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Eleanor Jones

The Country Vet



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She thought her biggest challenge would be curing the animals... Vet Cass Truman has just landed her first job, in the Lake District, and she's already eager to specialise in caring for horses. Horse breeder Jake Munro could help her achieve this dream; for one thing, he could teach her to ride. Instead, he acts as if he can't stand her. At first, Cass is happy to return the sentiment – until she learns Jake has suffered a terrible loss. Cass finds herself drawn to the grieving man, and the two bond over their shared affinity for horses. But while Cass can relieve an animal's suffering, she's not sure she can ease Jake's...

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She's got nothing in her kit to cure heartache...

Veterinarian Cass Truman has just landed her first job, in England's Lake District, and she's already eager to specialize in caring for horses. Horse breeder Jake Munro could help her achieve this dream; for one thing, he could teach her to ride. Instead, he acts as if he can't stand her. At first, Cass is happy to return the sentiment—until she learns Jake has suffered a terrible loss. Cass finds herself drawn to the grieving man, and the two bond over their shared affinity for horses. But while Cass can relieve an animal's suffering, she's not sure she can ease Jake's....

"Having trouble?"

Twisting around in her seat, Cass saw a horse and rider trotting toward her. Jake Munro! He was the last person she wanted to see, but it was too late to start her engine and pull out.

She cursed the blush she could feel spreading up her face. "No."

"I saw you driving out of Sky View."

"Yes," she said, determined not to be daunted by his sheer masculinity. "I've just rented a cottage from your dad."

There was an icy glint in his blue eyes, but she held his gaze without faltering. "Don't worry, though—it's well away from the farm, so you won't have to see me."

He swung his mount away. "It makes no difference to me where you live."

The angry set of his jaw belied his pronouncement, and Cass found herself hoping he wouldn't give poor Bill a hard time.

"Look," she called after him, "I needed somewhere to stay, and your dad had the perfect place."

Jake reined in. The grey mare tossed her beautiful head, and foam flew like snowflakes.

"I already told you," he repeated drily, "it means nothing to me where you live."

But as he rode away, Cass couldn't help watching. Man and horse, moving as one.

Dear Reader,

I truly believe that we all have a soul mate somewhere out there.

If you find your kindred spirit then never let go. Real love is well worth fighting for. No matter what.

I do hope you enjoy reading this story as much as I have enjoyed writing it.

Be happy,

Eleanor

The Country Vet

Eleanor Jones



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ELEANOR JONES

Born and raised on a farm in Northern England, Eleanor Jones has always had a passion for animals and the countryside. She has been writing almost all her life. The poems and stories she wrote as a child, which still grace a cupboard somewhere, were mostly written in longhand. She later wrote articles for an equestrian magazine and her first big break came when she began writing teenage pony mystery stories. These still sell successfully in seven countries throughout Europe and in North America.

Married at eighteen to Peter, she had two children and then set up the Holmescales Riding Centre in Cumbria with her husband. This busy center now trains career students, takes hacks and treks and teaches at all levels from children and total novices to competition riders.

Eleanor still rides every day, schooling and training horses, and her daughter is now a partner in the business and competes at the national level. Her son is married with two children, and she loves to spend as much time with them as she can.

I dedicate this book to all those who love animals and the countryside.

All the best,

Eleanor

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CHAPTER ONE

JAKE SETTLED EASILY into the saddle, picking up the reins with a confidence born of hours on horseback. Beneath him Carlotta sidled, snorting and shaking her head, sensing her master's mood and anticipating what she knew was to come. She needed no aid to urge her forward as he turned his eyes, as always, toward the skyline.

There was something about the vast infinity of the sky that made a strange kind of sense to Jake, when it seemed that there was little sense in life anymore. The way the bleak, ancient mass of the fell met the sky's glorious, timeless canopy, made him feel somehow insignificant, a mere dot in the march of time. He liked insignificance.

The mare's hooves echoed in his ears as his mind spilled over with memories—memories that flooded out from their confinement, painful and raw. A whole year, twelve long, endless months, and the accident still felt as fresh as it had on the day it happened. Every morning, when he awoke from yet another restless night, he went through the motions, working as hard as he could, talking, smiling, eating—and yet all he felt inside was sadness. The only time he felt even half alive these days was when he was riding.

Asking Carlotta to canter, Jake threw caution to the wind, gathering her up to jump the gate. She rose willingly beneath him, landing effortlessly on the tough grass and galloping up the steep slope of the fell. He leaned forward against her neck, feeling her power beneath him, trying to live in

the moment and push all the memories aside. Tara's cold eyes, the confusion in Robbie's; his mother, warm and vibrant...and Lucy, dear little Lucy.

* * *

THE CALL CAME in just as Cass was on her way back to the surgery—as the golden, late-summer sun slipped slowly behind the dark mass of the Lakeland hills.

Her first day at the Low Fell Animal Clinic had proved to be a challenge, to say the least, and it seemed that it wasn't over yet. She forced an image of the irate, red-faced farmer in his muck-splattered overalls, bellowing like one of his bulls, firmly to the back of her mind. "Cass here," she responded. "What have you got for me?"

Sally's clear voice filled Cass's car, her tone clipped and urgent. "We have an emergency...a horse...at Jake Munro's place. Jake usually insists on having Donald, but he's miles away. Where are you now?"

Cass glanced around at the rugged countryside.

"I don't really have a clue, but I'm just leaving Fell Side Farm, if that's any help..."

"That's great, you must be nearby. Carry on down the hill toward the village and take your first left up a narrow lane. You can't miss it. You'll see the sign on your right—Sky View."

The sun finally vanished, and long, shadowy fingers fell across the road ahead. Cass headed down the hill, peering over her steering wheel. "What's the problem, anyway?"

"Sounds like colic. The guy who rang in, Jake Munro's dad, Bill, seems to think it's serious."

"Okay." Cass blinked, trying to focus her over-stretched brain on the task ahead. "I'll be there as fast as I can."

The narrow lane crept, ribbonlike, around the steep hillside, down toward the dark, shimmering lake far below. She increased her speed as much as she dared, standing on the brakes as amber eyes glowed eerily in the road ahead and breathing a sigh of relief when a flock of sheep scattered in front of her car.

Down in the valley, lights were beginning to twinkle, bright pinpoints in the distance, homes where families were gathering after a busy day, smiling, communicating. Families! Cass felt suffocated as she thought about her own family. It seemed ages since she'd seen her parents, Tim and Molly. Her mother had rung just last night to tell her about the lump she'd found in her breast. It was benign, which was of course a huge relief, but the fact that she hadn't even told her about it until it was all over had upset Cass.

She knew why her mum had kept quiet, of course, and it was so typical. "I didn't want to worry you if it wasn't really necessary," she'd insisted.

But what if it had been necessary, Cass wondered, and she hadn't been there to support her mother. For the last few years, all she'd thought about was her career, endlessly studying for the next exam and eventually trying to get a job. Now she had a job, a good job, so surely she should have a chance to stop and reflect, to spend time with her parents. But she was still thinking about herself and trying to get ahead. She had only just started at Low Fell Animal Clinic, but she already knew she wanted to specialize in horses.

Had she been selfish in her single-minded quest to become a vet? she asked herself, shifting down the gears. The answer sprang easily to her mind as an image of her mother's face settled into place, her tired blue eyes filled with love and kindness. Her mother was always working and always worrying about her only child.

Yes, Cass realized with a lurch of guilt, she had been selfish, yet she knew her parents would not have had it any other way. She had arrived in the world as an afterthought, disrupting their world when they'd both turned forty. Fitting in a baby around running the busy village store her parents had bought when they were first married had been quite a feat, according to Molly. Cass had spent most of her early years in a corner near the vegetables, first in a pram and later in a playpen.

Cass's heart twisted as she thought about her mother's recent health scare. The diagnosis could have been serious, and she wouldn't have known. And Cass bet her mum would have barely taken a day off work. Her parents loved running the store, though. Their customers were their friends, and there was nothing Molly and Tim liked better than to pass the time of day with them, bragging a little about how well she was doing. So at least she'd done that for them. She sighed, peering at her surroundings. At least she'd made them proud.

The sign appeared suddenly, jumping out at her from around a curve in the lane and jerking her from her reverie. Sky View Stables was boldly written in an arc above the noble head of a black horse. Cass spun the wheel and swung her hatchback down the gravel drive, suddenly apprehensive about what she might find here.

* * *

BILL MUNRO PULLED at his whiskered chin. Why did it have to be Rosie, and where the hell was Jake? He had found the little chestnut pony out in the far meadow. She was in a bad way, sweating and kicking her belly, her head covered with cuts where she'd been thrashing on the ground. He had tried to ring Jake, of course, but got no signal, so he'd called the vet before managing to persuade the reluctant pony back to the yard. He had settled her down in a deep bed of straw, but it seemed that all the fight had left her. That was what worried him most—her despondency. He'd seen the signs before, and it didn't look good.

Car wheels crunched on the gravel. The throb of an engine sputtered and died as the vehicle slithered to a stop. Bill ran out into the yard, waving his arms.

“Over here!”

* * *

CASS CLIMBED FROM her car with controlled urgency, reaching for her bag and breathing deeply to slow the heavy beating of her heart. This was her job and she was well trained to do it. She turned toward the old man, noting the fear and panic in his blue eyes, and took control of the situation as professionalism kicked in. Her voice sounded firm and calm in her ears, as if she was watching herself from afar. “Right, now tell me the symptoms clearly and slowly.”

“It's Rosie,” the man responded, already heading off across the yard. “She's bad. Been like that a long time, I think.”

Cass followed hurriedly, running the procedure in her mind.

The pony was standing with its head lowered, sides heaving and a dead look in its eye. Cass's heart sank—twisted gut in its final stages. She went through the motions, checking the pony's heart rate and respiration and trying to ease her pain, knowing in her heart that it was already too late.

“Are you the owner?”

Bill Munro's face was gray, his response stilted. “She belongs to...my son.”

Cass looked at him, her hand upturned in a gesture of helplessness. “I think you know she's in a bad way. I doubt she'd make it to surgery, even if you wanted to try.”

“Twisted gut?”

She nodded sadly. “I've seen it before in old ponies. It could be a bit of fatty tissue that's twisted itself around the gut. Surgery is always an option, but it has to be fast, and to be honest...”

Bill finished the sentence for her. “You don't really believe it would be worth putting her through it,”

Cass nodded again, placing a comforting hand on his arm. “I am so sorry.”

Bill pulled out his phone, dialing Jake for the twentieth time. No signal. He thrust it back in his pocket, making the decision. “Just do it.”

“You're giving me permission to euthanize her?”

“Yes.... Don't worry. I'll take the rap.”

Cass's heart ran cold as she looked at the pretty little chestnut mare whose eyes were dull now with pain and fatigue, her sides straining with the effort to breathe. Cass brushed her hand across her

eyes. This wasn't why she'd trained to become a vet. Her quest was to save life, not end it. She drew the drug into a syringe, automatically tapping out the air bubbles, searching for a vein. She met no resistance from the exhausted pony.

* * *

JAKE STAYED OUT on the hillside as the sun sank slowly downward, lighting the sky with red and gold. Carlotta trotted, eager for home, and he let out a heavy sigh, turning her face back down the steep slope as darkness settled around them.

No matter how bad he felt inside, there were still horses waiting to be fed and chores to do. Life went on remorselessly, and he knew that he would, too—what else was there to do? He'd coped for the past year and he would cope for the next, and the one after that, going through the motions of his empty existence while always believing that if he'd dealt with things a bit better after Tara left, then his mum and Lucy would still be here. His life would still have meaning, and they'd all have a future together.

Jake saw the car as Carlotta jogged sideways through the gate into Sky View. A hatchback, dark green, abandoned in the center of the yard. He reined in, leaping to the ground and drawing the reins over the mare's head in one smooth, easy movement. Who was here, and what did they want? The gray mare ran eagerly into her stall, diving into her hay net as soon as he removed her bridle.

"I'll come back and brush you in a bit," he told her, sliding home the door bolt and depositing her tack on the ground before striding toward the car.

Rosie's stall door was ajar, he noted with a sudden jolt of alarm, peering into the sweet-smelling darkness of her empty stall. Voices trickled over from across the yard. There was someone in the barn. A light shone through the half-open door, casting a glow into the evening gloom and bringing a glisten of gold to the feathers of the ruddy-brown chicken that squawked its displeasure at being disturbed. What was going on? He hesitated, suddenly afraid of what he might find in the barn.

She materialized as if by magic, sleek dark hair and pale skin, staring at him with fathomless brown eyes. He sensed her pain, felt it even before she spoke, and for one endless moment she seemed so familiar, so vulnerable, that his every instinct was to just hold out his arms. When she stepped toward him, holding his gaze, her eyes shone with what looked like unshed tears. Something tore at the numb place in his heart and he froze, raising his barriers as her dark eyes slid away from his. There was no room in his life for compassion anymore, or any other emotion for that matter—only the raw anger that was his constant companion.

Her voice was soft and gentle, caring. "I am so, so sorry."

The beam of light from the barn fell across his foot. He stared at it, watching the dust dance within its confines before glancing back at the girl.

"There was nothing else I could do."

"I gave her permission." His father stepped into view, jaw set and eyes shadowed with grief. Jake pushed past him, his heart already hitting his boots.

Rosie lay motionless on the soft sweet hay. Her eyes were already glazed. He dropped to his knees, stroking her face. The pain he had tried to block out rushed back in one tumultuous wave of grief, erupting into anger. An anger he directed at the woman who had ended Rosie's life and taken Lucy away from him all over again—the woman who had dared to penetrate the part of him that was so carefully sealed away.

"I am so, so sorry," she repeated.

Jake towered above her, fists tightly clenched as rage seeped from his every pore. His voice was icy cold. "You did this?"

Cass tried to explain, stumbling on the words. "The pony was suffering. I had no other option."

He just stared at her, taut-jawed and hollow-eyed. "Donald could have saved her. Why isn't he here?"

"No one could have saved her. It was too late."

Jake's face was blank, expressionless. "I want a postmortem."

Her heart thudded hard inside her chest as she fought for breath "I'll do it right now."

"No!" He turned on his heel. "I'll get Donald to do it."

She watched his tall, angular figure disappear across the yard, back toward the stable, not realizing she was twisting her fingers fiercely together until she felt the warmth of a rough hand over hers.

"I am so sorry, lass," Bill Munro said with a sad smile. "I know you had to do it. I can only apologize for my son but he does have his reasons for being so hostile."

"I am truly sorry about your pony," she said again, pushing her hands deep into her pockets. "Are you sure you don't want me to do a postmortem right now?"

Bill shook his head. "Thanks, but we'd better leave it to Donald.... No doubt Jake will be apologizing after."

"I don't need his apologies," she said quietly, walking to her car. "I did what I had to do...as he'll find out."

CHAPTER TWO

CASS DROVE BACK to the clinic on autopilot, her heart heavy with a dull ache that spread through her whole body. She'd had no choice, she knew that, and so did the old man who'd given his permission. Healing the pain of innocent animals was the whole reason she'd become a vet. The taking of life was the dark side of her job, but sometimes necessary. It had been a sad relief to see the pain-misted eyes of the sweet little pony glaze over. Surely the man...Jake...must have understood that. Then why had he been so hostile? Or was that just his way of dealing with pain?

The older man, Bill, had followed Cass to her car, still trying to explain. Rosie had been Jake's daughter's pony, he said, his last real link with her, so obviously he was upset. Normally, the only vet Jake ever allowed near his horses was Donald, which didn't help the situation.

What had happened to his daughter? Cass wondered, looking out for the sign to Little Dale. She would be glad when today was over and she could forget about Jake Munro and the poor, unfortunate pony—not that there was much chance of that, she realized. The memories were already crowding back. What was it about the man that had made such an impression on her, anyway?

She would never forget the echoing ring of horse's hooves on the hard surface of the yard, breaking the awful silence of death in the barn and giving her an excuse to escape from the emotion that threatened to suffocate her. She had stepped out into the dusk of evening in a daze, blinking to focus in the half light as Jake Munro appeared from the shadows, looming above her. For some reason, it was his scuffed tan boots that she'd noticed first. Her gaze had settled on their well-worn toes, traveling up jean-clad legs to finally meet his glittering blue eyes, eyes that had held hers with such a fierce intensity it seemed for a moment as if the world stood still. And for one crazy, endless second she had wanted to run into his arms and release all the agony of the last half hour.

Cass blinked hard, focusing on her driving—anything to cut out the embarrassment of that moment. Was she going absolutely crazy, reacting like that to a total stranger?

"Cass Truman," she told herself out loud. "You need to get a grip. It wasn't the first time you've had a hard task, and it sure won't be the last, so get over it."

The sign for the clinic loomed ahead. With a sigh of relief, she pulled into the cobbled yard behind the huddle of buildings and cut the engine, allowing her thoughts to go back to the poor old pony once again. Damn Jake Munro. She'd done what she had to do, she knew that, and if he demanded a postmortem, then he would know it, too.

* * *

"BIT OF TROUBLE TODAY, Cassandra?"

Todd Andrews, her boss at Low Fell Animal Clinic, looked up with a quizzical smile as Cass walked in. Despite his pleasant expression, she could see that he wasn't happy. Her heart sank. She was still on probation here, and she could do without upsetting the boss on her first day.

“Not really. Nothing I couldn’t handle,” she answered in a matter-of-fact tone. “It had to be done, and if the pony’s owner was upset, I apologize. I’m here to care for animals, though, not people.”

“Whoa...pony? I was talking about Tom Alston.”

An image of the angry, muddy farmer flashed back into her mind and she rolled her eyes, shrugging. “He doesn’t like new vets, that’s all. Especially slightly-built female ones, I guess, as he kept harping on about me not being strong enough to do the job. Well, I am strong enough, and I can’t do anything about my gender, can I?”

Suddenly Todd grinned, his expression relaxing. “Look Cassandra,” he began.

“Cass,” she cut in. “Sorry, I hate Cassandra.”

Todd ignored her comment. “You’re bound to have the occasional problem with the older farmers around here, I’m afraid. Some of them are still living in the 1960s. Could you just try and charm them a little? It might help.”

“I’m not that good on charm,” Cass replied. “But I will try. Men like Tom Alston drive me nuts, though.”

“He’s just a struggling hill farmer, like a lot of others around here.” Todd sighed, running one hand through his curly gray hair. “He’s trying to make a living in the same way as his father and his grandfather did before him when it’s hardly possible anymore.”

Cass’s face softened. “I guess,” she agreed. “It’s just that I hate being bullied.”

“So what was the problem with the pony then?” Todd asked reluctantly. The phone rang before Cass could complete her explanation. Todd held the phone away from his ear and Jake’s raised voice boomed out into the room.

“How could she have been so sure it was a twisted gut? She should’ve called for backup...rung you...anything!”

Todd’s thick, dark eyebrows drew together, meeting in an arc above his nose. Cass found herself concentrating on them as she listened to her boss’s calm, deep voice assuring Jake that she was well qualified and promising a postmortem first thing in the morning.

Todd hung up and sighed again. “He wants Donald to do the postmortem.”

“I don’t care what Jake Munro says,” she snapped. “Or what his excuses are. The pony was suffering—his father could see it. He agreed with me. I could have done the postmortem there and then, shown him the proof. I offered.”

“He will only have Donald,” Todd repeated. “He’s our best horse vet, after all.”

Hot color flooded Cass’s face. “I’m really sorry for going on about this, but I know I did the right thing. I suppose the whole situation upset me, to be honest. The pony was so sweet.” She held up her hands, smiling apologetically. “I know that’s not very professional.”

“There’s nothing wrong with caring,” Todd said.

“Well, do you think I could at least go along with Donald tomorrow? I’d really like to see this through.”

She twisted her fingers together, wondering if now was the right time to tell her new boss about her ambitions for the future.

“I really want to specialize in horses, as well, and it would be good experience.”

Todd smiled, placing a hand on her shoulder. “I’m glad to hear that. I like to encourage ambition in my staff. It will have to be very early tomorrow, though. He has to be in Doncaster by afternoon.”

“Thanks.” Cass removed bottles of medication from her bag, putting them carefully back into the refrigerator. “And I’m sorry for upsetting your clients.”

“Oh, they’ll get used to you eventually,” Todd said.

* * *

CASS SLICED CHEESE on a piece of bread and doubled it into a sandwich. But after the events of the day, she couldn’t even think about cooking—or eating—at all, she decided, placing it back on the plate.

A vivid memory of the sweet little pony filled her mind and sadness welled up inside her. There was nothing more she could have done, however, and tomorrow would prove it.

Flipping open her phone case, she pressed Home on her contacts list. The ringing droned in her ears and she canceled the call, scrolling down to her dad's cell number. When she heard his familiar voice, warm and vibrant, tears pressed against her eyelids.

"Hi, Dad, it's just me. How's Mum?"

Her jovial tone sounded forced, and he obviously knew it.

"You really don't need to worry, Cass. It was just a scare, a false alarm. She wouldn't even have told you at all if I hadn't insisted."

"I'm not a kid anymore, Dad. I need to know these things. She should have told me right away."

"That's what I said, love. Anyway, how are you, and how's that new job of yours going?"

By the time Cass had related her experience at Sky View to her dad and made him chuckle at her story about the manure-splattered farmer, she felt a whole lot better.

"Now don't you worry about us," her dad told her. "Just concentrate on your career. We might come over to see you soon, if we can get anyone to mind the store for a day or two."

Feeling calmer after talking to her dad, Cass finished her light meal and called it a night, expecting to find sleep elusive. However, her eyes closed as soon as her head hit the pillow, and the next thing she knew, the school bell was ringing in her dreams, calling her in to lessons. She jerked awake, reaching out to turn off her alarm clock, totally in the present as the events of yesterday came back to her.

The sun was hardly over the hills when Cass and Donald set off for Sky View Stables.

The middle-aged vet glanced across at her. "You're very quiet," he remarked, nosing his large four-by-four up the narrow lane.

Cass might have been sitting beside him but her head was definitely elsewhere.

He tried again. "You okay, lass? Don't let Jake upset you."

Cass started, her thoughts rushing back to the present. "Oh, I'm not letting him upset me. I was just miles away."

"I could see that. In a nice place, I hope."

"I've always been a bit of a dreamer, I'm afraid—one of my worse traits. To be honest, I was thinking about my mum. She hasn't been well."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Noting the kind expression on his face, she felt a flush creep up her cheeks. "Thanks. And...look, I'm really sorry about you having to do this postmortem. I could easily have done it myself yesterday."

"No worries," Donald said. "I think I need to apologize on Jake's behalf. He can be a bit touchy, but he does have his reasons."

"That's exactly what Todd said," Cass murmured. "But surely there's no excuse for downright rudeness?"

Donald smiled. "I heard that Tom Alston was pretty rude to you yesterday, too, but that doesn't seem to have got to you."

Cass twisted around to face him, her interest raised. "What is this reason, for Jake Munro's attitude? Or is it just an excuse?"

Donald put the vehicle into gear. It juddered violently, throwing Cass into the window.

"Hey," she cried. "I do want to get there, you know."

"Sorry, this old vehicle could do with some attention. Anyway, are you sure about that, after yesterday...getting there, I mean?"

Cass's mouth set into a firm line as she glanced at him, catching his eye.

"Yesterday would have been a tragedy no matter who owned the little mare. I did what needed to be done. There's no doubt in my mind about that."

“Good for you.” He nodded. “And I guess you’ll be looking forward to saying ‘I told you so.’ Is that why you wanted to come?”

Cass’s response was immediate. “No, not at all. I came because I want to see it through. The guy was obviously very upset. Anyone would be. It still doesn’t give him the right to be so unpleasant.”

“What if I told you that his mother and little daughter were both killed in an accident a while ago,” Donald said quietly, concentrating on the road ahead. “And he doesn’t like people to talk about it, so you never heard it from me.”

A lurch of sympathy left Cass momentarily speechless. “I didn’t realize,” she eventually managed. “And of course the chestnut was his daughter’s pony.”

Donald shrugged. “Yes, but you weren’t to know. It wouldn’t have made any difference, anyway...if she did have a twisted gut.”

Cass fought back a sharp retort, staring out the window but seeing nothing. Jake would understand soon enough, and then maybe next time no one would question her.

“Was it his fault?” she asked quietly.

“Oh, no,” Donald said. “Well, at least not directly. I think he may blame himself, though. He was away, competing in Europe, when it happened.”

“Competing?” echoed Cass.

Donald nodded, carefully negotiating the entrance to Sky View.

“He used to show jump. Top level, too. He gave it up after the accident.”

“So what does he do now?”

Cass’s question fell on deaf ears as Jake Munro’s tall figure materialized in front of the Land Rover, forcing it to stop. He was just as she remembered—ruggedly handsome and fierce, his expression extremely arrogant. Was he like that before the accident? Somehow, Cass thought he probably was.

The tense line of his jaw softened when Donald climbed out of the vehicle. Jake almost smiled.

“Morning,” he called, holding out his hand and ignoring Cass. Donald took it, pumping it up and down, his soft white fingers clutched in Jake’s broad, suntanned grip.

“Bad business,” Donald remarked. “How are you holding up?”

Jake’s response was curt and to the point. “These things happen. I just needed to be sure.”

He looked pointedly at Cass, who held his gaze unflinchingly, raising her chin with an air of defiance.

“I’m already sure,” she said.

“Right, then,” interrupted Donald. “Let’s get on with it.”

Jake watched, arms wrapped across his chest and dark eyes narrowed, until Donald took out his scalpel. Then he turned on his heel and walked away to lean against the paddock fence, resting his head on his forearms. For a moment, Cass felt like going to him and placing her hand on his taut shoulders. No matter how irritating he was, the poor guy was suffering—she could see that.

“Look at this,” Donald said, getting her attention.

Cass had seen enough postmortems and dead creatures in the last few years to make her pretty hardened. They’d gone to a better place—it was only their owners who suffered now. But this pony, Rosie, had gotten to her somehow. She was glad of the blanket someone had so thoughtfully laid over her, relieved not to see her glazed eyes.

Donald was on his knees.

“Look,” he repeated. “Half the gut must have already been dead when you euthanized her. Poor little beggar.”

A shadow fell across them, and Cass glanced up to see Jake. His face was expressionless.

“Good job Cass acted quickly, as far as I can see,” Donald said. “I’ll tidy up here while you go and put the kettle on.”

“I’ll finish for you if you like,” Cass offered.

“Is that it then?” Jake said, his voice cracking. He cleared his throat, turning away abruptly.

“Thanks, Cass,” Donald cut in before she could respond, obviously trying to lighten the mood. He stood up, smiling. “I think I’ll take you on all my jobs.” When they both ignored him, he walked off toward the house. “I guess I’ll go put the kettle on myself, then,” he called.

Jake began to follow him, but stopped to look back at Cass, holding her defiant gaze.

“I really am sorry about Rosie,” she said quietly, her expression softening. “It must be tough for you.”

“What, no ‘I told you so?’” he retorted.

She just shook her head, turning her attention back to the job at hand, and he glared at her for another moment before striding off after Donald.

“No change there, then,” she murmured. Cass finished up and put Donald’s bag back in the Land Rover before following the two men across the yard toward the square, stone cottage. It should have been a pretty building, she thought, but the roses that had once grown around the front door looked half-dead, and the whole place needed fresh paint and some TLC. She found herself wondering what it had been like when Jake’s mother was alive.

A man’s deep voice interrupted her daydream.

“They’ll be round the back in the kitchen.”

Looking up with a start, she saw Bill Munro standing in the shadow of an oak tree at the side of the yard, one hand stroking his bearded chin.

She smiled impulsively, pleased to see the old man. He fell into step beside her.

“You were right, then?” he asked.

“You knew I was.”

He nodded slowly.

“Yes, I knew, but there’s no telling Jake. He had to see for himself.”

“I don’t suppose I’ll get an apology.”

Bill’s bright blue eyes sparkled. “You’ve already sussed him out, I see.”

Cass wanted to tell Bill how sorry she was to hear about his wife and granddaughter, but it wasn’t her business, and she didn’t want him to think she’d been prying.

Bill walked with her toward the kitchen door. “Staying around here long?” he asked.

Cass shrugged, smiling. “I hope to. I like the beautiful wild countryside and the tranquility.”

“You’re staying at the B and B, I believe?”

She glanced at him in amusement.

“Does everyone know everything around here? It’s temporary, while I look for somewhere to rent.”

“What, you mean a cottage or something?”

“Something,” she responded. “I’m not really sure, to be honest. I could do with a place for six months or so. I’m only on a six-month contract at the moment—a kind of trial period, I suppose you’d call it.”

She placed her hand on the dull brass handle in front of her, pressing it down with a sense of foreboding. The door was scratched and dirty, and desperate for a coat of paint. She looked over at Bill.

“Are you coming in?”

He turned away, shaking his head.

“Better things to do. I’ll no doubt see you soon.”

“No doubt,” she agreed.

As Cass pushed open the door, a heavy sadness weighed her down. There was an emptiness to this place, a total lack—or loss—of love. She had a definite feeling that Jake and his dad spent most of their time avoiding each other and found herself wondering what Sky View had been like when Jake’s mother and daughter were around.

Entering the kitchen, Cass saw the two men at once. They were deep in conversation, their heads lowered as they studied something on the table. She stepped inside, taking in her surroundings. The room was large and bright with sunshine, a lovely, homey place despite the clutter that crowded every available surface.

“Hi,” she called awkwardly.

Donald glanced up, smiling. “We’re just looking at stud books. There’s coffee in the pot. Help yourself.”

Cass poured a mug and added milk, sipping it slowly without looking at Jake. “So...” she said. “I guess you’re a breeder.”

Jake ignored her, but Donald filled the gap. “Only a couple of foals a year at the moment, but he buys and sells a lot of young stock. Don’t you, Jake?”

Forced to join in the conversation, Jake met her gaze. His eyes were like his dad’s, but without the sparkle. “Just trying to make a living,” he said.

The sound of Donald’s chair scraping across the floor as he stood up broke the ensuing silence. He reached for his jacket, slinging it over his shoulder. “Come on then, Cass,” he told her. “I don’t mean to make you rush your drink, but I’m supposed to be in Doncaster by early afternoon. I’ll see you soon, Jake, hopefully in better circumstances.”

“Is he always so antisocial?” Cass asked as she and Donald clambered into his four-by-four.

Donald concentrated on the narrow lane ahead of them, slowing down and pressing on his horn to chase away a small, black-headed rough fell sheep. It stood in the road and stared at the vehicle with yellow-ringed eyes.

“You’d think they owned the road,” he declared as it sauntered off.

“I guess they do around here,” Cass remarked thoughtfully. “Was it long ago, the accident that killed Jake Munro’s family?”

“About twelve months, almost to the day. Lucy was a lovely little girl, only five years old. Her gran, Gwen, was one of those salt-of-the-earth people who would do anything to help anyone. Such a tragedy. He has a son, too—Lucy’s twin, Robbie. He went to live with his mother after the funeral. The whole business totally destroyed Jake. He gave up competing altogether, but he’s still a top-class trainer, specializing in problem horses.” A wry grin flashed across his face. “I think it’s the horses that keep him going, but as you already know, he doesn’t have much time for people.”

“You can say that again. He doesn’t even seem to have time for his dad.”

Donald frowned. “I don’t think either of them has half begun to get over their loss. He’s a great guy, Bill. He used to be in on all the local action, you know, committees and things. He raised a lot of money for charity a couple of years ago. Now I guess he’s just kind of empty.”

“It takes a long time to get over a tragedy like that,” Cass said. “If you ever really do, that is.”

Donald pulled over outside the vet clinic, leaving his engine running. “Oh, Bill will get there,” he insisted. “Jake, now, I’m not so sure about. Anyway, thanks for your company, but out you get. I’m late as it is. You’ll have to come and have dinner with us one night. Meet the brood. I’ll get Jenny to give you a call.”

Cass got out of the vehicle, glancing back inside before she slammed the door. “Thanks, Donald,” she said. “I’d like that.”

Somehow it felt as if she’d just made a friend.

CHAPTER THREE

TODD WAS IN the surgery going through some paperwork. He looked up when he heard Cass come into the room, peering impatiently at her over his glasses.

“How did it go?”

She shrugged. “I knew how it would go. The poor little pony was in a bad state.”

He went back to his work, leaning forward over the desk.

“Well, that’s good then. Oh, and Mary Park is in the waiting room. Would you mind having a look at her dog? She doesn’t have an appointment but she’s a bit upset, says someone ran him over.”

“Of course,” Cass said, pulling on a white coat and pushing open the door into Reception.

The woman sat on a chair that was too small for her large frame. A bright-eyed Yorkshire terrier she clutched wriggled in her arms.

“Mrs. Park, is it?” Cass asked with her best professional smile, pushing all thoughts of Jake Munro and his tragedy out of her head. “What can I do for you?”

“Mary,” she said, struggling to her feet. “Call me Mary. It’s Poppy here. He ran into the road in front of a car...”

“Well let’s go into the examining room and I’ll check him out,” Cass suggested, already leading the way.

After a thorough examination of Poppy, Cass looked up at his worried owner with a broad grin.

“Well, Mary, you’ll be pleased to know there’s absolutely nothing to worry about. He has a scuff on his shoulder, that’s all, and he may be feeling a bit bruised.”

The woman’s round, pleasant face contorted into an expression of pained relief. “But are you sure?”

Cass picked up the little dog, settling him in his mistress’s outstretched arms.

“One hundred per cent. Now don’t let him run out into the road again. He might not be so lucky next time.”

Todd appeared just as they were leaving the examining room.

“I’m glad that Poppy seems to be okay,” he said.

“You’ve taken on a good vet this time Todd,” Mary told him. “She’s sorted my Poppy out good and proper.”

“Glad to hear it.” He held the front door to let her out.

“There wasn’t actually anything wrong with him,” Cass admitted as it shut behind them.

Todd grinned. “You’ll soon get to know Poppy—he’s one of our most regular visitors. Oh, and...” He paused. “I know you aren’t really supposed to be on surgery, but I’m afraid I have to pop out, so would you mind? There’s a bit of a line building up, I’m afraid.”

* * *

BY LUNCHTIME CASS had seen two cats with fur balls and one with a ripped ear, an elderly, bedraggled hamster, five more dogs and a parrot that was pulling out its feathers.

I can really identify with that parrot, she thought as she started to tidy up. Suddenly a sit-down and a coffee seemed very appealing. She was about ready to leave when Sally, the receptionist, popped her head around the door.

“You have a visitor,” she said. “And he doesn’t seem to have a pet.”

Cass frowned. Whoever would be visiting her at the clinic? She didn’t even know anyone around here yet.

Sally hesitated.

“I’ll send him in, shall I?”

“He?” Cass echoed as Sally’s perfectly made-up face disappeared again. Could it be Jake Munro coming to apologize, perhaps? Fat chance of that. Cass’s mind wandered back to the moment when she first saw him, and something tightened in her throat. He had seemed... What, she asked herself, what had he seemed?

“We meet again,” said a familiar voice, and Cass looked up in surprise to meet...not quite the icy blue eyes that kept haunting her thoughts, but something very similar.

“Bill,” her visitor announced, holding out his hand. “Munro. Remember, from Sky View,” he added, as she stood with her mouth open.

“Of course.” She placed her hand in his calloused palm. “How could I ever forget? What can I do for you?”

“Well, it’s really more what I can do for you.”

“For me?”

He nodded. “Yes... You said you needed somewhere to rent, and I have a vacant cottage. It’s small, but it’s a pretty little place and quite enough space for one.” His bushy gray brows drew together. “I take it there is only one?”

Cass laughed. “Oh, yes, just me, I’m afraid. I have enough trouble trying to sort myself out.”

“So what do you say? I was about to put it in the hands of a rental agency, but if you need somewhere...”

“Well, I do, but what about your son? He and I didn’t get off to the best start. I don’t think he would appreciate me living nearby.”

“Jake?” snorted Bill. “It has nothing to do with him. The cottages are how I make my income, and I’ll rent them to whoever I like. Anyway...” His face creased in a smile. “It’s not as if it’s right on the doorstep of Sky View. More like just around the corner.”

Cass felt happiness bubbling up inside. She belonged somewhere at last. “Well, then, I would love to come and see it,” she said. “After work today, perhaps? I don’t have a shift tonight, and for once I’m not even on call.”

“Any time is okay by me,” Bill said. “Say around seven?”

“See you at seven,” she agreed. “Just tell me where to go.”

* * *

IT WAS A BRIGHT, sunlit evening, the kind where the whole world seems abuzz with joy. Cass felt some of that joy as she drove toward Sky View. She had a good job, a job she could really come to love, and now she might even have a new home. Not a shared flat, but her very own place, here in some of the most beautiful countryside she’d ever seen.

The wind blew in through her open window and she breathed in the country scents as she left the village, humming softly to the strains of a modern love song. Love! It was totally overrated as far as she was concerned. Her fellow students had been constantly falling in and out of love, one minute wandering around with their heads in a euphoric cloud and in the next, totally inconsolable.

Sometimes Cass worried that there was something wrong with her because she’d never really fallen for anyone. There had been boyfriends, of course, but they’d been kind of lukewarm relationships, more friendships than love affairs. Her mind wandered back to the day Jamie had told her it was over. She had been seeing him for almost six months, but when he finally plucked up the courage to tell her he had met someone else, all she’d felt was a sense of relief.

Her only real passion had been the same since she was twelve years old—the passion to become a vet that had arisen on the day Bud died in her arms. Everything else had taken second place since that day, as if she’d been driven by the desire to make amends for her lack of knowledge.... And now that she’d fulfilled her goal, now that she had the opportunity to stop and reflect, love and romance still didn’t figure in her scheme of things.

Her parents had lived to work, with little time to spare for their child. Cass felt she had inherited that drive from them, as if her ambition overrode everything else. She couldn’t picture herself having the time to give a husband and children the attention they needed. She’d once thought that when she was finally qualified as a vet, she’d be able to slow down and start a family. But now that she’d finished school and begun her career, she wanted to push herself further. Beyond honing her skills, she wanted to specialize in equestrian medicine and become highly respected for her expertise. Did that make her selfish? she wondered. Surely it would be worse to have a family and neglect them.

As she carefully negotiated the narrow lane that ran across the steep Lakeland fell side on a wonderful summer’s evening, those early years at college seemed so very long ago. All the nights spent in a tiny, basically furnished room, poring over books and files and forgetting to eat while her flatmates went out partying. They told her she was crazy, but she didn’t care. In fact, if it hadn’t been

for her mother packing up a huge box of groceries for her on the rare occasions when she went home to visit, Cass reckoned she might just have wasted away.

Turning away from the past, Cass peered over the steering wheel, looking for the sign to Sky View. Bill Munro had told her to take a sharp right down a narrow grassy track once she'd gone through the gate. She nosed her car along the path, then rounded a corner to see a pretty little stone cottage. Her heart raced. Could this really be it?

Bill appeared just as she switched off the engine. He raised one hand in welcome while fumbling in his pocket with the other, withdrawing a set of keys.

"Hi," she called, falling into step beside him, trying to look calm but struggling to control her excitement.

He flashed her a smile. "It's very small, you know."

"It's so pretty," she exclaimed as the front door swung open.

"And there is no central heating, just old-fashioned electric heaters," he warned.

Cass locked her fingers together. "Is there a fire?"

"Better than that," Bill declared. "There's a wood-burning stove and a good stack of dry logs in the shed around the back."

As a vision of herself basking in the warm glow of burning logs after a hard day at work slid into her mind's eye, a smile spread across Cass's face. "I'll take it," she said.

"But you haven't seen everything yet," Bill reminded her. "And you don't even know how much I'm going to charge."

Cass flushed, feeling stupid. It wasn't like her to be so impulsive.

"Let's have a proper look around, and then we can talk business," Bill suggested. "Of course, you might find it a bit too isolated. It can be pretty bleak here in the winter."

"Nowhere is too isolated for me," Cass said, welcoming the idea. "And anyway...I might get a dog for company."

The vague idea, now put into words, made her feel panicky. What was she talking about? Having her own dog had been a plan for the future—somewhere in her dreams. Did she really even want a dog? Was she ready for that kind of commitment?

Oblivious to her doubts, Bill nodded. "That's a good idea. In fact, we have some pups for sale at the farm, you'll have to come and see them."

* * *

AS SOON AS the words left Bill's lips, he realized it was a bad idea. Technically, they were Jake's pups, and it was pretty obvious that his son had taken a real dislike to his prospective tenant—mainly because of Rosie, of course, but it was more than that. After Tara let him down so badly, he seemed to avoid all contact with women. Cass was nothing like Tara, although... Bill cast her a sidelong glance. She might not have had Jake's ex-wife's glamorous good looks, but the young vet certainly did have something. An innocent, untouched beauty.

Suddenly, Bill found himself questioning his decision to offer her the cottage at all. He and Jake had drifted apart since the accident... He took a breath. He and his son needed to build bridges, and bringing Cass here might be knocking them down.

"You would probably be happier closer to the village, don't you think?" he asked. "Closer to work and..."

His voice trailed off as he noted the disappointment in her dark eyes. "You've changed your mind, haven't you?" she said sadly.

"No, of course not. It's just..."

"You don't need to worry," she assured him. "I won't come anywhere near the farm, and I'll stay well away from your son, if that's what this is about. He won't even know I'm here."

"Well, in that case..." Bill held out his hand. "It's five hundred a month, payment in advance, and you pay the council tax and any fuel bills."

Cass took his hand and shook it firmly for the second time that day. “It’s a deal. I’ll move my stuff in tomorrow, if that’s okay.”

“Whenever you like.” The older man smiled. Never mind what Jake thought, he decided. She seemed like a lovely young woman, and maybe Jake would eventually discover that for himself.

* * *

THE IDEA OF having a dog had sprung itself on Cass. It wasn’t until she’d announced her intention to Bill that she realized it had been preying on her mind. She hadn’t even thought about owning another dog since Bud, but maybe she had finally come full circle.

She drove slowly back toward Little Dale, allowing her mind to wander back to the day her little ginger terrier cross had run out in front of a car. Bud had been a present from her parents on her ninth birthday and her constant companion from the day he arrived until that terrible day in the lane that changed her whole focus on life. Even now, a lump caught in her throat as she imagined his bright face. With her parents constantly busy in the shop and no siblings, she had spent hours with Bud in the fields around their village. Losing him had left a huge shadow over her life, especially when she found out that she could probably have saved him if she’d known how to staunch the bleeding. That was the day she decided to become a vet, and she had never swayed from her purpose.

Feeling the sudden weight of sadness, Cass pulled over and cut the engine, looking down into the valley far below without, for once, taking in the beauty of the scene. The memory of Bud’s trusting little face broke her heart. Did she really want a dog again, after all this time?

The sound of hooves brought her out of her reverie as they clip-clopped hollowly along the lane behind her. Twisting around in her seat, she saw a horse and rider trotting toward her. A big gray, its hatless rider sitting tall. Jake Munro! He was the last person she wanted to see, but it was too late to start her engine and pull out. The hoof beats grew closer and she leaned down to fumble in her bag, trying to look busy while wondering why she should care if he saw her sitting idly by the side of the road.

“Having trouble?”

His voice was just as she remembered, deep and melodic. Why did she feel like such an idiot?

She glanced up, not quite meeting his eyes, cursing the blush she could feel spreading on her face. “No, thanks. Just looking for something.”

“I saw you driving out of Sky View.”

Jutting out her chin, she regained her confidence. “Yes,” she said, determined not to be daunted by his sheer masculinity. “I’ve just rented a cottage from your dad.”

The icy glint in his blue eyes could have pierced her soul, but she held his gaze without faltering.

“Don’t worry, though—it’s quite far from the farm, so you won’t have to see me.”

He swung his mount away.

“It makes no difference to me where you live.”

The angry set of his jaw belied his pronouncement, and Cass found herself hoping he wouldn’t give poor Bill a hard time.

“Look,” she called after him. “I needed somewhere to stay, and your dad had the perfect place going begging.”

Jake reined in, turning his prancing horse back to face her. The wild-eyed gray mare tossed her beautiful head and foam flew like snowflakes.

“I already told you,” he repeated drily. “It means nothing to me where you live.”

“If this is still about Rosie, then I’m sorry, but you know it had to be done.”

Across the short distance, she could see the pain flashing across his face. “I just like my own space, that’s all.”

He hesitated then, as if searching for the right words.

“And...and I do know you did the pony a favor.”

As he rode away, Cass couldn't help watching. Man and horse moved as one. She felt a rush of empathy. He, too, understood the joy of the companionship with animals and appreciated their uncomplicated affection.

CHAPTER FOUR

CARLOTTA SIDLED, OBVIOUSLY disturbed by her rider's mood. After four years, the mare was used to Jake's ways—today the tension in him must have buzzed like an electric current. She moved out into the road, prancing sideways and snorting, taking his attention for a moment. His firm hand on the reins calmed her at once.

“Okay, easy, girl.”

However angry he felt inside—and he felt angry, foolish even, about the fact that his father had gone behind his back like that—he tried to make a point of never allowing it to spill over into his riding. Just being on a horse usually took his mind off everything life seemed determined to throw at him, but the woman had managed to play havoc with that simple rule. Anyway, it shouldn't have been her telling him that she'd rented the cottage, it should have been his dad. And for that matter, it would have been nice to have been consulted in the first place. A hollow laugh eased his tension. Since when had his father ever consulted him about anything?

A vehicle approached from behind, and Jake ran his hand down Carlotta's arched neck. There was no way he was going to let a vehicle squeeze past on this narrow stretch of road. It would just have to wait. Moving into a jog trot he glanced back, noting the green hatchback following them...her hatchback. Had she been sent here solely to annoy him? With another brief look at the pale face over the steering wheel, he turned Carlotta onto the grass verge, dug in his heels and urged her into a canter. Only too happy to oblige, the mare bunched up her quarters, sank into her hocks and sprang, clearing the wall at the side of the lane as if it was nothing and landing with an ecstatic buck.

A sudden rush of adrenaline released his mind, if only momentarily, from the pain of reality. Jake turned back, raising a hand toward the woman before heading off at a gallop. The look of amazement on her face brought a sense of satisfaction, and he leaned forward, absorbing the sheer elation of the power beneath him.

Horses had long been his escape when things went wrong. He had used the challenge and excitement of competition to try to get his life back on track after Tara's defection, but riding hadn't been nearly enough to fill the void left by Lucy and his mum. Reining in, Jake stared down into the valley, watching the green vehicle snaking its way down to the village. Nothing could ever fill that gaping hole in his life, or assuage the guilt and pain that constantly clawed at his gut.

Slowly, he turned Carlotta homeward. When she dutifully obeyed, moving quietly across the steep hillside, he closed his eyes for a moment, trying to stifle the sob that rose inside him.

* * *

CASS DROVE SLOWLY back to the village. After hearing about Jake Munro's loss, she wouldn't have been human if she hadn't felt some sympathy for him. His attitude, however, did him no favors. Many people lost loved ones without taking their bitterness out on the whole world. And what was that crazy jump all about? It was foolhardy, to say the least. Perhaps losing his family had sent Jake over the edge. And what about Lucy's mother? No one ever mentioned her. Did Jake have a wife tucked away somewhere perhaps?

Jake Munro was still invading Cass's thoughts as she pulled in outside the B and B and cut her engine. There was no denying his skill with horses—he and the high-strung gray mare had seemed to move as one entity. Pity he didn't have the same connection with humans.

Grabbing her bag from the back of the car, she ran up the steps to the square white guesthouse where she'd been staying since arriving in Little Dale. She had discovered it when she came for her interview at Low Fell Animal Clinic a couple of weeks earlier. The owner, Clare Biggins, had made her so welcome that Cass had booked in there as soon as she heard the job was hers. It was only fair to let Clare know as soon as possible that she was leaving tomorrow. She would pay her until the

end of the week, but she couldn't wait that long to move in to the cottage. Her own place, at last, and the start of a brand-new life.

* * *

TO CASS'S RELIEF, Clare was almost as excited as she was about the cottage. "I know Sky Cottage," she exclaimed, her round face shining with genuine delight. "Even its name is magical, and it's so pretty, like something out of a storybook. Won't you be a bit nervous, though, living in the middle of nowhere on your own...not to mention lonely?"

"It's not that far from Sky View," Cass reminded her. "Only a few minutes' walk. And I'm going to get a dog for company."

"A dog!" Clare said. "Are you sure they allow dogs, though? Lots of rented places have a strictly no-pets policy."

Cass's face fell. She hadn't thought about that. "I did say something about it to Bill Munro, and he never said anything. He even told me his son has some puppies for sale."

"Well, there you go, then." Clare smiled. "Obviously they don't mind dogs."

"I think Jake Munro would mind just about anything to do with me. We didn't get off on a very good footing, I'm afraid."

Clare shrugged. "He doesn't seem to be in a very good place with anyone," she said sadly. "It was bad enough that his wife left him, but losing Lucy and Gwen must have been too much to bear."

Cass felt her irritation at Jake's behavior fading. "He had a wife? I wondered what happened to Lucy's mother."

"I don't really like to gossip," Clare replied awkwardly. "He was living down south at the time, anyway, so no one from around here really knew anything about his wife—except that she went off to follow a singing career, leaving the twins behind with their dad. That was when he came back to Sky View. Gwen, his mum, was a lovely lady, and she was happy to help look after the children. I don't know how he and Bill have been coping since the accident..."

"I guess it's just a case of having to," Cass suggested thoughtfully. "Donald mentioned something about Robbie going to live with his mum. Was he Lucy's twin?"

Clare nodded. "She took him away with her after the funeral. I don't know whether it was her idea or Jake's. But tell me some more about the cottage. Exactly when are you moving in?"

Cass frowned, her thoughts still on the tragedy that must have turned Jake and Bill's whole world upside down. Bud's death had changed her life, and sad though it was, a pet's death couldn't even come close to losing a wife, a daughter and a mum. An image of Jake's bleak, angry face slid into her mind. Did he ever smile? she wondered. What was he like before the accident? Perhaps he should have kept Robbie with him—having the little boy to care for might have helped him to move on and find something to smile about again.

Clare touched her arm. "So...when are you leaving us?"

"Sorry," Cass apologized. "I was miles away. I'm moving in tomorrow, but I'll pay you for the whole week."

"You don't have to do that. I'll miss the company, of course, and the money, but I really am happy for you. I just hope you don't get too lonely out there by yourself."

"But I won't be alone, will I?" Cass laughed. "I'll have a dog to keep me company."

* * *

JAKE LEAPED EASILY down from the saddle, ran his stirrup irons up the leather and gave Carlotta an affectionate pat.

"What would I do without you, girl?" he asked, pulling the reins over her ears to lead her across the yard to her stable. The gray mare nodded, as if in understanding, and followed obediently.

Jake's eyes were drawn to the space in the yard where poor Rosie had lain, awaiting collection. A sigh of relief passed his lips, accompanied by a lurch of guilt at not being there when they came for her. His dad would probably say he had run away from his responsibilities, just as he always did,

but it wasn't true. Rosie was gone, and there was nothing more he could have done for her. When Tara left he had run away, throwing himself into his career instead of staying home and taking care of Lucy and Robbie. He knew that only too well now, and he would be paying for it for the rest of his life. A sharp pain tore at his stomach, bringing a rush of bile into his mouth. He didn't deserve to feel any happiness when little Lucy and his mum were no longer here to feel anything at all, and Robbie was gone to the other side of the world.

Oh, how he hoped his son was okay. A few minutes on the phone once a week, if he was lucky, told him nothing, and the darned lawyer he'd hired to try and get Robbie back was worse than useless. The memory of Tara's bitter voice in his ears, when he eventually managed to get hold of her after the funeral, doubled the heavy burden of guilt he felt every single day of his life.

You aren't fit to be a father. Robbie is staying in America with me now. I know I went away, but I thought I was doing the best thing for them by leaving them with their dad. You're the one who really abandoned them.

The accusation rang inside Jake's head. Was she right? Had he abandoned them? The answer came at once. Yes, in a way he had, running around Europe, throwing himself into the thrill of competition when his kids needed him. His poor, dear mother had never once complained about his being away so often. Perhaps she should have. She would still be here if he'd faced up to his responsibilities for once. A sob rose in his throat and he forced it back, turning his attention to the gray mare standing patiently beside him.

* * *

BILL MUNRO SAW his son clatter into the yard and vault down from Carlotta, saw the expression on Jake's face as he gave the mare an affectionate stroke. It seemed that Jake could only really communicate with animals nowadays. Setting his jaw, the old man headed purposefully toward him. Gwen would have told them both to get on with their lives, but it was just so hard. But he owed it to her to at least try to get Jake's life back on track.

"Good ride, son?" he asked.

Jake glanced sideways at him. "They turned up for her, then."

Bill nodded. "Yes, about two."

"I'm sorry." He turned away, unable to meet his father's eyes. "I should have seen to it myself."

"No, really. It isn't a problem.... Sad, though."

Jake's eyes darkened. "It should never have happened."

"There are a lot of things around here that shouldn't have happened," Bill agreed. Tentatively he placed a hand on his son's shoulder. "They say it gets easier with time."

Jake shrugged off his sympathy. "It will never get easier," he declared, leading Carlotta into her stall.

Bill shook his gray head sadly. "We have to try and get on with our lives, son. I know the anniversary has made it all raw again, but somehow we have to get through it."

"Why did you rent Sky Cottage to that girl?"

Jake's unexpected question took Bill totally by surprise. It held an accusation that brought out a sudden prickle of anger in him.

"I'll rent the cottage to whoever I please. She's in a strange place with a new job and she needed somewhere to live. And she's hardly a girl. She must be almost as old as you are."

"She doesn't look it," Jake responded. "She's hardly vet material, either. A gust of wind could blow her over."

Bill popped his head over the stable door as Jake slid off the gray mare's bridle, replacing it with a head collar and tying her to the wall ring.

"According to Todd," Bill said, "she's very highly qualified and totally dedicated. If I'm honest, I suppose I felt a bit sorry for the lass. She seems lonely and I wanted to give her a break."

Jake picked up a body brush and began running it rhythmically across Carlotta's gleaming coat.

“Well, just keep her away from me.”

“If she has any sense, she’ll stay away from you all by herself,” Bill retorted. “Oh, and by the way...”

Jake looked back, raising his eyebrows.

“I might have told her that you have some pups for sale.”

“Well you’d better untell her, then, hadn’t you,” Jake snarled.

CHAPTER FIVE

DAWN WAS BREAKING as Cass pulled off the lane into the Low Fell parking lot. Rubbing her bleary eyes, she clambered out of her car, taking gulps of the sharp morning air to try and clear her head. In retrospect, the celebratory drink she and Clare had shared last night might have been a bit rash, since it had been almost midnight when she’d finally gotten to bed. Then again, she hadn’t known she was to going to be called out to an emergency at five-thirty.

A small blue car was parked erratically, abandoned outside the clinic’s front door. Cass peered around the courtyard—all she’d been told in the brief message she’d received half an hour ago was that a dog was having difficulties and its owner would bring it straight to the surgery. She heard a muffled sound beyond the bank of colorful begonias that lined the bright green grass at the side of the stone building.

“Hello!” she called, trying to make herself heard above the dawn chorus of a thousand early birds. “Can I help you?”

The woman who appeared from beyond the begonias was elderly, red-faced and very distraught. Cass recognized her at once. “Mrs. Park!” she exclaimed. “Is it Poppy?”

“Oh, thank God,” the distressed old lady responded. “Yes...he’s in the car.”

A heavy lump settled in Cass’s chest as she dug through her pocket for the surgery keys.

“Don’t worry. We’ll get him inside right away. What seems to be the problem?”

“He’s choking on a chicken bone or something. He raided the garbage bin, you see.”

Dropping her keys back into her pocket, Cass hurried toward the small car, flinging open the back door to see Poppy’s smiling face eagerly awaiting her. When the little dog jumped out onto the tarmac and proceeded to run around in crazy circles, Cass took a deep breath, trying to control her irritation.

“Mrs....er, Mary,” she began. “I don’t think...”

“Oh, you’ve saved him! However did you manage to do it so quickly?”

The sheer delight and admiration on the old lady’s face dissolved Cass’s anger instantaneously.

“But I didn’t do anything.”

“So modest, as well,” she added. “I must admit that, at first, I thought you looked far too young to be a vet. From now on, though, we will be singing your praises, won’t we Poppy? That’s twice you’ve saved my little precious in two days.”

* * *

CASS RELATED THE incident to Donald later that morning. He let out a hoot of laughter, and suddenly she was laughing, too, feeling like a real part of the place.

“There you are, then,” he announced. “You have your first adoring patient.”

“Do you mean Mrs. Park or Poppy?” Cass giggled.

Just then, Todd strode into the room.

“If you’re talking about my aunt, then she’s already been on the phone,” he remarked, reaching for his white coat.

“Your aunt?” Cass echoed.

“Ah, so you’ll know that Cass here is a miracle worker, then?” Donald said.

“But I didn’t do anything,” Cass insisted.

“Just enjoy the adulation,” Todd suggested with a broad smile. “Knowing my Aunt Mary, she could well change her mind tomorrow. Now, on a more serious note, there’s a call from Ben Naylor up at Hill Gate. Bad calving. Better get over there right away. Sally will give you directions.”

“I’m on my way,” Cass said, picking up her case.

Donald took hold of her arm as she passed by on her way to the door.

“About that dinner... Can you do tomorrow night?”

Cass nodded, smiling broadly.

“Thanks, that would be great.”

* * *

THE BAD CALVING took longer than Cass had anticipated. Halfway through she almost called in for help, but thankfully the calf suddenly decided to greet the world. It slid from its mother, and Cass immediately began cleaning the mucus from the newborn’s tiny nose, willing it to breathe as she rubbed its chest with a clump of straw. Elation flowed through her veins as the calf let out a low cry. There was something so special about bringing a new life into the world.

“Well done, lass,” Ben Naylor remarked with begrudging surprise. “Frankly, when I saw you walk in, I considered telling you to get out. Slip of a thing like you! Todd told me there was no one else, though.”

“You rang Todd?”

“Didn’t think you were up to the job, to be honest.”

She sat back on her heels, struggling to contain a surge of irritation. The middle-aged farmer stared back at her, his face open, and Cass couldn’t help smiling.

“Now do you think I’m up to the job?”

He looked at the newborn calf, already struggling onto its tiny feet.

“Now,” he said. “I’m going to get the missus to make us a nice cup of tea. Might be a slab of cake, as well, if you’re lucky.”

As Cass followed Ben Naylor across the yard to the gray stone farmhouse, she felt a warm sense of satisfaction. Today she’d proven herself to at least one member of the farming community. It was a start. And tonight she was taking her belongings over to Sky Cottage, her very own place. It felt like a turning point—a fresh start and a whole new life. She breathed in the country scents that filled the air around her—grass and flowers and always that underlying, heavy odor of cow muck. The smell that greeted her senses as she stepped through the kitchen door, however, made her mouth water.

“Come in, lass,” urged Ben, ushering her ahead of him into the kitchen. “And meet my wife, Cathy.”

Ben’s wife was definitely not what Cass had expected. Small and dark and smartly dressed, Cathy moved quickly across the immaculate kitchen, shaking Cass’s hand with a surprisingly firm grip.

“It’s a nice change to have a female vet around here,” she announced, smiling.

“When I was at vet school,” Cass responded, “there were more than twice as many female students as males, so I guess you’ll be seeing a lot more women vets in the future.”

“Sign of the times,” Ben grumbled. “Women are taking over the world.”

“And about time, too,” Cathy said brightly. “Especially around here. We’re fifty years behind in these Lakeland hills. It’s about time we joined the rest of the country. And Cass here did a good job, didn’t she?”

“Well, that’s true,” Ben agreed. “It was a rough calving, too.”

“So,” Cathy asked, placing a pot of tea on the pine-topped table and motioning for Cass to sit down. “What made you decide to be a vet in the first place?”

Cass settled into a chair. “That’s easy. I can pinpoint the exact day...well, almost. My parents had—have—a store in a busy village, and as a kid I spent a lot of time on my own, so they bought me a dog.”

Cass hesitated, wondering why she was telling Cathy Naylor all this. Noting the interest in the woman's warm brown eyes, she went on.

"He was killed on the road when I was twelve years old, and when I realized I could have saved him if I'd known what to do, I decided to become a vet."

"What...just like that?"

Cass shrugged. "Pretty much, I guess."

Cathy set a plate heaped with homemade cakes onto the table and began pouring tea into three china mugs. "It seems to me that you must be a very determined and single-minded young woman."

Ben Naylor grinned, reaching for a muffin. "Bit like you, love," he said.

"Did you get another dog?" Cathy asked, ignoring him.

Cass shook her head.

"Well, now that you're settled into your new job, perhaps it's time you did. You're in the perfect situation, after all, and it'll keep you company. You can take it out with you on your visits, and—" a smile lit up her pleasant features "—at least you won't have any vet bills."

"There is that, I suppose." Cass laughed.

"Jake Munro has some puppies for sale," Ben said. "I saw them a couple of days ago when I called in at Sky View. Bonnie little black-and-tans, they are. Well-bred, too, if you ever fancy taking up shepherding."

"Thanks, but I wasn't really thinking of getting a sheepdog," Cass replied.

"You'd be surprised," insisted Ben. "Welsh Collies make good pets, as you know. They're trainable and loyal. You could do a lot worse. Jake's not the easiest man to deal with, of course, but it might be worth going to have a look at them."

Cass nodded thoughtfully. "I've already come across Mr. Munro, so I know exactly what you mean. I'm about to rent a cottage from his dad, actually."

Ben stood up, retrieving his cap. "Speak to Bill. He'll sort you out. Now I'd better go and get some work done. Oh..." He shifted from foot to foot. "Thanks for today."

"Glad to help." Cass smiled. "Perhaps you can spread the news around the farming community that I'm not totally useless."

"He'll certainly be doing that," Cathy declared.

Cass thought about going to see Jake Munro's puppies as she drove along the narrow lane. She dismissed the idea, concentrating hard on the road ahead. She'd hardly been in the area for two minutes—better get herself settled first. And if she was going to get a dog, then perhaps it shouldn't come from the one person around here she hadn't hit it off with.

Way down below, she could see a line of slow-moving vehicles around the edge of the lake. The water shimmered, smooth as glass, then disappeared behind a wall of trees as she dropped down the hill. Everywhere she went here seemed to be either up or down. A vague longing for the open spaces of home brought a rush of nostalgia. It was months since she'd been back to the bustling village of St. Thomas to see her parents. She made a mental note to phone her mum.

Maybe this place would eventually come to feel like home. A warm glow settled over her as she remembered Ben Myers's appreciative handshake. At least now the farming community might begin to gain confidence in her ability to do her job.

* * *

AT SKY VIEW STABLES, Jake was heading for the house, his whole body aching with fatigue born of far more than just physical effort. As the kitchen door swung shut behind him, Bess, his loyal black-and-tan Welsh Collie, looked up at him adoringly. She was nursing her squirming brood of pups in a dog bed by the stove. The smallest puppy wriggled to the side of the bed, and she nudged it carefully back in beside her before looking back at Jake with shining eyes.

“You’re a good mother, Bess,” he told her, bending to scratch her ears. She squirmed in delight and he gave a wry smile. Straightening, he crossed the kitchen to flick on the kettle switch. The radio came on at the same time. Before he could turn it down, a deep male voice announced the next track.

And here’s the number one song, ‘Love me True,’ from Tamara’s long-awaited album of the same name.”

Jake stood there, frozen, as Tara’s throaty tones flooded into the room. It was as if the radio announcer had read his thoughts. A memory of her beautiful face filled his mind, bringing back memories.... Trouble was, all he’d seen back then was her beauty. He turned off the radio, welcoming silence, and for the millionth time, he wondered if things would have been different if Tara hadn’t entered that singing competition.

His mother always tried to see the best in people, even finding a way to excuse Tara for walking out on him and the children. “She was going to leave eventually,” Gwen had told him in the dark days after Tara had left them. “She’s always been like a caged bird, and all you’ve really done is set her free. At least we still have Lucy and Robbie. That’s the main thing.’

Another sharp pain tore into him as he remembered his ex-wife at the funeral, tall and elegant and oh-so-beautiful, holding Robbie’s hand. He hadn’t realized then that she was going to take the little boy away with her right after the funeral. During the reception at the house, she had packed a few of Robbie’s toys and clothes while everyone else was downstairs, then she’d walked right out the front door with their son. She’d called Jake half an hour later, before he’d realized they were gone. She told him he wasn’t fit to look after Robbie, compounding his guilt. Crushed by the weight of his loss, he hadn’t been in a position to argue with her.

The house had felt so empty then. Anger had eaten at Jake’s soul. He had been awarded custody of the twins after the divorce, but now Tara was threatening to get that decision overturned. With the clever lawyers she had access to, anything was possible.

Eventually he closed the shutters, forcing his mind away from all the memories, shutting them out. He had totally messed up with his marriage, his kids and his whole life. Perhaps he deserved to suffer. Now he had no one, and that was how he wanted it. Loving someone laid you open to pain, as far as he could see. He was safer on his own, and perhaps Robbie was safer with his mother.

Something nudged Jake’s hand—a cold, wet nose. He curled his fingers into Bess’s coat. Sometimes love just crept up on you unexpectedly. That was what really scared him.

Through the window, Jake could see his father walking slowly across the yard. When had he begun to look so old? They lived in the same house, and yet they hardly even spoke. What was that all about? On a sudden impulse, Jake opened the window and leaned out.

“Coffee, Dad?”

The old man looked over at him in surprise, a smile lighting up his well-worn features.

“Yes...thanks, son. I’ll be there in a minute.”

* * *

BILL AND JAKE had become used to moving around the house in silence, getting on with their everyday lives without really communicating. Now they sat uneasily at the kitchen table, sipping strong coffee and watching Bess’s pups wriggling out of their dog bed, missing the comfort of their mother’s warmth and milk. Ignoring them, Bess sat at her master’s feet.

The biggest pup, a bold black dog with a white line down his face, bounced across the floor toward his mother, and she sank onto her side, allowing him to nurse.

“Time you were finding homes for them,” Bill remarked.

Jake nodded. “I’ve been asking around.”

“As I already said, Cass is looking for a dog.”

Jake looked up sharply, meeting his father’s eyes. “Not that vet again?”

Bill sighed, draining his mug and slamming it down on the tabletop. “I don’t know what you’ve got against her. It wasn’t her fault about Rosie, and she’ll be no bother as a tenant.”

“It’s not about Rosie.”

“Well, what’s it about, then?”

“She doesn’t even look like a vet.”

Bill smirked. “And what exactly is a vet supposed to look like?”

Jake shrugged, recognizing how lame his excuse sounded. “Well, definitely not like someone who could be blown over by a breath of wind.”

“And definitely not beautiful, eh?” Bill said.

“She’s hardly beautiful,” Jake muttered. But he remembered the way he had felt when they first came face to face in the yard.... Was that why he had this compulsion to avoid her at all costs?

Bill stood up, shaking his head. “Okay, forget it. It was just a thought. You need to find homes for the pups, and she’s looking for a dog. The way you feel about her has nothing to do with it.”

“Oh, do what you want,” Jake snapped. “Ask her if she wants a puppy, then, but keep her away from me.”

“It seems to me that maybe she’s made too much of an impression on you, son,” Bill said. “All pretty girls aren’t like Tara, you know.”

“You mean Tamara? I just heard her new song on the radio.”

“And you switched it right off, I suppose?”

Suddenly, Jake grinned. “Sure did. Don’t get me wrong, Dad, I’m over her. It’s just...”

“That you blame her for everything that’s gone wrong in your life, and you miss Robbie desperately,” Bill suggested. “Get onto that lawyer of yours again, or hire a different one.”

An icy glint replaced the smile in Jake’s blue eyes. “It’s myself I blame. Anyway, Robbie is probably better off without me.”

“Look, son...” Bill reached out his hand then drew it back again. “You’ve got to stop blaming yourself, and Robbie is definitely not better off without you.”

For a moment, Jake held his father’s gaze.

“Thanks, Dad,” he responded, his voice tight with emotion. “Anyway, as I already said, if you want this...vet...to have a pup, then it’s fine by me.”

“Her name is Cass, and you could go and see her yourself.”

With a snort of derision, Jake finished his coffee and stood up, stretching his arms above his head

“As if that’s going to happen,” he said, walking to the door.

CHAPTER SIX

CASS WAITED OUTSIDE the front door of the cottage, her heart playing racing games. This really was commitment, finally having her own place. Then again, she supposed, she was only renting. Real commitment was buying your own house—and having a husband and kids and the whole package. She stepped back, panic rising like a tide. What was happening to her? Perhaps she’d better just get back to the B and B and forget all about putting down roots.

She heard a vehicle approaching down the narrow grassy lane, and by the time Bill Munro’s Land Rover appeared she had regained her composure. She was renting, that was all. Everyone had to have somewhere to live, and there was hardly anything too binding about a six-month lease.

The vehicle ground to a halt, and she saw Bill’s smiling face through the driver’s door window. “Evening,” he called, waving a key at her.

“Hi.” She smiled back as he jumped out and headed for the front door.

He turned the old-fashioned key in the lock and the door swung open. “There you are then,” he announced, ushering her inside. “Your new home. I’ll leave you to get settled, but if there’s anything you need, just call me.”

Cass stepped into the cottage, breathing in the aroma of polish and the heady scent of the roses that grew around the front door.

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