

Walking Walter



KAITLYNN
CLARKSON

WALKING WALTER

FARMER IN A FIX BOOK 5



KAITLYNN CLARKSON

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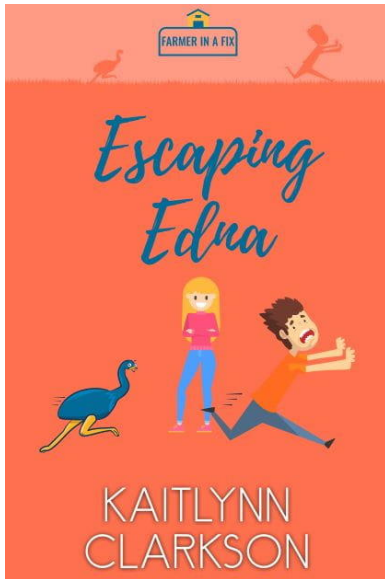
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CHAPTER 1



“You’re *what?*” Emma Raymond looked across the table at her parents in disbelief. Had they really just told her they were planning to live in Switzerland for the next twelve months?

“Yes, it’s all happening rather quickly,” Cynthia said. “We’re leaving in two weeks.” She pushed her silver hair back off her forehead. “There’s lots to do before we leave.”

Emma shook her head. It was all so sudden. “Is this because Lauren is pregnant?” she asked.

“Not entirely,” Phillip replied, his brown eyes serious. “We’d always planned to do it once we retired. Lauren’s pregnancy has just brought our plans forward a little.”

Emma stared at her father, still dazed. “This is so sudden,” she managed. “It was bad enough when Lauren married a Swiss guy who whisked her off to another continent, but now you two as well?”

“We love Switzerland,” her mother defended herself. “And twelve months really isn’t all that long. We’ll be back before you know it. Besides, we’d planned to go over when the baby was born for a few months anyway. This way, we’ll be around for the birth and can stay on and help out as we’re needed. Johan’s family don’t live

close, so having us around will be good if they need help.”

“I know, but ...” Emma’s voice trailed off. “What’s going to happen to the farm?”

“We’ve leased the land to the farmer next door,” Phillip explained. “He’s going to use it for a crop or two and pasture for his cattle.”

“What about your cattle?”

“We sold them. The buyer came and took them away yesterday, so we’re almost free. Your brother is going to take the dog and cat for us because the kids love them, so they’ll be in good hands at his house.”

Emma thought about Megan and Joel and their two daughters and young son. “Yes, I’m sure they’ll take good care of your pets,” she agreed. “But what about Walter? Are you going to sell him?”

Her parents looked at one another and Emma instantly caught the wary look between them. “We were,” her mother said slowly.

“Not Walter!” Emma exclaimed in dismay. “You can’t sell Walter. He’s family.”

Cynthia shook her head. “When we told Joel and the kids about it, they begged us to keep him so they can ride him when they visit. We must be crazy,” she finished.

Emma pictured the fat little chestnut pony with his shaggy blond mane and habit of escaping to graze around the house. He liked to be near people, and he was a sweetheart. Even though he was too small to ride, she

loved him. He'd been her first pony, and although he was well into his teens now, there was still plenty of life left in him.

"I can't believe you wanted to sell him," she fumed at her parents.

They exchanged another look. "I know he was your first pony, but let's be realistic, Emma. No one rides him anymore, and it would be better for him to go to a home where some kid will love him the way you did."

"But he belongs with us," Emma said stubbornly. "I can't see how you could think otherwise."

Phillip sighed and ran his fingers through his graying dark hair. "We're retired now. And you can't exactly take a pony with you when you want to see the world."

"No, but ..." Emma had run out of arguments. "He belongs in the family," she finished.

"Well, if you'd allowed me to speak, I was about to tell you what we'd decided to do with him," Cynthia said.

"All right, I'm listening." Emma leaned back in her chair and fixed her eyes on the white clock on the opposite wall. It had been there for as long as she could remember.

"Walter is going to a boarding farm until we return. After that, we'll decide what happens to him in the long term. We don't know what we're going to do with the farm yet, but let's get through the next twelve months." Cynthia put her hand on Emma's arm. "Would you like to come with us to check out the boarding farm? The

man who runs it said you're welcome to visit Walter whenever you want."

"Alright, I'd like to make sure he'll be well cared for there," Emma said. She flicked her long, dark ponytail over her shoulder. "If he's not ..." she let the thought trail off. "I'll take him away from there myself," she finished.

"We want to know that he's taken care of too," Phillip assured her. "Contrary to what you think, Emma, we do care about him, and it's our responsibility to ensure that he receives the care he needs while we're gone."

"We must be crazy," Cynthia said again. "It's nuts to pay board for a horse that no one rides anymore."

"But he's family," Emma repeated. "We can't just let him go to strangers who mightn't love him or care for him the way we do."

"He's fat and lazy," put in Phillip. "Maybe the boarding farm will exercise him and whip him into shape."

Emma just shook her head. In the space of a few minutes, her parents had upended the childhood world that had been so familiar to her, and as much as she wanted them to enjoy their retirement, she wasn't sure she was ready for them to leave their home near Granville entirely. Ohio was a world away from Switzerland.

A few days later, Emma pulled her truck to a stop in front of the stables at the boarding farm. "This is nice," she said appreciatively, looking around at the neat

buildings, white fences, and large, white farmhouse a short distance away. “Someone has taken a lot of care to make sure this place looks well-loved.”

“Let’s hope that means they will also take good care of Walter,” Phillip agreed as he got out of the truck and went to the horse trailer at the back.

“Hello there!” someone called.

Emma looked up to see a man approaching them. He walked with the easy gait of someone who was used to riding horses, and he was wearing jeans, boots, and a plaid shirt that fitted neatly around his broad shoulders. He lifted his hat and smiled a greeting, and she could see that he had dark, wavy hair, brown eyes, and even, white teeth. He appeared to be around her age, and Emma blushed as she realized she was scrutinizing a man she’d never met.

He approached and held out his hand to her father.

“You’ve brought Walter, I see,” he said as Cynthia led Walter toward them from the rear of the horse trailer. “I’m Will McInnes.” He shook Emma’s hand, and she noticed that his hand was muscular, his grip firm.

“I’m Emma,” she said, hoping her voice didn’t sound as shaky as she felt.

Will turned to Cynthia. “This little guy wasn’t quite what I was expecting,” he said. “But never mind, we take them in all shapes and sizes here.”

He grinned, and Emma thought he was possibly the best-looking man she’d seen in her life. She blushed

again at the absurdity of such thoughts and turned to fuss over Walter, hoping that Will hadn't noticed her reaction to him.

Phillip cleared his throat. "Well, we're pleased you can look after him while we're gone. He's too fat, so he'll need regular exercise. It's the only way we can keep his weight down."

Will's face fell. "I'm really sorry, guys," he said. "I was expecting a bigger horse that we could ride. Walter will need to be walked, and we can't offer that service. We don't have time. I'm really sorry."

Phillip and Cynthia looked at one another in dismay.

"But ... but we were counting on it," Cynthia protested weakly.

Will lifted his hat and ran his hands through his hair nervously. "If ... if you could find someone who can walk him regularly, I'd be happy to reduce the cost of his board," he said.

Silence fell as they thought about the problem.

"I could walk him," Emma spoke up at last. "I know it's not ideal, but ..."

"You?" Cynthia asked in surprise. "But you're already so busy with your work. How will you find the time?"

Emma shrugged. "I'll just have to come early in the morning or after I finish work," she said. "That's if it's alright with you, Mr. McInnes?"

“Please, just call me Will.” His smile was disarming, and Emma felt her knees go weak.

I'll call you anything you want.

She was glad he couldn't read her thoughts and was annoyed at herself for allowing him to have such an effect on her.

“Of course, you can come whenever you want,” he assured her. “I don't restrict my clients' access to their horses. I'll be here if you need me, or if I'm not, one of my staff should be here during business hours.”

“Thank you,” she murmured, looking down. “I'm not sure how often I'll get out here, but I'll try to make it regular. It will help me to stay fit, too,” she said with a laugh. “Poor old Walter won't know what's hit him.”

“Hey, he was getting exercised on the farm,” Phillip protested with a grin. “But maybe you'll take him for longer walks and go faster,” he conceded.

Cynthia turned to Will. “You can tell he's a spoiled member of the family,” she said with a laugh.

“Hey, it's great to see a pony who's been loved all his life,” Will replied. “He'll get plenty of attention here, too, don't worry. I have two staff members, and they both love taking care of the horses.”

“That's good to hear,” Cynthia replied. She looked at Phillip. “Well, that's one more thing we can cross off our list before we go,” she said.

“Mom and Dad are leaving for Switzerland in just over a week,” Emma explained to Will.

“It’s all happened a lot faster than we anticipated,” Phillip said. “But having Walter taken care of is a weight off our minds.”

“I’m glad I came,” Emma spoke up. “I was worried about him, but I can see that he’ll be in good hands here.”

Will grinned. “I’ll put him in with the donkey and ponies. They are what I call my ‘odd-bods’ because they aren’t like our other animals that get ridden every day. They kind of just hang out and look pretty.”

Cynthia laughed. “Odd-bod is a good way of describing Walter,” she said. “He’s too small to ride and his only useful purpose is to be a lawnmower, but everyone loves him.”

“I can see that,” Will said, approaching Walter slowly as Cynthia held his lead rope. He held out his hand and allowed Walter to sniff it, then reached out to gently pat the little horse’s neck.

Walter’s ears pricked, and he sniffed Will’s hand with interest, then relaxed as Will scratched him behind the ears.

“He loves having his ears scratched,” said Cynthia. “He’s a great kids’ pony because he just loves little people. He’s so good with them. That’s one of the reasons we want to keep him because we have grandchildren who are big enough to ride him when they come to visit. They’d be disappointed if we sold him.”

“And you don’t sell family members,” Emma said with a grin.

Cynthia shot her a look, but she stuck out her tongue at her mother before she remembered that one of the hottest males she’d ever seen was watching. She felt her face flame with embarrassment at her moment of immaturity, but when she glanced up, Will was watching with a grin. She wasn’t sure if that made it worse or not.

Phillip came to the rescue. “Emma’s brother might visit while we’re away, and the kids are sure to want to see Walter. Is that alright?”

“Sure is. Just let me know when they’re coming, and they’re welcome whenever they want to come out.”

“Great, I’ll let him know. The kids were devastated when they heard we were leaving the farm because they didn’t want to lose access to Walter.”

“I can imagine,” Will replied. “I had a pony when I was a kid, and he was my best friend. I rode him every day after school, and it was because of him that I’m doing what I do now. So, I understand how they become part of the family.”

Emma’s heart lifted in relief. Will understood their concerns about caring for Walter, and she was sure he would be in good hands at the Apple Creek Ranch. She smiled at Will. “I think Walter will be very happy here,” she said.

CHAPTER 2



Will looked up from the shoe he was replacing on a thoroughbred who had come in for a spell. The horse would still be exercised every day, and he needed the shoe to be right.

Walter's owner stood in the doorway, her long, dark hair pulled back in a ponytail. She was wearing some kind of dark-blue uniform with a logo on the front that seemed familiar, but he couldn't quite place it.

"Sorry to bother you," she said. "We met the other day. I'm here to take Walter for a walk."

"Of course, you're Emma." He smiled at her and was pleased to see that she seemed to relax.

She returned his smile. "I'm not familiar with everything around here, so I was wondering if you would be kind enough to point me in the direction of my little odd-bod."

Will chuckled, recalling the conversation from several days earlier. "Just give me a moment to finish off here and send this big boy on his way, and I'll show you," he said.

"Sure."

She stood back as he patiently tapped and positioned the shoe on the big bay's hind hoof. The horse nibbled on some hay in the rack in front of him, unconcerned by the man holding his foot. Will felt self-conscious as Emma watched with interest.

"This is the last shoe," he said after a moment of silence.

"It's fine, take your time," she said. "I'm not in a hurry. I'm just interested in watching what you do because I work at a vet's. But I haven't seen anyone shoe a horse before."

He looked at her in surprise. "A vet's? Which one?"

"The Northridge Veterinary Clinic," she answered.

"What's your role there?" he asked. "You aren't a vet, are you?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm a vet nurse. Which is why my work is mostly at the clinic. The vets go out and do farm visits, but assistants don't go with them very often."

"Do you enjoy it?" he asked, interested now.

"I do. I've always loved animals, and it just seemed like a natural choice to follow that career path. How did you come to this point?"

"I started out working on ranches as a trainer, and I also did some work with racehorses. I got my qualifications as a farrier, and that gave me more options. But I didn't really enjoy working for other people when I had ideas of my own that I wanted to pursue, so after I'd worked and

saved for a few years, I bought this place. It was quite run-down at the time, so I'm still working on improvements and upgrades, but for now, it does what I need it to."

"It looks great," Emma said. "It's clear that someone loves it. I had a lot of misgivings about handing Walter over to a stranger at first, but when I saw this place, I knew he would be happy here."

Will smiled. "He seems to have settled in nicely. I think it's been good for him to have the company of some other horses, too. There was a little bit of pushing and jostling until they'd sorted out a pecking order, but they are getting along well now. I always take it slowly before I introduce a new animal to a herd because sometimes, they clash, and we don't want anyone getting injured. Walter spent a few days on the other side of the fence so they could all get used to each other, and when I put them together, I watched closely for a while to see if everyone was happy. And after the first little bit, they all settled down to graze, so I was content to leave them and just keep an eye on them. He seems to like to hang out with the donkey more than the other ponies."

"You have a donkey?"

Will grinned. "Yep, we sure do. I never thought we'd end up with one here, but his owners pay me to look after him, so I'm not complaining. He's a pet, like Walter, only his owners are away a lot and don't spend much time with him. I don't know how long they plan to leave him

here, but as long as they keep paying me, I'll keep looking after him. His name is Nacho."

Emma laughed; a delightful sound that made him want to laugh with her. "I love it," she said. "Nacho the donkey. He sounds like a character."

"He certainly is," Will replied, thinking of some of Nacho's escapades. "There's never a dull moment when he's around."

"I hope he's not a bad influence on Walter," Emma said with a grin. "We don't want him teaching Walter to bray or something."

Will burst out laughing. "I'm sure Walter would love to sing such a sweet song himself," he said. "But Nacho is the only man diva around here. I'm not sure the neighbors would thank me if any more turned up."

Emma laughed. "A man diva. I've never heard of that one before."

"You'll see what I mean when you meet him," Will said. He straightened up and patted the big gelding on the rump. "You're all done, my boy." He glanced toward the door. "Sharon! Are you there?"

"Coming!" called a voice from somewhere in the stables.

A moment later, his stablehand appeared, her long, gray plait swinging as she hurried through the door.

"Can you please take Rollie for a run to check his shoes?" Will asked. "I'm sure they'll be fine, but it's just the usual check before we let him out."

“Of course.” Sharon approached the large bay and rubbed him on the neck. “You’re a good boy, aren’t you?” she crooned, pleasure on her lined face. “And now you have new shoes, so we’re just going to check them to ensure they don’t hurt your lovely big feet.” She led him through the large doorway and disappeared.

Will turned to Emma. “Are you ready to see that minibeast of yours?” he asked with a grin.

Emma laughed. “I’m sure he does feel tiny after you’ve worked with a big horse like Rollie.”

“I have to keep remembering that the tiny ones are every bit as much of a horse as the big ones. I’ve had Clydesdales come in before, and they make even the racehorses seem small. But the little horses have just as much personality and just as many horsey quirks as the big ones.”

“It’s amazing how much variation in size there is,” Emma mused. “Dogs are a bit the same. The small ones are often the feistiest.”

“Some of the small horses are downright nasty,” Will confessed. “You’re lucky that Walter has such a lovely nature because they’re not all sweet like he is. Some of them are entirely unsuitable for kids’ ponies, which is sad because that’s their best purpose. When kids learn to love and care for horses at a young age, it stays with them for life.”

“The next generation of horse lovers and owners,” Emma mused, following Will through the gate and across

the pasture, where she could see a small herd grazing in the shade of a large oak tree.

The horses looked up as they approached, and Will fished in his pockets for treats. The animals trotted toward them, Nacho the donkey leading the charge. He was brown with white points on his face, and his long ears looked almost comical compared with the neat little ears of his pony friends. Will found the pieces of carrot he'd stashed in his pockets earlier, and before long, the animals were gathered around, jostling for their turn to receive a piece.

"Now, be nice," Will spoke sternly as Nacho flattened his ears and tried to push in on another pony. "Go on; you've had your turn." He pushed the donkey's face away so the pony could take the carrot without interference.

"Nacho is a bit of a bully sometimes around food," Will explained as Emma watched with a rapt expression on her face. He reached out and slipped a headstall over Walter's head, clipping a rope to it before handing it to Emma.

"It's easy to catch them with a treat," he said. "But if you don't want to be in the middle of a food fight, just get one of us to go with you in the future, and we'll deal with anyone who isn't playing nice."

"Thank you," Emma said. "I'm sure I can handle it, though. But I'll keep that in mind if I have problems. Where can I walk him? I think I'd rather take him out of the pasture than have the others crowding us."

“Sure. You can go along the driveway and down the road if he’s safe around cars. There’s a nice wide verge on the edge of the road for several miles, so it will be easy to walk there. Or you can try the riding trails in the forest at the back of the property. We often go there when we’re exercising the horses, just for something different. Unless they’re actually in training, of course. If it’s just exercise, we have a lot more freedom to go wherever we want and not just stick to the training track.”

“I’ll try the road this time,” Emma said. “Walter is fine around traffic. I’m sure there isn’t much on this road anyway.” She glanced at the gravel road that ran past the front of the property. “It seems fairly quiet.”

“It is,” Will agreed. “We like it that way.”

They set off across the pasture toward the gate that opened onto the long driveway, the other ponies and Nacho following them. Once they reached the gate, Will opened it enough for Emma to lead Walter through and shooed the other animals away.

“You’re not invited,” he told them. “Walter’s going for a walk.” He turned to Emma. “Will you be alright now?” he asked.

“Of course,” she replied. “I feel as if I’m taking a big dog for a walk, but we’re going to enjoy our little adventure, aren’t we, Walter?” She rubbed his ears, and Walter half-closed his eyes in pleasure.

Will smiled. “Well, I’ll leave you to it,” he said. “I’ll be around when you come back if you need anything.”

“Thanks,” Emma said, giving him a dazzling smile that made his heart skip a beat, surprising him.

She was tall and slim, with long, dark hair, blue eyes and a brilliant smile, and Will wondered for a moment if she had someone special in her life. He’d thoroughly enjoyed their conversation, and he hoped she might come to see him again before she left. He didn’t see too many lovely young women in his line of work, and it was a nice change from the men he usually saw.

Emma gave him a wave and headed down the driveway, Walter plodding placidly at her side.

But as she walked, Nacho started to get upset. He ran alongside them on the other side of the fence, his tail twitching in agitation before he kicked up his heels and bucked. The other ponies weren’t interested in his display of bad manners and wandered off to graze, but Nacho seemed sure that his friend was about to go away forever. He let out a mournful bray and tried to push his way through the fence. Emma stopped, looking around as if perplexed.

“What do I do?” she shouted over the distance she’d put between them.

Will broke into a jog until he reached her. “Sorry. I wasn’t expecting Nacho to have a moment like this.” He looked at the donkey, who was still trying to push through the sturdy fence.

“You did say he was a man diva,” Emma said with a grin.

Will was relieved that she seemed unperturbed by the problem. “He sure is. Look, I’ll try to distract him while you get down the driveway. Turn left instead of right so you don’t have to walk along the front of his pasture and put up with this great display of donkey angst.”

She laughed. “Poor Nacho. I had no idea he was so attached to Walter.”

“It might be best if you take Walter walking on the riding trails next time you come,” Will said. “One of us can show you where they are, and at least you won’t have to put up with a donkey having a tantrum.”

“What a character,” she chuckled. “Walter has found himself some colorful company, that’s for sure. Hopefully, by the time we come back, Nacho will have forgotten his tantrum.”

Will accompanied them to the end of the driveway and then fed Nacho carrots through the fence until they were out of sight.

“You’re a big baby,” he told the donkey. “Throwing a tantrum is not a great first impression on our guests,” he added, rubbing Nacho’s neck. “You ought to be ashamed.”

Nacho continued munching, and Will smiled to himself as he admitted that impressing their guests was far more important to him. Emma was one interesting lady.

CHAPTER 3

“Where are you off to in such a hurry?” Sarah Hoffman grinned as Emma gathered up her things after work.

Emma looked at her colleague and friend. “Just to take Walter for a walk,” she said lightly.

“There wouldn’t happen to be a cute guy around the stables, would there?” Sarah teased.

Emma felt herself blush. “Well ...” she hedged.

“Oh, come on, you know me. We’ve been friends for years. Do tell.”

“I don’t know if he’s even single,” Emma defended herself. “But he’s nice. And very much my taste in men.”

“Oooh, this story is getting more interesting,” Sarah said. “I want to hear all about it.”

“There’s nothing to tell. He runs the Apple Creek Ranch, which is a boarding and training facility for horses, and we haven’t spoken about anything much besides horses.”

“But he must love them, which probably means he loves other animals, too. So you have something in common right away,” Sarah persisted.

“For all I know, there could be a Mrs Cute Guy waiting for him every night in his big farmhouse,” Emma said.

“Mrs Cute Guy? Doesn’t he have a name?”

Emma rolled her eyes. “Of course, he does. It’s Will.”

“Sounds perfect,” Sarah teased. “Emma and Will. Doesn’t that have a nice ring to it?”

Emma shook her head. “You’re incorrigible,” she said, but she was trying not to laugh. “Have a good evening. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Will was in the tack room when she poked her head in to ask which pasture Walter was in since she hadn’t seen him on her way up the driveway. His face lit up when he saw her, and her heart skipped a beat as he smiled his million-dollar smile at her.

“I moved them to one of the rear pastures,” Will said. “The front one is ready for a rest. I’ll show you where they are, and you can take Walter for a walk around one of the riding trails.”

“That sounds great,” Emma replied. “I can wait until you’re finished. I’m not in a hurry.”

Will hung up the bridle he’d been oiling. “I’m only pottering around with odd jobs at the moment,” he said. “Everyone has been exercised and fed, so I’m just catching up with other things.” He grabbed a lead rope from a hook on the tack room wall and handed it to Emma. “This might be useful,” he said.

“Thank you.”

She took it from him and followed him through the stables toward the rear pastures, passing several herds of grazing horses along the way. It was summer, the grass was plentiful, and the evenings were long and balmy. The horses had the option of spending their days and nights

outside or taking refuge in one of the shelters dotted around the pastures. Some wore rugs to protect them against the chill of the evening.

“These guys all look happy,” Emma said, pointing to several horses in the corner of the pasture as they walked past.

“They have everything they need, the weather has been warm lately, and they are safe. It doesn’t take much to keep them happy,” Will replied.

“Why do some have rugs and some don’t?” she asked.

“It depends on the requests of the owners. Rugging them takes time, so if the owner wants them rugged, they take a higher-level care package,” Will explained. “Some owners have never rugged their horses and don’t see the need, so we offer it as an optional service.”

“That makes sense,” Emma said. “A thoroughbred is not the same as a hardy mountain pony who’s used to being out in all weathers.”

They reached the pasture where Walter was grazing with Nacho and the other ponies. They came trotting over when they saw Emma and Will, and Will fed them carrots from his pocket. Emma slipped the halter over Walter’s head and clipped the rope to it, and then they set off down the trail toward the forest at the rear of the ranch.

“We have a few nice riding trails in this area,” Will said as he shut the gate behind them. “This area is fenced, but you wouldn’t know it as it’s quite large, and there’s

plenty of space for riding. You can go along the creek or up the ridge or take one of the trails that cross the valley. I sometimes have cattle in these rough pastures, but there aren't any here at the moment. A farmer I know will use it later in the month, but for now, we have it all to ourselves."

Emma breathed deeply, inhaling the clean air that was fragrant with the scent of pines and other earthy, woody scents.

"This is so nice," she breathed. "I love going for a walk in the woods."

"Even better when you have good company," Will said, glancing sideways at her with his killer grin.

Her heart skipped a beat. "Well, Walter will be pleased to hear that he's good company," she teased. "He likes being the center of attention."

Will laughed. "It wasn't Walter I was referring to."

Emma felt a blush spread over her cheeks. "Poor Walter, you'll hurt his feelings," she said with a grin.

"Oh, he'll forgive me if I feed him a bit of carrot," Will replied.

"Bribery and corruption," Emma quipped, and Will laughed.

"I'm sure he won't care," he said. "Anything for a carrot and a neck rub."

"That's about what he lives for," Emma agreed with a smile.

The trail climbed the ridge and emerged from the trees, and soon they could see the valley spread out below as the sun sank toward the distant hills in the west. They could see in all directions, but it felt as if the rest of the world didn't exist. The land lay still beneath the golden rays of the setting sun, and Emma felt the kiss of a gentle breath of wind on her cheek.

"This is so beautiful," she breathed, taking in the landscape around them. "It feels like we're the only people for miles around."

"I love it up here," Will agreed. "Sometimes I bring a horse up here and just sit and watch the world around me. It's a good place to lay aside your troubles and problems for a while and be still."

Emma looked at him with new respect. "How do you find time?" she asked. "You seem to be pretty busy."

"I am busy, but it's important to take time out to recharge your batteries," Will said quietly. "I learned that the hard way."

"What happened?" Emma asked as they stood gazing at the panorama around them.

"My life got unbalanced and I got sick," Will said. "I had to learn how to balance my time and take care of my health. Getting out in nature for some downtime isn't just a nice thing to do for me. It's a necessity. Yes, I work hard, but I also have to make sure I take time out, too."

"That's a good idea," Emma agreed. "I know plenty of people who are suffering from stress or burnout who

need to do the same thing.”

“Too many,” Will said. “It helps when you do something you love. It doesn’t feel like work then.”

“I know what you mean,” Emma said. “I love my work at the vet’s. I wouldn’t want to change it for anything.”

Will glanced at her. “What about the rest of your life?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“What do you do for fun? Are you a social person or do you prefer to recharge alone?”

“I am quite social,” Emma replied. “I like to hang out with friends, spend time in nature, that kind of thing. I like to stay fit, too. Walking Walter will help with that,” she finished with a laugh.

“Especially if you come up here,” Will agreed. He glanced at the setting sun. “I didn’t bring a flashlight with me, so it’s probably best if we go back rather than tackle the trail in the dark.”

“Of course,” Emma said. She tugged on Walter’s rope and he raised his head from grazing on the grass at the side of the trail to look at her reproachfully. “Come on, Walter. *You* might be able to see well enough in the dark to get down from here without breaking your neck, but I can’t.”

Walter obediently started making his way down the trail, which looped around the back of the ridge before descending to the pasture where they’d entered the forest.

“It’s nice that it’s a loop,” Emma remarked as Will opened the gate for them to pass through. “It means you don’t have to go back the same way you went up.”

“Yes, it’s good,” Will murmured absently, and Emma looked at him sharply. Worry creased his brow, and he seemed to be gazing at a horse in the pasture on the other side of the fence.

“Please don’t tell me ...” he started, then trailed off.

Emma looked in the direction of his gaze. One of the horses was behaving strangely, pawing the ground before lying down and getting up again. It seemed to be uncomfortable, and Emma wondered if it had fallen ill.

Will put his hand to his forehead and groaned. “I had a feeling this would happen,” he muttered.

“What’s wrong?” Emma asked, feeling alarmed.

Will sighed. “That horse over there is a champion quarter-horse who was sent to us for a spell. She’s won a lot of trophies, and her owners want to use her in competitions again, but she had a big season, and she needed a rest. In that regard, she’s a typical client’s horse.” He paused. “But last week, we discovered that she’s pregnant. We don’t usually take pregnant mares because we’re not really set up for birthing here, and our skills and interests lie with boarding and training rather than breeding. I told the owners, and they were astounded. It seems it was an accidental pregnancy. They said they would try to find another facility that handles birthing, but I think we’re too late. She must have been further along than we thought. She hid it well.”

Emma looked at the chestnut mare in concern. “So, now what?” she asked.

“We have no choice,” Will replied. “I’ll have to get her to the stables and do my best to ensure she has the foal safely. I’ve attended births before, but it’s not my area of expertise.”

“I can stay and help,” Emma said quickly.

Will looked at her distractedly. “Are you sure?” he asked. “It could be a long time before anything happens.”

“I’m sure,” Emma said. “I can be an extra pair of hands if needed, and I’m not totally useless around animals.” She grinned. “I do work as a vet nurse, and I have attended a few mares with the vets in my time. I’m not an expert either, but two heads are better than one, right?”

“Alright,” Will conceded, a look of relief on his face. “The staff have all gone home long ago, and it’s only me here. Your help would be appreciated.”

There was something Emma had to know. “I know we’ve kind of kept our personal lives out of our conversations, but I have to ask. Is there a Mrs Will somewhere in the background? She won’t mind if I hang around to help?” Will threw back his head and laughed. “Oh, not at all. No Mrs Wills in sight. You’re safe.”

Emma laughed too. “Well, that’s a relief. I wouldn’t want to tread on her toes. Invade her space or anything like that.”

Will shook his head. “No. But thank you for asking. And ... are you in the same situation?”

She nodded. “Yep. Only me.”

“Well, we don’t have to worry, then,” Will said with a grin. “Not about that, anyway. This mare might be another matter.”

CHAPTER 4



“Come on, Stormy,” Will coaxed as he led the mare toward the comfort of the stables. “You’ll be more comfortable in a nice bed of straw.”

The chestnut mare stopped again, fidgeting with her rear feet, her tail swishing.

“Poor love,” Emma said, patting the mare’s sweating flank. “You must be so uncomfortable.”

Finally, they reached the stables and Will spread straw on the floor of one of the stalls while Emma held Stormy’s halter and stroked her satiny neck.

“You’re such a brave girl,” she crooned. “And soon you’ll have a baby to love.”

Stormy pressed her head against Emma for a moment, then started to fidget again.

“Take her for a little walk,” Will advised. “It will help her to deal with the discomfort.”

Emma led Stormy out of the stables into the yard, where they walked around in circles for a while until the mare seemed to calm down.

Will stood watching. “Her stall is ready,” he said. “Let’s see if she’d like something to eat or drink.” Emma led Stormy inside again, and the horse had a long

drink before sinking into the soft straw with something between a groan and a sigh. Her head drooped and her eyes half-closed.

“She wants to rest for a bit,” Will said softly. “It might be a good time for us to have something to eat, too. This could take a while yet.”

“I can make us something if you point me in the right direction,” Emma said quickly. “One of us should probably stay here with her.”

“Alright,” Will agreed. “You’ll find enough food in the kitchen to make us some sandwiches or something. We don’t need anything fancy. I just noticed that I’m a bit hungry.” He glanced outside at the darkness. “Lunch was a long time ago.”

Emma hurried in the direction of the large, white farmhouse. She shed her boots at the door and fumbled for the light switch, then padded down the hallway in her socks to the rear of the house, where a large, modern kitchen greeted her, decorated in shades of gray and white.

Trying to push aside the feeling that she was trespassing in a stranger’s home, she opened doors and looked in the fridge for things that she could use to make a meal. She pulled out bread, cheese, meat, and a few other ingredients and took them to the broad stone benchtop next to the stove, then put two mugs of coffee in the microwave. She had a feeling they would need it before the night was over.

When the food was ready, she made her way back to the stables, where a soft yellow glow spilled out of the stall into the walkway.

“How is she?” she asked as Will opened the door for her.

“She’s up again,” Will answered, taking one of the mugs of coffee off the tray she held. “Mmm, this smells good. I sure am hungry.”

They took the sandwiches, fruit and cake that she’d found and sat side-by-side on two hay bales that Will had brought into the stall opposite, where they could observe the mare without disturbing her.

“I never thought I’d be acting as a midwife tonight,” Emma said with a smile.

“No, I didn’t think this would happen, either,” Will agreed. “I thought we’d still have plenty of time to make other arrangements for this mama-to-be, but she beat us to it.”

“You know, she’d probably have birthed the foal just fine all by herself out in the pasture if we hadn’t known about it,” Emma said. “You’d have woken up to a surprise.”

“That’s true, but because I did know, and she’s under my care, we sit with her to make sure everything goes as it should,” Will replied.

“Of course. Neither of us would sleep a wink anyway, worrying if she was alright.”

Will took a bite of his sandwich. “Mmm, this is good,” he announced. “I was about to fade away to a shadow.”

Emma laughed. “That’s hard to imagine,” she said, eyeing his muscular bulk in the soft golden light. “I think it might take more than a missed meal or two.”

Will grinned at her. “Hey, I work hard, I eat hard, too. You can’t blame a man for being hungry.”

“It doesn’t show,” Emma said, then felt herself blush. Why did she have to blurt out the wrong thing?

“As I said, hard work takes care of it,” Will said easily. “I hate the time I have to spend in the office taking care of the business side of things. I’d rather be outside in the fresh air doing something active.”

“I’m the same,” Emma agreed. “I was one of those kids who was always on the go. I hated sitting still in school.”

“You must love animals,” Will observed, glancing sideways at her in the dim light.

“I do.” She took another sip of her coffee. “I always had a menagerie when I was growing up on the farm.”

“You grew up on a farm?” Will asked in surprise.

“Sure did,” she grinned. “My father grew crops and kept a few cattle. My parents have only just retired from the farm. They decided that as much as they love life on the farm, they also wanted to travel and see some other places. So when my sister married a Swiss man and moved to Switzerland, it seemed like the perfect place to begin their adventures.” She paused. “Besides, they’re excited about the grandbaby she’s expecting.”

“Sounds like the perfect excuse to leave the farm and travel,” Will agreed.

“What about you?” Emma asked. “Are your folks nearby?”

Will shook his head. “Sadly, no. My dad died when I was in my teens, and once I’d finished school, my mom sold the farm and moved to Arizona to be near my aunt and Gran. Dad was from around here, so I still have aunts and uncles and cousins who live in the area.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Emma murmured. “That must have been tough.”

“Yes, it’s not something I’d want to go through again,” Will agreed. “I know how it feels when I see young kids these days who want a dad in their lives but for various reasons, don’t have one.”

“I can’t imagine not having my dad around,” Emma said. “He’s been there for me all my life, and now, even though he’s just gone away for a while, I still miss having my parents around. I hope they don’t decide to stay in Switzerland forever!”

“Your sister might argue with you about that,” Will said with a chuckle.

“Do you have other siblings?” Emma asked.

“I have an older brother and sister,” Will replied. “My brother was almost finished with school when Dad died, and after that, he joined the Air Force. So, I haven’t seen a lot of him in adult life.”

“What about your sister?”

“She’s married with a couple of kids. You said you had nieces and nephews, didn’t you?”

“Two nieces, one nephew. My brother and his wife live in Columbus. He’s an engineer. But they love to visit as often as they can because he misses living in the country, and he wants his kids to experience a bit of country life.”

“It seems we have a bit in common,” Emma said with a smile.

“It does,” Will agreed.

The mare groaned and stood to her feet, moving her feet restlessly.

“I think she’s getting ready to deliver,” Will said as he rose and observed her closely across the walkway.

Emma rose too and glanced at her watch. It was getting late.

“You can leave if you need to,” Will said.

“No, it’s fine. I want to stay and make sure everything is alright,” Emma said, but she yawned. “Excuse me. I’m more of an early riser than a night owl.”

“Same here,” Will grinned. “We might need some more coffee in a while if we’re going to stay awake.”

They sat down on the hay bales again, closer this time, and Emma’s heart skipped a beat as she realized their knees were almost touching. Will’s brown eyes regarded her steadily in the soft light.

“Thank you for staying,” he said quietly. “It means a lot to me.”

Emma didn't know what to say. "I couldn't leave," she said. "Not until I know that everything is alright and that you're not here struggling with a problem on your own."

"Well, I would call a vet if I needed to," Will said with a grin. "But there's no guarantee that one would come quickly."

"True. They might all be out on other calls. It happens sometimes."

"Do assistants ever have to come in overnight?"

"Sometimes, if there's an emergency. We have a backup roster of on-call assistants, but someone else is on that for tonight. Most of the time, the vets handle situations alone overnight. They don't want to pay the extra wages," she finished with a laugh. "And I can't say that I blame them. It's an expensive business to operate a veterinary practice."

"I can imagine. Running this place is expensive enough." Will waved a hand around the stable. "But I love it. I couldn't imagine doing anything else."

Emma had a sudden thought. "Did you call the owners?" she asked.

"I tried, but I couldn't get them. I'll try them again."

He got out his cell phone and tried to make the call, then shook his head. "No, I still can't get them," he said.

"Well, they'll get a surprise tomorrow, won't they?" Emma grinned. "They'll have a new member of the family. Do they know which stallion might be the father?"

“Apparently, she escaped during a competition, and they didn’t find her right away, and they think that was when it happened.”

“She went off and found herself a boyfriend,” Emma laughed. “Naughty girl.”

“It was probably another competitor’s horse, so the foal might actually be valuable. The owners are trying to track down who might have had a stallion at that event.”

“I’m sure everyone will love the baby regardless of who the daddy is,” Emma replied. “Foals are so adorable.”

“They are,” Will agreed. “And we don’t get to see many of them here because we mostly care for adult horses. Every now and then, a mare and foal come to us, but not often. And we all fuss over them while they’re here. We can’t help ourselves.”

Emma laughed. “I would too.”

Will smiled at her, and she felt her heart skip a beat. “You are a lot like me in that regard,” he said. “It feels as if I’ve known you for way longer than a couple of weeks.”

“It’s the same for me,” Emma said quietly. “I feel really comfortable with you, and that usually doesn’t happen quickly for me.”

Will slanted a glance sideways at her. “It doesn’t for me, either,” he agreed. “You’re a special person, Emma.”

“So are you. I can tell by the way you care for your animals.”

He straightened up and ran a hand over his face. “My mom always told me that a good way to assess a person’s character is to watch how they treat animals. That advice has stuck with me all my life, and I’ve wanted to be the kind of person that others can trust with their animals. It doesn’t matter if an animal is valuable or simply a much-loved family pet; they all deserve the best care I can give them.”

“There aren’t too many people who think that way,” Emma said. “It’s all about profit for many people.”

Will shook his head. “We have to make a living, and there’s no getting away from that. But profit should never come before the comfort or wellbeing of an animal.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Emma said.

The conversation was interrupted by a groan from the mare, and a moment later, they could see the foal’s nose starting to emerge from her body as she lay on her side in the straw.

“It’s almost here!” Emma whispered in excitement, the thrill of watching a new life enter the world gripping her.

“We just need to stay quiet now,” Will cautioned. “We don’t want to disturb her.”

Emma nodded; her eyes wide as she focused on the mare. “Come on, Stormy,” she breathed. “You can do it.”

A moment later, the mare gave another big push. The foal’s feet slithered out and its slippery little body

followed, landing in the soft straw. Will held up his hand.

“Not yet,” he mouthed.

Emma nodded. She knew the mare needed time to rest before she got up and started getting to know her baby. It was a critical time for the bonding process.

They sat in silence for about twenty minutes before the mare rose to her feet and started to nudge the little form on the straw with her nose. Then she began to lick the tiny body, and after a few minutes, the foal responded by untangling its gangly legs and rising shakily to its feet.

Emma felt tears fill her eyes as she watched the mare nuzzle her baby. It was such a beautiful moment, and she felt privileged to have witnessed it.

Will motioned to her. “We’re done here,” he mouthed.

They rose and tiptoed down the walkway, careful not to make any noise. Outside the building, Emma drew a deep breath.

“That was amazing,” she said softly as they stopped in the circle of light radiating from the exterior light above the stable door.

“It was,” Will agreed. “Thank you for staying on. We’ll leave them in peace now to get to know one another. I’ll check in the morning to make sure the foal is feeding normally, but other than that, I think we can call it a success.”

Emma clasped her hands together. “I would never get tired of seeing that,” she said. “What a beautiful moment.”

“No matter how many times I see it, I never tire of it, either,” Will agreed.

“It was a privilege to be a part of it,” Emma said. “I can’t wait to tell the girls at work. They’ll be envious.”

Will chuckled. “Not everyone could be as quiet as you, Emma. You’re a natural midwife. I’m not sure everyone would be.”

She laughed too. “I didn’t do anything other than bring you coffee.”

His eyes were dark, his face serious. “Just being there was what counted most,” he said. “It made all the difference to have someone there that I knew I could trust.”

Emma felt humbled. “Thank you,” she said softly.

“I mean it,” Will said. “What you did tonight was special, Emma. It meant a lot to me.” He yawned. “Oh, excuse me, it’s been a long day.”

“For both of us,” Emma agreed. “I think I might go home to bed and let you get some rest, too. Morning will be here before we know it.”

Will smiled at her, then reached out and put his hand on her shoulder. “Good night, Emma,” he said softly.

Emma hurried to her car, her shoulder burning from his touch. She wondered if she would ever view the world

the same way again after this magical night.

CHAPTER 5



Will frowned as his cell phone rang for the hundredth time that day. He was tempted to ignore it and continue working on the water trough he'd recently installed, but it might be a new client, and he couldn't afford to ignore that. With a sigh, he reached for it, assuming his professional demeanor as he prepared to answer it.

But when he saw Emma's number on the screen, his heart skipped a beat, and all thoughts of sounding professional flew out the window.

"Emma!" he said eagerly, feeling goofy and breathless.

"Hey, Will," she said easily.

He was glad she couldn't hear his thundering heartbeat over the phone.

"What's up?" he asked, trying to sound cool and collected, at the same time fearing that he'd failed miserably.

"I got a call from my brother this morning," she said. "He asked if the kids could come over and ride Walter tomorrow."

"Of course," Will replied. "Will you be coming with them?"

He could hear the smile in her voice. “Sure will. I want to see how the baby is going.”

“She’s running around all over the place with her mama,” Will grinned. “She gets cuter every day, I swear.”

“Have the owners named her yet?”

“They were here yesterday, and it seems they’re just as smitten as we are. They decided to call her Opal.”

“Well, I’m not sure I’d have chosen that name, but it won’t change how sweet she is,” Emma replied with a laugh.

“As it turns out, her father appears to be another prize winner,” Will said. “She has good bloodlines, so the owners are going to keep her and train her when she’s big enough.”

“A happy ending for everyone,” Emma said. “Well, I’ll look forward to seeing you tomorrow. Tell Opal that Emma loves her.”

Will chuckled. “I’ll do that,” he promised.



Will felt his heart skip a beat as he watched Emma’s car pull into the yard. Three children burst free the moment it stopped, chattering excitedly. Will guessed they were between five and nine. A tall man with dark hair got out of the passenger seat, and he could immediately see the resemblance between Emma and her brother.

“This is my brother, Joel,” she said. “Joel, this is Will. He’s taking excellent care of Walter for us.”

Joel smiled and held out his hand. “Pleased to meet you,” he said. “My children are beside themselves with excitement over seeing Walter again. You wouldn’t believe how my ears are hurting from all the chatter and noise on the way over here.”

Will laughed. “I’m an uncle to kids around your age,” he said. “I get it.”

“Where’s Walter?” cried the youngest girl. Her red hair was tied up in two plaits and her face was anxious. “I can’t see him!”

“Well, he’s not far away,” Will assured her. “How about we go to his pasture?”

She nodded, clapping her hands with excitement, and a moment later, Will found himself surrounded by bouncing children as they skipped alongside him. He led them to the small pasture near the stables, where he’d put Walter earlier that morning in preparation for their visit. The pony looked up at the sound of their approach, his ears pricking up with interest, and then with a welcoming nicker, he trotted over to the fence.

“Hello, Walter,” Emma said, her voice almost lost in the hubbub of excitement.

“Can we ride him? Can we ride him?” the children begged in unison, bouncing up and down with excitement.

“Sure,” Will agreed. “His saddle is sitting over there on the fence rail. Would you like help to put it on him, or is

that something Dad would like to do?”

“I’ll do it,” Joel said.

Will stepped out of the way and leaned against the fence beside Emma as they watched Joel showing the children how to saddle Walter themselves. A moment later, the eldest girl was on his back, gleefully trotting across the pasture while the younger kids watched enviously. Will went over to Joel.

“I guess you don’t need me right now,” he said. “When you’re ready, I’ll be over in the stables. Just bring the gear with you and we’ll store it away.”

“Sure,” Joel replied. “We’ll probably be here for an hour or two until they’ve worn themselves or Walter out. I’m not sure which will happen first,” he added with a grin.

“It’s just what Walter needs,” Will said. “Emma won’t have to take him for a walk today.”

“I’ll go do some work now,” Will told Emma as Joel turned away to watch the kids.

“I’ll stay here and do the doting aunt thing for a while,” she told him.

“I’ll be here,” he answered, giving her a look that was intended for her alone.

A tinge of pink touched her cheeks and she dropped her eyes. “I’ll find you,” she answered.

Will whistled as he walked away, giving the family some privacy. He hoped Emma would heed his unspoken invitation to join him later.

She'd been on his mind constantly since the night Stormy had given birth. Everywhere he went, everything he did, she was in the back of his mind.

You've got it bad, his mind told him, even as his heart longed to hear her voice. He wanted to tell her about the ordinary things that happened during the day because he was sure she would understand and appreciate them. He wanted to tell her how he felt about her, too, but he wasn't sure he should risk scaring her away. He valued her friendship yet wanted it to be more, and he was so distracted by it that even his staff had started to notice. Maybe it was because he'd put the chaff in the water trough this morning. Luckily, the water trough was empty, or it would've been a soggy, ruined mess. Or maybe it was because he'd booked a vet visit twice for the same horse. He hadn't exactly covered himself in glory when he'd forgotten that an important client was coming and had to scramble to be ready at the last minute, either. He was a mess, and he didn't know what to do about it.

An hour or so later, he heard voices approaching and his heart skipped a beat at the thought of Emma moving gracefully through the door, her long, dark hair swaying as she walked.

“Will. Will!”

The voice was loud and insistent and jerked him from his daydream. He saw Joel's youngest daughter standing in the doorway, taking off her little riding helmet.

“Yes, how may I help you?” he asked courteously.

Emma appeared behind her niece. “Millie has finished riding for the day,” she explained. “Would she be able to have a drink of water?”

“Of course.” Will went to the water cooler near the door and selected a clean cup from the stack. He filled it up and handed it to the little girl.

“Thank you.” She took it eagerly, gulping down the contents before handing it back to him. “I’m going back to watch Lucy and Benny finish their rides,” she said before darting out the door.

Will laughed. “What an adorable whirlwind. There must never be a dull moment in their house.”

“Never. Joel swears they’re going to send him gray before his time.”

“He seems to be an attentive dad,” Will observed.

“He loves them to bits,” Emma agreed.

Will smiled at her, glad for a moment of privacy. “It’s good to see you again,” he said quietly.

A faint blush appeared on her cheeks. “It’s good to be here,” she replied. “I was hoping to get back here earlier in the week, but work has been really busy.”

“I’m glad you’re here now,” Will said, suddenly wanting to kiss her bare shoulder. “You look great,” he added, taking in her jeans and blue sleeveless shirt appreciatively. “That color suits you. It brings out the color of your eyes.”

“Thank you,” she replied. “I like to be comfortable when I’m not working.” She glanced at him. “You look pretty good yourself,” she said shyly.

“Oh, I’m just in my work gear,” he grinned, deciding not to tell her that he’d spent ages in the bathroom that morning shaving and selecting the perfect shirt.

“I like whatever scent you’re wearing,” she said.

He was pleased that she’d noticed. “It’s my favorite,” he told her. “It always makes me feel good when I’m wearing it.”

“My favorite color does that for me,” Emma told him.

“What’s that?”

“The one I’m wearing,” she said, pointing to the icy blue of her shirt. “I just like it.”

“I do, too,” Will agreed.

Emma opened her mouth to reply, but before she could, a commotion burst through the door.

“Lucy and Benny want drinks, too,” Millie announced, skidding to a stop in front of them.

The other two children were hot on her heels, Lucy carrying Walter’s saddle in her arms. Will got them cups of water and took the saddle from Lucy.

“I’ll put this away,” he said.

“I’ll help!” Benny responded eagerly.

“I’d like your help,” Will replied, giving Emma a wink.

Benny followed him into the tack room and was about to shut the door, but Will stopped him.

“We’d better leave it open,” he said. “It gets stuck if it shuts, and it’s hard to open.”

Benny nodded and followed him to the saddle storage area.

“How old are you, Benny?” Will asked as he stowed the saddle.

Benny held up five fingers. “I’m five,” he announced proudly.

Will was about to answer, but at that moment, a gust of wind blew the door open at the end of the stables. It whistled down the corridor between the stalls and caught the door to the tack room, slamming it shut. Benny looked at him with wide eyes.

“Is it stuck?” he asked.

“Not too badly,” Will said, heading for the door. “It’s just a bit sticky sometimes. We need to fix it.”

But when he tried the door, it was more than a bit sticky. It was jammed tight. He gave it a hard tug, but nothing happened.

“Try again,” urged Benny.

He tried again, pulling on it with all his weight, but it remained tightly shut. He stopped for a moment to catch his breath and tried again, to no avail.

“I had no idea it was this bad,” he muttered.

“Emma!” he called, finally admitting defeat.

“What’s wrong?” she asked a moment later on the other side of the door.

“We’re stuck in here,” he answered.

He could hear laughter in her reply. “Stuck? What do you want me to do?”

“Push on the door while I pull.”

“OK. Pull away.”

He tried again, but the door stubbornly remained closed. “I think the wind gust must have made the frame shift a bit when it shut,” he said. “It wasn’t this bad before.”

Benny was watching with wide eyes. “Are we going to be stuck here forever?” he asked.

Before Will could answer, Millie’s voice came through the door. “You might be,” she said.

“But ... but how will we get food?” The little boy’s voice was full of worry.

“We’ll slide pizza under the door for you,” Lucy said cheerfully.

“And... and I saw a sink in there, so you can have water to drink,” Millie added.

“And you can go to the toilet in a bucket.” Lucy was getting enthusiastic. “And we’ll just have to tell your teachers at school what happened to you.”

“I don’t want to eat pizza and drink barn water and go to the toilet in a bucket,” Benny wailed.

“Girls,” Emma remonstrated, and Will could hear the laughter in her voice. “Be kind. You wouldn’t like to be stuck.”

“Where’s Joel?” Will asked.

“He’s on the phone,” Lucy answered.

“When he’s done, we might be able to get the door unstuck if he helps Emma,” Will said.

“But that might take forever,” Millie said with a hint of glee in her voice. “Maybe we should order pizza.”

“Nooooo!!” Benny’s eyes were huge with worry.

Will knelt down beside him. “Hey, don’t be scared,” he said. “We’ll get out of here, even if we have to get someone to break down the door.” He paused. “Don’t listen to your sisters,” he said conspiratorially. “They have agendas.”

“I can hear you whispering,” Millie said. “What are you talking about?”

“Nothing,” Benny shot back. “Sisters have agendas, so I’m not listening to you.” He turned to Will. “What’s an agenda?”

“It’s a plan for how things should be done,” Will responded. “But sometimes, people make plans or do things that will benefit themselves and not the other people who are involved.”

“Oh,” Benny replied. “Like when Lucy says she’s going to help me make cookies, but it’s really because she wants to eat my dough?”

“Something like that,” Will agreed.

Benny fell silent. “I don’t like agendas,” he said after a moment.

“They can be good, too,” Will replied. “It just depends on who’s making the plans and why.”

They heard voices on the other side of the door.

“Will?” Emma called. “Joel is here now. Let’s try again.”

Will grabbed the door handle and hauled on it with all his might as Emma and Joel pushed from the other side.

Without warning, the door shot open, and he landed on his back on the floor, looking up into Emma’s amused eyes. She clapped her hand over her mouth as she tried to stifle the laughter that threatened to escape, but at last, she couldn’t hide it any longer and doubled over in mirth. Will sat up. “Yeah, yeah, it’s funny,” he said good-naturedly. “I can just see the news headlines. Man gets trapped in his own stable. Wind to blame.”

Emma laughed harder. “Rescuers flatten man trapped in stable.”

He started to laugh too. “How about this? Stable gobbles up man and boy. Rescue a near-disaster.”

“Ah, thanks for the laugh,” Emma giggled, wiping her eyes. “I never expected to be in charge of a rescue operation today.”

“And I didn’t think I’d get stuck,” Benny announced, scampering past them out the door. “I’m not going in

there again,” he threw over his shoulder as he ran off. “Getting stuck is too scary.” He followed Joel and the girls through the stable doors, their happy chatter fading away quickly.

Emma held out her hand to help Will up off the floor. “I’m glad you’re not hurt,” she said, her laughter under control now. “I shouldn’t have laughed.”

Will took her hand and stood. “I don’t mind,” he said softly, still holding her hand. “It was pretty funny.”

She left her hand in his and looked at him with merriment still dancing in her lovely blue eyes. “It all ended well,” she said. “At least I didn’t have to find an axe and chop the door down.”

“Ah, I could’ve been rescued by a fair maiden,” Will joked.

She let go of his hand. “Haha, you ran out of luck. It was my brother who saved the day.” She paused. “But even if it had only been me, I would’ve done whatever was necessary.”

“And you wouldn’t have laughed?”

She grinned. “No. Well, maybe a little bit.” She paused. “Oh, all right. A lot.”

Will chuckled. “Don’t lie; you’d have been rolling around on the ground too. Laughing at my plight. In stitches over my predicament. Doubled over with mirth at my helplessness.”

“Yeah, probably,” Emma agreed, her mouth twitching as she tried not to laugh. “Poor Benny. I think the girls

had him convinced that he'd be there for life.”

Will grinned. “Poor little guy. I told him not to listen to them because sisters have agendas.”

Emma burst out laughing. “So that’s why he told them he wasn’t going to listen to them. Smart boy.”

“You have to teach them young,” Will quipped. “They need every bit of help they can get if they are to survive in a world of ruthless females.”

Emma grinned. “That’s right, and don’t you forget it. Us women are a force to be reckoned with.” She tilted her head to the side, regarding him with amusement. “It’s not every day that you get to save a man from his own stable.”

CHAPTER 6



“Hi, Camille,” Emma greeted her mother’s friend as she answered the phone. “What’s up?”

They exchanged pleasantries, and then Camille got to the point of her call.

“Walter is broken to harness, isn’t he?” Camille asked.

“Yes,” Emma answered cautiously, wondering what Camille was going to ask next.

“Oh, great. We’re looking for small ponies with little carriages or carts to take part in the fairground parade at the fair,” Camille answered. “Walter would look so cute pulling a little cart. He’d be perfect.”

“Er ... I don’t know about that,” Emma sputtered. “I haven’t ever ...”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Camille broke in to reassure her. “You don’t have to do anything much. We’ll have someone there who can help you with the harness if you need help, and after that, all you have to do is walk alongside him during the parade. It will be fun.”

“Er ... I don’t know,” Emma said again. “I hadn’t planned ...”

“Walter has his own little cart, doesn’t he?” Camille asked brightly.

“Uh ... yes. It’s out at the farm.”

“Perfect! Can I put you down for the parade, then?”

Emma felt trapped. “Uh ... I guess so,” she said slowly. “I can’t promise anything ...”

“Just be there on the day and we’ll help you to take care of everything,” Camille promised.

They said goodbye, and Emma sat back at the kitchen table with the phone in her hand. She clapped a hand over her eyes and groaned.

“What did I just agree to?” she asked aloud.

“What did you say?” Jodie, her roommate, looked up from the book she was reading on the couch.

“Nothing,” Emma said hastily. “Just ... just something I’ve been roped into that I’m not sure I want to do.”

Jodie gave her a knowing look. “You say yes too easily,” she said, then went back to her book.

Emma regarded her in silence, feeling slightly indignant. Jodie was right again, as usual. It was very annoying.



“I wish this wind would drop.” Emma scowled at the scudding clouds above the fairground and felt the cold slap of the wind against her cheeks. “It’s making Walter skittish.”

The usually calm pony tossed his head and danced around as she did her best to get the harness on him. She'd declined help from one of Camille's helpers, and the man had moved on to other matters. She wished she hadn't been so hasty in refusing his assistance.

"Hey, need a hand?" asked a familiar voice.

Emma glanced up to see Will standing there in his blue jeans and denim shirt. He'd never looked more handsome.

"Sure, I just need help getting this harness on," she admitted.

Will stepped up beside her and deftly dealt with the problem.

"Thank you." She smiled up at him. "I needed that."

"Hey, you came to my rescue, remember?" Will grinned back. "Besides, I told you I'd stop by and see you."

"You did. I was hoping you would."

"Really?"

Hope filled his expression and Emma felt her heart flutter. All Will would have to do was look at her with that hopeful look again and she'd be his, she was sure. She shook her head at the thought. *What foolishness*, she scolded herself, grateful that he couldn't read her thoughts.

"Of course," she answered, realizing that he was still waiting for her to say something. "I never know when I

might feel like performing a daring rescue,” she teased, steering her treacherous heart away from the sight of his broad shoulders and long legs.

Will chuckled. “You’re never going to allow me to forget, are you?”

“Nope. It was too funny.”

Will groaned and then brightened. “Hey, it gave me a story to tell, too.”

Emma raised her eyebrows. “Oh? About what?”

“About how a pretty girl came along and saved me from certain doom. Emphasis on the pretty girl rather than the doom.”

Emma giggled. “Oh, get out,” she said, making a shooing motion with her hand. “You’ll have everyone believing your wild tales next.”

“Wild tales?” he asked innocently. “Only the truth.”

Emma ducked her head to hide her laughter. “Well, this story won’t end well if I don’t get my butt down to the parade pretty soon. Camille will come after me, and let me tell you, she’s one formidable lady. You don’t say no to her.”

Will chuckled. “Well, we can’t have you eaten by a dragon lady. I’d better let you go.”

Emma laughed too and took hold of Walter’s reins. “Come on Walter-boy. Let’s go before Camille finds us and beats us up or something.”

“I’ll be watching,” Will assured her as she turned to leave.

Down on the parade ground, the wind was playing havoc with the preparations. Horses shied as leaves and trash whipped past, and many of the other animals in the parade were nervous. Even Walter tossed his head skittishly as he caught the general mood. Everyone was tense, it seemed, and even the brightly colored floats and cheerful band music couldn’t dispel the unease.

Emma and Walter got in line with the other ponies. There were carts, wagons, and miniature carriages, and Emma had to admit that they looked cute. Walter continued to move around restlessly, tossing his head and stamping his feet as they waited for the parade to begin. The announcer stepped up to the microphone, but before he could say a word, an explosion of sound ricocheted around the parade ground through the sound system, scaring Emma so badly that she dropped Walter’s lead rope.

The effect was immediate. Pandemonium broke out as horses panicked and ran for their lives, their handlers bolting after them with futile shouts. Dogs barked, sheep bleated, cows stampeded, and the procession broke apart, scattering all over the parade ground. Children screamed and adults ran in all directions, trying to corner runaway horses and cattle before bloodshed and destruction could take over.

It took Emma a split second to recover from the shock, and by then, Walter was far out of reach. She sprinted

after him, dodging a fleeing goat that had escaped from an upended ponycart. Bunting trailed from its horns, and its yellow eyes were wild with fear.

But Emma didn't have time to worry about runaway goats. As the mayhem unfolded around her, she desperately tried to catch up with Walter, only to be thwarted by other people or animals in her way every time she got close.

Walter continued to gallop through the mayhem, his ears flattened and his little hooves pounding the earth in terror. Miraculously, his cart remained intact, although its cargo of apples had bounced out along the way and his reins were broken where he'd stepped on them. Mud flung up from his hooves, splattering the front of the cart, and the flowers in his mane were strewn along his frantic flight path.

At last, Emma lost him when he ran behind a larger wagon and Emma had to wait for it to pass before she could follow. She stopped, out of breath and feeling desperate as she tried to see him amongst the milling bodies ahead of her, but when the view opened, she could no longer see him. Discouraged and worried, she walked in the direction he'd gone, trying to catch her breath. She noticed that some owners had managed to keep their animals calm, and she wished she had been more attentive, although she'd never known Walter to bolt before.

The mass panic started to die down, and she was grateful that the parade ground had a sturdy fence

around its perimeter. Walter would be unlikely to go far, but it was a sizable area and she still couldn't see him.

"Are you looking for someone?" asked a familiar voice behind her.

She turned around and gasped. Will stood there holding Walter's broken reins while Walter munched contentedly on a piece of carrot.

"How did you catch him?" she exclaimed. "He is such a naughty boy to run off like that!"

"I saw him coming and I was able to duck through the fence rails and grab him as he went by. And then he wanted a carrot." Will laughed and scratched Walter behind the ears. "He just needed a familiar face to tell him that everything was all right and he didn't need to be scared." He looked at Emma. "Are you OK?" he asked kindly.

"Yes." She rolled her eyes. "I just got puffed and lost all my dignity for the next three years, but apart from that, I'm fine."

Will laughed. "Hey, don't be hard on yourself. It can happen to anyone. I've had it happen to me. One moment everything is under control, and the next, I've been chasing a runaway horse."

"The horses were already nervous," Emma said. "And then when the microphone made that exploding sound, well, it was too much for them. It scared me as much as it scared Walter, and I let go of my grip on him for a split second, but that was all it took. After that, I just couldn't

catch him, partly because there were so many other people and animals in my way.”

“At least he didn’t do himself or his cart any major damage,” Will said, looking over the little cart. “Broken reins are a small matter compared with what might have happened.”

Emma shuddered. “I was worried he’d run into the fence,” she said. “I wonder what will happen now,” she added, looking around as the chaos started to unravel.

“Well, I’m sure there’ll be no parade now,” Will chuckled. “Everyone is all cross and out of breath and the animals are all still spooked. My guess is that they’ll gather up the remaining shreds of their dignity and do their best to exit the parade ground in an orderly fashion. It might take a while to get those sheep together, though.” He grinned and pointed to the six sheep, who were still running around in circles while their red-faced owner tried in vain to herd them to the gate. “The poor man needs a sheepdog. That would fix his problem.”

As if on cue, a dog bounded up to them, followed by its handler, and in moments, the dog had the sheep all bunched together and headed for the gate.

“Sheepdogs are magic,” Will said. “They are so good at their job.”

“Hey, thanks for stepping in and helping to catch Walter,” Emma remarked, still watching the sheepdog. “You’ve got the magic touch, too.”

“You’re welcome. I’m glad I was in the right place at the right time,” Will replied, reaching out to scratch Walter’s ears again. “The poor little guy was scared, weren’t you, Walter?”

“You’re a horse whisperer,” Emma grinned. “They find you irresistible.”

“I’m in the right job, then, aren’t I?” Will replied, fishing in his pocket for another piece of carrot. “They know when you love them, and it wouldn’t work to do what I do if I didn’t. It’s never just a job when you work with horses. You have to love it.”

Emma looked at him. “Are you competing later?”

He nodded. “I’ve got one of my own horses entered in a barrel race later. It’s just a bit of fun. It doesn’t really matter how we do because I’m not taking it too seriously this year. This horse is young and a bit of experience will help him a lot as he matures.”

“Well, I’ll be sure to watch,” Emma said. “But first, I think Walter needs to go to a quiet stall somewhere so he can calm down and recover from his eventful morning.”

“Sounds like a good idea. Come on, I’ll go with you and if he gets any ideas, we’ll be able to stop them before they start.”

As they headed for the stalls on the other side of the parade ground with Walter walking between them, Emma’s heart swelled with gratitude for Will’s presence. He’d saved the day and kept Walter safe.

“Hey, thanks for saving Walter,” she said again.

He glanced at her with a smile in his brown eyes. “I owed you one, remember? You saved me from spending the rest of my life in the tack room.”

She laughed. “I guess we’re even, then,” she said.

CHAPTER 7



Will held his breath as he waited for Emma to pick up the phone. He almost sagged with relief when he heard her voice. He hoped she wasn't too busy preparing for work to answer.

"Hey, Will," she greeted him. "What's up?"

"Are you free this afternoon after work?" he asked.

"Yes, why?"

"I have to do an after-hours pickup," he explained, leaning against the dark gray stone countertop in the kitchen. "One of my staff usually goes with me, but since this is after hours, I wondered if you would like to go with me instead. You don't have to do much, maybe help hold a horse or open some gates or guide me while I reverse the trailer. I could do it on my own, but sometimes it's handy to have an extra pair of hands or eyes."

Emma's response was warm. "I'd love to! Thank you for asking me."

Elation filled his heart after he'd ended the call, and he punched the air in triumph. "Yes!!" he exclaimed out loud, and his dog looked at him in surprise. He reached down to pet the beagle. "That was a win, Jack," he said.

“The prettiest, nicest lady in town is coming with me to get those horses this afternoon. Isn’t that good news?”

Jack wagged his tail and rolled over for a belly rub. Will obliged, then stood to his feet. “Lots to do today, boy,” he said. “I don’t want to get held up this afternoon.” Whistling, he headed out the door to start his day.



“This is a pretty drive,” Emma said as they headed home with the two horses on board. It had been an easy pickup; the horses were boarding for a short visit while their owners went away. Will had enjoyed the drive with Emma as they discussed their respective days while quiet country music played on the truck’s stereo.

“Even better with good company,” Will replied, aiming a sideways grin across the cabin at her.

“I’ve enjoyed myself,” Emma said quietly. “Thank you for inviting me.”

“The pleasure is all mine.” Will was about to ask if she’d like to go out for dinner sometime, but a sudden movement near the edge of the road caused him to brake hard even as he tried to keep the ride smooth for his passengers in the horse trailer.

“Oh!” Emma cried. “It’s a fawn. The poor little thing is hurt.”

Will pulled off to the edge of the quiet country road and they got out. Sure enough, the baby was standing beside the road, holding one leg off the ground. It made a

feeble attempt to escape as they approached, but Will was too fast for it. It let out a cry of alarm as he grabbed it, and he half-expected an irate mother to appear, but there was silence from the woods. The fawn squawked again as Will examined the injured leg.

“That needs treating,” he announced, looking at the injury in concern. “This baby won’t survive if we leave it here.”

Emma’s forehead creased as she regarded the unfortunate fawn. “Can we put her in the trailer?” she asked.

“Yes, we can put her in the front compartment,” Will decided. “She’ll be safe there until we get home.”

“I can pick her up in the morning if I’m organized early enough,” Emma said. “I’ll take her to a vet that does wildlife rehabilitation. Our vet doesn’t, but there’s another one in town that does.”

“Great. If you want to come with me and open the front door of the trailer, that would be helpful.” Will hoisted the baby in his arms, its long, gangly legs seemingly too large for its little body. “You don’t weigh much, little one,” he said quietly, trying to make his voice sound reassuring. “Don’t worry, we’ll get that leg of yours fixed and then it will be like new again.”

Emma opened the small door at the front of the horse trailer and Will was relieved to see that the compartment was empty, apart from several horse blankets.

“Perfect,” he announced. “She’ll be comfortable enough in there and the space isn’t too big for her.”

Emma spread out the blankets and made a soft bed for the fawn and then Will slid her gently inside. She tried to stand but fell onto the blankets, and Will quietly closed the door.

“She’ll be less stressed if we just leave her alone now,” he said. “Good work!” He held up his palm and gave Emma a high five, then they returned to the truck.

As they drove along quiet country roads through the golden evening light, Will glanced at Emma. She was still wearing her work uniform, her hair tied back in its usual ponytail, her expression content, and Will couldn’t believe that the most beautiful girl in the entire county was sitting beside him in his truck, having just helped him to rescue a fawn. It felt surreal.

Yet he’d discovered something new about Emma today. She had been so gentle and calm dealing with the injured baby, and he knew it wasn’t just her training as a vet nurse. It came from an innate well of kindness and caring within her, and he knew there was no training that could produce it on demand.

“Would it make it easier if I brought the fawn to your place in the morning?” he asked, breaking the silence between them.

Emma looked at him in surprise. “Well, it would, but I don’t want to inconvenience you,” she said. “I’d take her home now, but my place is small and not really suitable.

And I'm not sure if my roommate would appreciate a wild animal suddenly taking up residence with us."

Will laughed. "It's no inconvenience," he said. "My staff can start the day tomorrow. That's the best thing about being the boss. I can start when I want to."

"Then, in that case, I accept," Emma said with a grin. "It will help me not to be late for work. My boss doesn't like that."

"I can understand that," Will said. "You're probably his best vet nurse."

Emma shook her head. "We're a team," she said. "Each of us has things we're good at, and if one of us is missing, it makes it harder for everyone else. I like to be on time."

"Well, I'll take the poor baby to your house nice and early, then," Will said. "I have some foal formula left over from a foal I had to bottle feed once. I hope that will be all right for one night."

"It should be OK," Emma said. "I've never been asked that question before, so I don't know exactly, but I don't think it will hurt her and it will give her something to fill her little tummy."

They arrived at the farm, and Will unloaded the horses while Emma put the fawn in a calf pen in the barn. She made a bed of straw and hung a heat lamp she found in the storage room over the top. The fawn sank gingerly onto the straw, holding the injured leg out as she flopped onto her side.

“Poor darling,” Emma said softly. “Will is going to give you some milk, and you can get your leg treated tomorrow.”

She turned and walked out as Will walked in. “I’d stick around, but my roommate has asked if I can be home this evening because her brother and sister-in-law are coming over, and sometimes the sister-in-law is disagreeable. It helps if someone else is there and she’s on her best behavior.”

Will grimaced. “She sounds charming. You go; I’ll be fine now that everyone except this baby is fed and in the right place for the night. I’ll go make up the formula and see if I can persuade her to take it. I tried the local wildlife rescue organization, but the phone didn’t answer, so we’ll just stick with our original plan and take her to the vet in the morning.”

“OK. I’ll see you in the morning, then,” Emma said.

“Text me your address,” Will added. “I just realized I haven’t been to your place before.”

She clapped her hand to her forehead. “Silly me! I almost forgot that crucial little detail. Right, I’ll send it as soon as I get to my phone.”

She turned and headed for her car with purposeful strides, and Will watched her in admiration. She was one desirable woman.



“How is she?” Emma asked anxiously early the following morning as she opened the door. “Did the poor

baby make it through the night?”

Will grinned. “She did. I managed to persuade her to have some milk last night, and this morning she wanted more. I think she’ll make it as long as she gets some care.”

“I was awake thinking about her last night,” Emma confessed. “I wondered if we should’ve kept trying the rescue group.”

“Even if they had taken her, the injury is not immediately life-threatening,” Will said. “Her leg might be broken and it would claim her life eventually, but a vet would probably just say to bring her in during business hours anyway. She wouldn’t have received help any faster.”

“No, you’re right,” Emma said. “But at least she’ll get help now. Do you want to bring her in?”

“Well, it might be easier if we took her to the vet’s in my truck,” Will said. “And then I can drop you back home afterwards. Does that work for you?”

“Actually, it would.”

“Great, then let’s not stress her out by transferring her to another vehicle.”

“Do you have time?” Emma asked. “I have to do a couple of things before I leave.”

“I can wait,” Will assured her. “My time is flexible, so it doesn’t matter if I’m not at work when my employees begin. They know what to do.” He paused. “How did dinner with the nasty sister-in-law go?”

Emma grinned and rolled her eyes. “I could tell she was itching to tell Jodie off but she couldn’t because I was there. It was pretty funny.”

“I don’t understand why she would come to dinner if she’s not happy about being there,” Will said.

“She doesn’t want her husband to be lured away from her by his awful sister,” Emma said lightly. “She has to be there to keep an eye on things.”

“Well, that doesn’t sound like a match made in heaven,” Will stated. “Just as well you were there.”

He followed Emma into the cozy kitchen, where he could smell coffee and toast.

“Have you eaten?” Emma asked.

He shook his head. “Not yet.”

“Coffee? Toast?” she offered, her hand on the coffeepot.

He glanced at the gleaming toaster on the white countertop and felt his stomach grumble. “Well ... now that you mention it ... if you’re sure it’s not too much trouble ...”

“It’s no trouble.” She bustled around the small kitchen, and a moment later, placed a steaming mug of coffee and two slices of toast in front of him.

“Help yourself to sugar and cream,” she said, setting butter down.

“Thanks.”

He stirred the coffee as he sat at the kitchen counter and ate the toast, watching her appreciatively as she scurried around the living area collecting papers, keys, and other items she would need at work. Her uniform was a flattering fit, showing off her trim figure and long legs.

“Just making sure I’m ready when we return,” she explained. “I’m just lucky that this other vet opens before we do or I wouldn’t be able to take the fawn there myself.”

Will stood to take his plate and mug to the sink just as she hurried into the kitchen with a cup in her hand. They almost collided in the small space, and Will reached out without thinking to steady her as she overbalanced. Their eyes met, and Will felt the shock of recognition in hers as the connection between them blazed to life. His hand still on her arm, Will drew her slowly toward him, his eyes never leaving hers. Her lips parted as he pulled her against him, savoring the moment that he’d wanted for so long. He bent his head to hers, his eyes closed as he sought her lips with his. She dropped the cup on the counter behind him and reached up to wrap her arms around his neck, the scent of her lightly floral perfume intoxicating to his senses. His lips touched hers as an explosion of sensation ignited between them, taking his breath away.

“Is that coffee I can smell?”

The voice from the hallway ripped the moment apart. Will sprang away from Emma, sure that his feelings were

written all over his face. Emma gripped the edge of the kitchen counter, her knuckles white and her head down.

Jodie wandered into the kitchen in bare feet and a bathrobe. She drew in a quick breath of surprise when she saw Will.

“Oh, hi,” she greeted. “Emma told me you were coming this morning, but I didn’t expect it to be so early.”

“Sorry,” Will said, offering her his most disarming grin even as he hoped she hadn’t seen what had almost happened.

Jodie looked from one to the other. “Is everything all right?” she asked.

They both spoke at once.

“Never better!”

“It’s great!”

Jodie looked unconvinced. “Well, I might have a shower,” she said. “I’ll get coffee later.”

Will ducked his head and headed for the front door as soon as her back was turned. Emma followed, grabbing her keys and purse, and a moment later, they were in the truck.

Will grinned across at Emma. “Sorry about that,” he said. “I got a bit carried away.”

“We both did,” she replied, her cheeks still flushed. “That was a close call. I wasn’t expecting Jodie to be up so early.”

“But it was worth it. I wouldn’t change a moment of it.”

“Neither would I,” she said softly.

CHAPTER 8



Emma clipped the rope to Walter's headstall and led him toward the gate. She was looking forward to going for a walk on the ridge behind Will's farm. It had become one of her favorite places.

"Hey, Emma!"

Emma turned around with a smile as Will called to her from the house. She hadn't seen him when she'd collected Walter, and she just assumed that he was busy. She stopped and waited as he hurried toward her, his dog, Jack, bounding ahead.

"What's up?" she asked as Walter dropped his head to graze.

"I've been doing bookwork all day," Will said, rubbing his forehead. "I'm about to go crazy. Would you like some company on your walk?"

"Sure," she said. "If you can spare the time," she added in a teasing tone.

"I'm almost finished catching up," he said. "I deserve a break, don't I?"

"Yes, but you told me in the first place that you didn't have time to walk Walter and that's why I'm here to do it. What changed?"

He looked sideways at her with a quirky grin. “Um ... I wasn’t expecting the company to be so enticing.”

She laughed. “Don’t say that out loud! Walter will get offended that you like me better than him.”

“He’ll live. All it takes is a carrot or two and all is forgiven. He’s easy to bribe.”

Emma laughed and they set off on the trail to the top of the ridge, Walter trailing behind Emma. Will’s shoulder bumped into hers, and she snuck a glance up at his handsome profile. She couldn’t believe that such a wonderful man would want to go for a walk with her, but she wasn’t going to argue. Will was handsome, tall and strong with broad shoulders and lean hips, but he was also a man with a good heart, someone she could trust. If only Jodie hadn’t interrupted their almost-kiss in the kitchen the other day ... Will had come so close to kissing her, and she felt cheated. She had no idea what the future held, but she hoped that they would get the chance to explore whatever was between them. She sighed dreamily. Will was so close to her perfect man, and she couldn’t believe that after years of lackluster dates and half-hearted attempts at relationships, she’d finally found someone who lit her heart on fire. It was the best feeling ever.

Will almost seemed to read her thoughts. Without a word, he reached for her hand, his big and warm around hers. She could feel the rough skin on his palm, the result of hard work and the active outdoor life he led. Her heart skipped a beat as he glanced sideways at her, his lashes

long and dark against his cheek. Why had she never noticed them before?

They reached the ridge top and paused for breath. Emma dropped Walter's rope and he lowered his head to graze on the rough grasses waving in the gentle breeze that wafted up from the valley floor. Will led Emma to a log overlooking the western skyline and they sat in silence, admiring the view as the sun sank toward the distant hills, washing the landscape in gold as they watched.

"This is so beautiful," Emma said softly. "I love this place now. It's one of my favorite places to come."

"Mine too," Will replied. "I never get tired of coming up here and watching the sunset. It's a special place."

"You're so fortunate to have it on your property." Emma fell silent for a moment. "I loved my parents' farm, but it doesn't have anything like this. It's mostly flat."

Will looked at her curiously. "Have you ever wanted to live on a farm yourself?" he asked.

She nodded. "I've thought about it, often. But at the moment, I'm still saving for a place of my own, and I don't think my budget is quite ready to stretch that far. Besides, I work long hours, and I think I'd find it hard to keep up with all the jobs that need to be done on a farm, and I'm not ready to give up my job at the vet's right now. I enjoy it too much."

“Those are good reasons to live in town,” Will replied. “It shows that you’re thinking logically about it rather than falling in love with a lifestyle that isn’t practical.”

“Would you ever live in town?” Emma asked.

Will shook his head as a slow smile spread over his face. “Perhaps when I’m old, if I can’t manage farm work anymore. But for now, I love living out here.”

“I wouldn’t want to leave either.” Emma gazed across the landscape until she became aware that Will was looking at her.

“What if ... what if you were no longer single?” he asked shyly. “Would you still want to live in town?”

She blushed. “Well, that would depend on who I was with,” she said.

Will opened his mouth to say something and then seemed to think better of it. “It’s easy to imagine that the world we know doesn’t exist up here,” he said after a moment. “All the problems, all the trouble, all the myriad jobs we haven’t finished ... it’s all down there, far away.” He pointed to the valley floor.

“I know what you mean,” Emma said. “That’s one of the reasons I enjoy coming up here so much because it feels as if I’ve left it all behind for a while. And you know what? When I go back, I feel better about dealing with it. Isn’t it strange how that happens?”

Will chuckled, a low, soft sound that reminded her of firelight and winter nights. “I guess it is, but I’m not

going to complain. If the hilltop can work its magic on me, I'll take it."

Will slid closer to her and put his arm around her shoulders as they watched the sun touch the hills. She leaned into his bulk, grateful for his warmth as the breeze grew cool. They watched in silence until the glowing orb had slipped away, and Emma felt a strange sense of loss, almost as if it had taken something precious with it that she couldn't quite grasp or recover. She leaned her head against Will's shoulder and he rested his cheek on her hair as they sat in silence while the light faded over the valley.

"I guess we should go back," Emma said after a while.

"We can if you want," Will replied. "But if you want to wait until the stars come out, I have a flashlight with me. It's a nice clear night. We should see some."

"I love stars," Emma said. "We visited Australia when I was a teenager, and we went out into the country away from all the cars and city lights, and the stars were amazing. I felt as if I could reach up and touch them." "That sounds like a wonderful experience," Will said, and Emma heard the longing in his tone. "I want to travel someday, too. I haven't had the chance because I've been working on building up my business. But it's on my list of must-do things before I die."

"At the time, I didn't appreciate it as much as I should've," Emma said. "All I could think about was that it was taking me away from my friends and was sure to be a boring experience." She laughed ruefully. "I was a

brat. But now I appreciate the experience because it was a wonderful time. I got to see new places and meet people I'd never have met otherwise. I still keep in contact with a friend that I made while I was there. My parents have had the travel bug for a long time, and now that they've retired, I expect they'll do a lot more of it." Will didn't reply, just gently kissed the top of her head, and they sat in silence as the sky deepened. Emma watched the sky intently, hoping to see the first star appear, and when it did, she drew in a deep breath.

"It's as if God is switching the stars on," she said. "One moment, they weren't there, and the next, they are twinkling away as if they've been on all the time."

Will smiled. "It does seem that way. Are you a believer?"

Emma nodded. "I believe that God loves people and helps us," she said.

"So do I. And I like your thought about Him turning on the stars. I hadn't thought about it like that before, but you're right. One moment there's only the sky, and the next, a star appears. It's like a little miracle that happens a million times across the canvas of the sky, every single night."

"And we're so caught up in our lives that we take no notice," Emma mused. "No wonder we get worn out and need to recharge in nature."

"You know what?" Will asked, his arm tightening around her shoulders.

“What?”

“That’s one of my favorite things about you.”

“What’s that?”

“You know how to appreciate the little moments that bring happiness to our lives. That’s a gift not everyone has.”

She didn’t know what to say, but Will hadn’t finished.

“And I like how you understand what I’m trying to say even though I’m not very good at expressing my thoughts sometimes. I feel as if I can be myself around you, and even if I don’t always get it right, you still understand.”

“Awww, I don’t know what to say,” she responded.
“That’s so sweet.”

“It’s true,” Will insisted. “It’s a rare thing in this world.”

“I feel the same way,” Emma said softly. “I know you’ll understand even if I don’t say it well.”

Will removed his hat and drew her closer, his lips just above her temple. She felt his breath on her cheek and tilted her face up toward his, anticipation shivering all the way down to her toes. He dropped his head and his lips brushed across her cheek with the softness of a butterfly’s wings before meeting hers. His kiss was gentle at first, his lips silky smooth and firm as they explored hers. She responded eagerly as he deepened the kiss until they were both breathless, her lips tingling with the explosion of sensation between them. She closed her eyes

and allowed it to sweep her away, longing for the moment to last forever.

At last, she was forced to draw away from him to catch her breath, her heart pounding as she clung to him, suddenly feeling as if she no longer had the strength to stay upright on her own.

“Whoa,” Will said shakily above her ear. “What just happened?”

“I don’t know,” she managed. “But I’m pretty sure I like it.”

Will chuckled, breaking the intensity of the moment. “That makes two of us,” he agreed. “My sweet Emma.” He kissed her temple. “I’m so glad Walter came to live with me. Otherwise, I would never have met you.”

She snuggled her face against his chest as the stars littered the sky above them and the bulk of Will’s warmth shielded her from the cool breeze. “I’m glad, too,” she whispered. “I couldn’t imagine not having you in my life now.”

They sat in silence for a moment and Emma could hear the steady beat of Will’s heart against her cheek. At last, he stirred and turned to her.

“As much as I hate to leave this wonderful place, I have to get up early in the morning. I think we’d better head back.”

“Yes, I’m getting cold,” she admitted. “A walk will warm us up. And we’d better find Walter. I haven’t heard him munching close by for a while.”

Will stood and shone the flashlight around. Walter was grazing not far away, and they were soon on their way back down the hill. They took Walter back to his pasture as soon as they got back, and then Will walked Emma to her car.

“I’d better check my messages,” he said as they walked across the barnyard, the outdoor light illuminating their path. “I had my phone on silent mode up there because I didn’t want anyone bothering me. I have an early morning pickup to do, and I need to check if the owners have left a message.”

“Go ahead,” Emma said, still glowing with happiness. She couldn’t believe that Will felt the same way about her that she did about him. And kissing him had been such a heady experience that she was still floating on a cloud of happiness.

Will started to check his messages, but a moment later, stopped dead with a look of consternation on his face. His mouth dropped open in a silent gasp, and his skin paled beneath his tan.

Emma was concerned. “Is everything all right?” she asked.

Will was distracted. “Uh ... sure. I hope so. I don’t know.” He sounded agitated. “Emma, I have to make a call. I’m sorry. I have to go.”

He turned and spun around, walking rapidly in the direction of the house. Emma stared after him in shock. What could possibly be wrong?

CHAPTER 9



“You’ve been floating on this little pink cloud of bliss all morning,” Sarah teased Emma as they took their break at work the next day. “Don’t even try to hide it because you can’t.”

Emma shot her a look. “Really?”

“Really. Come on, tell all. You know I’ll find out one way or another.”

Emma sighed. She knew Sarah wouldn’t give up until she’d learned every last juicy detail. “I went to the farm last night,” she said. “I took Walter for a walk and Will came with me.”

Sarah pounced. “Ah, I knew it! Will, the handsome rancher.”

“Yes, that Will,” Emma agreed. It was pointless to argue.

“Is he just as handsome and wonderful as ever?”

“Yes.”

“And you kissed him?”

“Yes.”

“I knew it!” Sarah was jubilant. “And it was even more wonderful than you expected?”

“Yes. It was very beautiful beneath the stars. The perfect kiss.”

Sarah clasped her hands together, her eyes shining. “Ooooh, it’s so romantic. I expect to be a bridesmaid, you know. Wedding bells are on their way, I just know it!”

“Hey, wait a minute,” Emma protested, laughing. “This is all very new and we really haven’t discussed the future at all. I don’t even know that much about his past. It somehow hasn’t come up in our conversations.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Sarah said airily. “It only matters that you love each other and he’s the right one.”

“Well, we haven’t even mentioned love,” Emma said. “So, I have no idea what the future holds.”

“But you *want* it to include love, don’t you?”

“Of course. But I don’t know how it will work out yet. So don’t go planning a wedding just yet.”

Sarah laughed. “Only in my imagination. Oh Em, that’s so exciting! I’m so happy for you.”

A shadow crossed Emma’s heart. “Something else happened though,” she admitted.

Sarah’s face fell. “What?”

“Just before I left, Will got a message that really rattled him. He said he had to go and ran off without even saying a proper goodbye. I sent him a message to ask if everything was all right, and he didn’t answer. It’s probably nothing, but it left me feeling a bit uneasy.”

Sarah wrinkled her nose. “I can understand that. It does seem weird, but as you say, it’s probably nothing.” “Will did say he had an early-morning pickup. Maybe something went wrong with that.”

“That’s probably all it is,” Sarah agreed. “He’s probably just sorting out problems.”

“I don’t want to overthink things,” Emma said. “I’m trying not to get all bent out of shape over it.”

“No, there’s no point losing sleep over something when you don’t know all the details. It’s easy to create mental pictures of disaster when that’s not reality.”

“I know. I’ll try to get him again later and hopefully, everything will be fine.”

“I’m sure it will,” Sarah said reassuringly.



“Will isn’t here,” Sharon said, leaning on the yard broom she was holding. “He’s been gone all day and I don’t know where he is. You could try calling him.”

Emma felt her heart plummet to her boots. This was the second time she’d been out to walk Walter since that magical night beneath the stars, and Will hadn’t been there either time. Nor had he called her. Something was terribly, awfully wrong. Had Will gotten cold feet after their kiss? Had he had second thoughts about her?”

Sharon was watching her. She took a deep breath. “Thank you,” she said. “I’ll try to contact him again tomorrow. He might be around then.”

“I’ll tell him you were asking for him if I see him,” Sharon offered.

Emma smiled at the kindly older woman. “That would be great, thank you,” she replied, then turned to Walter. “Come on, my chubby boy, let’s get you some exercise.”

They walked out of the barnyard toward the rear of the property, but Emma knew there was no way she would go up on the ridge today. All the memories of Will came flooding back as they walked, and she felt as if a knife were being driven through her heart. Why hadn’t he responded to her messages? Why hadn’t he called? True, it had only been a few days, and she didn’t want to seem like an overeager puppy who couldn’t leave him alone, but it was as if Will had vanished from the planet without a word.

She led Walter along one of the other riding trails that went through the forest, sure that if she were to venture up the ridge, she would find lingering traces of stardust and Will’s kisses. Her heart burned in her chest as she recalled the tender look in his eyes as he’d pointed out things in the valley, the sound of his voice above her head as she’d pressed her cheek against his chest and the way his long, dark eyelashes rested on his cheek.

And yet, it was as if he’d only been a figment of her imagination. Had she ever really kissed the most wonderful man she’d ever met up on the ridge beneath the stars? And had it really only been a few days ago?

When she returned Walter to his pasture, Sharon had gone home and the barnyard was silent and empty.

There was no sign of Will's truck in the yard, no sound of his happy whistle as he went about his business at the stables. It was hard to believe he'd ever existed.

The following morning, Sarah noticed right away that something was wrong.

"It's Will, isn't it?" she asked as they prepared for an operation on a puppy with an injured leg.

Emma nodded, not trusting herself to speak as tears hovered close to the surface.

Sarah looked at her with compassion. "Do you need to talk?" she asked gently.

Emma shook her head, but then the words tumbled out anyway. "I ... I don't think I'm going to see him again," she choked out, tears blinding her as she fumbled with an instrument tray.

"Oh, no, honey. What's happened?" Sarah appeared beside her and slid an arm around her shoulders. "You were so happy the other day. What went wrong?"

Emma swallowed, finding Sarah's kindness almost unbearable as she struggled for control. "It's as if he's vanished from the face of the earth," she managed, at last, her voice wobbly. "I took Walter for a walk last night, and Sharon said she hasn't seen him for days. She starts early in the morning and works a full day, and he hasn't been around. She said he picked up the client's horse early the other morning, but no one has seen him since. She saw tyre tracks on the dewy grass the other morning, so he's still around, but no one knows where."

“Oh, Em, that’s awful.” Sarah’s tone was sympathetic.

Emma drew in a shaky breath. “I ... I must have done something wrong,” she whispered.

Sarah shook her head vigorously. “Uh-uh. This isn’t about you. It’s Will’s problem.”

Tears blinded Emma again. “But ... but it’s hard to imagine that it has nothing to do with me,” she said. “He literally ran off right after we’d kissed. I saw him with my own eyes. How can that *not* be about me?”

“You’re too close to the problem,” Sarah said seriously. “You can’t see the same things that I can see as an outsider looking in. Trust me, Em. I know it’s hard to see from your position, but it’s very obvious to me that something is going on here that has nothing to do with you. If I were a gambler, I’d be willing to bet money on it.”

Emma wiped her eyes. “Well, you’re probably right, as usual. My head is telling me you are, but my heart is a lot harder to convince.”

Sarah patted her shoulder. “Believe me, I’m certain this has a lot less to do with you than you think. And it’s Will’s problem, not yours. It could be anything, even something from his past.”

Emma sighed. “We haven’t really spoken of our pasts. They kind of never came up in the conversation. But I wasn’t worried about skeletons in his closet at the time. He seemed pretty straightforward and uncomplicated.”

She paused. “Thanks for listening,” she said. “It helps to get someone else’s perspective.”

Sarah nodded. “I’m here for you if you need to vent again,” she said. “It’s no fun getting your emotions jerked around like a toy on a string.” She glanced at her watch. “The vet will be in here at any moment to get started, so I’d better get on with my other jobs.”

She patted Emma on the shoulder again and hurried from the room, leaving Emma alone with her thoughts. Was Sarah right? Did Will have some problem that he hadn’t mentioned, or had he been scared off by something Emma had said or done? She just wished she knew.



Will sat in his truck in the parking lot of the hardware store. He’d been thinking of going there to grab a couple of items for the farm, but he was still sitting there, unable to move.

It had been that way for days, ever since the phone call that had brought the past rushing back with such ferocity that it had flattened him. He’d been unable to eat or sleep, consumed by the awful dread that had arisen along with the reminder from long ago.

He’d left home early that morning, unable to face questions from his employees or another day of work. He hated that. He wanted to be productive; there was plenty of work to do at the farm and he knew he would have to return to it soon or everything he’d worked for would slip away.

Yet at the same time, he couldn't focus on anything other than this savage obstacle that had reared its ugly head in his path, stealing his peace and turning him into a mess.

He'd thought he was over the past. He'd never wanted to dwell there; no one in their right mind would. At the time, he'd thought he was moving on. But now, this new development had brought something raw and unhealed to the surface, and it had knocked him off his feet. It was so unexpected, so brutal, yet he was powerless to stop it or get out of its path. He felt as if he were riding a wave over which he had no control.

It didn't help that he had no idea what to expect. Janie hadn't told him. But she'd said it was important and she couldn't tell him over the phone.

Just the sound of her voice had brought a thousand memories rushing back, accompanied by all the emotions he'd buried in the aftermath of her betrayal. He'd prided himself on being able to pick himself up and carry on, sure that he was simply strong and resilient.

Cocky and arrogant was more like it, he acknowledged to himself. How could he have imagined that he was immune to the destruction of his heart and life?

Emma sprang into his thoughts, and he felt guilty. He should have at least let her know that he was all right, but he'd been so consumed by this blow that he'd been unable to gather up his wits enough to call her or even send a text. He hoped she would understand, and he

wished he'd opened up to her about his past. It just hadn't seemed relevant at the time. Now, it was threatening to swallow him whole, and there was nothing he could do about it. He would have to wait to hear what Janie had to say tomorrow.

CHAPTER 10



Will's hands shook as he sat at the table in the Red Door Cafe. Janie had suggested meeting there for coffee, and he wondered how she'd even known where to find him. He fidgeted, paying no attention to the cheerful splashes of color around the room or the quirky décor. The clinking of china and the low hum of conversation from the other diners set his nerves on edge, and he was hardly able to sit still.

The waitress appeared around the corner of the room, and Will looked up to find Janie staring at him. To his surprise, she had a young boy in tow. He looked to be around five or six.

"Hey, Will," Janie greeted as she took the seat opposite him. The little boy sat down and looked around, but he stayed quiet. He had dark hair, brown eyes and a cute face, and Will smiled at him.

"Hey, Janie," he said, hoping his voice didn't sound as shaky as he felt. "It's been a while."

She looked more mature than the flighty young woman who'd left him for a country singer. Her light-brown hair had returned to its natural shade, and she wore it hanging loose around her face. She'd put on a few pounds, and Will thought it suited her; she'd been too

thin before. The silence stretched before them and Will felt awkward. He waited for Janie to speak; meeting here had been her idea, after all.

At last, she spoke. "I know this is hard," she began. "I didn't think it would be this hard." She fell silent again and Will waited for her to continue. "I thought you might be angry, and I was prepared for that."

Will shook his head. "That would be pointless," he said.

"But I'd have understood if you were." She raised troubled hazel eyes to his. "What I did to you was wrong, Will. I want to say upfront that I'm truly sorry for what I did. If I could turn back time, there's no way I would make that choice again."

"Where's Lenny?" Will asked, looking around.

A look of pain crossed her face. "Long gone." She dropped her eyes. "I was so stupid, Will. I hope you can forgive me one day. I was young, immature, angry, and stupid."

Will felt as if his breath were being crushed from his body. "I can forgive, but I can never forget," he said softly, suddenly realizing the truth of that statement. Forgiving had allowed him to move on, but the memories had gushed out of the place where he'd stuffed them, threatening to derail his entire life until he paid them the attention they deserved.

"I understand. It's too late for me, and I'm not here to ask for a second chance." She took a deep breath. "But I

was hoping... hoping ...” Her words seemed to catch in her throat. “Maybe it’s not too late for Cody.” She glanced at the boy beside her, who looked up at her with trust in his eyes.

Will raised his eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

She squeezed her eyes tightly shut. “Will, Cody is your son,” she said quietly.

Will froze, staring in shock at the young boy sitting opposite him in wide-eyed innocence. He had to force himself to take a breath as the silence seemed to roar in his ears. He opened his mouth to speak but no words would come out. He could see it now; the boy was the image of him at the same age.

The lad looked up at him. “Mom told me about you,” he said hesitantly.

Will glanced at Janie. She was gripping the edge of the table so tightly that her knuckles were white, and her eyes were huge in her pale face.

Will made a strangled sound. “Why now?” he choked out, a sudden surge of anger and grief flooding through his body. “Why not before now? Like ... when he was born?”

Cody drew back, a look of fear on his face. Janie put her hand on his head.

“I’m sorry, Will.” She sounded broken. “I ... I thought what we had was enough. I had a new life when he was born, and I thought it would be enough. But it ended, and then I thought we could just go on, the two of us,

and I thought it would be all right. By then, I thought you'd be angry because I'd waited to tell you, and I was right; you are angry. You have every right to be mad. But Cody doesn't deserve that. He deserves ... a Dad." She said the last words so softly that Will had to strain to hear.

"Is that why you've come to see me now?" he asked, trying to keep his tone softer this time.

She nodded. "I realized it would be unfair to deny him that. I also realize it's a huge risk taking him to meet you because ultimately, I have no say in the outcome. It's your decision. But I thought if you could meet him and see what a wonderful little person he is ..." Her voice trailed off. "I'm not putting any pressure on you, Will. What you choose to do from now is up to you."

"You already took that choice away from me for the first years of his life," Will growled, still angry. "And *now* you change your mind?"

Janie shrank back in her seat as if afraid of him, and he hated how beaten and intimidated she looked. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "So, so sorry. But I can't change the past. All I can do is try to make the future better."

He took a deep breath. "I don't know, Janie. I need some time to think about this. I can't promise anything, especially not here ..." He cast a meaningful glance at Cody, who was playing with a toy car he'd taken out of his pocket.

The waitress arrived with their order, interrupting the conversation, and Will was glad of the distraction. He

couldn't stop looking at the child who was his own flesh and blood. The boy had his eyes, his nose, his mouth, and even his hair color. How could Janie have ever imagined that she should keep his existence a secret?

Janie looked stricken but she nodded. "I understand," she said. "It's a lot to take in."

An awkward silence fell between them as Will looked at the woman who'd briefly shared his life. She'd simultaneously offered him closure and a son. He wasn't sure what to do with either of those things, and he desperately wanted some time and space to think about it.

They made small talk for a few more minutes and then agreed to meet again the following day before Janie left town. She didn't say where she lived and Will didn't ask. There were more important things to think about.

Will drove home afterwards, not sure what he was going to do when he got there, and hoping he wouldn't have to deal with any clients or his employees. But when he drove along his driveway, Carlton was on the other side of the fence working on a drinking trough for the few cows they kept. He held up a hand in greeting and Will stopped, aware that it would be rude to ignore his friend and neighbor.

"Howdy," Carlton greeted, propping himself against the roof of Will's truck with a lanky arm. He peered in the window and his expression grew concerned. "Hey, what's up? You look as if you've seen a ghost or something."

“I kind of did,” Will muttered.

“What happened?”

Will sighed, suddenly wanting to share the news with someone he trusted. “Janie called,” he said flatly.

“Your ex?”

Will nodded. “She told me she wanted to meet in town because she had something important to tell me.” He paused. “She’d been gone from my life for so long that I thought I’d never hear from her again. It kind of freaked me out.”

“What did you do?”

“I haven’t been able to eat or sleep for days. Or work, for that matter. I thought I’d moved on from what happened with Janie, but it seemed to bring a whole lot of stuff to the surface and I haven’t been able to think straight ever since.”

“I’m not surprised,” Carlton said thoughtfully. “If we don’t deal with our baggage properly in the first place, it arises to hit us again sometime down the track.”

Will looked at him in surprise. “You nailed it,” he said. “I think that’s what happened. At the time, I thought I’d moved on, and I was even kind of proud of being able to push it aside and get on with my life. I just didn’t realize that I’d buried it rather than getting rid of it. I’m a mess.”

“That’s understandable. So, what did Janie want?”

“She wanted to tell me that I have a son. And she turned up with him.” The story sounded so hard and flat

coming from his lips, but there was no way he could enunciate the nuances and emotions behind meeting his son for the first time.

Carlton's jaw dropped and he stared at Will in shock. "Are you serious?"

Will nodded. "I couldn't believe it myself for a moment. But the boy looks like me. I have no doubt that she's telling the truth."

"That's huge." Carlton paused. "I don't know how I'd handle it if I were in your shoes. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," Will answered. "I literally only just met my son before I came home. I'm still in shock."

"Hey, I would be too."

Will looked at his friend. "But you know what? I think one thing I am going to do is get some professional help to deal with this instead of trying to go it alone. That didn't work last time."

"That would be a great idea," Carlton agreed. "There's no shame in admitting that you need help with working through something like this."

"I'm not saying my life has been wrecked or anything like that. I just think I'll be able to move on quicker this time if I get some help to process it, that's all. I don't want to live with the thought that it might pop up again to surprise me in the future. I can tell you, the last week hasn't been fun at all."

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Carlton asked.
“Anything you need help with on the farm?”

Will shook his head. “Thanks for the offer, but no. You’ve got your own life to manage, and I have employees who have everything under control for now. I have to get back into it myself pretty soon, or I’ll lose clients and everything I’ve been working towards will disappear. I don’t want to allow that to happen.”

“No. You’ve worked too hard to let it all go.” Carlton paused and looked at Will. “What about Emma?” he asked quietly.

Will sighed. “I hate that this is probably going to hurt her,” he said. “Things were going so well for us.”

“You looked so happy,” Carlton said. “I thought for sure you’d fallen for her.”

“I had, but who knows now?” Will felt a stab of guilt as he thought of Emma. “I haven’t even spoken to her since ... since right after I kissed her.”

Carlton drew in a sharp breath. “You kissed her and then ghosted her?”

“Essentially. I didn’t mean to. But Janie called while I was with Emma, and hearing from her sent me into a spin. I couldn’t think straight, and to make matters worse, I was unable to return her call for several days. I think she must have been having phone problems or something. I feel so bad for Emma.”

“You have to get in touch with her,” Carlton urged. “She deserves an explanation at the very least.”

“I know.” Will rubbed his hand over his face. “I know I have to talk to her, but how do you tell the woman you love that there’s a whole other aspect of your life that she had no idea about? I wouldn’t blame Emma if she ran the other way and never looked back. It looks as if I’ve been dishonest with her.”

“But even if she does walk away, *she* should be the one who makes that choice,” Carlton said. “It’s probably tempting to do nothing and let it go because it’s a hard thing to do, but if you do that, you’re effectively deciding for her. She didn’t ask for this, but it’s going to affect her.”

“I know.” Will stared straight ahead through the windshield of his truck. “What I’ve already done to her was wrong. I need to make it right. And as you said, it should be her decision after that.” He thumped the steering wheel with his fist. “It sucks, you know. Just when I found a wonderful woman who could potentially be my life partner, my past arises to snatch away my chance at happiness.”

“The timing couldn’t be worse,” Carlton agreed. “You’re right in the first stages of a relationship and it’s still new and fragile. But don’t underestimate Emma. If she’s the kind of person you say she is, she will act with integrity. And don’t forget, she’s a big girl with a mind of her own. Don’t second guess what she might do.”

“You’re right again,” Will said with a wry grin. “I’m seeing everything in black and white at the moment, but it’s not simply a case of ‘Emma will or Emma won’t.’”

“She might surprise you with how she responds to this situation,” Carlton said. “Keep an open mind and don’t assume that the worst will happen.”

Will took a deep breath. “Thanks for listening,” he said. “It’s helping me to get it sorted out in my head.”

“That’s what I’m here for,” Carlton said, reaching through the window to clap him on the shoulder. “Anytime you want to talk, I’m here.”

“I appreciate that,” Will said. He looked at Carlton. “I think I have decided one thing,” he said slowly.

“What’s that?”

“It doesn’t matter how things work out with the adults in this situation. My son deserves the chance to get to know his dad, and I’m going to give it to him.”

“Good for you,” Carlton said with a smile. “I wasn’t going to tell you what to do, but you’ve made the right decision.”

Will took a deep breath. “I hope so.”

CHAPTER 11



Emma led Walter back to the pasture after his walk, his little hooves tapping lightly across the barnyard.

“There you go, Walter-boy,” she said, patting his neck affectionately as she gave him a carrot after she took off his headstall.

He took the treat and munched it greedily, then reached up for another one.

Emma laughed. “Here’s the last one,” she said, handing it over. “You’ll have to wait until next time for more.”

Walter finished the carrot and she gave him a final pat and turned to head to her car. She hadn’t seen Will and didn’t expect to, although Sharon said he’d been around the stables a few times. It seemed that he was spending a lot of time in his office or keeping to himself, and Sharon and Mike just went about their everyday duties without seeing much of him.

Emma opened the gate into the barnyard and headed for her car, but her head snapped up as a familiar voice called her name.

“Emma!”

She looked up to see Will walking toward her, his feet crunching on the gravel, and her heart constricted. All the hurt and questions that had arisen since she'd seen him last rushed to the surface and she opened her mouth to reply but couldn't say a word. Will stopped in front of her and she was shocked at his appearance. He looked as if he hadn't slept for a month. His face was pale and drawn, and there were lines around his eyes that she hadn't noticed before.

"Emma," he said again, his voice quiet and lacking its usual vibrancy.

She looked at him with a silent question.

"I owe you an explanation," he said, his voice catching on the words. "Can we talk?"

Emma opened her mouth to reply, but before she could, a blue car entered the driveway, distracting their attention as it drew to a stop not far away. Will's face creased in frustration.

"Someone always comes along at the wrong moment," he muttered. "Hold that thought, Emma. I'll have to see what this is all about first."

He walked toward the vehicle, and Emma watched as a woman and child got out. Will stiffened, and Emma could see his face go white as he cast a glance in her direction. Will started to walk towards her, and the woman and child followed. Emma was surprised when the little boy reached up to tug on Will's hand, and as she looked from one to the other, realization struck hard in

the pit of her stomach. The little boy looked just like Will.

Will reached her, and the woman and child stood nearby. Will cleared his throat.

“Uh, Emma, this is Janie and Cody,” he said, his voice sounding strained. “Cody is my son.”

“I can see that,” she choked out, horrified as tears filled her eyes. “He looks like you.” She paused for a moment. “It was nice to meet you both,” she said, trying to sound positive. “I was just on my way home, so I’ll leave you to it.”

“Emma, wait ...” Will begged.

She ignored him and fled to her car, leaving the three of them standing in the barnyard talking. *Just like the happy family they obviously should have been*, she thought furiously as she drove away.

She pulled over to the edge of the road as soon as she was away from the farm, blinded by tears.

“Why?” she raged aloud. “Why did he deceive me?” She pounded her fists on the steering wheel in frustration. “He never said a word about having another woman and a son in his life. What a jerk!”

Unbidden, a choked cry rushed from her lips as the thought of his kisses flooded her memories, and hot tears scalded her cheeks. She glanced in the rearview mirror and saw herself ugly crying, her face red and splotchy and her eyes swollen. She couldn’t believe what a fool

she'd been to fall for a man who couldn't tell her the truth.

Tears continued to pour down her cheeks as she thought of what might have been if only he'd been honest. He'd told her he was single, and she'd never thought to question that. Even if it was the truth, he still should have told her about the complications that went with loving him. Anger and humiliation burned in her heart as she thought about how he'd allowed her to stumble into the situation in the barnyard with no preparation or warning. For all she knew, that Janie woman was probably there gloating over the banishment of her rival. Or convincing Will to give her another chance or something.

Her phone buzzed and she picked it up, staring at it dispassionately as Will's number came up. She declined the call, only to have a message come through a moment later.

I'm so sorry. That wasn't meant to happen. I need to explain, can we talk?

"Uh, no," she said aloud, tossing the phone down on the seat beside her. "No, we can't. You've already done enough damage for one day, Will." She glanced in the mirror again, hardly recognizing the swollen, tear-stained face that looked back at her. "Besides, I'm not letting you see me like this."

Heart pounding and anger surging through her veins, she drove home through the late evening sunshine, trying to forget how she'd enjoyed this time of day with Will on the farm after she'd taken Walter for a walk. She'd been a fool, thinking of him so much and wanting to share every little detail of life with him because she felt that he'd be interested or that he would care about the little things that mattered to her. Quite clearly, she'd been deceived and she couldn't believe how easily she'd fallen for it.

"Never again," she muttered fiercely as she turned into her driveway, grateful that Jodie was visiting her sister and she would have the house to herself.

But she hadn't been home for more than five minutes when there was a knock at the door. She considered ignoring it, but it was insistent, so she reluctantly got up to answer it.

Sarah was standing there with a box in her hands. Her eyes flew to Emma's face and she gasped.

"Emma, what's happened? You look terrible!"

Emma sighed and stepped aside to allow Sarah to enter. At least her friend was kind and understanding. "You guess," she said quietly.

"Will again?" Sarah asked sympathetically. "Here, I brought these books back that I borrowed," she added, setting the box down on the floor. "I was just going to give them to you at work, but I was going past and I had them in the car, so I thought it was just as easy to give them to you now."

“Thanks,” Emma said. She collapsed on the couch and waved her hand around the room. “Have a seat.” She leaned back and looked up at the plain white ceiling, its simplicity oddly soothing in a world that no longer made sense.

Sarah sank down in the comfortable gray recliner opposite and looked at Emma with concern. “I’m guessing things didn’t go well when you went to walk Walter this afternoon?”

Emma shook her head. “No, not at all.”

“How bad?”

“Think disastrous. Think Titanic-level disastrous.”

“Oh, Em.” Sarah squeezed her eyes shut, her face a grimace of sympathy. “I was so hoping that it would all turn out to be a huge misunderstanding. I was hoping to hear wonderful news tomorrow. That’s kind of why I came over,” she confessed with a sheepish grin. “I wanted to hear you say that you’d cleared the air with Will and everything was all right again.”

“Well, I didn’t get to talk to Will at all,” Emma said flatly. “He came out and asked if we could talk, but then his son turned up with his mom.”

Sarah’s face went white and her mouth opened in an O of shock. She tried to speak but all that came out was a squeak.

“His son?” she managed at last. “Will has a son?”

Emma nodded as tears sprang unbidden to her eyes again. “He does,” she sniffed. “And there’s no doubt

about it because he looks just like Will.”

“But ... but ...” Sarah was lost for words.

“He told me he was single,” Emma burst out, anger and grief bubbling up inside her once more. “But it seems not.”

“What do you mean? He’s not actually *with* the boy’s mother, is he?”

“I don’t know. I never heard the whole story. I couldn’t bear to stay there and have them look at me and think how pathetic I was for not knowing. It was just too much of a shock, Sarah. I had to get away.”

“Of course; I wouldn’t have been able to stay there either. Why did Will ask to talk to you if they were going to be there?”

“They came just as he asked if we could talk. Will introduced them to me, and then I left. I couldn’t bear to watch them playing happy families and knowing that I had been left out of something that affected me, too. Will deceived me. He should’ve told me.”

“Yes, he should’ve,” Sarah said decisively. “It’s totally unfair to you to lead you astray with something like that.”

“And even if Will and Janie are not together and never will be, he still should’ve told me that he came with baggage and complications.” Emma reached for a tissue and blew her nose. “Don’t get fooled like I did when a seemingly nice man comes along. It’s not worth the heartache.”

Sarah huffed out a breath. “They aren’t all jerks,” she said. “At least, that’s what I like to think.”

“But have you found someone worth keeping?” Emma asked pointedly.

Sarah rolled her eyes. “Around here? Forget it. But I’m sure there must be nice guys somewhere.”

“Your last relationship didn’t end well, so I know you know what I’m talking about. It’s nice that you want to stay positive, but right now, I can’t agree.”

“Oh, Em, you’re hurting and miserable right now,” Sarah said with sympathy in her tone. “You fell hard for Will, didn’t you?”

Emma nodded. “He seemed to be everything I wanted. But it’s really a case of ‘if it seems too good to be true, it probably is.’”

Sarah leaned back and closed her eyes. “Don’t become cynical, Em. You have a beautiful heart that always wants to see the best in people, and it would be a shame if you lost that. The world would be a poorer place. And since Will hasn’t had the chance to explain his side of the story, maybe it isn’t exactly what you think it is.”

“How could I see it any differently?” Emma argued. “Will didn’t tell me he had a son. That’s deceptive. He wasn’t honest with me. And he never told me that he had an ex lurking in the background, either. Instead, he just left me to find out the hard way when they turned up. I had no warning whatsoever, and he could’ve prepared me for meeting them. He could’ve told me and allowed

me to decide before they arrived if I wanted my life to go in that direction. But no, he didn't. It all just came crashing down around my ears while he stood by and watched. He doesn't deserve any consideration because he didn't show me any."

"You have a point," Sarah said, wriggling her toes. "I'd probably do the same thing if I were in your shoes." She sighed. "I'm sorry, Em. I really am. I thought you'd finally found someone you could be happy with. I'm a hopeless romantic."

"Well, there's no point wasting your energy on my behalf," Emma said tartly. "I'm done with romance and romantic causes. I'll get myself a little house and an army of cats, and I'll live out my life as a crazy cat lady. Men need not apply."

Sarah laughed. "Don't be too drastic. Becoming a crazy cat lady is a serious step."

Emma smiled despite the bitterness that still raged in her heart. "It's a worthy goal," she asserted. "Can't you just see me in a neat little cottage with flower beds out the front and a cat in every nook and cranny?"

"Your neighbors might not thank you," Sarah giggled.

"Oh, and a big sign out the front telling men to stay away."

"You're funny," Sarah giggled. "You wouldn't really."

Emma raised an eyebrow. "Don't tempt me," she said.

CHAPTER 12



Will ran his hands through his hair in frustration as he checked his phone for the hundredth time. He'd messaged Emma early this morning, begging for a chance to explain, but this message had also gone unanswered. No matter what he did, she seemed determined to keep her distance.

Not that he could blame her, he thought miserably. He'd made a huge mess of things, and even though some of it had not been his fault, he should've been upfront with Emma about Janie. At least that part of his past would not have come as a shock if he had.

He went down to the stables, hoping to avoid his employees, but Sharon was cleaning out a stall and turned to see who had entered. She took one look at him and he realized right away that she knew something was amiss. They stared at one another in silence for a long moment before she spoke.

"It's not really my place to say anything, but you should speak to her," she said.

Will raised his eyebrows in astonishment. "What do you mean?"

She shrugged. “I have eyes,” she said. “I’m a mom. I know what people go through when it comes to love. I’ve seen plenty of heartache and drama.”

Will sighed. It seemed that Sharon was far more perceptive than he’d given her credit for. “All right. You know, so I might as well listen.”

Sharon gave him a brief glance. “I could see that you and Emma were really happy,” she said. “The pair of you were glowing whenever you were around here together. I was happy for you.” She paused. “I’m not sure what went wrong, and I can only assume that the woman who was here the other day has something to do with it. Is the boy yours?”

Will nodded.

“It’s easy to see the resemblance,” Sharon said. “It’s none of my business, but you need to sort things out with Emma. You’ll be miserable until you do.”

Will raised his hands in frustration. “I’m trying! But what am I supposed to do when she won’t answer my messages or return my calls? I don’t want to turn into some kind of creepy stalker.”

Sharon regarded him in silence for a moment. “That’s a fair point. But you haven’t exhausted all your options until you’ve gone to see her and asked for a chance to explain. Face-to-face. I’m guessing this is all a big misunderstanding, but even if it’s something else, it’s still fair to ask for a chance to explain. If you don’t do that, then you haven’t done everything you can.”

“What if she calls the cops on me? Maybe she hates me that much.”

“I never said to force her, I said to ask. If you’re polite and respectful and ask for a chance, perhaps she’ll listen. If she still doesn’t want to listen, leave her alone. Respect her choices. There’s a fine line between being the man who doesn’t give up on a woman and the one who won’t respect her choices enough to leave her alone. But you need to try, for both of your sakes. Who knows, perhaps you can salvage what you had.”

Will shook his head. “I don’t like my chances,” he muttered.

Sharon pinned him with a look. “You’ll have no chance if you don’t try. Unless you don’t want her in your life, of course. I’m wasting my breath if that’s the case.”

Will felt guilt and grief settle in the pit of his stomach once more. “I do want her in my life,” he said bleakly. “But I’ve made a horrible mess of things.”

“Then go and make it right. Don’t just leave it and hope it will work itself out on its own because it won’t. You’ll wake up one day with a ton of regrets if you don’t.”

“All right. You sound like my mom.” Will gave Sharon a wry look. “I can imagine her saying something like that.”

“She sounds like a fine lady.” Sharon shot him a grin. “I’ve had my say; now I’m going back to work.”

She disappeared into one of the stalls, and Will stood staring after her, thinking about what she’d said. Should

he take her advice and attempt to see Emma in person?
What would happen if he did?



“I’d like to see Emma, please,” Will said to the young, fair-haired woman whose name badge said ‘Sarah.’

“May I ask your name?” Her tone was professional, but Will had the feeling she would only give him one chance to get it right.

“It’s Will, Ma’am.”

She looked at him sharply. “I’ll see if she’s available,” she said abruptly, almost knocking her chair over as she rose. “Just wait here.”

A few moments later, she was back. “Emma is busy,” she said, blandly dismissive.

“When will she be available?” Will asked, determined to get his chance to speak with Emma.

Sarah shrugged. “Probably not today. Tomorrow doesn’t look great either.”

Will knew that he was going to get no help from this young woman, who was no doubt protecting her friend.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll go.”

He turned and walked out the door, but as he did, a wave of stubbornness arose inside. He wasn’t going to be dismissed like that, as if he were of no consequence. Anger flared as he thought about Sarah’s cool, dismissive attitude, and he made up his mind to do whatever it took

to get Emma's attention. He would wait beside her car all afternoon if he had to. She had to go home sometime.

He drove his truck around to the parking lot at the rear of the veterinary clinic and parked near Emma's car. Then he settled in to wait, ignoring the thought that he should be working at the farm to catch up on all the jobs that had gotten out of hand since this whole mess had begun.

It was late in the afternoon when Emma finally emerged from the rear door of the clinic. Will got out of his truck and headed for her car, hoping she would just give him the chance to speak and not run him over as she drove off.

"Hey Emma," he greeted, trying to keep his tone light and friendly, aware that he didn't want to scare her.

"Will!" She looked afraid as she glanced around the parking lot, and Will hoped he hadn't messed up again.

He held up his hands. "Look, I'm not here to harass you or scare you. I just want to talk to you. But if you tell me that's not what you want, I'll get in my truck and drive away, and you won't hear from me again. Is that a deal?"

Her posture relaxed slightly, and after a long moment, she nodded. "All right. But no crazy stuff, or I'm out of here."

He sucked in his breath, desperate not to mess it up this time. He could see the hurt in her eyes, and he despised himself for the part he'd played in causing it.

“I want to tell you how sorry I am,” he began. “I know I hurt you, and I’ve made a huge mess of things. I’m a fool.”

“That’s not the word I’d have used,” she responded, but despite the anger in her tone, Will could see tears shining in her eyes. “I’d have called it something else.”

Will wasn’t about to ask her to elaborate. The last thing he wanted was to get derailed by hostile feelings and responses.

“I know how it must look to you,” he went on, choosing his words carefully.

“Yeah, how does it look to me?” she challenged.

“You probably think Janie is part of my life,” he said.

“Yes. It appears that way.”

Her words slapped him in the face, but she wasn’t done yet.

“But what’s worse, Will, is that you didn’t tell me about any of this. You deceived me! And you left me completely unprepared for meeting your *family*. How was I to know that you had a woman and child lurking in the background? What a jerk!”

Will recoiled as if she’d slapped him physically. “They aren’t lurking in the background,” he said.

“Oh, so what you’re saying is that they’re part of your life?”

“No!” He almost shouted the word and Emma jumped back. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you. But please,

believe me, Emma. I had absolutely no idea that Cody existed before that night in the barnyard. And Janie was just a long-gone part of my past. Truly.”

She looked at him with narrowed eyes. “Well, that’s a handy explanation.” Sarcasm dripped from her tone. “Did she catch you out? Having a relationship with me? Did it all unravel for you?”

“No! Please believe me,” he begged. “Janie left me for a country singer and went touring all over the place. We got a divorce, and I never expected to see her again.”

Emma stared at him with anger in her eyes. “Divorced? You could’ve told me.”

“Yes, I could’ve,” he agreed. “I should have. It just didn’t seem that important at the time. I never expected to see Janie again. I didn’t believe there could possibly be any reason she would need to contact me in the future. I was so caught up in getting to know you that I didn’t even think about her. She was just part of the past, long gone.”

“Did you ever think to call me and tell me what was going on?” Emma asked with fury in her tone. “What you did really hurt me.”

“I know it did, and I’m so sorry. It was a stupid way to handle the situation. But it shocked me so much that I couldn’t think straight.”

“Another handy excuse.” She stared straight ahead, two bright spots of anger flaring on her cheeks. “Did you think this would somehow all work out and that we could play happy families or something?”

He sighed. “Emma, I deserve your anger. But please believe me when I say that I had no idea about Cody, and it was such a shock to even hear from Janie again that I couldn’t function in everyday life. I’m still trying to get my head around it and fix all the problems that arose as a result.”

“Including this one?”

Her eyebrows arched high, but despite the anger in her tone, Will could see the hurt shining in her eyes.

“Emma, what we found together was so important to me. I wanted to explore what we had discovered to see where it might take us, but this came along and swept that away. I’m angry about it, too. But I wanted you to know that I never intended to hurt you and that I’m sorrier than you can imagine.”

She sighed, her anger clearly ebbing. “I don’t know what to think, Will. I guess I should’ve given you the chance to explain so you didn’t have to lurk out here to waylay me. But I don’t know that it will change the outcome of this disaster. I’m not sure if it’s possible to go back to where we were before.”

Will felt grief and loss settle heavily on his shoulders. “I understand,” he said softly.

“I just need time to think about it,” she replied. “I’m not sure what else I can say.”

Will nodded. “I know. I needed time to think about it, too.” He sighed. “I don’t know what else to say, either,

Emma. Except I miss you being around, and I wish we could turn back time and start over.”

She looked at him with tears in her eyes. “If only we could.”

CHAPTER 13



Emma kept her head down as she hurried across the barnyard toward Walter's pasture. It had been a week since Will had confronted her as she left work, and she'd done nothing but think about the disastrous turn their budding relationship had taken. Although she'd conceded that perhaps he was telling the truth about Janie's current involvement in his life, she still couldn't believe that he hadn't thought to tell her that he'd been married before. It was something too important to overlook, in her opinion. Hurt and anger waged battles with her heart, along with memories of the things they'd done together, the things she wanted to tell him before she remembered how things had gone horribly wrong between them. There were no easy answers to the obstacles that had been thrown into their path, and she just hoped she didn't see Will today. She wasn't sure she was ready to face him.

He'd been absent every time she'd come to walk Walter since then, and she could only assume that he was giving her space. Her walks had become less enjoyable somehow, knowing that she would get in her car and drive home without seeing him or engaging in some friendly banter. It hurt.

As she approached Walter, she stopped in surprise. A young boy stood with his back to her, his arms around Walter's neck. She guessed it was Cody; he was wearing jeans, boots and a shirt that looked identical to what Will would wear. She stood still, unwilling to intrude on the moment, even as all the feelings she'd experienced over the past week rushed to the surface at the sight of Cody. He was the reason everything had fallen apart in her relationship with Will, yet none of it was his fault. He was just a sweet, innocent little boy who deserved a dad like any other child. This situation had been unfair to him, too.

The little boy pressed his face to Walter's, and there was something so vulnerable about the way he clung to the pony that Emma's heart ached. In a world of grownup angst and confusion, Cody had found solace in the one creature who loved kids and was always happy to have him around, and tears sprang to Emma's eyes as she thought about how much his little world must have changed, too.

He turned to look over his shoulder and saw her standing there watching him, but before he could react to her presence, she saw a wistful sorrow in his eyes that matched her own heart, and she suddenly knew that regardless of whatever else happened, this child deserved her kindness.

He looked worried as she started to walk toward him, and he stepped away from Walter.

"Hello, Cody," she said kindly.

“Hello,” he mumbled, twisting his hands inside his shirt sleeves, his eyes downcast.

“Have you made friends with Walter?” she asked, squatting so that she was at eye level with him.

He looked up, a flash of hope appearing briefly in his brown eyes, so much like Will’s.

“It’s all right,” she encouraged gently. “Walter loves children. He’ll always be happy to see you.”

He darted a glance at her. “I thought I might be in trouble,” he mumbled after a pause.

She shook her head. “No, I’m happy for you to be friends with Walter. It’s good for him to have someone his own size to be his friend.”

A shy smile flitted across his face, and Emma was once again struck at his likeness to Will. “Is Walter a horse that you can ride?” he asked.

She smiled at him. “Yes, he is. I take him for walks because he’s too small for me to ride, but he’s just the right size for someone like you. Would you like to ride him?”

His face lit up in a grin that blazed like the noonday sun. “Oh, yes, Ma’am. I would love to ride him.”

“You can call me Emma,” she said, straightening up with a smile. “I’m happy for you to have a ride on Walter, but first we must ask ... Will. Or do you call him Dad?”

“I think I’ll call him Dad one day,” he said earnestly. “But I’m not ready right now.”

“I’m sure that’s fine,” she encouraged. “Will is a good man. I’m sure you’ll get to know him better and one day you might be ready.”

“Sure.” He looked at her expectantly, the subject of his father fading quickly from his mind.

“All right,” she laughed. “Let’s go ask him and then we can take Walter for a ride.”

They found Will in the tack room mending a saddle. Cody raced through the door, bursting with his news.

“Emma said I can ride Walter!” he said breathlessly. “May I? Please?”

Will looked from one to the other in astonishment. “Well, if Emma says it’s all right ...”

She stepped up closer. “Yes, it’s all right with me,” she said quietly. “Cody and Walter have become friends, and I don’t mind. It’s good for Walter to have a kid to love.”

Will opened his mouth and closed it again, then spread his hands wide. “OK,” he said. “But next time, Cody, you have to tell me where you are. I thought you were playing outside the door. You must tell me if you’re going to the pasture.”

Cody dropped his head. “I’m sorry,” he murmured. Then he brightened as he looked up at Emma. “Please, Emma? Can we ride him *now*?”

She laughed. “Of course. But we have to get his saddle first. It’s over there.” She pointed at the tiny saddle hanging on the rack beside the larger ones.

Will left his work and went to get it. Their fingers touched as he handed it to her, and the contact sent a jolt of recognition through her. She avoided his eyes and hurried out of the tack room; Walter's bridle slung over her arm.

Cody ran beside her, sometimes stopping to bounce up and down as he waited for her. She'd never seen a child so excited about a horse ride.

They reached Walter, and Emma suddenly realized that Cody had probably never seen a horse being saddled before. She would have to show him how to do it so that he could still ride Walter if she wasn't around.

"Do you know how to put the saddle on him?" she asked.

Cody shook his head. "Not really."

"Would you like me to show you how?"

He nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, please."

She showed him how to put the saddle rug beneath the saddle, and how to do up the girth and tighten it. She slid the bit into Walter's mouth and fastened the bridle strap at his jaw.

Then she showed Cody how to mount, using her hand as a step so he could climb up. His grin almost split his face in half as he sat on Walter's back.

"I did it," he crowed. "I got on Walter!"

"You did a great job," she encouraged. "Now, there's something really important we have to remember when

we hold the reins. You know how the bit goes in Walter's mouth?"

He nodded.

"Well, his mouth is a bit like ours, and it gets sore if we pull on the reins too hard. So, we must be gentle. All we need to do is give the reins a bit of gentle pressure when we want Walter to go in a certain direction, and then he knows what we want." She paused. "Does that make sense?"

He nodded. "We don't want Walter to get a sore mouth," he said solemnly.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

His grin was the only answer she needed, and they began a steady walk around the pasture as she held the lead rope that was clipped to Walter's bridle.

When they'd completed a lap, they returned to where they'd started from. Emma glanced up in surprise to find Will leaning on the fence watching them, his cell phone in his hand.

"You're a good teacher," he told Emma. "You're very patient."

She suddenly realized that he must have been filming her with Cody, and just as swiftly had another thought.

"It should've been you giving him his first riding lesson," she said. "I'm sorry, Will. I didn't think."

"It's all right," he assured her. "Walter belongs to you and he's the only horse I have here that's small enough for Cody to ride. There will be plenty of other

opportunities to teach him things about riding and horses.”

“He’s a natural,” Emma said. “I guess he got it from his dad.”

A look of pride crossed Will’s face, and Emma felt a pang of sorrow at the situation that had deprived Will of his son and had caused their relationship to falter.

“I want to get down,” Cody said suddenly.

Emma had almost forgotten that he was still sitting on Walter’s back as the little horse stood patiently beside her. She gestured to Will.

“Would you like to show him how?”

Beaming, Will stepped forward and showed Cody how to place his weight in the stirrup and swing his leg over Walter’s back to dismount. When Cody was on the ground, Will pulled a piece of carrot from his pocket and showed Cody how to feed it to Walter.

Cody laughed as Walter’s lips tickled his palm, then hugged the pony exuberantly around the neck.

“Walter is my friend,” he announced. “I love him.”

“He loves you, too,” Emma replied. “See how his ears are standing up and his face is turned towards you? He’s happy, and he likes you being close by.”

Cody turned to Will. “May I ride Walter again tomorrow?” he asked. “Please?”

Will looked helplessly at Emma. “Walter belongs to Emma,” he said. “You’ll have to ask her.”

Cody turned his big brown eyes on Emma with a pleading look. “May I please ride Walter again tomorrow?” he asked.

“Well, I won’t be here then, but if it’s OK with Will, you may,” she said. “But don’t try to do it by yourself.”

“I won’t,” Cody promised, throwing his arms around Walter’s neck. “We get to go for a ride tomorrow, Walter,” he exclaimed jubilantly, burying his face in Walter’s mane.

Will smiled. “I’ll help him, don’t worry,” he said. “There’s no way I’d allow him to attempt it by himself, and we’ve had a chat about not going to the pasture without me.”

“I know you’ll take care of Walter,” Emma said. “And being ridden will be good for him.”

Will slapped his hand to his forehead. “I could’ve taken him with me yesterday,” he said. “I took a horse for a ride along the trails just for some exercise. I didn’t think to put Walter on a lead and bring him too.” He grinned. “Although he might’ve struggled to keep up with a big horse like the one I was riding.”

“Well, if you ever do something like that and it’s suitable for Walter, I’m happy for you to take him,” Emma said. “But I don’t expect it, and I’ll continue to walk him.” She looked at Will, her heart catching as she thought about what they’d almost had together. “I’ll head home now. Do you want me to return Walter’s saddle?”

“No,” Will decided. “I’ll take it back. Cody might like to ride him again before we unsaddle him.”

“Sure,” Emma said, feeling curiously left out. “Well, you know where I am if you need me.”

“Hey, thanks for taking an interest in Cody,” Will said quietly. “It meant a lot to him.”

“He’s a great kid,” Emma said. “It’s not his fault that he’s caught in this situation,” she added softly. She turned to head for her car. “I’ll see you around, Will.”

As she drove home, she thought about spending time with Cody, and guilt niggled at her as she thought about how she’d reacted and shut Will out, refusing to give him the chance to explain his side of the story. Sure, he’d done the wrong thing by not telling her about his past, but did she have an apology to make, too?

CHAPTER 14



Will looked up as he heard car tires crunching on the gravel of the driveway. He was expecting a client to pick up a horse, but he was surprised to see Janie's car instead. She must have come for Cody a little earlier than she'd said.

He turned to his son, who was playing with some old leather he'd found in the tack room. "Cody, your mom is here."

Cody looked up, and his face lit up. Without a second glance, he dashed toward the barnyard, where his mother was just getting out of her car.

"Mom!" he yelled, flinging himself into her arms.

She laughed and twirled him around before setting him down again while he tripped over his words in his eagerness to tell her all about his adventures.

"You can tell me all about it on the way home," she promised, her eyes roving to Will.

He stepped forward. "We need to get your things, Champ," he said, ruffling Cody's hair.

Janie had asked if Cody could stay with him while she underwent minor surgery. Although they didn't know each other well, both had agreed, and they'd had a great

time together. Will had enjoyed teaching his son about some of the things he did on the farm, and Cody had loved the horses. But now, it seemed that he was ready to go back to his mom, and Will was grateful that she took good care of him.

“Come on up to the house,” he said, leading the way. “Would you like a coffee?” he asked Janie.

“I won’t say no,” she said with a grin. “It’s been a while since lunch.”

Janie sat at the kitchen table while Will made coffee, and Cody went to his room to gather up the toys he’d brought. Will set the coffee down and sat down opposite Janie. Although he’d come to terms with co-parenting Cody, the sight of Janie reminded him of all the damage her choices had caused and he knew it would still be a while before the sight of her didn’t make him feel uneasy.

Janie looked at him with a soft look in her eyes. “You’ve been great with Cody,” she said. “He’s had a wonderful time here.”

“He’s a good kid,” Will acknowledged. “You’ve raised him well.”

“I want him to see more of you,” Janie said. “I’ll be moving to Granville as soon as I can arrange it.”

Will felt a jolt of joy followed by a note of caution. What did Janie expect of him? “That’s great,” he said. “I’ll look forward to having him around.”

“He needs a dad,” Janie said, leaning forward. “And I couldn’t have picked a better dad for him.” She looked at him for a long moment, something in her eyes that Will couldn’t identify. Then she took a deep breath.

“Will, this is a big risk for me. But I have to ask for Cody’s sake. Is there any chance that we could try again? Be a family?”

Will felt as if she’d slapped him, and he couldn’t utter a word. He opened his mouth but closed it again when he didn’t know what to say. He didn’t want to hurt Janie or Cody, but the past exploded in front of his eyes once more as the hurt he’d been carrying around rose to the surface. He breathed deeply, trying to calm the anger that went with it.

At last, he spoke, in control again. “Janie, what you did hurt me. A lot. I know you’ve apologized, and I’ve forgiven you, but forgiveness does not equal trust. As much as I’m coming to love Cody and want the best for him, I’m not sure at all that trying to make a family out of something so broken is what’s best for him.”

Her face fell, and he could see the rejection hitting her hard. “I understand,” she said. “I messed up too bad. No one could want me now.”

He resisted the urge to tell her to end the pity party, but trying to remain on friendly terms with her for Cody’s sake, he stayed silent.

At last, he spoke again. “It’s a good idea in theory,” he said. “But I just don’t think it would work.” he took a

deep breath. “Besides, someone else has already laid claim to my heart.”

Janie looked at him with tears shining in her blue-gray eyes. “It’s Emma, isn’t it?”

Will nodded.

“I thought so. She seemed awfully eager to leave when we arrived. Is she kind to Cody?”

“She sure is. She was shocked when you met because she had no idea I had an ex-wife and child. I hadn’t had the chance to tell her about you.”

“Oh. That would’ve been hard.”

Will grimaced. “Hard doesn’t even begin to describe it. But that’s not your problem. What we need to do now is figure out how to make this work for Cody.”

Janie sighed. “I feel like such a fool now.”

“Don’t,” Will said. “Your intentions were good, I’m sure. Every parent wants the best for their child, and I want what’s best for Cody, too. I just don’t think that us being together is what’s best for him.”

“Well, he can still spend plenty of time with his dad once we move,” Janie said, and Will could tell she was trying to make the best of the situation.

“Yes, and I’ll be glad to have him around. I’ve enjoyed getting to know him during his stay.”

They discussed the next visit, and then Janie and Cody said goodbye, and Will had the house to himself again.

Somehow, it seemed empty and quiet now, and he wondered how he'd never noticed before.



“Hey, Emma,” Will greeted the following day as he picked up the phone.

“Hey, Will.” Her voice sounded subdued.

“What’s up?”

She took a deep breath. “Will, I have an apology to make,” she said resolutely.

“Why?”

“Because I reacted badly when I found out about Cody and Janie. It wasn’t very mature of me, and I should have allowed you the chance to explain your side of the story. I’m sorry. Can you forgive me?”

“Already done.” Will paused. “I do understand, you know. It was a huge shock to me, too.”

“I feel lousy about it.”

She sounded downhearted, and Will felt a surge of compassion. “Don’t beat yourself up,” he said. “I get it. I messed up too, remember.”

“Yes, but ...”

He took a deep breath. “Let’s allow the past to stay there,” he said. “I’d like to still be friends if that works for you.’

“I’d like that,” she said, and he could hear the relief in her tone.

“So, in the spirit of renewed friendship, would you like to come out for dinner tomorrow?” he asked.

“That’s an invitation I can say yes to,” she responded, and he could hear the smile behind her words.

He couldn’t wait.



“Is there anything I can do to help?” Emma asked, propping one hip against the kitchen counter as she watched him prepare the fish for their dinner.

She’d come to the house earlier than he’d expected after taking Walter for a walk and his dinner preparations were not as advanced as he’d hoped. He wanted to have everything perfect for when she arrived, and instead, he was still surrounded by mess.

But she looked so adorable standing there in her cute blue top that matched her eyes and her jeans that showed off her slim figure, so he abandoned his plans of perfection and grinned.

“Sure. You can prepare the salad. That would be great.”

She got to work beside him as if they’d been sharing a kitchen every day for years, and it struck him again how comfortable he was around her as they chatted about work, the horses, the farm, and how Cody had big plans for riding Walter when he visited again.

“He’s a great little guy,” Emma said, a smile lighting up her eyes. “Any kid who loves animals as much as he

does has a good heart.” She slanted a teasing grin in Will’s direction. “It must be hereditary.”

Will felt his face heat up, but he did his best to return the light-hearted banter. “You’re not exactly unbiased,” he pointed out. “You do work as a vet nurse. I can’t imagine that you’d be kind to anyone who didn’t care for their animals.”

Her face took on a slightly ferocious expression. “They don’t deserve it,” she growled. “But those people rarely bring their animals to the vet because they don’t care about them. We usually only see the good owners.” She paused. “Maybe Cody will grow up to work with horses one day like his dad. Or become a vet or something.”

Will turned the fish in the pan, then paused for a moment. “I know we’ve gone through a rough patch since Cody arrived, but I hope ... I hope ...”

“I know,” Emma said softly, surprising him. “I hope we can move on from that, too. Let’s leave the past where it belongs and look ahead.”

A wave of relief crashed through him. “I’d like that,” he replied.

After dinner, Will rose from the table and went to the front door. Emma watched curiously as he opened it and peered outside.

“Perfect,” he announced.

Her brow creased in confusion. “What’s perfect? Why are you being so mysterious?”

“Did you bring a coat?” he asked.

She shook her head and he tossed her one of his from the hook near the door. “You’ll need this. Come on.”

“Where are we going?” she demanded, half-laughing.

“You’ll see,” he told her, wiggling his eyebrows at her.

“Will!” she protested. “Just tell me. I don’t do suspense. It’s killing me.”

He chuckled. “Then I do hope you survive long enough to find out,” he retorted, leading the way to the machinery shed.

He opened the door and went to the ATV, then gestured to Emma to get in. “Your chariot awaits you, my fair lady.”

She pulled a face at him and climbed in. He got in, too, his shoulder pressed against hers in the confines of the small cabin. It felt cozy and intimate, and he suddenly knew that his plan was going to work out perfectly.

He started the vehicle and headed for the ridge trail. Emma got out to open the gates, and before long, they were climbing towards the top. Above them, the stars spread out across the clear sky, and when they stopped at the top, the panorama surrounded them.

“Look at the stars,” Emma breathed as he switched off the motor. “And the pretty lights in the valley. It’s so beautiful up here, Will.”

They got out of the vehicle and went to their log seat. Will doubled up the blanket he’d thrown in and put it on the log to sit on.

“A bit of padding,” he said. “Who needs a sore butt?”

“Not me,” Emma agreed, sitting down. “I just can’t stop looking at everything,” she added, her eyes fixed on the vista before them. Car lights moved along a distant road, and house lights were scattered across the valley while the starry canopy almost seemed to touch the distant horizon.

Will slipped his arm around her, and she leaned her head against his shoulder. She belonged there, he realized. “Hey, you know what?” His voice was husky as his lips brushed her temple.

“What?” she asked dreamily. “You think this is the perfect date, too?”

“Well, now that you mention it, I have to agree,” Will said, his heart skipping a beat at the thought that she considered this a date. “But that wasn’t what I was about to say.”

“Mmmm. So, what were you about to say?”

He kissed her temple. “You belong right there where you are,” he murmured. “You’re the perfect fit.”

She snuggled closer. “I could stay here forever,” she whispered.

He took a deep breath. He had to know. “So ... are you saying you’re willing to give us another chance?” he asked cautiously.

In answer, she reached up and drew his face down to hers, her lips meeting his in a fiery explosion of sensation. She took her time exploring his, her soft

touches driving him crazy. At last, when he thought he couldn't wait another moment, she kissed him with a pent-up passion that matched his.

At last, breathless and disoriented, they drew apart.

“Does that answer your question?” she asked.

He nodded, unable to speak as his heart soared with relief and happiness. It more than answered his question; it was a beacon of hope for the future.

EPILOGUE



One year later

“No! I love Walter the most!”

The childish shout brought Will and Emma running from the tack room to see Cody and Lucy standing eye to eye just outside the stable door, their noses almost touching. Lucy had her hands on her hips, outrage oozing from every pore. Cody stared at her stubbornly, not moving a muscle. At last, he spoke.

“I love Walter the most,” he said with as much authority as he could muster.

Lucy’s indignation flew into overdrive. “No, I do!” She stomped her foot. “And he belongs to *my* aunty, so I have the right to love him more than you do.”

Cody didn’t budge an inch. “And he lives on *my* dad’s farm, so I ride him more than you do. I love him the most.”

Lucy folded her arms, her fair face going red with fury. “I’m *older* than you,” she shouted. “So you need to listen to what I say.”

“But you’re still six,” Cody pointed out. “Just because your birthday is in January and mine is in March doesn’t

make any difference. You're still six. So you can't boss me around."

"Can too!" Lucy stomped her foot again as she glared at him.

Cody folded his arms and glared back.

Emma looked at Will and saw him trying not to laugh. Her own lips twitched, but being the responsible adult for the day, she thought she'd better do something.

"Should we intervene?" she asked Will.

He answered with something like a snort, dropping his head to study the floor as his shoulders shook with silent laughter.

"Now, Will ..." she admonished softly, trying to hold her own laughter in check. "We aren't just going to allow them to kill each other, are we?"

His shoulders shook harder, and soon she found herself laughing too as the standoff outside the door continued, neither willing to give in.

At last, she wiped her eyes and straightened her shoulders. "I'm heading into the war zone," she announced. "Do I look serious and businesslike?"

Will choked in a deep breath, trying to gain some composure. "Good luck," he chortled.

She gave him a withering look. "Well, one of us has to be the adult around here. Today that seems to be my job."

“I’m not that brave.” Will started laughing again. “Look at Lucy! She’s six, and she could stop an army single-handed with that stare.”

“Cody is just as stubborn. I wonder where he gets that from.”

Will stuck out his tongue at her. She rolled her eyes at him, trying to keep a straight face as she headed towards the recalcitrant pair.

“Good luck,” Will repeated softly behind her. “If you come back missing an eye or a limb, I’ll make sure you get a Valor award.”

She tried to ignore him, but it was hard when all she wanted to do was laugh at the comical sight of two six-year-olds locked in mortal combat over who could love a horse the most.

“What’s going on here?” she asked, trying to sound businesslike and neutral.

“I love Walter the most!” Lucy shouted. “Tell Cody that, Aunt Emma. Tell him!”

“Now, now.” Emma put her hands on her hips and looked at them.

They fell silent, but Lucy still kept a wary eye on Cody lest he somehow gained an unfair advantage. She continued.

“Shouting at each other and demanding to have our own way isn’t a nice way to behave, is it? Where are our manners?”

“He doesn’t have any.” Lucy pointed an accusing finger at Cody.

“She doesn’t, either,” he returned.

Emma squatted down so she was eye-to-eye with them. “I know you both love Walter, but there’s no need to fight about it. Walter has plenty of love to share, and there will always be enough for everyone.”

“But I love him the most,” Lucy insisted. “Not Cody.”

“The thing is, Lucy, we can’t really measure love. It doesn’t fit in a bucket or a box, so we really can’t say how much someone loves something. Love is like the wind. It’s all around us, but we can’t see it. We can just see where it goes and what it does.”

Lucy remained unimpressed. “Cody gets to see Walter more often than I do,” she pouted.

“Walter still loves you,” Emma assured her. “Did you see how he came trotting over to the fence when you arrived?”

Lucy’s scowl faded. “He’s so lovely,” she said. “I wish I could see him every day.”

Emma straightened up. “Are you both ready to practise with the pony cart? We need to get all the practice we can before the wedding.”

They both nodded, the argument forgotten.

“You can get Walter from the pasture, then.”

They scurried off, and Will appeared at her shoulder. She gave him a mock glare.

“Fine time to arrive, Brave One. Now that the danger has been averted.”

Will chuckled. “You know as well as I do that my mirth would seriously have undermined your efforts to restore law and order. That Lucy is a feisty one.”

“Cody isn’t far behind her,” Emma said with a grin.

“I just hope a fight doesn’t break out as they arrive at the wedding,” Will said. He slipped his arm around Emma’s waist and kissed her temple. “Not long to wait now, darlin’.”

“The next month will pass with terrifying speed,” Emma agreed, but she was smiling. “Actually, I can’t wait. And Walter will look so cute pulling the kids in the pony cart.”

“It’s a good thing your sister is your maid of honor,” Will said. “She loves Walter, too. That worked out well. She can keep the whole circus from unravelling while they walk down the aisle.”

Emma chuckled. “Kids and animals. What could possibly go wrong?”

“I can’t wait to see Mom and Dad again,” Emma said. “I think our wedding made up their minds that it was time to come home.”

“Does that mean we’ll lose Walter?” Will asked.

“It means they’ll stop paying you,” Emma grinned. “After that, if you want Walter to stick around, he’ll be a freeloader. I’m sure my parents would be happy to take

him back if you need the space for a more lucrative client.”

Will shook his head with an amused grin. “No, I’d hate to do that to Cody. And can you imagine what would happen to Nacho?”

Emma laughed. “Poor Nacho. He’s so dramatic. It wouldn’t be quiet, that’s for sure.” She had a sudden thought. “Speaking of which, Nacho is not invited to the wedding, is he?”

“Oh, no. No way. I’m going to put him in a pasture far away from us so there’s no chance of donkey drama ruining our day.”

“That’s good.” Emma sighed in relief. “I hadn’t thought about where he might be during the wedding until just then.”

She’d pictured their wedding so many times in her mind that it was almost as if it had already happened. They were getting married on the farm, and her nieces, nephew, and Cody would arrive in the pony cart, with Lauren leading them down the aisle to ensure mayhem was averted. Emma and her father would arrive in a carriage generously loaned by one of Will’s friends from the horse world.

After the ceremony, the guests would retire to the hired marquee while they took some wedding shots around the farm and went up to the ridge, and then they’d celebrate with a full reception afterwards.

“It will be perfect,” she said aloud.

“Sorry?” Will looked puzzled.

She laughed. “Sorry. I was just thinking aloud. Our wedding will be perfect.”

He slipped his arm around her and kissed her on the nose. “Just like you.”

THE END



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Kaitlynn Clarkson loves writing sweet and clean romance that makes people smile. She's wanted to write stories ever since she was a little girl when she would get into trouble for reading instead of doing her chores. Kaitlynn writes from the Mid North Coast of NSW, Australia, where she lives with her husband and children and a herd of cows. She's sure there will never be enough time to read all the books she wants to! You can follow Kaitlynn on [Amazon](#), [Facebook](#), [Goodreads](#) and [Bookbub](#). You can also find her on her website, <https://kaitlynnclarkson.com>

