



**THE DOUBLE TREE KIDS**

# **HIGH HURDLES**



*Gayle Farmer*

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**HIGH HURDLES**

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## Chapter 1

“They should be here any minute, Becky. Is the stall ready?”

“I just put a couple of flakes of hay in there, Karen. Carlos had it done before I got here this morning.” She ran her hand through her cap of auburn curls. Wide-set aqua eyes looked at her trainer in question. “What’s the new guy like?”

“I haven’t met him yet, just talked with him on the phone. Seems nice and friendly. Looks like we’re going to meet him in a minute. There’s the van.”

They looked down the driveway as Bob Hubbard’s huge red commercial horse van rumbled down the driveway toward the barn.

The Doubletree horses stuck their heads over their stall doors, watching the activity. They knew the arrival of a van meant someone was either coming or going and they were curious to see what happened next.

The van stopped near Karen and Becky, the air brakes making a sharp, hissing sound as the driver turned the engine off. Two men climbed down from the cab of the truck, waved hello to Karen and Becky and prepared to unload the horse. They pulled the wide ramp from under the bed of the trailer and attached the side rails, forming a chute for the horse.

One of the men walked up the ramp, reappearing with his charge. The large buckskin mare paused at the top of the ramp and gave a shrill, ringing whinny. The other horses neighed to her in welcome.

Just then a young man of about eighteen drove into the yard and parked behind the van. He hopped out of the car and hurried to the ramp.

“Do you want me to take her?” he asked the handler.

“Nah, that’s okay. She’s fine, just looking around.”

With that, they stepped onto the ramp. About half way down, the mare spotted the boy. She raised her head, whinnied again and lunged forward, dragging her attendant with her.

The boy grabbed the trailing lead rope as she went by him, calling, “Whoa, Connie, it’s all gonna be fine, girl. Easy.”

At the familiar sound of his voice the mare swung her huge body around to face him. She buried her muzzle in his stomach, made solid contact and pushed hard, sending the boy reeling backwards. Raising her head again she looked around the farm, eyes intense. Her whinny was so loud and high-pitched, Becky put her hands over her ears to shut out the sound.

The mare pawed the ground in front of her, just missing the boy’s legs. A light film of sweat covered her pale gold coat as she danced in place, dark legs doing the two-step. She shook her massive head again, grinding her teeth. Black mane and forelock flew in the breeze and she lashed her tail in anger. Another step brought her closer to the boy.

The look on her face, eyes staring now, ears laced flat to her head, brought a fearful cry from Karen. “Watch out ....”

The mare snapped at the boy, just missing his arm.

“Stop it, Connie, knock it off.” He reached up and stroked her neck, murmuring to her in consolation. Searching his pockets he extracted a sugar cube and offered it to the mare. She snatched it from him, crunching hard.

He turned toward Karen and extended his hand, smiling. “I’m Larry Klein and this is Connie. She’s mad right now, can’t really blame her, I guess. We just weaned

her yesterday and she's missing her baby." He stepped aside as the mare snapped at him again.

Karen looked at the mare, then at Larry, hazel eyes wide. "Okay. Well, ah, do you want to turn her out and let her run or should we put her in her stall?"

"Maybe a nice run is just what she needs. She's been on the road for hours. Where can we turn her out?"

Karen led him to the arena, holding the gate open for them. Larry slipped the halter off, and stepped back out of range of her hooves.

The mare exploded. Connie jumped straight up in the air and took off down the arena rail, bucking and squealing every step of the way. After three circuits, she screeched to an abrupt halt and threw herself down on the soft dirt, rolling back and forth in the sand. She banged her head repeatedly, throwing a horse tantrum. She erupted from a prone position into a gallop and did another half a dozen circuits, frantic for her baby, screaming to the heavens.

The introductions continued as they watched the mare.

"I'm Karen Evans and this is Becky Edwards, my assistant."

Larry had a ready smile for them, glancing down at Becky and Karen. He was a handsome kid, tall for a jumper rider, with bright blue eyes and wavy brown hair.

The mare neighed again, banging her chest against the arena gate to show her displeasure.

"I guess she's had enough. If you'll tell me where the wash racks are, I'll give her a bath."

"I'll show him around, Karen. We have the ladies in half an hour or so. I should be done with the tour by then."

"Thanks, Becky. I'll start setting up the course. If you see Carlos please tell him to come up and—never

mind, there he is.” She waved goodbye and headed for the arena.

Larry halted the mare and led her from the turnout, following Becky up the trail.

“What’s her name? Gosh, she’s gorgeous. I love buckskins, yep. Don’t see many of them in the jumpers, though. What’s her breeding?”

“She’s a Swedish Warmblood. Her registered name is Constant Battle, but I call her Connie. She’s a total idiot, very quirky, but she can jump the moon. If she’s in the mood, that is. We retired her for two years hoping that having a foal would settle her down some. So far, I haven’t seen a bit of change. When my father transferred down here from San Jose, we thought it’d be a good time to wean her. We sold her colt ... beautiful mover ... to a big dressage barn in Rolling Hills.”

He cross-tied the mare and turned on the hose, adjusting the temperature and the spray. Connie stood there pawing, grinding her teeth and casting baleful looks at Larry. Twice she snapped at him.

“Does she ever make contact or is that a political statement?” Becky watched amazed at the antics of the mare.

“She’s a zero in the manners department. She’ll push you as far as you let her, but it’s all empty threats so far. She’s all show and no go.” He jabbed a finger into her side, making her step back out of his space. “You just have to be on your toes around her. I get to the point where I’m just about ready to place the sale ad and then she goes and jumps her heart out, and I’m back to square one. She’s a challenge that’s for sure, but I love her.”

He reached up to Connie’s face, petting the slender velvety muzzle. She was quiet for a moment, enjoying the strokes. Then she threw his hand off, shaking her head up and down several times.

Her bath finished, Becky led them down the aisle to Connie's new stall.

Two mares nickered a welcome hello to the new arrival, getting nothing from Connie but laced-back ears and bared teeth. They tossed their heads and disappeared into their stalls.

"The tack room is right over there. You can pull your car right up to the door to unload. You'll see an empty saddle rack and there's plenty of room to stow your trunk underneath." Becky tossed him a grin and turned to go.

"Hey, I have to run. The decrepit intrepids are riding in about five minutes and I have to meet Karen in the arena. After you're settled in come on up and watch. It's hilarious." With that she was gone, red hair glistening in the warm sun.

Larry stroked Connie's silken neck, crooning to her. He stepped toward her flank, ran his hand over her side, and looked at her full bag. Little dots of milk glistened on the ends of both teats. He laid a gentle hand on her udder, checking for heat. She cocked a hind leg in menace and ground her teeth.

"It's all right, Connie, I won't hurt you. Looks like the shot is working just fine. The milk should dry up in another day or so. I'm sorry you're sore. Poor girl." He stepped back to her head, feeding her several lumps of sugar, which she took like a lady.

"Okay, Connie, you be a good girl. I'll be back in a couple of minutes." He just secured the latch when Connie charged the door, giving it a solid thump with her chest. She screamed at him to come back, striking the door with her front hoof as he walked to the arena. Steel-shod hooves struck the walls of her stall as she registered her frustration.

\* \* \*

Karen and Becky stood in the center of the arena as six little old ladies trotted down the rail, half of them on the wrong diagonal. Karen was about to tell them to bounce once when her cell phone went off.

“Hello? Hi, Blair ... you what? Can’t you catch a ride with Melanie? I’m just in the.... Oh, fine, where are they? Okay see you in a couple of minutes.” She snapped the cell shut, looked at the ladies and then at Becky.

“Can you handle them today? Blair locked her keys in the truck. I have to get her spare from the house and take it to school. I’ll get back as quick as I can.”

“Sure, no problem. I’ll be fine, don’t worry.” Becky grinned and turned to the riders. “Check your diagonals, ladies. Okay, let’s get a little distance between horses. You’re all piled up there. Mrs. Davis, how about if you cut across the arena and bounce once, please. Everybody check your diagonal again.”

Larry sat in the bleachers watching Becky teach. He chuckled as the ladies cantered, bouncing around on the backs of their aged horses, hands flopping in rhythm. They had such a rollicking good time it was fun watching them. They popped over the little cross rails, clapping and cheering for each other, faces pink with exertion. Permed white hair peeped out from under their black velvet helmets.

“Okay ladies, I guess that’s it for today. Are you going out on the trails?”

They nodded in unison as Mrs. Kingman turned to Becky and chirped, “Oh yes, we found a new trail that heads down to the ocean. We’re going to give it a try.” The other ladies smiled in anticipation.

“You have a cell phone with you, right?” They had a tendency to get lost.

“Oh, yes,” the ladies chorused, “four of them.” They turned for the trails; tinkling laughter floated back to the arena on the warm breeze.

Spring had arrived early this year and the flower gardens that lined the trails glowed, alive with purple Elysium. Little birds rustled in the shrubbery, busy building nests while bees crawled around in the bougainvillea, collecting nectar. The trees that shaded the extensive trails sprouted tender new leaves.

The heady fragrance of citrus blossoms filled the air with breathtaking sweetness. It was almost too much. The ladies disappeared in a bend in the trail.

The silence ended when the parking lot sprang to life as the kids arrived for their lessons.

Becky walked up to Larry with a smile. “I have to get ready for my class. Come with me and I’ll introduce you to the rest of the team.”

The tack room became a beehive of activity as the kids pulled saddles and bridles off the racks. They teased Blair about locking her keys in the truck, making good-natured comments on her memory.

“Hey, guys, I want you to meet Larry Klein. He just moved his mare in today. Larry, this is Melanie Young, Shievon Mahoney and Blair and Jessi Evans.”

The girls said hello, smiling in welcome. Two more kids came in the door, filling up the room.

“Billy Martin, Steve Bianchi, this is our new team member, Larry Klein.”

“Great,” Billy said, “another guy.”

The boys smiled and waved hello, asking Larry what division he rode in, who his last trainer was, all those getting to know you questions. They headed for their horses still talking with Larry, who joined the procession.

“What division do you show in, Larry?” Melanie asked. Beautiful white skin flushed to a dusty rose as she gazed up at him.

“We show Open Jumpers to level ten. How about you?”

“Wow,” she said in admiration, “that’s really gettin’ up there. Almost Grand Prix level. Benny and I do the Hi-Juniors, but some day soon we’ll move up to level nine.”

Melanie stroked Benny’s muzzle and fed him a cookie. Opening the door, she slipped on his halter, fastened the lead shank and led him to the crossties. Benny looked at Larry and extended his muzzle, begging for a treat. Larry chuckled, stroked his nose and fed him a sugar cube.

Benny backed into the slot between Angel and Megan. The huge chestnut gelding made the diminutive mares look even smaller.

Blair glanced over at Larry. “Have you lived in Del Mar long? Where did you come from?”

“We just moved down here from San Jose. Mom really lucked in and found us a great house just up the road.” He pointed at the hill behind them. “It can’t be a three minute drive from here so the Doubletree was ideal. When I read the news article about Karen and how well you guys did at the Del Mar show it sounded like the place for me.”

“Is your house on Willow Trail? Is it the split level with the red roof?”

Jessi and Blair made eye contact with Melanie as Larry’s words sunk in.

“Yes, we just moved in yesterday. Mom’s still in a tizzy, why?”

“We’re neighbors. How cool is that. Ya live across the street from Blair. I live at the top of the hill. Gosh, it sure is a small world, I’m sayin’.”

“Guess that’s a double welcome—barn and neighborhood,” Jessi said as she led Fowie over to the mounting block.