



THE DOUBLETREE KIDS!

Gayle Farmer

Two Books In One



ALL IN THE GAME

COUPLES



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**TWO BOOKS IN ONE**

*Gayle Farmer*



To Jeff,

With all my love

Thank you for always being there  
and for sharing the memories.

Other books in the Doubletree Series

Follow Your Dreams

High Hurdles

Riding High

Riding Blind

The Sessions and Browning Series

Secret Lives

Lethal Intent

Firestorm

Cold Fusion

# **COUPLES**



# **ALL IN THE GAME**

## **TWO BOOKS IN ONE**

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# **COUPLES**

*Gayle Farmer*



## *Chapter 1*

**B**lair Evans tossed the brush back in her grooming bucket. Green eyes narrowed to slits, she stared into the leaden sky. It looked ready to burst.

“I hate rain, but this is even worse. If it’s gonna rain, then let’s get on with it. This misty, drizzily stuff makes me crazy. I get so sticky when it’s damp and humid like this. Makes me want to curl up by the fire and just read or something.” Disgusted, she wiped her palms on her jeans and picked up the hoof pick. She reached for Angel’s left front hoof.

“Downright depressing, and I agree about how it feels. One minute I get the chills, the next I’m sweating. Really weird,” agreed her stepsister, Jessi. She continued to brush the sand and dirt out of Foxy’s long black tail. She separated it into three sections and made a quick braid. She tucked the braid up into thirds and wrapped it in a bright green tail bandage. She unhooked the crossties and attached the lead shank to her horse’s halter.

“As if that’s not enough, we’ve got all these mid-terms coming up. Crud, I’ve got a Spanish exam that’s gonna be a bear, even with Jeff’s help. I’m only half-way through my history report, and it counts for most of my semester grade.”

Melanie grimaced, and ran a vigorous hand through her pale blonde hair in an attempt to diminish the dreaded effects of her riding helmet. It stuck to her head in damp wisps and refused to fluff out. “Arrgh, helmet head,” she

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said, continuing to rub at her hair. "Looks terrible an' itches, too."

She poured a generous amount of Absorbine into her cupped palm and began to rub Benny's front legs. "I know what ya mean about tests, too. Add the championship show comin' up next weekend, the awards banquet the weekend after that, and yes indeedy, the next weekend is Christmas. I feel like I'm on a treadmill gone haywire."

Melanie shrugged at her friends as she brought her horse out of the cross ties and into the aisle. She palmed several sugar cubes and fed them to the gelding and then headed for his stall. "I could use a break, y'know? Instead, I get the schedule from hell and a calculus test. Go figure."

Shievon Mahoney popped her head over the stall door and grinned, offering her million-dollar smile. "That's what you get for taking all honors classes, Melly. Just pray it doesn't rain until after the show. Man, remember that one year it rained so hard they almost had to call the whole show off? All the trailers kept getting stuck and the footing was so slippery we all thought we'd break our necks."

"I'll never forget that one as long as I live," Blair said, unhooking the cross tie snaps and leading her horse into her stall. "Remember how Angel almost did the splits going down the ramp into the arena? She got so frustrated in that class she actually pulled a rail. Imagine that."

"Absolute disaster all around," Jessi said. "We'd have done better to stay home and miss the whole thing. I went off course twice and Mom was so mad, remember? Thought I'd never hear the end of that one."

"Well, y'know, Jessi," said Becky Edwards, a pert redhead with bright aqua eyes. "You have to admit you're in control there. I mean, learning your course is up to you."

"Oh, you always side with Mom. Just because you're her assistant and all, you could cut me a little slack." Jessi started to grumble. Pulling off her helmet, she shook her head, running her hand vigorously through her dark

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brown hair. She kept at it long enough to make a rat's nest. Finally she straightened up. "I do my best, y'know."

Blair glanced at Jessi in dismay. The hair thing was a sure sign of aggravation. Before Blair could say anything to defuse her, Melanie chimed in.

"Ya know she's right, Jessi, and ya still do it. No wonder Karen fusses at ya. I mean, what's with that?"

By now, Jessi's cheeks flamed. "Oh, just gang up, why don't you?" She glared at Melanie as she led Foxy to her stall, put her inside and secured the door. Snagging her bridle and saddle, she stormed up the aisle to the tack room without another word.

Shievon came out of her stall and bolted the door behind her, normally pale cheeks pink. "Why do you guys keep doing that? It's really mean, y'know? Jessi already feels bad enough. Why keep ragging on her about it?"

Becky shrugged. "Well, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt her feelings. It's my fault for saying anything, but really, Shievy, best friend or not, it's about time she got over that, don't you think?"

"Crap." Shievon turned on her heel and headed up the aisle in search of Jessi.

Becky turned to Melanie and Blair, eyes wide, arms outstretched. "I didn't mean to start trouble."

"Forget it, Becky. Ya just told the truth, although the timin' might be a bit off," Melanie said. "We're all stressed to the breakin' point. Feelins' get hurt real easy at times like these. Besides, ya have to admit it is a bit much."

"We aren't all blessed with photographic memories, Melly," Blair said. She slammed Angel's door and followed Shievon up the aisle.

Becky and Melanie glanced at each other and shrugged. "Ya need a lift home? Right about now I could use a latte."

"Thanks, that sounds great. Maybe they have one with hemlock." Becky chuckled at Melanie and followed

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her to the parking lot.

## *Chapter 2*

The sun returned along with a brisk wind. Becky closed the door behind her and walked down the sidewalk by her house just as her boyfriend, Steve Bianchi, drove in the driveway. She waved at him, returning his grin. The top was down on the little Fiat, as though paying respect to the sun, hoping to encourage some warmth from the strangely cold orb.

The breeze ruffled his dark brown hair as he got out of the car. “Denny’s again, or do you want to try that new IHOP?”

Becky licked her lips in anticipation. “IHOP has the best waffles ever. I’m in the mood for a change of pace. You, too?”

He opened the door with a flourish and gave her a quick hug. “As long as I’m with you, I don’t care what we do. Let’s give it a try. Maybe they’ll have pecan pancakes. Talk about good.”

The parking lot of the brand new restaurant was almost full, but the majority of the people lined up at the counter wanted their orders to go. Rows of freshly baked donuts, sweet rolls and a variety of Danish delights tempted the breakfast palate. Coupled with a selection of signature-blend coffees, the rich aromas made everyone salivate.

The hostess led them to a window seat, leaving them with their menus. She returned with a carafe of coffee, took their orders, and left.

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“She needs skates,” Steve quipped as he stirred cream into his coffee cup. He took a sip and sighed.

“I guess. Man, talk about busy.” Becky sipped at her cup then placed it back on the saucer. “I’m so excited about the finals, I just can’t stand it. Makes me want to squeal.” She chuckled and took another sip of her coffee. “The kids keep talking about how much fun they’ve had there over the years. Have you shown at the Del Mar fairgrounds before?”

Becky leaned back as the waitress served them and refilled their cups.

He shrugged around a bite of his pecan pancakes, nodding. He added more warm maple syrup and grinned. “All the rings are super, but especially the stadium. I still remember the first time I rode in it. This year, I’ll be riding Magic. I have big shoes to fill, but Magic and I are getting along so well, I know I’ll make Billy proud.”

Becky spooned cherries onto her waffle. “Oh, they do equitation in there, too? I knew about the jumpers, but other classes, too?”

“They run all the medals and a couple of the higher equitation classes in the stadium. It’s such a thrill, especially if your class goes at night. I saw Billy there at the Nationals last year when he won the Maclay. Oh, man, you should have seen it. The bright lights, the flags flapping, and there’s Billy doing a working sitting trot right down the center of the arena. Still gives me the chills, and to know I own the horse he did that on. Wow.”

He chuckled, large dark eyes sparkling. “I’m riding my good luck charm. He gives me so much confidence and Karen says it shows in my riding. When the horse knows the ropes the way Magic does, all I have to do is sit quiet and let him do it all.”

“I think you downplay your contribution a bit. After all, it is equitation,” she said with a giggle. “I agree, though, the improvement in your riding, well, you were always

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good, but now, it gives me roly-poly's in my stomach to watch you. We're gonna have so much fun. I can't wait. What a ball."

Becky spooned more hot cherries onto her waffle. Eying her fork, she chuckled. "I don't even want to think about the calories." She popped the bite into her mouth.

Steve snorted and gave her a hug. "You don't need to worry about that, you're perfect." He reddened slightly and took another bite of his pancakes.

Becky chuckled under her breath. "I guess I shouldn't worry, this is probably all I'll get to eat until dinner. Karen will have us buzzing around once we get to the show grounds."

\* \* \*

Excitement whirled around the Doubletree team as they prepared to go to the Del Mar Fairgrounds for their year-end championship show. The final performance of their hard-fought show season was about to begin and the whole team felt optimistic. Double points were offered in each class, giving riders in close contention one last chance to win their division high-point championship, but it didn't come easy.

The complicated jumping courses challenged horse and rider alike, and the equitation tests required tests as complex as the division rules allowed. Rivalries escalated and the competition grew fierce. All told, more than two hundred riders would vie for year-end glory

Although no money prizes were awarded, every division winner received a monogrammed riding jacket, a tradition started in the early '90's. The trophy jacket, treasured and worn proudly for a year, was then hopefully retired and replaced with a new one.

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The team checked their lists one more time, ensuring the right tack ended up at the show and not in a pile somewhere, forgotten until the last minute. The banter ricocheted across the tack room as they teased each other in a vain attempt to relieve the tension.

“Jessi needs a course map that she can tape between Foxie’s ears.”

That got several genial if restrained laughs. Depending on her mood, Jessi could take offense at the drop of a hat, although for the most part, she was the biggest trickster on the team.

“Shievy needs a “Whoa” sign on her helmet visor.” The laughter escalated, turning Shievon’s cheeks quite pink.

Melanie grinned, a glint in her bright blue eyes. “Y’all can’t run at the fences yet.” She paused for dramatic effect. “But I can.” She laughed with delight, curling up to avoid the elbow jabs. “Considerin’ the way she’s goin’, Shievy’ll be out there runnin’ with me soon enough, and when Billy gets goin’, we’ll all have a run for our money.”

“I learned about running the hard way.” Blair rubbed her leg, remembering the scary fall she and Angel took last season. “No running at the fences,” was their trainer’s mantra.

“So,” Shievon said, raising her arm for a high-five. “Let’s show them how it’s done.”

Melanie led the cheer.

\* \* \*

The grooms loaded the furniture for the setup and tack room last. The heavy show trunks, bales of hay and bags of shavings lined the end of the far wall of the huge horse van. Plastic bins stored all the supplements, vitamins and special equipment they would need for the four-day show.

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The horses stood waiting in their stalls, their legs encased from hoof to hock in thick, protective shipping boots. They each wore a dark blue sheet with Doubletree Stables embroidered in silver on one flank and their show name on the other.

Carlos checked the list one more time and handed it to Karen. “Es finish. Everythin’ is loaded up. We are ready, si?”

She nodded at the grooms to begin loading the horses.

Carlos attached the lead shank to Angel’s halter, opened her door and led her to the van. He chuckled as she took the lead up the ramp, stopped midway in the large aisle and then backed herself into the end stall. She always went first and always traveled in that stall, as befitting the alpha mare on the team. Carlos attached the chest strap and clipped the cross ties to her shipping halter.

As Jose prepared to bring Megan up the ramp, Angel issued a shrill, ringing cry of encouragement to her teammates. Before long, all seven horses stood in their stalls, rattling their crossties in their anxiety to get started. They loved to show and the anticipation the kids felt transmitted itself to the horses. Angel whinnied again, high and excited.

The grooms removed the sides of the ramp, pushed them into their slots and slid the whole thing under the belly of the van. The doors closed with a hiss and the huge diesel engine rumbled to life.

Next stop, the Del Mar Fairgrounds.

\* \* \*

Barn parking was always at a premium, so most of the kids rode over with Billy Martin in his limo. Parents would come later in the morning and park in the outback, but meeting up at Doubletree and riding together in the

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morning made life so much easier.

Bob, Billy's driver and body-guard, parked in front of the setup long enough to help the kids get their stuff out of the spacious trunk and stowed in the tack room, and then he left. His place was quickly filled with another horse trailer.

Karen insisted they arrange everything the same at all the shows. Like a puzzle, each piece had a particular place and made things easier to find when time really mattered. The grooms hung the show drapes and set the furniture in the usual familiar pattern, with large, colorful potted plants at the corners. While all the barns had similarities in their setups, individuality really mattered.

Each show management team offered a nice cash prize to the barn whose setup they considered most attractive and unique. Some used carpet to cover the dirt floors. Others installed squares of turf, but most used cedar chips, their fragrant aroma wafting in the air.

Colored photos of winning horses and trophy blankets personalized the area. A large photo of the Doubletree team taken at last year's championship show graced the far wall. On one side was a large print of Benny and Melanie sailing over a huge oxer. On the other side hung a gorgeous portrait of Billy and Magic winning the Maclay Finals.

Smaller photos of Shievon and Megan, Jessi and Foxie and Blair and Angel filled in the remaining space on the wall, and of course, Jessi's favorite autographed poster of Richard Spooner and Robinson dominated the tack room.

The new sign wore their barn colors of royal blue and silver with beveled edges. Across its gleaming face: Doubletree Stables ~ Karen Evans, trainer in silver script.

The barns hummed with activity as the other show teams settled in across the huge facility. Enormous ten and twelve-horse vans drove up the aisles, stopped long enough to offload their cargo and then moved on, replaced by yet

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another horse carrier.

The carnival atmosphere spread as the barns filled. Mexican music, dominated by mariachi bands, filled the air. Laughter and shrill whinnies rang out, augmented by the occasional barking dog.

\* \* \*

“I love being up front,” Billy said, closing the lid of his trunk. “Makes everything so much easier and you get to see all the action.”

“Boy, that’s for sure, an’ so much more convenient,” agreed Melanie. “Remember that one year we didn’t decide to show until late and they put us way out in the middle of the back of beyond? I’m sayin’, it took ten minutes to walk from the arena to the barn. Exhaustin’ after seven or eight trips, an’ that was just in the mornin’. By afternoon, even the horses got tired.”

“What a blast. That was the year Dad rented the golf cart.” Blair smiled at the memory. “Now you have to admit, that turned out to be loads of fun.”

Melanie snorted. “Well, it was fun at night when the classes were finished an’ we could play around with it, but durin’ the day, when it coulda come in handy, the adults hogged it. All I ever heard was that I was young and could use the exercise. Yeah, right.”

“We’re lucky to be local, too.” Becky plopped down on the bench, pushed her short red curls out of her face and sighed. “I feel sorry for the kids that come down from LA, or even the Temecula area. It’s too far to commute so they’re stuck in a hotel. We’re lucky we get to go home each night.”

Blair nodded, grinning at Melanie. “Remember when we went to Indio for the week and stayed in a hotel? Doubled stress and all that restaurant food. I must have gained five pounds. Nah, home is better. I like sleeping in

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my own bed.”

“I’m with you.” Billy glanced around at the kids. “When you consider we have Showpark and the fairgrounds right here, traveling around doesn’t make much sense. I’d like to go to the Oaks once just to say I’ve been there, but I don’t want to do Indio again. Just too long.”

“Indio is a mess, spread out all over the place like that. That’s why everyone uses golf carts and mopeds up there. Traipsin’ around on foot from ring to ring, tryin’ to get from one end of the show grounds to the other takes forever. Y’all should hear my mama’s take on Indio. She forgot her camera in the car and by the time she got back from the parking lot, my round was over. Whew, was she mad. Not pretty. An’ I was three rounds out when she left!”

Melanie grinned at Blair. “But y’all have to admit, bein’ there was a blast. It’s a world class facility, super footing, not to mention the shoppin’ and the restaurants. It’s just really too spread out.”

“And Richard,” Jessi said, “don’t forget Richard.”

They all chuckled at the memory. It was at Indio that Jessi developed her crush on Grand Prix champion, Richard Spooner. Nicknamed The Master of Faster by equine sportscasters, he and his equally famous gray partner, Robinson, stole the hearts of horse lovers everywhere. Their performances were hair-raising, record breaking and sometimes just plain astounding.

The handsome young man also set the hearts of the female contingent to fluttering with his kind and gracious manners. His willingness to talk with fans and sign autographs became a legend in the show world, so they flocked to him every chance they got.

“Hey, let’s go to the jumper arena and see who’s here,” Jessi said, dark eyes alight.

“I can read her mind a mile away; we just set off the Richard alarm. Here we go again, I’m sayin’.” Melanie shook her ash blonde hair and pursed her lips. “Jessi, really.

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It's gettin' downright embarrassin'. We haven't been here an hour and you're already on the hunt for him. I'm tellin'."

Jessi made a face at Melanie. "I wonder if he brought any of the new horses with him. I know Robinson will be here. Let's go see."

Shievon grinned, nodding. "I'll go with you. He was so nice to us at the last show, remember? Richard loves his fans. You want to come with us, Billy?"

He rolled his eyes at her in pretended annoyance and shrugged.

"Oh, don't give me the hairy eyeball, dude. You want to see him as much as we do," she said, giving him a nudge with her elbow. "He's your favorite, too."

Chuckling, Billy slipped an arm across her shoulder and nodded. "Count me in. We'll keep Jessi under control."

Melanie giggled. "Imagine that."

They headed for the arena, still teasing Jessi, although they all had secret crushes on Richard.