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Wholesome, tender romances

Eleanor Jones

*The Little
Dale Remedy*

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The Little Dale Remedy

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You have to walk before you can ride. Still reeling from the accident that claimed her thriving horse racing career, her engagement and almost her life, Maddie McGuire was determined. Determined to ride again, though she struggled to walk. Determined to start a new life on her own two feet. Determined to keep her past, and her identity, a secret. And she was determined not to get involved with anyone. Especially a man like Ross Noble. Strange and dark and interesting as he was, she had no room for distractions, or romance. Everyone in the village said he was trouble. And she could sense it. But there was something behind his brooding intensity...

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“You’d better come in,” Ross said, his tone gruff and strangely awkward.

Maddie held her breath. Was he going to set off on one of his rants? She looked him straight in the eye, refusing to be daunted... To her dismay, her heart began beating loudly in her chest.

“About today...”

“Yes?”

He lowered his eyes, concentrating on his bare feet. His toes were long and finely formed, with broad flat nails and a dusting of dark hair above the knuckle joints; they made him suddenly seem vulnerable, those bare feet.

Looking up with a surge of embarrassment, she met his dark gaze again; there was a hint of amusement in his face. “I’m sorry, that’s all,” he said. “Sorry for being angry with you, especially in front of Bob Nelson.”

“Well, he didn’t have a bad word to say about you,” she remarked.

“He is one of the few who didn’t judge me after...”

“I know what you went through,” she told him. “And for what it’s worth, I wouldn’t judge you, either.”

“Wouldn’t you?” he said, holding her gaze.

He took a step toward her, and suddenly, somehow, she was in his arms.

Dear Reader,

I do hope you enjoy this book. It is the third in my Creatures Great and Small series, set in and around Little Dale and the beautiful Lake District fells in Northern England. I was brought up on a farm in the area and have always loved its timelessness and ancient traditions. To be able to immerse myself not only in the romances I love to write but also in a place that is so dear to me feels like a real privilege. It is heartwarming to know that as time slowly passes us all by, there are places and traditions that never seem to change, places where our ancestors lived and loved, laughed and cried, just as we do now and as our children and their children will do in the future.

Enjoy, and I’d love to hear your thoughts. Feel free to contact me at info@holmescalesriding.co.uk.

Eleanor

The Little Dale Remedy

Eleanor Jones



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ELEANOR JONES was brought up on a farm in the north of England and learned to love animals and the countryside from an early age. She has ridden all her life, and after marrying her husband at just eighteen years old and having two wonderful children, they set up a riding center together. This is still thriving over thirty years later. Her daughter competes at the national level, and she is now a partner in the business and brings her adorable three-year-old son to work with her every day. Eleanor's son is also married with two children, and they live nearby. Eleanor has been writing for what feels like her whole life. Her early handwritten novels still grace a dusty shelf in the back of a cupboard somewhere, but she was first published over fifteen years ago, when she wrote teenage pony mysteries.

I would like to dedicate this book to my dear Aunt Gwen

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

MADDIE SANK WEARILY into the well-worn, ancient chair by the open fireplace. The grate was black and cold, heaped high with ash and half-burned logs that had once brought warmth and cheer. Now the room was empty and kind of sad, an alien environment. A wave of homesickness washed over her, flooding her mind with images of her mum and dad and the comforts of home, making her question, yet again, why she'd moved here, so very far away from all she knew.

Guilt niggled as she remembered how hard her parents had fought her spontaneous decision to leave behind the love and care they'd lavished upon her, especially since the tragedy turned her whole world on its head. She'd been so determined to try to regain some independence and self-esteem after the accident, though, that getting away was all she'd been able to think of. Perhaps she'd been stupid; perhaps she should have stayed in their care longer. Perhaps it was too soon for this.

Impulsively, she reached for the car keys in her pocket. Of course she could just climb into her car and drive home. But then where would she be? Back in the protected cradle of love that stifled her dreams—that's where. Well, she wasn't prepared to give up on her future...not yet. Fate may have moved in unexpectedly to shatter her dreams on a lonely road in the pale light of dawn, but she wasn't about to give up on everything that mattered to her because of one bizarre accident. If she was focused enough, then anything was possible. She just had to hang on to that thought and keep believing it. She'd worked way too hard to regain even half of what she used to be to give up on the next stage just yet.

Dropping her keys on the small oak coffee table, Maddie took a deep breath and stood up. She pressed a palm to her back to fight the pain that flared up, waiting a moment to let it settle before going into the tiny kitchen to fill the kettle. The sound of water starting to bubble and the fresh aroma of the coffee she unpacked from the box of groceries her mum had provided brought familiarity and contentment, reestablishing the single-mindedness that had brought her this far. This was the right decision; she was sure of it. She had overcome so much already, and she was determined to find a place again in the life she loved...or she'd die trying. Maddie's every instinct told her that Sky View Stables held the key to her future. All she needed was the strength to see her plan through.

Returning to her chair, she sipped her coffee, reflecting on the new job that was just a stepping stone to what she really wanted. She may only have been hired as a general home help, but she intended to gradually try to work with, and eventually ride, the horses there. It might not be the promising horse-racing career she had been forced to abandon, but it was a start, at least. The doctors and consultants had told her riding again would be impossible, and her parents would have a heart attack if they knew what her real goals were but in Little Dale no one knew her history. Here, she had a chance to prove them all wrong; no one would watch her every move, no one would judge her and no one would look at her with sad sympathy in their eyes.

A loud knock took her by surprise. Who could be at the door? She didn't know anyone from around here. Draining her cup, Maddie headed slowly down the hallway with a sense of unease and a sudden awareness of her isolation. The noise came again, louder and more intense as she approached the front door and opened it just a crack. A tall, dark, angry-looking man in his early thirties was

on her doorstep, his hand raised high to begin the tirade of knocking yet again. A large dog stood behind him. Hurriedly, she slipped on the chain, gasping in relief as it slid easily into place.

“Yes?” she said, her voice deceptively cool. “Can I help you?”

“What do you think you’re doing in my house?” the man roared. “I want you out. Now!”

Maddie felt her anxiety drain away as her anger rose. No one was going to speak to her like that. She’d paid good money up front to rent this place, so what was he talking about? She had every right to be here. That knowledge lent her confidence. “What the hell are you doing here is more to the point,” she retaliated, meeting his gaze through the crack.

The ferocity in the man’s dark eyes swayed her slightly, making her aware yet again of how alone she was out here.

“This is my house,” he insisted. “And my guess is that you’re squatting, so if you don’t get out right now, I’m calling the police.”

Maddie held her ground, knuckles turning white on the door handle. “And you will look like a fool,” she told him. “I’ve rented this place for three months, and I’m fifteen hundred pounds down, so I’m going nowhere. Call the rental company if you like, but I’m not leaving until my lease is up. So stop harassing me...unless you want me to call the police.”

“What do you mean?” His whole frame deflated just the tiniest bit. “What rental company?”

Sensing the shift in his demeanor, Maddie held his gaze with fresh confidence. “Shouldn’t you know that?”

He paled beneath his tan as he turned abruptly away. “We’ll see,” he said, striding off toward the lane without a backward glance.

Maddie shut the door and quickly bolted it, her whole body shaking. There had been something so fiercely intense about the man...and the huge, silent dog behind him had seemed to echo his master’s expression. Yet again, she felt so alone. What if he had tried to break into the house? And what did he mean, anyway...it was his house? If he was really the owner, then surely he’d have known the cottage was rented out.

Hurrying to check the back door and all the windows, Maddie wondered about calling the police herself. He hadn’t really done anything wrong though, had he, so what could they do? She peered through the narrow window beside the front door and saw the tail end of his travel trailer pulling away. Well, at least he’d gotten the message for now. She’d just have to see what tomorrow brought.

Walking wearily into the kitchen, she poured herself a strong coffee and sat down at the small table, determined to put her annoying visitor firmly out of her mind.

Maddie’s thoughts wandered back to how she’d come to be here, all alone in this cottage in the middle of nowhere. She’d felt jittery on the long journey from Devon to the Lake District, she remembered, driving on automatic, her head crowded with doubts and apprehension. It was only when the sign finally loomed out at her, penetrating the fog that clouded her brain, that her spirits lifted. Little Dale—at last, the place that she hoped held a brand-new start.

The moment she’d seen the sign, she’d felt everything beginning to click into place. Now though, after her encounter, she was not quite so sure. A pain shot down her back, almost on cue, as if it had been sent to strengthen her doubts, making her wince and worry. She realigned her position, wondering how long it was going to be before her body felt whole again. And what if it never did? She pushed that thought straight out of her head; there was no place in her life for what-ifs.

Was she crazy to even contemplate having a career with horses again? Her parents had certainly thought she was making a huge mistake by going back to work too soon, especially when the job she’d found was so far away from home. She’d felt so guilty when she hugged her mum goodbye. The image of her strained, worried face in the rearview mirror had left a heavy weight in Maddie’s heart. But this was her life, and she knew what she wanted...had always known. Horses had been her entire life for so long, and the buzz of competition was ingrained into her soul; she couldn’t just let go of that.

Rose Cottage had sounded really nice in the ad, and when Maddie arrived in Little Dale, she decided it was probably one of the prettiest places she'd ever seen. The buildings were all gray stone, apart from the village store, which was painted white. They surrounded a small village green with a lovely old church on one side, and there was even a river running through the center of the town, with ducks waddling and quacking on the bank. The town seemed like a friendly place to make a fresh start.

She'd driven another mile before Rose Cottage appeared around a bend. It had felt instantly welcoming, small and quaint with a tiny front garden, standing all alone in beautiful surroundings. The view of the Lakeland hills and wide open sky beyond was amazing.

After arriving at Rose Cottage, Maddie had headed over to Sky View Stables to see Cass Munro. Maddie was starting her new job there tomorrow, helping Cass with chores and with her eight-year-old stepson, Robbie. Cass had turned out to be slightly built, very friendly and approachable and obviously pregnant. She had swung back her shiny dark hair and smiled at Maddie. "Now you know why I need help," she'd said, patting her stomach. "And I didn't want some experienced old nanny type looking down her nose at me, so I hired you."

Maddie had smiled back at her. "Well, I've certainly had no experience, so you're okay there."
"Perfect. I'll show you round. Do you know much about horses?"

Maddie had considered telling her the truth. Oh, yes. I was once a promising young jockey, engaged to my boss's son, working with Thoroughbreds and looking forward to a long and successful love affair with the racing industry...until some prat knocked me off my bike early one morning, leaving me for dead on the side of the lane...

Biting her tongue, though, she had just smiled and given a little shake of her head. No sad, pitying faces and no one to judge her. That's why she'd come here, and it meant keeping quiet about her past, no matter how nice Cass Munro seemed to be. "A bit," she'd said, not wanting to be totally dishonest.

Now, three hours later as nighttime hovered, sitting alone in the secluded cottage after her disturbing visitor left, Maddie tried to focus on how much she was looking forward to tomorrow. Seeing the stable yard at Sky View had reinforced her passion to ride again, maybe even compete in some way, and she wasn't going to let some rude, obnoxious, deranged man upset her. And he had upset her, if she was honest with herself, and had frightened her a little. Glancing around the cold and empty cottage, she picked up on a vibe she hadn't noticed earlier. A sad and lonely vibe, as if someone had suffered here.

Taking a deep breath, she lifted her chin and stood up. This was ridiculous; she'd come here to put her future straight again and drive away the emptiness and fear that had filled her life for the past year and a half. It was her own vibe she could feel, simple as that. All that the cottage needed was a glowing fire in the grate, a good cleaning to sweep away the cobwebs and the aroma of the stew her mother had insisted she take.

* * *

OVER AN HOUR LATER, tired and aching but feeling so much happier, Maddie surveyed her handiwork. She'd found wood neatly stacked right outside the back door, and now flames flickered red and gold in both the kitchen log burner and the open fire in the small sitting room. The enticing aromas of wood smoke and stew simmering on the stove drifted through the cottage.

She pushed the vacuum cleaner back into the cupboard beneath the steep, narrow staircase then sank into a chair in the kitchen to try to ease the nagging pain that spread through her back and down into her left leg. She'd overdone it; she knew that by the way her leg was suddenly refusing to do what she told it to. Damn her stupid injuries and damn the man who'd caused them. She'd eat the stew and have an early night, she decided—build up a bit of strength for her big day tomorrow.

And as for the fierce and angry man who'd unsettled her with his unexpected visit...well, she'd just have to hope the rental company would sort it out when he called them in the morning. With a

bit of luck, she wouldn't even see him again. If he did come back to harass her, she'd just ring the police. And tonight she'd check that all her windows and doors were locked yet again...just to be sure.

CHAPTER TWO

A GRIPING, FAMILIAR pain in the region of his heart made Ross Noble lighten his foot on the accelerator of his big, old pickup truck. How could he have believed he would be able to just drive back into Little Dale as if nothing had happened? As the vehicle slowed down, he glanced in the rearview mirror at Meg, his six-year-old daughter. "Come on, Dad, we're nearly there," she cried, her eyes alight with excitement.

"Perhaps we should just turn around and go back home to Scotland," he suggested.

Her face fell. "But you said that this was my real home."

"And it is." He sighed. "It's just..."

For Ross, the area held nothing but sad memories. He had vowed never to set foot in Little Dale again, but his daughter had been born here, and she had a right to know her heritage. She might not remember her mother, Jenny, or her grandma, Anne Maddox, but Little Dale was the place where they all used to live when she was a baby and Ross was only too well aware that Meg longed for a proper family life and other kids to play with. Suddenly, though, he was questioning his decision to bring her back here and questioning his own ability to get past all the bad memories.

Stalling for time, he pulled his truck onto the shoulder and jumped out. "Seems like Red needs to stretch his legs," he told Meg, who was peering out of the window impatiently.

Next to his daughter, his huge copper-colored dog whined softly. Ross opened the back door and let Red out, kneeling down and cradling the dog's big face between his palms. His heart ached with regret. "Am I really doing the right thing, lad?" he murmured. "Or should we just turn around and get out of here?"

Well used to his master's ramblings, Red pushed against him, eager to get out of the confined space. "I know." Ross sighed, giving the dog one last rub behind the ears before slamming the back door. "It's the right thing to do...for Meg's sake. She deserves to know where she came from."

Memories assailed him, of Jenny, his sweet young wife, when she was whole. They had been so in love back then; how had he let it all go so terribly wrong? Perhaps her mother was right; perhaps it really had all been his fault. If he hadn't been so selfish then maybe she'd still be alive today to watch their daughter growing up. He'd been too engrossed in his work, though, to realize how ill Jenny was becoming, how much she struggled with depression after Meg was born...until it was too late.

Ross climbed back into the driver's seat, closing the door with a heavy clunk. How he felt was irrelevant. He'd lost the right to be selfish. Now it was all about Meg. When Jenny died, he'd sworn to dedicate the rest of his life to his daughter's happiness, and he intended to keep that promise. He couldn't expect her to live in a trailer forever, especially not now, when a real house awaited them.

"Well, Meg," he said, reaching across to ruffle his daughter's hair. "You'll soon be home."

"Home," Meg echoed, her bright little face shining. "Isn't it your home, too, Daddy?"

The powerful engine rumbled into life and he nosed the big vehicle back out into the lane, glancing in his wing mirror to make sure that the travel trailer, their home for the past six years, was clear of the verge. "I hope so, Meg."

The little girl grinned, pressing her face against the window, eager to take in all her surroundings.

It would be strange, Ross thought, as the landmarks became ever more familiar, to stay in one place and live in a house again, especially one where so much had happened. But Meg was school-age now, and she needed that stability. When they found out Anne Maddox had left Rose Cottage to her granddaughter, it was as if it was meant to be.

The sign for Little Dale appeared ahead of them. "Well, Jenny," he said under his breath, "are you waiting here for us, watching our every move?"

"Who is waiting?" Meg asked, overhearing.

Ross smiled at her. “Your mum, I hope. She’ll be watching over you from heaven, I guess.”

Meg nodded slowly. “She’s still with Jesus, though, right?”

He cleared his throat to cover up a sudden rush of the emotion he rarely showed. “Yes...she’s still with Jesus. She’s helping look after him.”

Ross drove slowly through the village, overcome by memories. He’d first arrived at Little Dale from his native Scotland to take a job on a farm. Sutcliffe’s, a sheep farm farther up the fell. That’s where he first met Jenny. Anne Maddox’s sister, Dora, was married to Ian Sutcliffe, and Jenny often came to the farm to visit with her mum. She’d been just nineteen and he twenty-four when they’d met.

Swallowing hard to ease the dryness in his throat, he glanced across at Meg. She smiled at him, and he ruffled her chestnut curls. “Nearly there, Nutmeg.”

She wriggled on her seat, squirming in excitement. “How long will it be?”

“Five minutes, I guess,” he told her.

She started to count. “How many seconds is that?”

“Three hundred or so. Start again and count slowly.”

Clasping the sides of her seat, she closed her eyes tightly. “When I open them we’ll be there,” she cried. “One...two...three... Tell me when to open them.”

The cottage looked just the same, Ross thought with a lurch of surprise. A bit more run-down and uncared for, perhaps, but there were the same low front door, the same small, paned windows, same backdrop of rugged hills and glorious sky. He pulled over, cutting the engine, staring at the place that held so many memories both good and bad. Shame it was the bad ones that stuck in his mind.

“Are we there?” asked Meg, sneaking a peek.

Seeing a movement from inside the window, he hesitated. There was a small car parked outside, too. “Well...yes,” he said. “This is Rose Cottage...but I think someone’s here.”

Meg’s wide grin filled her whole face, and she grabbed his arm. “Can we go inside now?”

He opened the driver’s door slowly, fighting off the demons that urged him to get back in the truck and drive away.

“Just stay in the truck for a few minutes while I have a look around,” he told her firmly, letting Red out the back door. The big dog slipped in behind him as always, silently faithful.

Ross walked slowly down the narrow path toward the cottage, stopping outside the front door and breathing in the heartrendingly familiar smell of wildflowers and gorse. He’d been told that the key was underneath a plant pot on the window ledge—as if he didn’t know that; it had always been there.

The plant pot revealed nothing...why wasn’t he surprised? Well, whoever was in there could get out right now. Anger rippled inside him. This was Meg’s place...and his. No one had any right to be here. He hammered on the door, his fist reverberating with a satisfying thud. The face that peered out at him as the door slowly opened, however, took him totally by surprise. A young woman, probably mid-twenties, stared at him with alarm in her wide eyes. “Can I help you?” she asked.

“What are you doing in my house?” he responded angrily.

They exchanged heated words, but Ross soon understood that this woman wasn’t going to budge, no matter what he said. Blood boiling, he turned on his heel and headed back toward the truck.

Red pushed his nose against his master’s hand as if in understanding. “What am I going to tell Meg, boy?” He sighed as he saw his daughter’s eager little face pressed against the window.

* * *

MADDIE SLEPT FITFULLY despite her medication and woke at dawn with anxiety fluttering inside her. She’d thrived on anxiety once, but it had been offset by the adrenaline that had coursed through her veins as, mounted on a bulging mass of muscle and raw energy, she’d waited for the race to start. Closing her eyes, she allowed her mind to slip back to those giddy days when success had called her at the start of each race, the smell of horses, sweat and fear like a cauldron around her until

suddenly the gates opened up and her body took over. And then she'd fly, leaving fear in the stalls, just her and the horse beneath her, battling to win.

A sigh rose in her chest and tears flooded her eyes, making her lids feel heavy. She'd known the risks, the danger. All the jockeys did. And she'd had her fair share of crashing falls from spirited young Thoroughbreds high on life. She'd never expected her career to end in a lonely country lane; that was the worst part. If she'd broken her body on the racetrack, she'd have been a hero, but to lose her hopes and dreams to a cowardly hit-and-run driver as she pedaled to work one morning just felt so wrong.

A sound outside caught her attention, stopping her from dwelling on the past just as her memories were moving on to Alex and his treachery. Some fiancé he'd turned out to be! Maddie crawled out of bed and went to the window. There it was again—a chopping sound accompanied by loud barking.

Her bedroom overlooked the lane, and the window revealed nothing so she went across the landing to the back of the cottage, where the second bedroom looked out into a small copse. She froze, her heart pounding in her ears. A trailer was parked on a patch of grass just beyond the cottage garden, and the man from last night was chopping wood—actually chopping wood—from a fallen tree, top two buttons of his white shirt open and powerful arms raised like some kind of nineteenth century throwback.

He had no right to park there...no right. Then again, she didn't know who owned the land. Maybe he did. Now what was she supposed to do? He was obviously only waiting for her to go out so that he could take over the cottage. Well, she'd see about that. If she locked it up securely and took the key, then he'd never get inside. If he did, she'd call the police because that wouldn't be squatting, it would be breaking and entering. She was angry now, all hint of last night's fear gone. He'd obviously been parked there all night; if he'd wanted to hurt her or break in while she was inside, he would have already done it.

Suddenly, he glanced up at her window as if aware that she was watching him. For an awkward moment their gazes locked, and then he turned away with slow deliberation, swinging his ax with a ferocity that Maddie found disturbing. Well, if he was trying to frighten her out of the cottage, then he had totally underestimated her. If he wanted a fight, then he'd get one.

* * *

AS SOON AS she arrived at Sky View to begin her new job, Maddie felt better. She climbed awkwardly out of the car and was immediately greeted by all three of the family dogs: Bess, Jake's black, white and tan Welsh collie; Bess's daughter, Puddle, who belonged to Cass; and Choco, Robbie's brown-and-white terrier cross.

All three dogs eagerly followed her to the house, making her feel totally welcome and pushing any stray thoughts about her unwanted neighbor firmly from her mind. She took a gulp of fresh air. A horse whinnied from somewhere over to the right; the scent of honeysuckle from the hedge that bordered one side of the garden overpowered the pleasant aromas of the stable yard; a brown chicken appeared, clucking as it happily pecked at the earth.

Sky View felt like a happy place, a place to find herself again. She had thought so yesterday, but now she was sure...and knowing that she was at last in a horsey environment again gave her a huge lift. She might not be dealing with the horses directly for a while, but that time would come...because she would make it. Injury wasn't going to stand in her way.

Cass met her at the door with a broad smile. "Right, then," she said. "Let's have a coffee, and then we can discuss what happens around here. All I want from you is to be another pair of hands, to make things a bit easier."

"I get it," Maddie said. "And I'm happy to do anything."

"I see you've met the dogs."

"I was briefly introduced when I stopped by yesterday."

Cass nodded. “Oh, yes, of course. By the way, there’s something else I wanted to touch on... You mentioned you had an accident last year...”

Maddie nodded. She had told Cass a little about her injuries, but fearful of not getting the job, she’d played them down. Her new boss had no idea how much she sometimes struggled to do the simplest task, but the last thing Maddie wanted was for anyone to make allowances for her.

“Well, I just wondered if there was anything else I should know. I don’t mean to pry, but if there are any jobs that you’re not up to, you know, physically, then I’d rather you told me so I don’t ask too much of you.”

Maddie twisted her hands together in her lap, feeling awkward. She didn’t want to lie to Cass, but it was so important to her that she was treated as an equal, not as an invalid. “No,” she said determinedly. “I can do most things...or try at least.”

“Good,” Cass said. “We know where we are, then. Now your first task this morning is to take Robbie to school. I’ll come with you, since it’s your first time. And here he is,” she said as the little boy burst into the room. “Robbie, this is Maddie. She’ll be helping to look after you.”

He grinned at her, grabbing a piece of toast and stuffing it into his mouth. “Are you going to take me to school every day?”

“She’ll pick you up, too,” Cass added.

“Great,” he said as they headed to the car. “Dad is always late when he picks me up.”

All the way to the school in the village, Robbie chattered on about Choco, his dad and granddad and his pony, filling Maddie in on life at the stables. Her confidence soared at being so readily accepted by the little boy, as if she belonged at Sky View already.

When they reached the school gates, he leaped out eagerly, waving his bag as he raced off with a smile and a wave.

“I always wait until I’m sure he’s gone inside,” said Cass. “Or I go in with him.”

Maddie nodded. “Don’t worry. I’ll make sure he’s safe before I leave. He’s such a lovely little boy. He’s the image of his dad.”

“He’s the best,” Cass agreed. “And he does look like Jake.”

On the drive back to Sky View, Cass did a little gentle probing about Maddie’s past experience, asking her again about the accident. Maddie answered all her questions as honestly as she could without going into too much detail, explaining that she was knocked down by a driver while out cycling one morning, but making light of her injuries.

She had good reason not to reveal too much about the aftermath of the collision, but she didn’t really know why she was keeping her experience with horses a secret. Was she afraid? Afraid, maybe, that she wouldn’t be able to live up to the person she used to be? She just wanted this to be a new start with no expectations from anyone other than herself.

“I’m not Robbie’s real mum, you know,” Cass said, quite out of the blue. “Now, I love him like my own, but before I came here and fell in love with Jake, I hadn’t really had much to do with children. All I wanted out of life was to be a successful vet. That’s why I didn’t mind that you hadn’t had much experience with kids, either. There’s something about you, though, that reminds me of myself back then, and I felt that maybe you needed a break... I hope my judgment was right.”

“It...it was. Is.” Maddie stuttered, surprised by the rush of emotion that Cass’s honesty brought out in her. “It’s true, I haven’t had much experience with kids, but I love Robbie already and I really want to learn. And...you’re right about the break. I just had to get away.”

Cass rubbed her stomach absentmindedly. “Well, you don’t need to worry—I’m not going to pry about that,” she said, smiling. “And hopefully it won’t be too long before you’ll have to learn about babies, as well.”

Maddie smiled back at her, feeling happier than she had in months. “That’s a bit more daunting, but I’m sure it can’t be that hard.”

“To be honest,” Cass admitted, “I probably don’t know much more than you, but I didn’t want some experienced nanny type making me feel inadequate.”

“You’re safe enough there, then,” Maddie responded, finally feeling confident in her decision to come to Sky View. She liked Cass Munro and felt she was up to the job. All she had to do now was build up her strength and—she hoped—gradually start riding again. No one here knew what she was capable of or had been once, so she really did have a whole new start. And it felt good.

* * *

THE GOOD FEELING stayed with her right through the day. Doing chores around the house, picking up Robbie in the afternoon and making him some tea—simple everyday tasks that made Maddie feel useful and normal again. Her sense of well-being lasted until she was on her way home.

A curl of wood smoke from behind the cottage brought reality back with a bump. He was still here, then? Well, if he even came near her, then she was calling the cops. Parking as close to the cottage as possible, she jumped out, fumbling with her keys and dropping them before racing down the short pathway to the front door.

The cottage still smelled of burning logs and coffee—comfortable, homey smells that inspired confidence. She’d have some soup for supper, she decided, carrying on the theme.

She was rooting around in the large stack of cans she’d brought with her—cans had seemed like a good idea, but she’d definitely gone over the top, she realized now—when a gentle knock came on the kitchen door. She froze, clutching a can of tomato soup in one hand. It must be him.

But no, men like her unwanted neighbor never knocked gently. Then who could it be? Putting down the can, she headed for the door. Only one way to find out.

The little girl who stood on the doorstep took Maddie totally by surprise. Long chestnut hair curled down her back, a dusting of freckles across the bridge of her snub little nose stood out against her tanned skin, and unexpectedly dark eyelashes outlined huge, honey-brown eyes. The girl looked cross, thought Maddie, standing back to let her step inside. “Can I help you?” she asked.

The child just lifted her chin. “Why have you taken our house? We’ve never had a house before, and it’s not fair to take someone else’s. You should get your own.”

“Taken your house?” Maddie echoed, confusion slowing her thoughts.

“We’ve come a long way to get our house,” the little girl said, stamping her foot and tossing back her mane of curls. “It’s not fair to take it from us.”

Clarity slowly dawned on her. “I don’t know what’s going on here, but I’m guessing you live in the trailer?”

“Yes, with Daddy, Red, Cuckoo and Moneypenny.”

Maddie looked at her vaguely. Red must be the huge dog the man had with him yesterday, but who or what were the other two and how could they all live in such a small space?

“And who are Cuckoo and Moneypenny?” she asked.

“They’re chickens, of course. And I’m Meg. Daddy calls me Nutmeg, though. I’m six. How old are you?”

“Twenty-six,” said Maddie, smiling. “Now why don’t I get you a cookie, and you can tell me all about it.”

The little girl deliberated for a moment, and then she shook her head determinedly. “No, thanks. Daddy says I have to stay away from you. He says you’re mean.”

“Well, you can tell your daddy...” Maddie began, but she stopped herself. This was between her and... “What is your daddy’s name?”

Meg stared up at her. “Ross. He’s called Ross. What’s yours?”

Maddie reached out to shake Meg’s hand. “I’m Maddie, and I’m pleased to meet you.”

Meg pulled her hand away sharply, glancing behind her as if expecting a reprimand. “Well, I don’t think we are very pleased to meet you,” she said, running off across the yard.

Maddie watched her go, noting with surprise how Ross smiled warmly as his daughter approached. He placed a broad hand on her shoulder, leading her toward their makeshift home. Why were they really here, and why would she have been allowed to rent the cottage if it did belong to them? She needed to find out soon. Standing her ground with this Ross guy was one thing—he could obviously stand up to her—but being here in this warm, comfortable cottage when a little girl lived right next door in a small trailer with her dad and three animals just didn't feel right, especially if they had a right to be here.

Tonight, Maddie decided, hopefully after Meg had gone to bed, she was going to try to find out what this was really all about.

CHAPTER THREE

ROSS SAW MADDIE arrive home, watching with interest as she climbed awkwardly out of her small car and hurried to the front door, dropping her car keys on the way. Was she putting on the slight limp to try to get his sympathy? Well, it wouldn't work on him. Then again, she hadn't actually seen him, so it couldn't be for his benefit. And come to think of it, she didn't exactly look as if she was blooming with health, either. She was quite thin, her expression was strained and there were dark shadows under her eyes. For all he knew, she'd been lying about having paid three months' rent. Perhaps she was a squatter after all—on drugs, even. Judging by her put-together appearance and nearly new car, though, he had to admit that did seem to be a bit of a long shot.

The first thing he'd done that morning was call the solicitor, but that had been a waste of time. As far as they knew, the cottage was empty; probate had been granted and now it was just a matter of waiting for the regulatory period of time before he was actually handed the deeds. When he explained about the woman who appeared to be living there and had insisted that she'd paid rent, they promised to look into it and let him know in due course.

So now it seemed all Ross could do was wait. But he would do whatever was necessary to get his daughter what she was entitled to, that was for sure. And if he found out the woman was lying, then he'd kick her out right away, within the law or not.

Reluctantly, he went back to fixing up the chicken run. "Won't be long now, chucks," he told the tawny brown chicken and her brightly colored cockerel companion. They watched him from their small coop with bright, beady eyes.

It wasn't until later, as he gently placed the chickens into their new enclosure, watching with a satisfied smile as they eagerly pecked at the grass, that he realized he hadn't seen Meg for a while. She appeared suddenly from the direction of the cottage. "She's called Maddie and she's twenty-six," she announced.

"You stay away from her."

Ross's voice sounded loud in his ears, and he placed a hand on Meg's shoulder, surprised at his own reaction. "Sorry, Nutmeg, but we don't know her and you should stay away from strangers."

Totally unperturbed by her dad's outburst, Meg just smiled. "I told her she had to give us our house back."

"Well...good for you," Ross said. "But in the future, stay well away from her. Hopefully she'll be gone soon."

Meg stared at him with her huge, honey-colored eyes... Jenny's eyes. It made his heart hurt.

"She offered me a cookie, but I didn't take it."

Ross ruffled her curly hair. "Good for you, love. Now go and get washed—your supper will be ready soon."

* * *

AS THE ORANGE sun slipped behind the dark mass of the trees at the edge of the property, Ross sat by Meg's bed, relating his usual bedtime story about elves in the forest that helped injured creatures. Tonight, it was a hedgehog that had become trapped when some silly teenagers had started a campfire. All his stories were aimed at encouraging his daughter to care for animals and learn how

to behave in the countryside. As her eyes began to droop, he lowered his tone, eventually leaning down to kiss her forehead before tucking the plaid blanket around her shoulders. She'd had the slightly threadbare blanket since she was a baby, and she wouldn't sleep without it.

Suddenly feeling weary himself, he decided to have a shower and then go through some job leads. He'd saved up enough money to bring Meg back home, but he needed to get work soon or they would be forced to move on. There would always be work for him in Scotland, but moving back there was the last thing he wanted...for Meg, at least.

The small knock on the door came just as he emerged from the shower. "Coming," he called, quickly rubbing himself dry and pulling on jeans and a blue check shirt. He was still rubbing his dark hair with a towel as he opened the door. When he saw the woman from the cottage standing outside, he dropped the towel to his side. "Oh," was all he could manage. "What do you want?"

* * *

MADDIE PUSHED PAST HIM, stepping determinedly into the surprisingly tidy trailer. It was small, of course, but it did seem cozy and cared for. There were even flowers on the table.

"Meg's touch," Ross said, following her gaze.

"It seems very..." She looked at him, feeling awkward as she noted his open shirt, revealing a hard, tanned, muscular torso. She cleared her throat. "Comfortable."

He stared down at her, his expression revealing nothing. "What did you expect?"

"Nothing," she said quickly. "I had no expectations."

"Be honest," he urged, his voice deep and slightly harsh. "You expected us to be living in squalor alongside the chickens and the dog. Well, yeah, Red lives here—he deserves to—but as you can see, the chickens have their own place."

At the sound of his name, the huge dog padded into view. Ross dropped a hand to caress his ears. "He likes to sleep near Meg...he adores her."

"Why didn't you tell me you had a daughter?"

Ross shrugged. "Why would I? It has nothing to do with you."

Suddenly, Maddie found it difficult to breathe. She'd built herself up to this moment, wanting to discuss the situation like two mature adults. But his hostile demeanor was making that seem impossible. It wasn't just about his attitude, though; it was also the raw masculinity he exuded. Was Ross aware how awkward he made her feel? she wondered. She had never met anyone so comfortable in his own skin, so...sure of himself.

Determined not to let him get to her, she tried to ignore her discomfort. "Why did you tell me it was your cottage?" she asked bluntly.

For a second, he stared at her as if she was stupid. "Because it is." He hesitated. "Well, to be honest, technically it belongs to Meg."

"Then how come I've been able to rent it, and you didn't even know?"

He moved toward her, and she forced herself to stand her ground, refusing to take the backward step that would have given her space to breathe. He held her gaze, his dark eyes narrowed. "Perhaps you haven't paid any rent. Perhaps it's just a con."

Anger lent Maddie the strength she was losing. "I already told you—I've paid fifteen hundred pounds up front, and if you call the leasing agent, she'll back me up. I think you're the con man. You just want somewhere to live for free, and you thought the cottage was empty."

She could tell by his face that she'd gotten through to him. "I think you'd better leave," he said, his voice rising. "And stay away from my daughter."

"Dad?" The tiny voice came from behind them. "What's going on?"

They swung around simultaneously to see Meg standing outside her room, eyes bleary and hair tousled with sleep. One arm was draped across Red's huge back, his head the same height as hers. At the sound of her voice, he gently lapped his tongue across her cheek.

Ross's attitude changed at once. "It's okay, Nutmeg. You go back to bed. This lady has just come to talk to me about the cottage."

"She's called Maddie," Meg said. "And she has cookies. Have you asked her why she's got our house?"

"It's a mistake," Maddie said gently. "Just a silly mix-up. Go back to bed like your daddy said, and we'll try to sort it out."

The little girl did as she was told, putting her hand across her mouth to smother a huge yawn. The big red dog padded along behind her, settling himself down in her bedroom doorway as if keeping guard.

"I'll just make sure she's settled," Ross said, disappearing into her room.

Maddie was just about to leave when he reappeared. "If you pay me back the money I've paid out, then I'll leave," she told him.

Ross's dark eyes glinted. "I'd rather make sure you've actually paid it first."

"I am not a liar, but go ahead," she said coldly. Desperate to get away from him, she pushed open the door and glanced over her shoulder as she stepped outside. "Anyway, as I already said, if it really is your cottage, you should know that."

The door banged shut behind her, and Maddie breathed in the cold night air, suddenly aware of how hot her cheeks were and grateful for the breeze's cooling touch. Well, she'd tried, and if that wasn't enough, then too bad. There was no reasoning with the guy. If it wasn't for Meg, she'd have gone out of her way to make sure she'd never have to speak to him again. She should have realized yesterday that trying to have a civilized conversation would be a waste of time. He'd even let his daughter believe she was a bad person, and that wasn't fair when he didn't know her. She'd had her say, and now the ball was in his court.

It was only much later, in the moments between waking and sleeping, that Maddie remembered the gentleness in Ross's voice when he'd spoken to Meg... The softness he'd shown then had certainly belied the bitterness in his dark eyes and the hard outline of his muscular physique. It was his gentleness that stayed with her, however, as her heavy eyelids finally drooped shut.

CHAPTER FOUR

THAT NIGHT, AS USUAL, Maddie slept restlessly. She always woke up several times if she hadn't taken painkillers, but she hated to depend on them. Some nights, though, the constant ache in her left leg and back was unbearable. The doctors had told her to take things slowly, and she was still supposed to be doing physiotherapy, but to her it was all useless. As far as she was concerned, there was only one thing that would make her whole again, and that was getting her life back.

Going carefully down the stairs in the darkness, she dug around in her bag for her medication, washing down the pills with a glass of water. Through the window she could see a glow in the trailer. She stood for a moment, taking in the scene as the silver moon slid from behind a dark cloud, casting an eerie light that made the trees look like sentinels.

She felt a surge of irritation. Things were tough enough right now without having to put up with Ross's harassment. And what if he was telling the truth—what if the cottage really had been left to Meg? She didn't care where Ross lived, but Meg deserved better. If she saw him around, she'd put her offer to him again, but she certainly wasn't going to seek him out. Hopefully, he'd soon find out she was in the right and go back where he'd come from until the three months were up.

Without meaning to, Maddie found herself wondering where that place was. His accent held a strong Scottish burr, and Meg's voice had a hint of it, too. Well, if he headed back there today, it wouldn't be too soon. Wearily, she headed back up the steep staircase and snuggled into her bed, waiting for her medication to soothe away the pain. She needed a good night's sleep to function properly tomorrow, but at the moment sleep felt a very long way off.

When she woke again, the pale light of dawn was creeping through her window. She had opened the curtains a crack when she went to bed, not liking total darkness; now she could see the Lakeland hills looming into the sky with rugged splendor. For a moment, she was disoriented. Where was she?

Memories flooded into her confusion: Alex when he loved her... Alex when he'd turned away, stony faced. He was such a successful jockey, groomed for stardom by his trainer dad, Josh Andrews. Maddie had been totally over the moon when he'd first asked her out and unable to believe it when he'd asked her to marry him. Theirs was to have been the biggest wedding of the decade, he'd insisted. That was the first time she'd questioned their relationship; he didn't seem to take into account that she just wanted a small wedding, and that had sowed a seed of doubt.

When she'd had her accident, a month or so later, he'd been at her bedside every day at first...until the weeks turned into months. When they'd told her she would never ride again, she'd been distraught, and if she was honest with herself, she might have taken her frustration out on Alex. It was easy to be bubbly and fun when you lived life in a whirl of success...not so easy when your whole future had crumbled and your dreams were shattered. His visits had had become less and less frequent until he admitted that he'd found someone else.

In a way, Alex's betrayal had been a relief. After that, she hadn't needed to try, and she'd been able to wallow in her own self-pity. She wasn't proud of it, the depression that had left her without motivation. Then one day she'd looked out the window at the glorious sun-filled sky and realized there was still so much beauty in the world. That was the day she'd made a promise to herself to get her life back...no matter what.

A cockerel shrieked out its morning call, and Maddie pulled her covers over her head. They had a cockerel for goodness' sake! Oh, well, at least she wouldn't need an alarm clock while Ross and Meg were around. Today, she was off to Sky View again, and she couldn't wait.

After eating a light breakfast of tea and toast, Maddie locked the cottage door and pocketed the key, deliberately not looking at the trailer as she walked up the pathway and opened her car. When something nudged her from behind, she turned with a start to see Red gazing up at her happily, his long pink tongue hanging from the side of his mouth to reveal a set of dangerous-looking fangs. Somehow, though, she felt totally unafraid. "Hello, boy," she said, holding out her hand. The giant dog nuzzled her gently, belying his fearsome appearance.

Maddie noticed Meg watching solemnly over by the trailer. She waved, but when Meg just wiggled her fingers in return, obviously afraid to show a response because of her dad, Maddie felt a rush of anger at his unfairness. Where was this little girl's mother, and why were they living in a trailer, anyway?

It was none of her business, she decided, so she got in her car and drove off. Besides, she wasn't even interested in Ross's way of life.

* * *

AT SKY VIEW, Cass Munro was waiting impatiently. "Sorry," she said as Maddie came in through the kitchen door. "I forgot to ask if you could come a bit earlier today. I have a doctor's appointment and I'm running late. Jake brought a client in for breakfast and I haven't even had the chance to load the dishwasher, so if you wouldn't mind taking Robbie to school and clearing up the breakfast dishes after... He's all ready to go."

"Of course." Maddie smiled, placing her hand on Cass's arm. "It's what I'm here for. You just take your time."

As if on cue, Robbie ran in through the back door with Choco at his heels. "We've been right up to the top of the hill," he cried. "I'll just get my school bag."

"And remember to wipe your face," Cass called after him as he raced off up the stairs.

Forty-five minutes later, Robbie duly dropped off at the village school, Maddie surveyed the pile of clean breakfast pots beside the sink with satisfaction. She was needed here, and it felt good to be needed after being unable to do anything useful for so long.

Her mother had called last night, stressing about how she was eating and whether she was doing too much. Maddie had to admit it was nice to know her mum cared. Here at Sky View, no one knew just how badly injured she'd been. For a long time after the accident, she'd been in a vague, formless, pain-filled place. Then the depression had descended, taking over her every thought...until, after eighteen long months, as she watched a swallow skim across the glorious summer sky, she suddenly remembered that she, too, still had a life—her life. She needed to live it and not just go through the motions. After that day, she'd let nothing hold her back from her ambition to make enough of a recovery to stand on her own two feet and have a future again.

To her surprise, she was glad that Alex was no longer around to hold her back. This was her fight, hers alone, and it had finally begun.

Despite her satisfaction, even by midmorning Maddie was finding it tough to keep going. The nagging pain in her leg and back had become a throbbing ache, and she longed to sit down and take a rest.

“Does it hurt a lot?” Cass asked in a casual tone when she got home from her appointment. “Take a break if you like.”

“No!” Maddie shook her head. “Thanks, but I’m here to work.”

“Then make us a drink and we’ll both take a break,” she suggested.

As they sat at the kitchen table five minutes later, sipping coffee in companionable silence, Cass looked across at her with a puzzled frown. “So...what happened? The accident, I mean.”

Unused to such a direct line of questioning, Maddie hesitated. “I was cycling to work one morning, and someone knocked me off my bike,” she eventually began. “To be honest, I can’t remember much about it, and I’m okay now...except that my leg sometimes aches.”

Cass stirred sugar into her mug then met Maddie’s gaze with sympathy in her eyes. “And that’s all?”

Unable to bear seeing the same sad expression everyone gave her back home, Maddie gritted her teeth. Before she knew it, the Munros would be talking about her in lowered voices, going quiet the moment she walked into a room. Poor Madeline, her whole career ruined...and she was doing so well.

“It’s hardly anything, really,” she said, forcing a bright smile onto her face. “Just a bit of a nuisance. It doesn’t hold me back at all.”

She stood and went back to peeling carrots, pretending she hadn’t seen the concerned look on Cass’s face.

At midday Jake, his dad, Bill Munro—a tall, thin man whose current project was fixing up the holiday cottages—and Jed, the young lad who helped Jake back the youngsters, came in to eat. They sat at the large kitchen table, laughing and joking and talking about their plans. Maddie handed out food and poured tea, desperately trying not to limp as she moved around the large, homey kitchen.

“Sit down and join us, lass,” said Bill, smiling in Maddie’s direction. “You have to eat, too.”

Jake nodded in agreement, pulling out a chair, and she sat, feeling awkward.

“I already told her,” Cass told them. She turned to Maddie. “Get your lunch—I can see to dessert.”

“It’s okay,” Maddie insisted, not wanting the fuss.

“Sorry, lass, you’re overruled,” Bill said, stroking his neat, white beard, his eyes crinkling in a smile. She settled into the chair with a sigh as Jed passed her a plate.

When the talk turned to horses, Maddie found it difficult not to join in. This was so stupid. Maybe she should just come clean and let them all in on the truth, tell them about her ambition to ride again. They’d help her; she knew they would. She didn’t want help, though, did she? She didn’t want people to make allowances, to see the pity in their eyes as they watched her struggle to be even half of what she used to be. She wanted to be respected for what she’d achieved on her own merit; that was why she’d come here—to be treated like a normal human being again.

“Have you done any riding, Maddie?” Bill asked, right out of the blue. She couldn’t lie about that.

“Some,” she told him. “Not for a while, though.”

“Well, then,” Cass said, placing an apple pie and jug of cream on the table. “You can start again while you’re here. We’re always looking for exercise riders.”

“As soon as we get a suitable horse in for you, we’ll get you on board,” Jake agreed. “At the moment, they’re all only half-broken, or too difficult for a novice.”

Novice! Something deep in Maddie’s chest curled in objection. “I’m not—” she began before biting her tongue, “that bad. Just rusty, I guess.”

“I started on Carlotta,” Cass said. “She’s the best. Unfortunately, she’s in foal right now, or you could have tried riding her.”

“In foal to Grand Design,” Jake added, excitement rising in his voice. “We’re going to have one very special foal, I reckon.”

“I know that stallion!” Maddie exclaimed without thinking. “Big bay...quite tricky to handle, but so talented...” She trailed off as she realized her mistake.

Jake frowned. “How do you know that?”

Cass hesitated. Here’s another chance to tell the truth, her conscience told her. “My dad,” she blurted.

Jake sat back, hands behind his head. “Ah, into racing, is he?”

“Kind of.” Maddie got up to start clearing the table, remembering the elation of riding the big bay stallion out on exercise, when he was one of the three she used to “do.” Tears pressed against her eyelids, and she blinked to try to clear them. She had lost so much more than just the riding. She had lost the companionship of her charges, too.

“You okay?” Cass whispered as they bundled pots into the dishwasher.

Maddie nodded. “Yes...thanks.”

“Well, you might want to go a bit easy on my crockery,” she suggested, and suddenly Maddie was smiling again.

“Sorry,” she said. “I wasn’t thinking.”

When the men had disappeared out into the yard again, Cass eased herself down onto a comfortable chair beside the stove. “My back aches a bit,” she groaned. “I’ll just sit for a second.”

“You need to rest,” Maddie said. “How long is it now?”

“Just a matter of weeks,” Cass told her dreamily, touching her stomach. “Look, she’s kicking.”

When Maddie hurried over, Cass grabbed her hand and placed it next to hers. “See?”

“And it’s definite...that it’s a girl, I mean?”

Cass nodded, puckering her brow. “To be honest, I didn’t really want to know, and neither did Jake, but...”

“But what?”

“Well...” Cass let out a big sigh. “Robbie’s twin sister was killed in a road accident, along with his grandma. It was before I even came here, but obviously it’s had a huge effect on Rob. We wanted him to know what to expect...no surprises.”

“And was he pleased to find out it was a girl?”

“He was—is—over the moon about having a sister again.”

“And do you have a name for her yet?”

Cass nodded. “We’re going to call her Gwen, after Jake’s mum.”

As the unborn baby’s frantic movement slowed, Maddie withdrew her hand. “That’s lovely,” she said. “Like a brand-new start.”

“A brand-new start,” Cass echoed, her eyes gently drooping.

Maddie moved quietly away, not wanting to disturb her. There was so much love in this house where once there must have been so much pain. Jake Munro had gotten past his heartache, and that

was what she wanted to do. Learn to live with the past and forge a new future. Would hers hold a family one day? She couldn't help but wonder. It might, she decided, but not for a long time yet. She had to straighten herself out before she could include anyone else in her life...and anyway, look what happened the last time she started to dream of a future...with Alex. No, it was definitely just her and her demons, for the next few years at least.

CHAPTER FIVE

ROSS CLICKED OFF his phone with a heavy heart. So Maddie had been telling the truth after all; she had paid for the cottage. Seemingly the solicitors hadn't informed the rental agency of Anne Maddox's death, and they'd rented it out, not knowing... So now what?

He'd felt so positive, coming back here to Little Dale, more positive than he had been since Jenny died. In those early years after her death, dealing with the weight of his own guilt and his mother-in-law's accusations, the only thing that had kept him going was Meg.

He should have noticed how ill Jenny was, he realized that now, and he would have if she'd shown physical symptoms, but depression was way beyond his experience. It had been foaling time on the stud where he worked, too, but that was no excuse for all the hours he spent there...hours he should have spent trying to help his young wife overcome her illness and deal with their baby girl.

Later—way too much later—he had read up on postpartum depression and finally begun to understand just how real and painful the condition could be. He continued to keep reading about it to this day, again and again, as if for the first time, asking himself why. That couldn't bring Jenny back, though, couldn't get rid of the guilt that haunted him.

She had taken her own life because he was too selfish to put her before his work. Her mother had known it; Anne Maddox had blackened his name in their community so convincingly that some people had shunned him in the street. That was when he'd decided to take Meg and leave, go back to his native Scotland. And to his surprise, Jenny's mother hadn't even kicked up a fuss when he'd told her he was taking her only granddaughter so very far away. It seemed as if there was nothing left inside her but hatred and blame, and she hated him so much she would rather lose Meg than have him around. She'd done the right thing by her granddaughter in the end though, by leaving her the cottage. He would always be grateful to her for that.

He and Meg had been relatively happy in Scotland, even though he'd known that they would need to settle down somewhere eventually. He'd found plenty of part-time work on farms and studs, even working in forestry for a while. He and Meg had traveled wherever he was needed, though never so far away that he couldn't get Meg to Tynyots in Kelso.

He'd tried a few different nurseries, but Tynyots, run by a warmhearted, middle-aged woman named Clare, was the only one that he really trusted with his daughter. When she wasn't there, he looked after her himself, waking with her in the night, caring for her when she was ill or teething, playing with her and introducing her to the countryside he loved...wanting her to love it, too. He'd had no social life of any kind for years, to such an extent that some people nicknamed him the Recluse, but he didn't care. He didn't believe he deserved a social life. His lot in life, he had long ago decided, was to make it up to Jenny by giving their daughter the best that he could.

When Anne Maddox died, leaving her granddaughter the cottage where he and Jenny had lived for the short time they were together, he knew that giving Meg the best meant bringing her home to Little Dale to claim her heritage.

The last thing he'd expected was to find someone living there; he'd been so angry, truly believing the woman was lying. So now what? Dealing with people had never been one of his best skills, and the lonely years in Scotland had left him even more awkward with strangers, especially those of the opposite sex. There would never be anyone in his life again after Jenny—he was sure of that. He'd failed his wife, and he didn't deserve another chance at that kind of happiness. What right did he have to destroy yet another woman's life?

He wasn't going back to Scotland, though, wasn't going to give up and give in. This Maddie person would just have to put up with them for the next three months; he had no money to give her, even if he wanted to.

Having settled on his course of action, Ross decided to spend the day putting down roots. He laid a row of paving stones up to the trailer door to keep their feet out of the mud. He went to town with Meg and bought a plastic storage container from the local DIY store to put their dirty boots in, and he passed the afternoon building a barbecue area out of bricks just under the shelter of the trees. When their unwanted tenant came back, she would see that he had no intention of moving on. Maybe that would persuade her to move on herself...sooner than she'd planned, at least. It was obvious that she was uncomfortable with his presence, maybe even a little threatened, and he didn't have any intention of trying to change her mind about that. All he wanted was to be settled with Meg in the cottage...and to land a decent job, of course.

That was another thing he packed into his busy day: traveling around to some local farms in the hopes of finding part-time work, at least. Unfortunately, he had no luck, but tomorrow he had an appointment with the principal of Little Dale Primary School. Once Meg was settled in there, he'd have more free time to pursue his job prospects.

Putting on the kettle, he called for Meg, who was sitting at the table drawing. She loved to draw. "You might be going to proper school soon," he told her.

"Will there be lots of kids to play with?" she asked, pencil poised above the paper.

"I guess so," he said.

"Will they be nice?"

For a moment he just stared at her, his small, innocent, beautiful daughter, and the weight of responsibility made him shudder. He'd tried to bring her up to be independent and strong in a hard, tough world, but he knew she could never be tough enough. She had her mother's sweet, soft personality, and that would never change. It was Jenny's own personality that had let her down at the end, the inability to stand up to pressure. She'd needed looking after, and he hadn't seen that.

That was one thing that drew him to Maddie, he supposed. Despite his determination to dislike her, she had that same vulnerability...and yet she'd stood up to him so bravely, holding her ground. That was what he wanted Meg to be able to do.

"I hope so, love," he said finally.

"Are you all right, Daddy?" Meg asked, huge eyes gazing solemnly up at him.

He blinked, smiling. "Why, yes..."

"You look funny...kind of sad. Are you sad?"

"Sometimes," he admitted, holding out his arms. She ran into them, and he held her tightly, twirling her around. "We all get a bit sad sometimes."

"Is it because someone is living in our house?"

"Yes... I guess so."

"Maybe we could live there, too, if there are enough bedrooms."

"I don't think she'd like that," he said. "No...we'll be fine in here until she moves out, and then we'll decorate the whole place. You can choose any color you want for your room."

"Pink and purple," Meg exclaimed, clapping her hands as he put her back down.

Red jumped up, pushing against her, and she wrapped her tiny arms around his huge neck.

"Can Red come to school with me?" she asked. "He'll sit quiet—I know he will."

Ross studied his daughter's bright little face, his heart aching. "I'm sure he'd love to, and I wish he could, too, but I don't think dogs are allowed in school. Don't worry, though—I'm sure you'll make lots of friends really soon."

* * *

MADDIE DROVE HOME from Sky View as the day drew to a close, feeling tired and drained but happier than she had in a long while. It was nice to be taken at face value again, and she was glad that she hadn't given in to the temptation to own up about her riding experience.

When Jake had told her she could start riding when they had a "suitably quiet horse," the idea had rankled her. She, Maddie Maguire, the person who used to take pride in being able to ride anything, lowered to novice status? But she'd soon realized she had to think like a novice if she was going to get back on a horse again—which the doctors had told her was impossible. Her balance wasn't what it used to be, and she didn't even know yet how capable her body was. She had to take it one step at a time if she wanted to get anywhere at all. And if that meant being a novice for a while, then she just had to swallow her pride and get on with it.

Her stomach lurched when she spotted the trailer through the trees. Would Ross come over and try to bully her out of the cottage again? There was something very disconcerting about him, a primal ferocity that overrode modern etiquette. How he'd ever managed to father such a lovely little girl was beyond her. Anyway, he was in for a shock if he thought he could frighten her away; she was made of tougher stuff than that. He had turned her offer down, so now she just had to stand her ground for the next three months—which, despite her delicate appearance, she knew was well within her capabilities. You didn't get to ride highly strung young Thoroughbreds, let alone win races, without being able to stand up for yourself.

Trying to stand tall, Maddie walked slowly and determinedly toward the front door of Rose Cottage, staring straight ahead and refusing to even acknowledge the fact that Ross might be watching. She slammed the door and bolted it, giving in to her nerves for a moment by leaning back. From outside, she could hear music and Meg's high-pitched laughter. What was the little girl laughing at? she wondered with a sudden tug of loneliness. Unable to resist the temptation, Maddie went across to peer through the window that looked out on the trailer. Ross was sitting cross-legged on the ground. Smoke curled up from some kind of barbecue, and he was playing a guitar—actually playing a guitar!—as if everything was okay, when he had disrupted her whole life.

Suddenly, as if aware of her gaze, he looked up, meeting her eyes from across the distance. Maddie froze, her heart hammering in her chest, and then she turned abruptly away. It was certainly going to be a long three months if this was what she was going to have to put up with every night.

Maddie made herself a cup of coffee and sat down, cradling the mug in her hands as she went over the day's events, remembering how the talk had turned to horses. Finding out that Jake Munro's mare, Carlotta, was in foal to Grand Design had brought her past tumbling back and reminded her sharply of Alex.

They'd nicknamed the colt Dennis, though his real name was Grand Design. He had been one of her three charges at Apple Tree Stud, and it was Alex who had persuaded his dad that she would be able to handle him. She'd struggled with Dennis at first and been bitten more than a few times, not to mention the episode when he dumped her on the gallops. But eventually her resilience had paid off. She and Dennis had reached an understanding, a companionship that had lasted until he'd been sold. She'd cried all night when he left, and the stable yard at Apple Tree had felt empty without him.

Suddenly realizing she was sitting in darkness, Maddie got up and headed for the switch, hesitating as she passed the window. She could see lights on in the trailer, and then the door opened, light silhouetting the man's big frame. What was he doing here? Why was he all alone with his little girl, and was this really his cottage? He must have found out that she had every right to be here or else he'd have been over here to give her a hard time again. His demeanor had unnerved her at first, but she didn't feel quite so threatened now. The way he was with Meg...and Red, who never seemed to leave his side, made her believe he couldn't really be a bad person...could he?

The little girl had looked so much like him when she'd questioned Maddie about her taking their house, so fierce and angry. Perhaps tomorrow she should try to talk to her again. If they were

going to be living next door for the next three months, then she didn't like the idea that Meg thought she was mean.

She'd have an early night, she decided, to build up her strength for tomorrow. She was so relieved by how well she seemed to be getting along with everyone at Sky View. Then again, they were all so welcoming and easy to talk to...even Jake Munro, who she'd been a bit in awe of.

The memories of Grand Design, and consequently Alex, were harder to deal with. Mostly, nowadays, she was glad he hadn't hung around to see her like this, but she couldn't help but reminisce, back to those amazing days when they were a golden couple in the racing world.

Steeling her mind, she went into the kitchen, forcing herself to concentrate on the basic task of making something to eat. Those times were gone, and reflecting on them would just depress her. At least she had hope in her heart again. That just had to be enough...for now.

CHAPTER SIX

MADDIE WOKE EARLY, discovering immediately that she'd really overdone it the day before. She could hardly manage to climb out of bed, and her left leg refused to do as she told it. Knowing the cause, she fought off the panic attack that threatened, fixating on breathing deep and slow. It was ages until she needed to get ready for work, and experience had taught her that she just had to stay calm and be patient.

Sitting on the side of the bed, she began her exercises, wincing in pain but determined to be ready to leave for Sky View by eight. Slowly, her muscles eased and her coordination improved enough for her to get dressed and go down the steep, narrow staircase.

As she passed through the hallway, she heard a gentle tapping on the door.

"Hello?" she called as she slowly went to open it. Surely, her unwanted neighbor would have made a lot more noise, but who else would be knocking so early in the morning?

Meg stood outside. "No dog?" Maddie asked, smiling.

Meg shook her head. "He's gone with Daddy."

"What!" Maddie frowned. "He left you alone?"

Meg stepped across the threshold. "No, he's just doing the chickens and letting Red go for a run... Do you have any milk?"

Maddie stifled a smile. "Have you run out?"

"Daddy forgot to buy some yesterday. He says it doesn't matter, but he loves to have a cup of coffee with his breakfast. I thought you could let us have some, but don't tell him or he'll be cross."

It obviously hadn't occurred to her that her dad might wonder where the milk came from, but Maddie didn't point that out. Hopefully, Ross would just let it lie.

"What's your full name, Meg?" she asked.

"Megan Noble," Meg said proudly, tossing back her long chestnut curls. "And my dad is called Ross Noble."

"That's a lovely name." Maddie smiled. "I've got plenty of milk, you can have as much as you like."

"And you won't tell Dad?"

"I won't tell your dad. Here, we'd better hurry if you want to get back before he does."

As they walked into the kitchen, Maddie felt Meg's hand curl around hers, and warmth trickled through her veins. "So we're friends now, are we?"

She was rewarded by a wide, heartfelt smile. "If you want to be," said Meg.

"I want to be," Maddie repeated. "And I won't tell your dad about the milk."

By the time Maddie finally set off for Sky View, having taken her medication and eased her objecting limbs into submission, she felt much more ready for the day. Her previous preoccupation about the man in the trailer seemed less important, and she barely gave him a thought as she headed for her car. She wasn't afraid of him anymore, and as far as she was concerned, his presence at Rose

Cottage was just a nuisance she'd have to endure for a while. When he suddenly appeared beside her, however, her heart sped up, pounding in her throat.

"I'd rather you didn't encourage my daughter if you don't mind," he said curtly. "I can't have her disappearing all the time."

Rankled, Maddie stopped in her tracks. "Then maybe you should keep a better eye on her. I haven't 'encouraged' her and don't intend to. If you don't want her around me, then maybe you should go somewhere else and come back when I've moved out."

"In three months, you mean," Ross snapped, his dark eyes narrowing.

Maddie nodded, raising her eyebrows. "Ah, so you've spoken to the rental agency."

"I may have...but I still intend to camp here until you leave."

Maddie set off toward her car again, walking carefully. "Well, that's your prerogative, but if you think you can frighten me off, I'm afraid you're wasting your time. I'm a lot tougher than I look."

Ross paused, and automatically she stopped, too, standing tall and holding his gaze in defiance. A sudden softness in his eyes took her by surprise, but then his mouth set into a grim line. "I don't doubt it," he said quietly.

Maddie turned away abruptly, more uncomfortable with the momentary flash of warmth and perhaps admiration than she was with his more familiar display of anger. "Now if you don't mind," she insisted, "I'm late for work. Oh, and by the way..."

He frowned. "By the way what?"

She stuck out her chin, looking him straight in the face and hoping he didn't notice the slight trembling in her limbs. "Meg only came to ask for milk—for you—so maybe you should appreciate her a bit more instead of trying to get at me."

To her relief, Ross stepped away from her without another word, but the expression in his eyes spoke volumes. He didn't like her, and she didn't like him.

"Don't worry," she called after him as he strode away. "I'm quite happy to keep my distance...from you, anyway. If Meg chooses to seek me out, though, I'm not going to turn her away."

* * *

MADDIE DROVE TOWARD Sky View, her mind totally taken away from the spat with her unpleasant neighbor by the sheer beauty of her surroundings. The rugged fells loomed against a pale blue sky shot with gray and silver, and rough fell sheep roamed way up toward the skyline, tiny white dots against the greens and browns of grass and bracken on the lower slopes, tucked in cracks and valleys to seek protection from the wild winds that must surely blow here in the winter months. Today, however, it was calm and balmy, both colorful and gray, a stark contrast that made the landscape seem even brighter.

And way, way below her as she climbed toward Sky View, she could see the lake glittering in the morning sun, a paradise for boats and wildlife.

Determined to forget about Ross Noble, Maddie started to hum, feeling happily hopeful as the roofs of Sky View Stables appeared just ahead.

Maddie pulled up at the end of the yard instead of driving right to the house, needing the fix of horse sights and smells she'd get by walking through the stable yard.

A heavily pregnant gray mare appeared through the front gate, led by Jake.

"Morning," he called.

"Morning," she responded. "This must be Carlotta."

When he stopped for a moment, she placed her hand on the elegant arch of the mare's neck, drinking in the feel of her and desperately wanting to press her cheek against the silky softness of her coat. "She's just as beautiful as the painting of her you have in the house," she said.

Jake smiled proudly. "She's going to have a beautiful foal, too, I reckon."

"If it's to Grand Design, then it sure will be," Maddie agreed, already biting her tongue as the words spilled out.

Jake looked at her curiously.

“At least...if his photograph is anything to go by,” she managed.

“Yes...he’s a handsome horse,” he agreed. “I don’t reckon the picture you saw will have done him justice. Anyway, I’m off to turn her out. Cass will be waiting for you.”

“Of course... I’d better hurry,” Maddie cried, glancing at her phone.

After she returned from dropping Robbie off at school, Maddie settled into her daily tasks, enjoying the routine. It gave her confidence to feel that she was actually useful here at Sky View. That had been her worst fear—that she’d find she didn’t have enough strength or coordination to do what was required of her. Deep down, she worried that Cass knew more about the extent of her injuries than Maddie had let on and was giving her an easy workload. No, that wasn’t possible, she realized as she began setting the table for lunch; there was no way anyone here could know how badly hurt she had really been.

“By the way,” Cass said, looking up from the stove. “You’ll need to set an extra place. Bob Nelson, who owns the sire of Carlotta’s foal, is stopping by. We have another filly that we might put to one of his stallions, and we wanted him to take a look at her.”

“Grand Design’s owner.” Maddie stifled a gasp. The past she’d tried so hard to put behind her sprang into her consciousness.

Cass nodded. “That’s right... You have a good memory.”

When Bob Nelson came into the kitchen half an hour later, chatting to Jake about his horses, Maddie half expected to recognize him and had a minor panic attack about him recognizing her. To her relief, the small, white-haired man was not familiar, and she heaved a sigh. She was there when Dennis’s new owner had come to collect him, but she’d been way too upset to take much notice of anything other than the big bay stallion. Maybe poor Dennis had changed hands yet again, and Bob Nelson was his new owner.

When Jake and Cass insisted she join them for lunch, Maddie was happy to sit down and listen to them chat about horses, although she had to stop herself from joining in on more than one occasion.

They were almost finished the meal when she noticed Bob Nelson eyeing her curiously. “Don’t I know you?” he asked.

Maddie froze. “Um...no, I don’t think so. You must have mistaken me for someone else.”

For a moment, the older man held her gaze. “I could have sworn...” He shrugged. “No matter. As you said, I must have made a mistake.”

“Seems you must have a double, Maddie.” Cass smiled.

Maddie stood hurriedly, almost losing her balance in her rush to start clearing the table.

“She knows all about Grand Design,” Jake remarked. “Through your dad, right, Maddie?”

“Er...yes, kind of,” she mumbled, pushing crockery into the dishwasher. “I just know that he’s beautiful but cantankerous.”

“Well, that is a good description of him,” Bob agreed.

As the older man went to leave with Jake ten minutes later, Maddie glanced across at him and caught his gaze again. The puzzled frown on his face unnerved her slightly. She’d never set out to lie to anyone...and she hadn’t, not really. She was just keeping some things to herself until the time was right. If Bob Nelson did recognize her, then she would come across to Jake and Cass as deceitful, and that was the last thing she wanted.

When Maddie set off later that afternoon to pick Robbie up from school, she felt positive and lighthearted, absorbing her surroundings with a new awareness. Fell sheep with black faces and wild eyes scattered off the road as she rounded a corner, trotting off through the bracken just as the sun burst from behind a cloud, casting its beam across the fell side so that its greens and grays took on a mantle of gold. Why was it, she wondered, that the sky here seemed so much bigger than anywhere else? A hum bubbled through her lips and she smiled to herself, feeling that she’d somehow turned a corner, and this time it was in the right direction.

She flexed her legs as she drove along. Unbelievably, they felt less tired and painful than they had yesterday, and she was definitely more coordinated. Her back still ached with nagging consistency, but she knew that was something she just had to learn to live with. Balance, stamina and coordination were what she needed if she was going to ride again. Finally it felt as if her goal might be within her grasp.

She arrived at the school way too early and pulled into the parking lot outside the old-fashioned gray stone building, settling back into her seat to wait. With new hope also came the memories of what she'd lost, and for once she allowed them to crowd back into her head. Starting with the morning she tried not to think about, the day her life was turned on its head.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SHE WAS LATE for work, thanks to Alex. They'd had another of their arguments again last night; if it wasn't a disagreement about their wedding plans, then it was usually over what he called her "lack of business sense." Sometimes Maddie felt as if he was trying to groom her for a future as a trainer's partner rather than his wife. Well, she was definitely not going to give up racing or working with the horses hands-on, no matter what he thought.

Last night, she'd still been upset about Dennis, and it had irritated him. It was always hard to let go of a horse you'd cared for constantly, though, and Dennis, aka Grand Design, was extra special. She'd been bitten by him, kicked by him and dumped on the gallops more than once, but then they'd made their breakthrough and suddenly found trust.

She'd insisted on leading him up the ramp when the new owner had come to collect him two days earlier. It had been such a mistake, though, letting Dennis believe, she felt, that she'd broken that precarious trust. That was what she'd been upset about the night before, but Alex could be so cold sometimes. Horses were just a means to an end in the racing industry, he insisted, there to win races and make money. In his eyes, a reflection of his dad's attitude, sentiment had no part to play in the business. You cared for the horses to your best ability, fed them the right food, gave them the best training, helped smooth out their problems, but getting too attached, as Maddie did, was, according to Alex, a mistake.

She'd left him in a temper, she remembered, and woken up the next morning bleary-eyed with the tears she'd shed. They had been hailed as racing's golden couple, both talented jockeys with a bright future. It was expected that Alex would one day take over from his father, and Maddie would be by her husband's side, supporting him as Alex's mum, Joan, had done for his dad. But it hadn't felt like that to her then; it had felt as if he was trying to take control of her, even of her emotions, telling her how to feel and how to think and what to do.

With a gulp of apprehension, Maddie allowed herself to remember what had happened next...

She'd slept in past dawn, waking in a panic because she was late. Pulling on her jodhpurs and a thick, pale blue sweater, she had grabbed a packet of crisps as she passed through the kitchen before jumping on her bike. She was intent on getting to the yard before Scott, the head lad, noticed her absence. Her engagement to the boss's son held no clout with him, and she respected that.

A late February frost had brought a sparkle to the gray surface of the lane. Even the few brave daffodils, whose glorious yellow flowers heralded the approach of spring, had glittered. Maddie could almost feel the sharp, clear morning air on her face as she relived the moment.

Her thighs had ached with effort as she pedaled up the hill from the village, and then she was freewheeling down the other side, her breath coming more easily as her bike increased speed.

It was as she approached the bridge that she saw it. The lane narrowed and she slowed her pace just as the black SUV came roaring into sight over the bridge, traveling way too fast. For a moment, she'd frozen. There was nowhere to go. Pulling on her brakes, she'd veered right, seeing the white face of the driver as he tried to avoid her. Oblivious to the ice, he'd stood on the brakes, but the big vehicle had just carried on, slithering sideways on the slippery road. She would never forget the horror that filled her whole body, the sheer, tortured fear that took away her breath and rendered her helpless.

When the vehicle hit her, strangely there was no pain. She felt a thud, heard the crack of bones unable to withstand the onslaught, felt the fuzziness inside her head that distanced her from the scene...and then came the blackness.

* * *

“MADDIE...MADDIE!”

It was only when Robbie pulled the car door open that she heard him. “Sorry,” she said, blinking. “I was miles away.”

“I won, Maddie!” he cried, jumping up and down.

“Won what?” she asked.

He flashed her a puzzled glance. “The drawing competition—you know, you helped me with it yesterday?”

“Of course... Sorry, Robbie, that’s brilliant. Your mum and dad will be so proud of you.”

“She is kind of like my mum, isn’t she?” he said thoughtfully, climbing into the backseat. “Cass, I mean... It’s like I’ve got two mums.”

“You can never have too many mums.” Maddie smiled. “Now tell me what they said about your drawing.”

Robbie’s excited chatter about his teacher’s glowing praise for the galloping horse he’d drawn, and his detailed account of the other contestants’ entries, took Maddie’s mind well away from her memories of the fateful morning that had realigned her hopes and dreams.

When they got back to Sky View, Robbie relayed the whole story again for Cass, who then asked Maddie if she would take him out to the yard to see his dad. Robbie’s dog, Choco, followed them, bouncing around in excitement.

They found Jake in the barn, feeding some youngsters. Maddie drank in the sweet aroma of hay, running her eyes over the six yearlings that were diving into buckets of feed. The environment brought such a heavy weight of memories that she felt the sudden rush of tears.

“Are you okay?” Jake asked, noticing her expression.

“Yes,” she said, forcing a smile. “Just a bit of hay fever, I think.”

“Best get back into the house, then,” he suggested. “Cass will have some antihistamines, I’m sure. Rob can stay and help me.”

Maddie walked slowly back across the yard, stopping by each stable to gently stroke the head of every inmate. So many beautiful horses—grays and bays and chestnuts, all eager for attention. The horses at Sky View were happy horses, she decided, wondering how long it would take before she felt confident enough to try riding one. It annoyed her that she had to wait until a quiet one came into the yard, but that was something she just had to accept. Planting a determined smile upon her face, she continued to the house. If she had to pretend to be a novice, then that was what she would do.

“You may as well head off,” Cass suggested when Maddie stepped into the kitchen. “Thanks for picking Robbie up.”

“It’s what you pay me for,” Maddie said, grinning.

“Yes, but you’re so good with him.”

Maddie shrugged. “Well...he’s a great little boy.”

“He certainly is. Oh, and by the way, I forgot to tell you earlier, but you may as well have tomorrow as your day off. I’m at the hospital and Jake is coming with me. We’re going out to lunch after, and Bill is away for the day, too, so there’s not much point in your coming in. Is that okay?”

“It’s fine by me,” Maddie said. Truth was, the thought of having a day to rest and build up her strength was very appealing. She’d done more in the past few days than she had in over eighteen months.

“So I guess I’ll see you on Friday, then. Can you get here in time to take Robbie to school?”

“Of course,” Maddie responded, pulling on her jacket. “And have a nice day tomorrow... I mean, not at the hospital of course, but...”

“I know what you mean.” Cass laughed. “Doctors’ appointments are never much fun, but we’ll have a nice lunch somewhere and then we’re going to go and buy a stroller... Wow, I never thought I’d hear myself say that.”

“Well, it’s a bit too late to change your mind now,” Maddie said, glancing meaningfully at Cass’s belly. “And you’re going to need a stroller pretty soon.”

Cass grimaced. “Three weeks tomorrow, actually, and I’m definitely not looking forward to it. I mean, I’m looking forward to being a mum, of course—it’s just the birth that worries me.”

Maddie placed a reassuring hand on Cass’s arm. “Thousands of people have babies every day, so surely it can’t be that bad. And if it was, then why would anyone have more than one?”

“Thanks, you’re right. I’m just being stupid. I’ll see you on Friday, and you can give me your opinion on my beautiful brand-new stroller. I’m thinking of getting something really outrageous.”

“Good for you.” Maddie smiled again. “And have a nice day tomorrow.”

As she walked toward her car, Maddie felt a sudden lurch of regret. If things had been different, she could have been like Cass right now, married to a man she loved, satisfied and secure...maybe even pregnant, too. No...she definitely wouldn’t be pregnant; she’d still be riding in races and living her life.

Alex’s face came into her head, an image of him on the day he’d told her he had met someone else, and she knew her sense of regret was misplaced. Relief was what she should be feeling, for escaping from a relationship that would only have ended in heartache anyway. If Alex hadn’t left her then, he would have done it later when she’d become dependent on him again. Despite her brave words to herself, however, the only feeling that consumed her as she set off for Rose Cottage was despair. Riding a horse again felt so very far away, and that was all that was keeping her going.

CHAPTER EIGHT

EVER SINCE THE ACCIDENT, Maddie had made a conscious effort to keep her memories at bay, trying not to think too much about before, when every day was packed with exhilaration and adrenaline. In fact, she sometimes felt as if her whole life was in two separate parts—before and after. She tried to focus on the after, because before was too painful to bear. Finding out that Grand Design was stabled not too far away, however, had broken down her carefully nurtured barrier. The link with the stallion was just too strong to ignore.

Somehow, she decided, as she climbed awkwardly into her car and started the engine, she was going to try to see him, just to make sure he was happy and well cared for. She didn’t yet know how to go about it, but at least she had met his new owner, so that was a start.

As she drove back to Rose Cottage, Dennis was all she could think about. His power when she rode him up the gallops, and the way he used to nuzzle her, putting his nose over her shoulder to draw her back when she tried to leave him...happy memories from another life. She didn’t even notice the gorgeous scenery all around her, or think about the man in his dratted trailer, until it came into view. With a heavy lurch, her mind came back into the present.

The little girl, Meg, was outside playing with Red. Her chestnut hair had been braided and tied with brown ribbons, Maddie noticed, and she wore a bright blue dress with flowers on the front. Who could have done her hair? Surely not her dad; he didn’t have a sensitive bone in his body. Perhaps he had a girlfriend. Though if he did, then Maddie certainly hadn’t seen her around...not that she cared, of course. It just bothered her that he’d been so harsh this morning, ordering her to stay away from his daughter as though she was a bad influence or something. Oh, he had pretended it was just for the little girl’s safety, to discourage her from wandering off, but she wasn’t stupid. She didn’t like him, and he didn’t like her—that was the crux of it. Well, it wasn’t her fault that she’d paid good money to rent the cottage.

When Meg saw Maddie’s car pull up, she ran toward it, waving madly, braids bouncing on her shoulders and skinny legs flying. Red ambled along behind her, keeping guard.

Maddie clambered out into the late-afternoon sunshine, gradually easing her limbs into position as Meg came to a stop, a huge smile on her bright little face. Maddie hesitated, wondering whether she should send the girl back home, but her doubt lasted no more than a second. If Meg wanted to see her, she was only too happy to oblige. Never mind Ross Noble and his irritating arrogance.

“You look nice,” she said. “Have you been somewhere special?”

Meg shook her head, and one braid slid from its confines. “We’ve just been practicing for when I start school after summer.”

Maddie nodded. “That’s a good idea. You need to look nice and tidy for school.”

“They keep falling out, though.”

“What, you mean your braids?”

“Daddy says he can’t get them tight enough.”

“So your dad actually braided your hair and put the ribbons in and everything?”

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