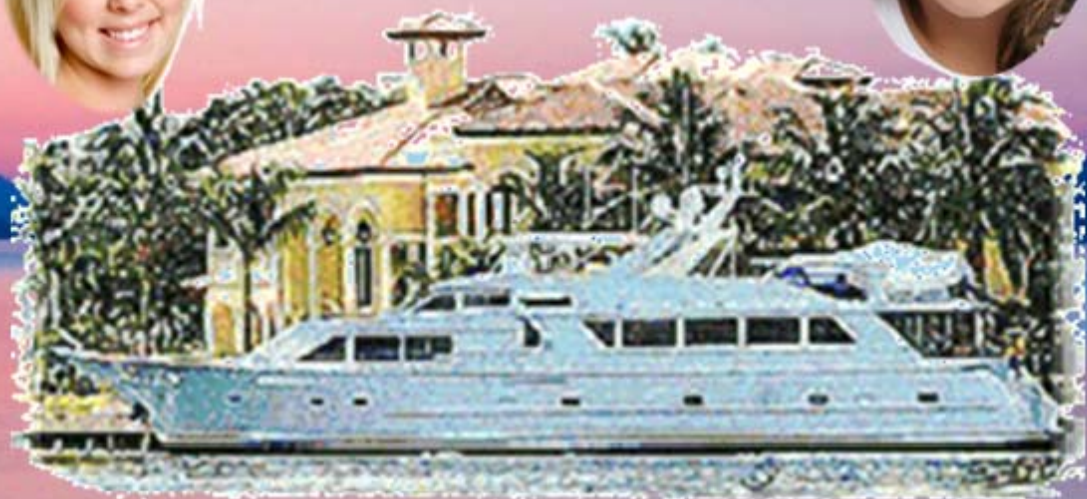


THE DOUBLE TREE KIDS

# COUPLES



*Gayle Farmer*

**THE DOUBLETREE KIDS ~ COUPLES/  
FARMER, GAYLE**

**THE DOUBLETREE KIDS**

**COUPLES**

**Gayle Farmer**

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**THE DOUBLETREE KIDS**

**COUPLES**

By

Gayle Farmer

**Chapter 1**

“I hate rain.”

Blair 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.

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“But this is even worse. If it’s gonna rain, then let’s get on with it. This misty, drizzily stuff makes me crazy.”

“Downright depressing,” agreed her stepsister, Jessi. 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 grade.”

Melanie Young chuckled, removed her helmet and ran a vigorous hand through her short blonde hair, trying to diminish the dreaded effects of helmet head.

“I know what ya mean. 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.”

She shrugged at her friends as she brought her horse

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into the aisle. She palmed several sugar cubes and fed them to the gelding. “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.

“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 show? All the trailers kept getting stuck and the footing was so slippery we all thought we’d break our necks.”

“Absolute disaster all around,” Jessi said. “We’d have been better off to miss the whole thing. I went off course and Mom was so mad, remember? Thought I’d never hear the end of that one.”

“Well.” Becky Edwards, a pert redhead with bright aqua eyes, shrugged at her friend. “You have to admit you’re in control there. I mean, learning your course is up to you.”

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“Oh, you always side with Mom. Just because you’re her assistant and all.” Jessi started to grumble. Pulling off her helmet, she shook her head, running her hand briskly through her dark brown hair.

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 led Fokie to her stall, put her inside and secured the door. Snagging her bridle and saddle, she stormed up the aisle to the tack room.

Shievon came out of her stall and bolted the door behind her, normally pale cheeks pink. “Why do you guys keep doing that? Jessi already feels bad enough, why keep ragging about it?”

Becky shrugged. “I’m sorry. It’s my fault for saying

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anything, but really, 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 her best friend.

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," Melanie said. "We're all stressed to the breakin' point. Feelins' get hurt real easy at times like these."

\* \* \*

The sun returned along with a brisk wind. Becky walked down the sidewalk of her house just as her boyfriend, Steve Bianchi, drove in the driveway. She waved at him, returning the grin.

"Denny's again, or do you want to try that new IHOP?"

Becky licked her lips. "IHOP has the best waffles ever. I'm in the mood for a change. You too?"

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He opened the door wide, giving 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 was almost full, but the majority of people lined up at the counter wanted their orders to go. Rows of donuts, sweet rolls and a variety of Danish tempted the breakfast palate along with a selection of signature blend coffees.

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.

“I’m so excited about the finals, Steve. The kids keep talking about how much fun they’ve had there over the years. Have you shown at the fairgrounds before?”

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

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He shrugged around a bite of his pancakes, nodding. “It’s super, especially the stadium. I still remember the first time I rode in it. This year, I’ll be riding Magic.”

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

“They run the medals and a couple of the higher equitation classes in the stadium. I saw Billy there at the Nationals last year when he won the Maclay. You should have seen it. The lights bright, 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.”

“We’re gonna have so much fun. I can’t wait. What a ball.”

Becky spooned more hot cherry filling onto her waffle. Eying her fork, she chuckled. “I don’t even want to

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*think* about the calories.” She popped the bite into her mouth.

“On the other hand, 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. This final performance of their hard-fought season was about to begin and the whole team felt optimistic. Double points offered in each class gave riders in close contention one last chance to win their division high-point prize, but it didn’t come easy.

The complicated jumping courses challenged horse and rider and the equitation tests required moves as difficult as the division rules allowed. Rivalries escalated and the competition grew fierce.

Although no money prizes were awarded, every

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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, then hopefully retired and replaced with a new one.

\* \* \*

The team checked their lists one more time, ensuring the right tack ended up at the show and not in a pile somewhere, forgotten. 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.

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

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Melanie grinned, a glint in her eye. “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.”

“I learn about running the hard way.” Blair rubbed her leg, remembering the terrible fall she and Angel took. “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

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show.

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 name on the other.

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

She nodded at the grooms to begin.

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 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.

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.

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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 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 morning made life so much easier.

Bob, the driver, stopped in front of the setup long enough for them to get their stuff out, and then he left.

They arranged everything the same at all the shows. Like a puzzle, each piece had a particular place. The grooms hung the show drapes and set the furniture in the familiar pattern, with large, colorful potted plants at the corners. While each barn had similarities in their setups,

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individuality really mattered.

Each show offered a nice cash prize to the barn whose setup management 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 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 poster of Richard Spooner and Robinson.

The new sign wore their barn colors of royal blue and silver with beveled edges. Across its gleaming face:

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*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 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.”

“Boy, that’s for sure,” agreed Melanie. “Remember that one year we didn’t decide to come until late and they put us 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 a day.”

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“That was the year Dad rented the golf cart.” Blair smiled at the memory. “Now that turned out to be loads of fun.”

Melanie snorted. “It mighta been fun for all the adults. 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 the hotel? Doubled stress and all that restaurant food. Nah, home is better.”

“I’m with you.” Billy glanced around at the kids.

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“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 one end of the show grounds to the other takes forever. Y’all should hear my mama’s take on Indio. Whew!”

Melanie grinned at Blair. “But y’all have to admit, bein’ there was a blast. Not to mention the shoppin’ and the restaurants.”

“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

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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. “It’s gettin’ downright embarrassin’. We haven’t been here an hour and she’s on the hunt for him already. 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

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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.”

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. They all had secret crushes on Richard.

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## **Chapter 2**

Karen leaned against the arena fence, chatting with a trainer from Rancho Santa Fe. She nodded at her team as they headed for the bleachers and tapped the arm of the other woman as if in parting. Instead, she followed Karen, and together they walked up the stadium steps.

Karen's expression, bland and unreadable, didn't fool the kids. "You remember Peggy Smith, trains at Kingsdown?"

The kids said hello.

"You train Emily Goss, don't you?" Billy stared at her, voice without emotion.

"Sure do." Peggy nodded, displaying small even teeth. "She's here, chasing those points with everyone else. Do you know Emily?"

"Uh huh."

The kids leaned forward in their chairs, quick looks passing among them. Emily Goss, known throughout the

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local horse community as the worst sport in town was no stranger to the Doubletree kids. Friendless and solitary, she'd been asked to leave show barns all over the county; her behavior and trash mouth simply would not be tolerated. Trainers dropped her for causing scenes at horse shows and throwing tantrums if she didn't win. Worst of all, she took it out on her horses.

“Heads up,” Jessi muttered under her breath as she saw Emily approaching.

Melanie saw her, too. “Well,” she said, jumping to her feet. “I need to get back to the barn.” She waved goodbye to Karen and led the team down the stairs, mumbling something in response to Emily's cheery hello. The kids responded to her greeting with low mutters and downcast eyes.

The girl paused, hands on her hips, watching their retreating backs. Emily took a deep breath, turned around and trudged back down the steps.

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\* \* \*

Melanie strode down the refreshment aisle, the kids right behind her. She stopped at a vendor and ordered a soda. She slapped her money on the counter, popped the top and took a long drink.

“That is one gal that really riles me up good, I’m sayin’. Has for years.”

After another long swig she pursed her lips in distaste. “Gets on my last nerve, I’m sayin’. She had the nicest little mare back when we all showed equitation, remember, Blair? She’d counter canter all day, totally honest, a truly sweet mare.

“Then one day, I don’t know what happened, but she stumbled in front of a fence and stopped. Emily fell off and before ya could blink she’s just up an’ beatin’ the tar outta that poor mare, right there in the ring, I swear. If I’d had anyone to hand Puddin’ to, I’d’a gone out there and beaten *her* with that crop.”

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By that time Melanie was red-faced and panting.

Blair nodded at Becky and Steve. “Really, that’s true, just like Melly said. The steward disqualified her and they announced it right from the booth; can you imagine? We were like, eleven? Her trainer walked off right there and then. When Mom came to Doubletree, Emily tried to move in. We clued her in about what a bad sport Emily was and thank heaven, she believed us.”

Becky blinked, blue eyes wide in disbelief. “You gotta be kidding me. The steward disqualified her? Holy cow, I can’t even picture. What did her parents do?”

Shievon harrumphed. “Like mother, like daughter. It’s a circus around them.” She snickered. “Trash of the whitest kind. Her mother’s always threatening to sue someone; I’ve never seen her father.”

Melanie pursed her lips. “My mama says they’re *common*, and in her book that’s as low as you can go.”

Billy shook his head in surprise. “It’s weird, too.

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She's a really good rider with tons of money to back her up and she sure isn't hard to look at. Wonder why she acts like that? I remember way back when we were in the same pony club together. They threw her out for abusing her pony.

Even back then she was a terror."

Melanie stared back at the stands. "I'm wonderin' what Peggy's doin' with Karen."

"I'll find out when we get home," Jessi said. She glanced at her watch and turned to Blair. "I'm starved. Is there anything more we need to do here? I'm ready to go."

"I'm ready, too." Billy reached into his pocket for his beeper.

"We'll see you guys later," Steve said, slipping an arm around Becky's shoulder. "I'm parked clear back in the overflow."

Waving goodbye, the kids retraced their steps to the barn, happy to see the limo sitting in the aisle, waiting for them.

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\* \* \*

Steve held the door as Becky hopped into the Fiat.

“Is your mom working tonight?”

“Oh, yes, the restaurant is always busy, especially when the Christmas season starts. Why?”

“I wondered if you wanted to go out for dinner. I brought clean clothes with me, so if you want to go somewhere nice, I can change at your house.”

Yawning, Becky chuckled. “Aren’t you tired? I’m kind of hoping Mom has something good in the fridge. If not, how about if we order in? Dominos? My treat. Honest, I don’t think I can go out again tonight. I’m beat.”

“I just feel kind of guilty always eating at your house, but I get that you’re tired. Either one works for me ‘cause you know I love pizza.”

Steve pulled into Becky’s driveway, parked and followed her into the house. They opened the fridge to find a disappointingly small box and a note of apology. “Sorry

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about the slim pickings, kids. New gal beat me to the punch. Enjoy! Love, Mom.”

Inside the box was a beautifully prepared antipasto salad ... for one.

Steve pulled his cell phone out and hit the number for Domino's. He ordered a large deluxe pizza and gave Becky's address. He hung up and put his cell away.

“They figure twenty minutes. By the time we finish this, it'll be here.”

Becky got the silverware and pulled two sodas from the fridge.

“What time do you want me to pick you up tomorrow,” Steve asked, taking a bite of salad. “I think we should get there by seven, don't you? Our first class goes pretty early.”

“Yep, that's perfect. I'll be ready by six or so. Karen always brings us breakfast, so at least we don't have to worry about that.” She leaned back in her seat, a

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speculative look in her eye.

“Do you know Emily Goss?”

He shrugged and took a swig of soda. “No, not really. I know who she is, of course, but that’s about it. She rode at my old barn for a while, but we never got to be friends. If you want the truth, she always made me a bit nervous. Something about the way she looks at me.”

The doorbell rang and Steve went to get the pizza. He placed the box on the table and grinned, shaking his fingers. “Hot!”

“Did you ever ride against her? Billy said she’s terrific.”

Steve placed a slice of pizza on her plate and slid it toward her. “She’s a fine rider, I guess, but nobody likes her. I think she’s a bit strange if you want the truth. I never saw the incident Melanie talked about, but I remember a terrible story going around about her whipping her horse in the stall.”

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“Oh man, you’re kidding.” Becky stared at him, outraged. “What kind of person does that?” She shook her head in disgust.

“I’ll never figure out why people take their tempers and bad moods out on their animals.”

“Or their kids.”

Nodding, Becky shook her head and took a bite of steaming pizza. “That, too. Umm. Oh, gosh, that’s great.”

She chewed and took a sip of soda, large eyes sad. “Stories like that give me the creeps, for sure. You’ve gotta wonder what she’ll be like when she grows up. Great parent material.”

He shrugged. “She’s a nutty one. My best advice is to keep away from her. I sure plan to. Now, to change the subject; you qualified to ride in Green Rider and Children’s Hunters, huh? Novice equitation, too?”

“Yeah. Karen got me qualified in equitation early on in the season and I made good points in Children’s

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Hunter at the last couple of shows. I'm not going to do any Green Riders. I can't afford to ride in every division I qualified in, for one thing. Besides, Karen wants Lark to be fresh. She's an older mare, y'know. I don't want to wear her out, especially with the biggest classes running Sunday."

She got up and pulled two more sodas out of the fridge. "Pizza always makes me so thirsty." Becky placed one in front of Steve and took her seat.

"Karen wants me to move up, especially on the flat. She thinks I can do well. Funny, y'know, equitation never was a goal in my plan, but if Karen believes it will be good for me, I'll do it."

Steve leaned back in his chair, grinning. "She is such a great trainer. I can't tell you the stuff I've learned since riding with her, and I've been in professional training since I was eight. Over the years I've had good, talented trainers, but no one like her. The way she can get her ideas

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across is fantastic and her connection with the horses is incredible. Imagine having her for a mother. Blair and Jessi sure are lucky.”

Steve slid the last piece of pizza onto her plate. He stopped for a moment and stared into glowing blue eyes. Picking it up, he folded the sides to the middle and said, “Open wide.”

\* \* \*

Magic stood in the cross ties, coal black coat glistening in the early morning sun. A diminutive gray mare, dapples glowing, stood beside him. Braided manes and tails showed off sculptured necks and rumps. Two flowing black tails floated just above the ground.

They stood there like beautiful statues, polished to a brilliant sheen.

Carlos went over their tack one more time, adjusting splint boots and ensuring they did not pinch.

Steve applied a coat of Stick'em to his boots and

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drew a deep breath. He glanced in the mirror one more time, happy with his appearance. His dove-gray jacket and pale blue striped shirt, set off by the dark blue tie looked stunning against Magic's black coat.

He turned to Becky, offering the tube.

“Oh, I've already got half an inch on there, but thanks anyway.” She studied her appearance with a critical eye. Her jacket and breeches, also light gray, matched Lark's coat. The burgundy shirt set the coat off to perfection, enhancing Becky's coloring. Tall black boots gleamed, encasing her slender legs.

“You ready?” Steve pulled on his gloves and nodded at her. “Karen's going to meet us at the warm-up ring. She's got some of the other kids there.”

“Lead on.”

They followed the grooms to the aisle, mounted, and headed toward the arenas. The announcer's mike came on as they approached Karen.

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“Class 27, Novice Equitation on the flat, you have a five-minute gate.”

“Perfect timing, kids. Pick up a nice trot and warm up. I’m almost done here.”

Becky and Steve stood at the in-gate, listening to last minute advice from Karen. “You kids are prepared for any test the judge throws at you. Listen to the instructions and don’t anticipate the calls. Just keep your eyes up and watch for trouble at the canter transitions and don’t cut the ring, just be alert. Okay, good luck.”

Steve entered the ring at a sitting trot, floating in quiet sync with Magic. He did a half circuit around the arena before coming back to a walk. He looked up just in time to see Lark enter the ring. The little gray mare minced along, her trot soft, flat and easy to sit.

Becky melted into Lark and became one with her horse. Part of it was the gray outfit, but the visible harmony

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they shared was of mind and body.

“Riders, you are being judged at the walk. All walk, please.”

The judges wrote down the twenty plus entry numbers, making small notations on their cards. One nodded to the other and then held up two fingers to the announcer.

“Trot, please, riders. All trot.”

They moved into a regular trot, back to the walk, then canter, both ways of the ring. The announcer turned on his mike.

“The following numbers remain on the rail, please. The rest are excused with thanks from the judges. Becky smiled as her number came up. Steve’s number came up last.

“Riders, you are to line up at the top of the ring. One at a time, perform a figure eight in the center of the arena. You may make a simple change or a flying change

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of lead. When the figure is completed, please exit the ring and wait for further instructions.”

Becky walked behind Steve to the top of the arena. They were sixth and seventh to go.

The first rider approached the center of the arena and began the figure. At the middle she did a flying lead change, which excited her horse just enough that he increased his pace. Her circles were uneven and Steve whispered, “Keep ‘em round.”

Becky nodded as another rider performed the figure. She did a simple change, coming back to the trot before proceeding to the canter again. Her test remained smooth, evenly paced and so far, the best. They exchanged glances again.

The next rider, obviously nervous, made her lead change too early causing the bottom of the figure to bulge.

Then it was Steve’s turn. He and Magic stepped out of line and walked to the starting point. Steve nodded to

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both judges and from a dead standstill, asked Magic to canter. The magnificent gelding rolled into the gait, soft and smooth. Steve never moved; seat, legs and hands stayed quiet with the rhythm of the canter. Top circle completed, they approached the change point.

They'd practiced this so many times at home, Magic knew what came next. He waited. There it was, the almost imperceptible shift of Steve's weight. At the next stride, Magic switched leads so smoothly the audience sighed. As the figure ended, Steve brought the gelding down to a square halt and then exited the ring.

Becky glanced at the gate where Steve and Karen stood and then at the judges. She nodded and began her test.

Lark stepped down into the canter, gliding along the arena as though on ice. She knew exactly what came next, too, and where to do it. In unison with Becky's aid the mare switched leads and proceeded to finish the bottom of the

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figure. She halted and then walked out of the arena.

“Man,” Karen said, a huge grin splitting her face.

“That was so cool. Both of you, honest, you should both win.”

The remaining riders finished the test. Now they all waited at the gate while the judges tallied their score cards. The announcer came on and a hush fell over the crowd.

“In eighth place ...” He proceeded to pin in reverse order. “Fourth place goes to 216, Becky Edwards.” Karen and the Doubletree team cheered as Becky and Lark entered the arena to get their long white ribbon.

“And now, the winner of our Novice Equitation on the flat, 215, Steve Bianchi, first place.”

The DT’s exploded in cheers and shouts and a rebel yell topped it off.

Magic pranced into the ring, fully aware of the significance of the moment. He stood motionless as the show photographer snapped pictures rapid fire.

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Steve's eyes swept the cheering audience and settled on Billy, who met his gaze, grinned and gave him the victory sign. Steve returned the grin, threw both arms around Magic and stroked the gelding's silky neck.