



THE DOUBLETREE KIDS

RIDING HIGH

Gayle Farmer

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HIGH*

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

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

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*RIDING
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Chapter 1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Billy’s voice rose with anticipation. “Neither can I and I still can’t. I’m so excited I’m bouncing off the walls. How about if I come over and take you out to breakfast? I’ll be right there.” He hung up before she could agree.

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

“Hi, Mom.”

“Hi, Shievon. Boy, you’re sure up early. What’s going on?”

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

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

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

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

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

“The one I really want to catch doesn’t start until after lunch, but it’s clear over in Coronado, so it looks like we’ll be gone for most of the day.” She turned back to the paper, red pen in hand. “Can’t imagine who starts a garage sale so late, but there it is. They have a whole bunch of that blue glass Lana’s crazy about. Looks like you’ll have to take a rain check.”

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

"I know. I've been there a couple of times with my folks. There's so much to do and the shopping is out of this world. Oh, we'll have a ball, I just know it. I wonder where ... oh, there they are."

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

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

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

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

"Oh, man, I guess." Steve nodded, his dark eyes wide. "They're impossible to get. I know. Believe me, I tried everything I could think of. I wanted to surprise Becky, but there was nothing, not even in the nosebleed

section. And you managed to score a box.” He chuckled at Billy, giving him a high-five.

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

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

Billy waved his hand with a grin. “Oh, please. It wouldn’t be the same without you guys. It’s so cool there, and yes, we have plenty of things to do. We’ll all ride up in the limo, of course. Driving around in Las Vegas is a nightmare and parking is impossible, so that will make life a lot easier. Dad keeps a couple of suites at the Mandalay Bay Towers for business meetings. They’re available for our stay so there’s no problem there. Looks like all the bases are covered.”

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

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

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

“Crud,” Shievon said, eyes wide. A frown creased her forehead. “I just thought of something. My mom will

want to know who is chaperoning.” She shrugged her shoulders at Billy, still frowning. “No way around it.”

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

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

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

With a sage look on her face, Becky said, “We’re just lucky it’s a huge show like this. No matter how mad she is, she’d never keep us from attending the Olympic trials.”

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

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

Steve gave a short laugh. “I guess we’re on the ‘A’ team, at least for now.”

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

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

Becky finished the last of her milk with a grin and a shrug. “I think she’s pretty much over it. I bet today’s lesson will be fine. Speaking of which,” she glanced at her watch, “it’s just about time to leave for the barn. Last thing we need to do is give her an excuse to be mad.”

They paid their tabs and headed to the Doubletree.

* * *

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

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

Under the shrubs lurked two compatriots in the ongoing, never-ending battle of the birds. A plump Siamese crouched in the warm dirt, intense blue gaze fixed on the

tiny hummingbird floating above his head. His tail lashed back and forth in a strange feline beat and his whiskers trembled. Periodically the fur on his back rippled.

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

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

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

Toby, always on the go and noticing a group of kids getting ready to turn their horses out in the pasture, was of two minds. His favorite thing in the world was to chase the horses. The birds could wait. He streaked off in the direction of the turnout arena, shrieking with delight.

* * *

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

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

Melanie and Blair preferred Billy's plan. It had the added benefit of not alerting Karen before their lesson,

which did have universal appeal, especially if for some reason the lesson did not go well.

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

"That's the thing, actually. Mom could only get eight. Just enough for the team. My folks have two suites at the Mandalay Bay hotel and we'll stay there. Bob's driving us up in the limo, of course, and he'll stay in our suite." Billy's voice began to climb as his nerves set in. "He's getting used to playing the role of chaperone." He chuckled and glanced at Shievon for reassurance.

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

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

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

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