



THE DOUBLETREE KIDS

Riding Blind



Gayle Farmer

*Gayle
Farmer*

***RIDING
BLIND***

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Visit Gayle's website at www.GayleFarmer.com

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

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

And as always to my husband,
Jeff

Other Books
by
Gayle Farmer

The Doubletree Kids Young Adult Series

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Five Stars for **Riding Blind**

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

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

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

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

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

Karen Ackerman
Los Angeles, CA

RIDING

BLIND

Chapter 1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He glanced down and shook his head.

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Determined to state her case, Becky spoke first.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Mall rats,” Tom said with a snort.

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

Billy grinned at her, shaking his head with enthusiasm.

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

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

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

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

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

Billy grinned at his mother, expression avid.

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

Excitement built as ideas matched enthusiasm.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Deep in thought, he absently rubbed his crippled hand.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They both smiled.

“Let’s do it,” they said in unison.

And thus, Mystic Ridge Farm became Mystic Ridge Academy.