



THE DOUBLETREE KIDS

FOLLOW YOUR DREAMS



Gayle Farmer

THE DOUBLETREE KIDS

*FOLLOW
YOUR
DREAMS*

Gaule Farmer

This book is dedicated to my dear friend,

Shievon Mahoney Schlesinger

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Omega Publications Palm Springs

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ISBN 978-0-9822303-6-7

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Cover design and page layout by

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Chapter 1

The bright California sun peeked through the trees as Becky Edwards walked down the road to Doubletree stables.

Rounding a bend, she strode along, drinking in the sweet outdoor smells and the unmistakable scent of fresh mowed grass. Tall oaks threw shadows across the rolling, dewy lawns. White paneled turnout paddocks, empty now, flanked either side of the driveway.

The morning breeze lifted her red hair in a flame of long silky curls. Humming to herself in nervous anticipation, she hoped for the best but expected the worst. So far, that was what life had taught her.

A brown and white object charged her from under the shrubs, short legs a blur. Sliding to a stop, he sat at her feet, pink tongue hanging out in exertion.

Startled, she hesitated and stared at him, wary but amused.

“Hel-loo,” she said, drawing out the word as the dog cocked his head from side to side, listening to her voice.

Becky checked the surrounding lawn and shrubs, aqua eyes alert for larger, more formidable reinforcements.

“Are you the guard doggie?” Her voice rippled with laughter. Satisfied the little fella was alone, she returned her gaze to the grinning dog.

“Besides, you weigh like, what ... ten whole pounds? You’re the welcoming committee, aren’t you? Right?”

Slowly, eyes half closed and with as much dignity as he could muster, the dog sat up and begged.

She studied the plump little Jack Russell and following the direction of his eyes, she looked at her sack and then back at him.

“Gimme a break, dude, the starving act won’t fly. One thing you are not is hungry. Very cute, but not hungry.” She raised the bag to chest level, skirted the begging dog and continued her trek down the driveway. She rounded the final turn and the barn came into view.

Green-roofed and sporting a red spire, long white buildings extended from both sides of the clubhouse. Grooms tossed hay to the waiting horses, singing along with the radio as they filled water buckets and began their daily chores.

Becky stopped at the first stall and stroked the inquisitive nose that poked in her direction, loving the delicate feel of velvet lips, the salty-sweet scent of her coat. The horse nickered hello and lowered her muzzle close to the girl’s neck, drawing in long, *I’ll remember you* breaths. The mare lowered her head even more, inviting pats and hugs.

The nameplate on the stall door read *Windsom Angel*.

“I bet they call you Angel. Hi, Angel, I’m Becky.”

Like the purring of a happy cat, the mare made soft chuckling noises in her throat. The slender muzzle vibrated with the sound as she sniffed the girl’s cheek.

“I’ll be back in a little bit. Eat your breakfast.” She walked over to the groom and spoke in fluent Spanish. “Hi, I’m Becky Edwards. Is the barn owner here?”

The man smiled and replied. “Morning, senorita. My name is Carlos. Yes, he’s over at the next barn. His name is Jim.”

“Thanks.”

Rounding the corner of the barn, she saw a tall man counting off the newly delivered bales of hay. She stood off to one side and waited until he finished.

He saw her out of the corner of his eye. “Can I help you?”

She nodded. “I’m Becky Edwards. I’m looking for a job working with horses.” Rocking back on her heels, she looked up at him and cupped her hand over her forehead in an attempt to shield her eyes from the bright morning sun. Squinting, she said, “I love to

ride, but I can't afford my own horse."

Tone cool and dismissive, he said, "Sorry, but I don't have anything." He turned away and then hesitated. "Check with Karen Evans. She's the trainer and she might have something for you." He shrugged, pointing at the other barn. "She should be here any minute."

"Hey, thanks a lot. I appreciate that. I'll go talk with her." Becky straightened, determined to convey the pride and self-confidence she didn't feel. Shoulders back, head held high, she tried to swallow but her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. Her stomach flipped over twice and settled.

"Well." She cleared her throat, hands clenched behind her back. "I guess I'll head over that way and say hello. Thanks again."

Although tempted to say more, she drew on another of those things life had taught her and clamped her mouth shut.

So far, so good. At least he hasn't run me off.

That had happened before, and more than once she had been asked to leave the barn when it was apparent she had no money. Poor kids rarely succeeded in show jumping unless they had a wealthy mentor, but she couldn't give up on her dream of becoming a show jumper rider and then a trainer.

Becky turned and retraced her steps to the lower barn, back to Angel, who once again left her hay to come and say hello. Stroking the silky forelock, she caressed the mare, loving the fine thin skin around her eyes and muzzle. It felt so soft under her gentle fingers. She glanced at the sign again and giggled. "Someone doesn't know how to spell *winsome*, unless that's part of your lineage somehow. Like that race horse, Wyndy See. His name was spelled weird like that on purpose." Becky chuckled as the mare pressed her nostril against her hair, taking short little breaths.

"What a beautiful horse you are." She cupped the delicate muzzle in her palms and inhaled, drinking in the hay-scented breath. Running a practiced hand down Angel's neck, she said, "Whoever owns you is one lucky person."

Angel gave another equine chuckle, nostrils bouncing as she searched for treats, snuffling her new friend's pockets like a vacuum cleaner.

Sounds of a slamming car door echoed across the parking lot, shattering the tranquility of the peaceful barn.

Becky flattened herself against the stall door, hidden behind Angel and a large horse blanket hanging from a hook. She took a deep breath and held it, not quite ready to make her pitch to Karen.

This has to be good. I'll only get one chance and I'm not ready.

Peering around the edge of the blanket, she watched a tall blonde girl close the trunk of her car and stagger down the barn aisle toting several packages and a large plastic bag.

A lilting voice as sweet as gardenias floated down the barn aisle as she called, "Oh, Benny, I bought ya somethin'."

The chestnut gelding popped his head over the door and nickered at the girl, short little ears perked forward, an inquisitive look on his face.

She dropped her burden in front of his stall, opened the plastic bag and extracted a new blanket.

"Look here, isn't it a beauty? Monogrammed and all."

Shaking it out, she held it up to the horse. He sniffed it and then returned to his hay net. The quilted blanket of navy blue had silver piping on the lower left side:

INHERIT THE WIND ~ Benny.

Becky watched her enter the stall and close the door. Curiosity got the best of her and she crept down the aisle, listening to the girl croon to her horse in the most alluring, melodious voice she'd ever heard. It sounded like poetry.

"What an ungrateful dude you are, I'm sayin'. Here, let me see how it fits ya. Move over, buddy." She threw the new blanket over his shoulders, adjusted the chest and girth straps and stepped back to admire the blanket.

"It's a great fit. My, aren't ya just the handsomest fella around? Blue is definitely our color, huh?"

Undoing the straps, she swept the blanket over his back and folded it in fourths. She glanced out the stall door and saw a face peering back at her.

"Hi. I'm Becky Edwards, who're you?"

“Hey. I’m Melanie Young. Nice to meet ya.”

“Likewise. I just moved here from San Jose and I love horses. I’m looking for a job.”

“Here? Doin’ what? Groomin’?”

“Yeah, or whatever. I’ve had a ton of experience working with horses.” Large blue eyes watched Melanie finish brushing the chestnut gelding. “I’m almost fifteen, how old are you?”

“Sixteen.”

“Oh, that’s cool. Are there other kids here?” Becky asked.

“Um hum.”

“Our age?”

“Yeah, pretty much. There’s a group of little kids, but they don’t ride with us and a bunch of older ladies.” Melanie chuckled. “Technically they ride, I suppose ... take a couple of lessons a week, but bless their hearts, they’re the grandma contingent. They’re really into trail riding.”

“He’s gorgeous.” Becky’s eyes darted from girl to horse, admiring the gelding. “Do you jump?”

Melanie stepped out of the stall, latching it behind her. She folded the blanket tighter and mashed it into her show trunk.

“Oh, yeah. We love to jump, don’t we Benny?” She snapped her fingers to get his attention. “Say hello to our new friend.” She nodded at a bag of carrots next to her trunk and grinned.

“Help yourself, I’ll be right back.”

Benny hung his head over the stall, extended his long, graceful neck and made soft begging sounds. Becky pulled a carrot from the bag, broke it into several pieces and offered one to the gelding. She stroked his wide blaze, smiling as the soft gentle lips took each bite with delicate pleasure.

A sharp, irritated whinny echoed down the barn row. Angel stuck her neck as far over her stall door as she could get it and struck the wood with her front hoof. She whinnied at Becky again, her body language clear as she shook her head.

Silence ended as slamming car doors and raised voices tore a hole in the peaceful morning. Laughter preceded them as the Doubletree riding team, primed for a great lesson, surged down the

aisle.

Their trainer, Karen Evans, led the way, laughing. She tossed a witty retort to her teenaged daughters who followed right behind her.

“Mom, there’s no such thing as a nice sitting trot,” Jessi said, dark eyes dancing. “It’s an oxymoron.” The girls looked at each other and snickered.

Karen’s stepdaughter, Blair, nodded and gave Jessi a hip-bump. “A sitting trot on Foxie is like riding a box of rocks.”

They gathered buckets of brushes and prepared to head for their horses, still clowning around.

Billy Martin and his girlfriend, Shievon Mahoney, pulled up the rear, lost in conversation.

Melanie called out, “Hey, y’all, I have a new friend and I want ya to meet her.” With Becky in tow, she walked into the tack room and began introductions.

“Karen, this is Becky Edwards. She just moved here and wants a job workin’ with horses. Becky, this is Karen Evans, our trainer, and this is the Doubletree show team.”

The kids waved hello as Melanie introduced them, smiles wide and welcoming. They continued playing around as they gathered their tack.

Karen nodded at Becky, a wide smile on her lips. “Hi there, are you new to California?”

Becky smiled. “No. I just moved down here from outside San Jose.” She rubbed sweaty hands together and jammed them in her pockets.

Karen gathered a bridle and lunge line. “How do you like Del Mar so far?” She picked up a pair of splint boots and clutching everything to her chest, headed for the door, nodding for Becky to follow.

“Love it. The Doubletree is a great barn, has a good name around town, too. Saw an article about you in the paper and when I found out how near you were to me, figured to head on over and say hello. I have loads of experience and consider myself a good rider on the flat. Thing is, I’ve never had jumping lessons, but my dream is to be a successful show jumper. I just need to catch a break, you know how that goes. One day, though, I’m gonna be a

great jumper rider, just wait and see. My problem is no money, so I need to work off lessons, y'know, be a working student, something like that.”

She heard herself gibbering, unable to stop her runaway tongue. “I’ll do anything I can to pay my way—clean tack, groom, you name it. I do a great job pulling manes and no one does better at show braiding. I’ve done a lot of body clipping, but I don’t own clippers. I give a great massage.” The sentence ended in a gasp. Color flooded her milky cheeks.

Karen smiled at Becky. “How about helping me set up a new jump course? Then we’ll see about other stuff you can do.”

They chatted as they rearranged the jumps, setting up a tricky course. Not high, just tricky. Becky asked all kinds of questions, like why this jump was positioned so and what you needed to do to make that turn. Her enthusiasm was contagious.

Karen asked questions of her own.

“So, tell me a little about yourself. How much riding have you done?”

“Well, no formal training, really, but I’ve done loads of trail riding and read every how-to book out there. My neighbor had two horses and she didn’t like to ride alone, so I’d go along to keep her company. I learned a lot from her, but she didn’t jump. I’ve never had a professional lesson, but some day I’m going to be a great rider. I just know it. Up in San Jose I worked with a trainer there at a hunter show barn, that’s where I learned to do massage and braid. She didn’t have any horses for me to ride, so it was all ground work, but I learned a bunch. Do you think I could work for you in exchange for lessons?”

Becky held her breath, waiting for Karen’s response. She felt long overdue for a lucky day. Shivering in anticipation, she glanced at the trainer from under long, auburn lashes.

The faintest smile played on Karen’s lips. “Let me think about it for a little bit. We’ll talk after the class is over. If you want to, you can come out with me while I teach.”

Nodding, Becky followed the woman to the arena center. The invitation to accompany her was another good sign. Encouraged by Karen’s friendliness, she listened to every word the trainer said. The lesson began on the flat, with advanced riding

exercises.

“Okay, kids, at the trot, single file, please.”

The horses moved up the long side of the arena. They made a full circuit then Karen called, “Working trot, please.”

Becky watched the riders settle deeper into their saddles and take a little more feel of their horse’s mouths. Their speed did not increase, but the strides lengthened as the horses lowered their heads and rounded their backs, engaging their hocks.

She watched Blair lean back just a bit as Angel rolled into the gait, the mare’s body perfectly round. They performed the exercise in fluid rhythm then moved into spirals, keeping their cadence throughout the exercise.

“Walk, please,” Karen said. “Okay, take a breather. Has everyone memorized the course?” She nodded at Becky and pointed at the large chalkboard by the in-gate. “Okay, then, Melly, you go first.”

Benny picked up a crisp trot, transitioning into the canter. They headed down the line to the first fence, a simple post and rail and jumped it with ease. They held a controlled pace, waiting for the turn. With an opening rein, Melanie extended her arm into the turn, as though pointing the way and wrapped Benny around her inside leg.

As they came out of the turn, she closed both legs hard, sending the gelding forward. Just three strides out, her legs pressed again. Benny put in a big effort and they jumped over easy. They completed the course well and rejoined the team.

Karen grinned in approval. “Melly, I can always count on you to get the ride right first time out. How did you like the turns?” She pointed at the second fence on the course, a square oxer. “When the turn is ahead of you rather than behind, it’s easy to misjudge and undershoot the distance. You have to develop your eye, kids. Okay, Blair, next.”

Blair picked up a canter, heading aggressively to one. They jumped over and started the count, one, two, three, *now look*, turn, *here it is*, and two was perfect. The rest of the round went very well and they finished in style. Jessi and Shievon put in good rounds and then it was Billy’s turn to go.

Bitsy picked up her deceptively long stride, going straight

up the ring to one. They hopped over and his count was only *one, two*, before he began the rollback. Light on her forehead, Bitsy made a perfect turn, cleared the oxer with ease and then began the long gallop to three. With another quick turn, they finished their ride with a flourish.

Karen grinned at her team. "Wow, that was great. Talk about controlling the drift and watching your focal point. Okay, Becky, let's raise each cup two holes and they'll do it again."

For more than two hours, the kids re-rode the course, perfecting turns, collecting or lengthening their strides as the fences got higher and wider.

"Okay, team, that was absolutely super today. Tomorrow we'll work on combinations, get those down pat, too. Great rides, kids."

Karen chatted with Becky as they walked up to the adult barn. They stopped outside the stall of a little thoroughbred mare. Poking her beautiful gray head over the stall door, she nickered at them. Delicate black-edged ears pricked in their direction, working back and forth, while large liquid brown eyes blinked once. She lowered her head to Becky, allowing the girl to stroke her cheeks.

"This is Meadowlark, Lark to her friends."

"Oh my, aren't you beautiful." Becky straightened out the long black forelock.

Karen stood back, watching the interchange between girl and horse as they got to know each other.

Becky reached into her pocket and extracted a small bite of rubbery carrot. She offered it to Lark. Soft black lips snuffled her palm, gentle mouth opened, carrot received. She crunched the treat twice and it was gone. Lark made that horse-vacuum sound, sniffing for more carrots.

Becky turned to Karen. "Do you...?"

Before the sentence ended, Karen reached into her pocket and pulled out several sugar cubes. She handed them to Becky, who turned back to the mare.

"Oh, here, Lark. How about some sugar, pretty girl?"

The mare snuffled her palm again, crunching the sweet treat. As she accepted the second lump, she lowered her head into

Becky's body and sighed.

Karen removed the halter and lead-shank from the hook outside Lark's stall door and handed them to Becky.

"Why don't you just put these on her and we'll take her out for a walk. Her owner is sick right now, so Lark is lonely. She hasn't been out much this week."

Becky slipped the halter over the mare's ears and adjusted the strap. The mare stood quietly while Karen strapped the splint boots in place. They walked over to the turnout, allowing Lark to grab snatches of grass on the way. Becky led her into the paddock and closed the gate. Reaching up she slipped the halter off, stepped back several feet and waved it gently at the horse.

The mare followed her, snuffing at her arm. Becky reached up, stroked Lark's neck a couple of times and then climbed through the fence. She shook the halter again and clicked with her tongue. Once the mare knew she was alone, she went into high gear. Tail curled over her rump, she power-trotted up the paddock. Spooking at nothing, she gave a couple of big, explosive bucks and charged back to the gate.

She slid to a stop, snorted several times, then whirled and galloped up to the top of the paddock again, long black tail carried on the wind like an ebony banner. A couple of good rolls completed her time out and Lark trotted back to the gate.

"We'll have to rename you Mud Pie," Becky said, eyes shining as she reached up to smooth the dark mane, which fell over both sides of her neck.

"Do you suppose I could give her a bath? She got kinda dirty out there rolling. I mean, look, here's a grass stain." She bent over, pointing at a faint green tinge on one gray knee. "Can't put her back like that."

"Oh, I think that would be just fine." Karen smiled at her, nodding. "Just fine."

They walked to the empty wash rack and tied Lark in the first slot. Becky stripped off the boots with practiced care and turned on the water. Fingers testing the temperature, she twisted the nozzle to light spray. Starting at the mare's legs, she moved slowly upward to her belly, then to her neck and head. She adjusted the strength of the spray, taking special care not to get water in Lark's

ears when she washed her face.

She rinsed the mare well, cupping the water with her hand to make sure it ran clear. Turning the tap off, she pulled a sweat scraper from the little box by the faucet and scraped Lark dry. She replaced it and pulled out a comb and with short easy strokes, brushed out the mane and tail.

Karen glanced at her watch. "Well, I have ladies waiting in the arena. When you're done with her, come on back down. I have a couple of ideas." She gave Lark a pat and headed back down to the arena.

Becky's fingers trembled as she unhooked the crossties and headed back to the barn. Quick, inexplicable tears sprang into her eyes and she threw both arms around the mare's damp neck with a sob. "This has to be it, Lark, everything has to be okay. Today is our lucky day. It has to be good news."

Her stomach lurched. She knew it would be good. It had to be. "Karen has *ideas*, Lark. That has to be a good thing. Oh, I hope she'll give me a break. I'd love to ride you." Her heart soared one moment and then plummeted the next as she opened the door and led the mare inside. She reached up and removed the halter. Lark lowered her head, pressing gently into Becky's stomach.

"I hate to leave you, and I'll be back in a little bit, but I can't wait another second to find out what Karen has in mind."

Author's Note:

This is the first in the Doubletree series. If you liked it, may we suggest you read Couples.

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Gayle

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