hurt.” Embarrassed, Melanie clasped both hands over her bare midriff; a blush stained her cheeks. She glanced at her friends and turned large eyes to the detective. “I’ll be happy to tell ya anything ya need to know.”

“Well, start at the beginning.”

Melanie nodded. “Ya know from talkin’ to Becky that we’ve had our suspicions as to how Yoli died ... after the tape and all. When we found out that Yoli and John were married, we figured he might have taken out an insurance policy pretty much like what Billy found. When John left his jacket behind at the food court, we thought it would be good insurance that we would see him again. We could have just left it with the steward or dropped it off at his barn, but we decided to keep it. Hey, Billy, where’d ya stash the jacket?”

Billy walked to the other suite, soon returning with jacket in hand. He handed it to Detective Anders and resumed his seat next to Shievon.

Melanie continued. “We were ready for John, but Leon was a big surprise. We didn’t expect him at all, but the plan went pretty much as we thought.” She grinned. “We took ‘em out with no problem, not scary at all.”

Pausing, she glanced at Billy and her expression turned grim. “We weren’t expectin’ those other guys, though. They said Bob was in trouble, and we haven’t seen

him for ages, so we figured we'd better find out what was goin' on. Bob would never leave us alone like that so we knew *somethin'* was wrong."

Cheeks pink, she clenched her teeth. "I opened the door and they burst through. One of 'em, the tall one, knocked me up against the wall. Then he asked where John's jacket was. I thought that was so strange at the time, still do. I mean, why would...."

She noticed the look on Anders face and got back to the story. "I didn't grow up with two older brothers for nothin'." She tossed a smug glance at the twins. "When I let those guys in, I didn't think they'd get violent, but we'd already called hotel security anyway, so we knew they wouldn't be long." She glanced at her torn belly button and shrugged. "Seems the only casualty is my belly ring."

Melanie looked at Blair and Jessi and burst out laughing, patting her oozing tummy with a tissue. "We've faced worst than those guys, believe me."

"They were easy," Jessi said, smiling at Anders. "We've even beaten up pirates."

The detective looked from one to the other, refusing to take the bait. *Pirates. Yeah, right.*

Just then, they heard a commotion in the hall followed by loud voices. A disheveled Bob burst into the room, two security cops right on his tail. He waved his ID as he shook off their arms and did an immediate head count. He breathed a deep sigh of relief and looked at Billy. "You kids okay?"

Detective Anders jumped to his feet, hand on his weapon. Juan's jacket fell to the floor. "Who the hell are you?"

"It's okay, he's my body guard." Billy grinned at Bob. "We're fine, how about you?"

Bob looked down at his rumpled clothes and shrugged. "Long story, Billy. I'll tell you on the way back

to Del Mar, which can't happen soon enough to suit me." He turned to the detective with a grim face. "So, what are the junior sleuths up to this time?"

"Took out a couple of bad guys." Anders snorted and bent over to retrieve Juan's jacket. Picking it up by the corner, he felt the vial in the pocket, glanced at the kids and pulled on gloves. He removed the vial, held it up to the light and shook his head. "Betcha that's a bingo." He put the vial into an envelope and stuffed it in his pocket. With a wide grin, he nodded at the kids to continue.

Dark eyes glistening, Jessi got up from the sofa and approached Anders. Long black lashes fluttered as she hesitated. She licked her lips once and took a deep breath as her cheeks turned a dusky rose. "Detective Anders, I was just wondering." She snuck a glimpse at Melanie and drew another deep breath.

"Do you guys give out citizen medals or commendations in Las Vegas, anything like that? Y'know, like when regular folks do brave things? Catch bad guys and stuff?"

She glanced at Melanie again then back at the detective. "I mean, Melly was wounded in action. That deserves a purple heart, right? Do you people do that out here? We already have one from the Coast Guard. We could use another."

Anders stared at them in amazement. "What? You want a commendation?" He shook his head with a wry grin and glanced at Bob. "*Another* commendation? They already have one?"

"Oh, yes, indeed," Bob said, his face straight as a poker. "Captured a gang of armed international pirates. Foiled a plan to hijack a yacht on the high seas."

"You're kidding me."

Bob shook his head. "Nope, it's a true story. I was there."

“I got time,” said the detective. “Do tell.”

They all hesitated and then Jessi leaned forward and grinned.

“Well,” she said, dark eyes dancing with the memory, “it all started when we decided to cruise to Hawaii for Christmas break....”

## *Chapter 28*

Detective Anders entered the interrogation room where Leon waited for him, wild eyed.

“If you want to get out of this in one piece, Leon, you need to tell me everything you know. Let’s start at the beginning, shall we? You drugged Ditileo’s horse, right?”

Maria, the police interpreter, spoke to Leon, translating the detective’s words.

“Si, I tell to you all things.” Looking at Maria, he spoke to her in rapid Spanish, and then continued in halting English, glancing at her from time to time to be sure he said the words right.

“Sone guy pay me big bucks to do it. I got the juice—the drugas—from Juan. Street junk, easy to find. Juan have me pass for gate to get in barn. I tell him stall and he takit me to horse.” Leon shrugged. “It is only a momen’.”

Anders looked at him again, watching his face. “Did you kill Yoli Navarro?”

Before the interpreter could speak, Leon said, “Oh no, Dios. No is me. Juan killit Yoli. Por dinero.” His English collapsed and he turned to Maria, waving his hands for emphasis and rolling his eyes at the detective from time to time.

Anders reached in his pocket and removed an envelope. Donning gloves, he placed it on the table in front of Leon, never taking his eyes off the man.

“Is this what killed Yoli? We found it in the pocket of Juan’s jacket.”

Leon shrugged and started to sputter at Maria. When he finished, she looked at Anders.

“He said that Juan killed Ms. Navarro, his wife, for insurance money ... got the drugs from some guy named Bernie. He does not know whether that is the vial. He never

saw it. He says Juan also killed Ernie Spinelli for personal reasons. Something about getting the ride on a horse and hating Mr. Spinelli for double crossing him.”

Noting the expression of disbelief on the detective’s face, she glanced at Leon and then back at Anders. “I think he’s telling the truth. He’s scared spitless.”

“*Spinelli?* That can’t be. I got—never mind right now.” He rose and began to pace the room, staring at Leon, whose face blanched. “You should be good and scared.”

Anders made a tent of his fingers as he maintained the stare. He resumed his chair and leaned back, eyes boring into Leon. “Tell me about tonight.”

Leon began speaking before Maria could say a word.

She listened to him and then nodded at Anders. “He’s ready to make a deal. We need to get him a lawyer right now before he changes his mind.” Maria looked at Anders and grinned.

He hit a button on his desk phone and said, “Let the fox into the henhouse.”

Public Defender, Sarah Seminski, bustled into the room, took one look at Leon and shrilled, “Have you been questioning my client without benefit of counsel?”

Anders grinned at her and indicated a chair. “Take a load off, Counselor. Open and shut here. You just need to make him see that if he cooperates, all he’ll get is deportation. If he gives me a hard time, I’ll give it right back to him. In spades.”

Sarah spent five minutes listening to Leon. Finally she turned to Anders, a sly look on her face. “We want to make a deal. What’s your best offer?”

“You tell him if he tells me everything he knows, all the names, I’ll seek deportation only. If he lies to me or if I discover that he left something out, deal’s off. Pure and simple.”

Sarah talked with Leon another minute or two and then turned to Detective Anders. “We’re ready to make a statement.”

The End

## *Epilogue*

The kids stood in the limo, heads popping out of the sunroof as they drove down the strip for the last time. Taking turns, they waved good-bye to Las Vegas.

As the city receded in the distance, Becky turned to Steve.

“Well,” she said, eyes alight, “that sure was fun. I wonder what’s next on the agenda.” She slipped her arms around his neck and kissed him.

“Hey,” Jessi said, “let’s watch a movie.”

Billy leaned forward in the seat and withdrew a drawer full of DVDs. He arched his eyebrows at her and grinned. “What sounds good?”

The kids looked at each other, secretive little smirks on their faces.

“How about *Young Frankenstein*?” Blair said.

“Frau Brucker,” Jessi shouted. The rest of the girls dissolved into whinnies and helpless giggles. The guys shrugged their shoulders and sighed.

As the limo picked up speed on the desert freeway, Bob glanced in his rearview mirror at the laughing kids. He rolled up the security window, closed the sunroof and turned on the radio.

“Not again,” he said with a sigh. “I can’t take that movie one more time.”

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