

New Beginnings
at the Little Highland
Horse-Yard

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IMPRESSUM

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*In loving memory of Fluffy, Donna Clara and Glen,
who grew wings this year.*

*For Holly,
who not only lent her name to the protagonist, but also temporarily gave up her favourite sleeping place on my keyboard so that I could write. She also noticed that Miss Marple looks suspiciously like her and that she is therefore entitled to at least 50% of the proceeds from this book – this share may be paid in the form of tuna or salmon.*

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Prologue

A faint winter sun glinted down over the friends sat around the table at the edge of the riding arena. Each with a warm cup of tea or coffee in their hands. It was the first week of the new year and each one of them knew that it would bring them many changes.

‘Have you thought of a name yet?’ asked Alyson, eyes flashing with excitement in her round face. Flicking her wild, red curls out of the way, she looked right at her best friend over the rim of her cup.

Rowan smiled and placed a hand lovingly on her bulging belly. Leaning against her husband, Tristan, who put his arm around her shoulder. ‘We’re still thinking about it. I want something unusual, like Rowena or Mina for a girl. Dorian or Westley, for a boy.’

‘And what do all these names have in common? They are all protagonists from your favourite classics, of course.’ Tristan shook his head while a grin played around the corners of his mouth. He loved to tease his wife about her love of literature. ‘If it was up to my family, they would probably have something like Jane or William. Traditional names.’

‘How boring,’ remarked Jake. ‘I’d also like a name from a classic, so I have to side with Rowan here.’ With that, he grimaced and quoted something in German that only Amelia could understand. He was an actor and since arriving at the yard a year ago to take riding lessons for a new role, he has barely left. When he met Alyson, they fell in love and he was now looking into a position at the local theatre. Amelia who,

like Jake, was originally from Germany, worked with Alyson as a tour guide at Urquhart Castle on Loch Ness. Hearing Jake's words, she grimaced. 'I guess a son of a duke can't get away with just a single name anyway.'

Tristan narrowed his eyes. 'Will you ever stop calling me a duke? The title belongs to my uncle and will be passed to my cousin Isobel. I have no title at all and it's just as well, otherwise I wouldn't have been allowed to just move here and take over the farm.'

'The aristocratic connection is still there, though,' Jake remarked. 'You must have more than one first name, don't you?'

Tristan made a pained face and Rowan had to laugh.

'That bad?' asked Freddie, the farm's farrier, Amelia's new boyfriend and newest member of their friend group.

'Worse,' Tristan claimed. 'That's why I'm never going to tell you.'

'Rowan?' pleaded Alyson but her friend made a sign that her lips were sealed.

'Oh, come on, mate!' Jake put his empty cup down and clasped his hands behind his head.

'Only Rowan and Aiden know my whole name and we shall keep it that way,' Tristan replied. 'And I'm definitely not going to do something like that to my own child.'

'What are you not going to do to your child?' As if on cue, Aiden appeared next to the group with his dapple-grey Andalusian, Sir Percy. He was one of Tristan's oldest and closest friends.

‘He doesn’t want to give his child a series of first names as his aristocratic circles demand,’ Jake explained, shaking his head in mock shock, ‘Tristan, you little rebel, you.’

‘What?’ grinned Aiden. ‘So, your child isn’t going to be Tristan Louis Cedric Edward Scott Junior?’

‘Tristan Louis Cedric Edward?’ Jake repeated, snorting.

The man in question turned to Aiden with narrowed eyes. ‘Thank you very much.’

Aiden raised his arms defensively. ‘I’m sorry, was that a secret?’

‘I would have expected worse. Each name is actually quite nice on its own,’ Amelia said tactfully, slapping a still laughing Jake. ‘Better watch out, Jakob Schulz, or I’ll dig out a few gossip magazine articles about your scandalous past!’

‘Oh, but my scandalous past is no secret anyway,’ said the actor, attempting to keep a contrite expression on his face.

‘What’s going to happen to Kili and Fili’s old stall, by the way?’ Aiden interrupted, changing the subject. The two Welsh ponies had recently moved from their stall in the stable to one of the pastures to live beside one of their newest members, Eli. Tristan had taken in his late aunt’s donkey who had a history of abuse and was afraid of being stabled. So, to help him settle in, Tristan, Jake, and Hamish, the old stable hand, had built a new shed for them. Here, Eli, Fili and Kili lived together, all sharing a history of being mistreated by past owners, keeping each other company.

‘I put an advert out three days ago and I think we have already found someone,’ Tristan said, glad of the subject change. ‘A Wilma got in touch yesterday. She seems like a nice lady with a lovely Clydesdale she would like to stable here. She is coming round in a few days to see if it is the right fit.’

‘Sounds good.’ Rowan shifted her weight and leaned back against Tristan’s chest. Looking up at him she asks, ‘And otherwise? The stall is big enough for two horses.’

‘That’s right. Wilma’s Clydesdale can only come if it gets on with Rosie because she is definitely coming.’

‘Rosie?’ asked Freddie.

Tristan nodded. ‘Rosie is a half Friesian, half Highland pony. She belongs to a fellow student of mine who has been through a lot in the last year.’

Six questioning faces looked at him.

Sighing, Tristan adds, ‘Alright, but she doesn’t like to talk about it so please don’t bring it up, okay?’ When the others nodded, he continued, ‘Holly’s from London. She started studying history at a university there but a year ago her boyfriend and father died in a car accident. After that, she quit her studies and became quite withdrawn. Now, she has decided to pick up her life and her studies again. She started our history course last semester online and is planning to move up and start the next semester in person. However, she doesn’t want to leave London without her horse so she asked me if there was space for Rosie and luck would have it ...’

‘That’s terrible.’ Amelia grabbed Freddie’s hand

and squeezed it tight as if she feared she might lose him too.

Tristan nodded gravely. ‘She’s been through a lot and, like I said, she doesn’t like to talk about it. I promised her I wouldn’t publicise it here so please don’t say anything. Promise?’

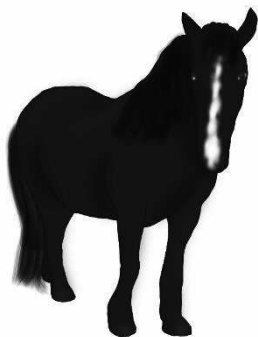
‘I swear.’ Jake put a hand over his heart, earning him an annoyed look from his girlfriend. ‘Can you be serious for once in your life?’

‘I am being serious,’ Jake said, without a trace of humour in his voice. ‘Most of us know what it feels like when life gets nasty. We have all lost someone in one way or another. We should welcome her to the stable as best we can and be there for her.’

Alyson smiled and gave Jake a fleeting kiss. ‘We should.’

Tristan, relieved, smiled as well. ‘Holly is a wonderful person and I am sure you will all like her.’

Chapter 1: *Aon-adharceach Stàball*



The town sign with the name CAWDOR on it was weathered and someone had stuck a round sticker saying *Yes to Independence* inside the letter O. Holly took a deep breath as she slowed down and looked for the driveway Tristan had described to her.

Highfield Farm.

Seascape B&B.

Cawdor Tavern.

The old Land Rover, which had been abandoned in the shed since her father's death, rattled past the driveway signs. Her mum hadn't had the heart to sell her husband's beloved vehicle, but in the middle of London she simply hadn't seen any use for it. Malcolm had grown up on a farm in Northumberland and although he had moved to London over thirty years ago for love, he had refused to drive anything other than a Land Rover for the rest of his life. Now that Holly had decided to leave everything that reminded her of her old life and her loss behind to

move to the Scottish Highlands, her mum had given her the car. ‘At least it will get used, and in the Highlands a Landi like this is actually suitable,’ she had said.

Far Far Away.

The farm name made Holly laugh. It fitted perfectly into this area. No tower blocks, no motorways ... in the last half hour she had only come across two cars and a tractor on the narrow country road.

Aon-adharcach Stàball.

That had to be it. Tristan had told her that the name translated to *Stable of the Unicorn* and referred to his wife’s horse, which was small, white and slim and did indeed look like a unicorn – and apparently also had a fly bonnet with a horn sewn on.

Holly put on the indicator and slowed down even more as she drove along the uneven driveway. She glanced in the rear-view mirror and thought she saw the hay-net swaying through the front window of the trailer. Fortunately, Rosie was used to travelling in the trailer; her previous owner had often gone to competitions. After a jumping accident in which Rosie had broken her leg, she had wanted to put her down like a useless piece of sports equipment, but Graham, who had been doing his practical year as a veterinarian at the time, had stepped in and bought Rosie off her. With a lot of patience and love, he had brought her back into work. Her leg had healed and she was even rideable again, albeit only as a leisure horse, a *Happy Hacker* as Graham had called it. Now Rosie was all she had left of him. Had it really been over a year since the police had turned up at her door to tell her

and her mother that an inattentive lorry driver had crashed into the end of a traffic jam and that the two occupants of the Renault Clio that had belonged to Graham had been killed instantly? It had been a long time since she had cried over them. For the first few weeks, not a day had gone by without tears. Now there was only a feeling of emptiness in her heart whenever she thought of Graham and her father. Perhaps she had already cried all the tears she was meant to cry in her life.

A small car park came into view, where four cars were parked. The Land Rover rattled past them at walking pace and Holly made a practised turn so that the trailer was parked with the loading side facing the stable building. Through the windscreen, she saw two children trotting across the riding arena on Shetland ponies. The sight made her smile. Then, she took a deep breath and opened the driver's door. She pulled her headband over her ears as the cold January air greeted her.

‘Holly!’

She spun round and saw Tristan coming towards her, side by side with a small, brown-haired woman who was obviously heavily pregnant. Holly waved and moved towards them.

‘Hello Holly, welcome.’ The woman next to Tristan smiled warmly and to Holly's utter surprise, she instantly leant forward and pulled her into a hug. When she let go of her, she introduced herself, ‘I'm Rowan, Tristan's wife.’

‘I've heard a lot about you,’ Holly said shyly.

‘I hope only good things,’ Rowan grinned and her

warm, carefree manner made Holly feel at ease. This was the right place for her and Rosie, she was suddenly sure of it.

‘How was the journey?’ asked Tristan, now hugging Holly too. His long blond hair peeked out from under a thick woollen hat.

‘Everything went as planned, thank you.’ It was the second time she’d met Tristan in person, as she’d attended the last term – her first at the University of the Highlands and Islands – almost exclusively online from London. She had only travelled to Scotland for an excursion to Edinburgh Castle and had had a long chat with Tristan then. That was when she’d learnt that he owned a yard up north.

A rumble sounded from inside the trailer. Rowan’s eyes grew wide. ‘Is that Rosie?’

Holly nodded and looked questioningly from Rowan to Tristan. ‘Where do you suggest I take her?’

‘Maybe let her out in the pasture first so she can stretch her legs a bit and see the other horses over the fence? Then I can show you the stable, the tack room and the rest of the yard,’ Tristan suggested.

‘Sounds good.’

‘And I’ll go and make us a coffee. Do you like coffee, Holly, or would you prefer tea or something cold?’ asked Rowan.

‘Coffee sounds so good,’ smiled Holly.

‘Okay, I’ll be right back.’ With that, Rowan turned and disappeared in the direction of the farmhouse. Holly turned back to the trailer, undid the buckles on the tailgate and then carefully opened it. A black rump appeared, which Holly squeezed past to undo Rosie’s

lead rope. She carefully led her out of the trailer. Rosie's ears scanned her surroundings like satellites and her nostrils flared as she took in the many unfamiliar odours. Her coat was raven black, only her head had a regular white pallor. Nervously, she stamped one of her huge hooves.

'What a beautiful animal,' Tristan remarked and carefully held his hand out to the mare so that she could sniff it. 'How old is she?'

'Seventeen.' Holly stroked the animal's neck reassuringly. 'Come on, Rosie, time for some movement.'

Holly and Rosie followed Tristan around the stable building to the pastures. Tristan pointed to an open meadow gate and as soon as Holly slipped Rosie's halter off, she shot off at full gallop, prompting Rowan and Alyson's horses Silvano and Hamlet in the neighbouring pasture to shoot off too, keeping a close eye on the newcomer. Tristan closed the metal gate and leaned on it. He and Holly watched for a while as Rosie's ears perked up and she sniffed over the fence at Silvano, who stuck his nose out at her with interest. She snorted excitedly and nudged Silvano, completely ignoring Hamlet, who had joined them.

'I think she's already found a new mate,' grinned Tristan as Rosie tried to nibble Silvano over the fence.

Holly stroked a purple curl from her forehead with relief. She had started dying her hair after the accident, as Graham had always called her *Goldilocks* because of her light blonde bob, and she couldn't bear to be reminded of it every time she looked in the mirror. 'I hope she settles in quickly.'

'I'm sure she will. Shall I show you the farm?'

With her hands buried in the pockets of her green waistcoat, Holly followed Tristan into the stables, where he introduced her to the other horses and showed her Rosie's stall, which was already stocked with straw and hay for the night. 'Ivanhoe will join us next week and hopefully the two will get along. Otherwise, we'll have to think about something else. Maybe one of them will be compatible with O'Brian, he's been on his own so far and could definitely do with a stable mate.'

'Is Ivanhoe the Clydesdale you told me about?'

Tristan nodded. 'His owner Wilma is nice. A bit chaotic, but very sweet.'

'Sounds good.' She strolled along beside him and finally they stopped in front of the last stall in the stable, the door of which was ajar.

'Ah, Aiden,' Tristan greeted the man with the short jet-black curls, who stood with his back to them. 'May I introduce you to Holly?'

The man turned around and Holly looked into the deepest blue eyes she had ever seen. The man's face was angular, his skin pale and his mouth curved into a friendly smile.

'Hello Holly, nice to meet you. I'm Aiden and these are my horses, Sir Percy and Buttercup.' He pointed to the large dapple-grey horse and the sturdy big pony next to it, whose hooves he had just oiled.

'Hey,' she said shyly.

'Aiden is one of my best friends, we've known each other for years,' Tristan explained.

'You're from London, aren't you?' Aiden wanted to know.

Holly nodded. ‘Yes, from Richmond upon Thames.’

‘Oh, how nice,’ said Aiden, brushing a strand of hair from his forehead. ‘My company is based in Bloomsbury, but I know Richmond well. A colleague of mine lives there.’

‘Bloomsbury is great. Besides, my favourite book is set there, it’s about a little bookshop in Bloomsbury.’

‘A little bookshop? You’ll have to introduce Rowan to the book,’ Tristan grinned. Then he added: ‘Not that she doesn’t already have enough books ...’

‘There’s no such thing as enough books, darling.’ Rowan had come up behind Holly and Tristan with a tray and three mugs. Smiling, she offered Holly one of the mugs, which she gratefully accepted. Tristan reached for one of the others. ‘It’s usually debatable, but with you there’s no point.’

‘Hey Aiden, would you like a coffee too? I can make myself another.’ With that, Rowan held out the tray with the remaining mug.

He waved it off. ‘Thanks, but I have to go. Lavinia must be waiting impatiently, I promised her I’d take her out tonight.’

Holly could see Tristan roll his eyes when Aiden wasn’t looking. ‘Well then,’ was all he said.

Aiden stepped past them out of the stall and pulled the sliding door shut behind him. ‘Nice meeting you, Holly. See you around.’ Holly looked after him. His black breeches had the same trademark embroidered on the back that was emblazoned on the front of the olive-coloured gilet he was wearing.

‘Of course, Lavinia,’ Rowan moaned softly. ‘When is he going to finally dump her?’

‘Aiden’s always had a knack for the wrong women,’ Tristan remarked. ‘He’s good-looking and rich, which attracts a certain type. Unfortunately, he always realises too late that that’s the only reason they’re after him.’

Holly blew into her coffee and then took a sip. At that moment, a cheerful ‘Hellooooo!’ call rang out and shortly afterwards a red-haired woman and a dark-haired, broad-shouldered man appeared, entering the stable hand in hand.

‘Holly, may I introduce you to our closest friends Alyson and Jake?’ Rowan took a step forward.

‘Alyson is the owner of Hamlet, who was standing in the meadow with Silvano. Silvano is Rosie’s new best friend,’ Tristan whispered to Rowan with a wink. ‘Alyson is Rowan’s best friend. Jake is an actor, he was originally only supposed to stay for a few weeks last winter, but over a year later he’s somehow still here. I don’t think we’ll ever get rid of him.’

‘I know you’d be heartbroken if I disappeared,’ Jake asserted in Tristan’s direction with a suggestive waggle of his eyebrows. Then he said to Holly: ‘I think Tristan is sad enough that I’ve recently moved out of the holiday cottage here on the farm and moved in with Alyson.’

‘Sure, I’m devastated,’ Tristan said, shaking his head and with unmistakable sarcasm in his voice.

‘As you can see, we all really love each other,’ grinned Alyson, who, like Rowan and Tristan before her, naturally pulled Holly into a hug. ‘It’s nice to

have you here.'

'I'm happy too.' Holly looked from Alyson to Jake, who winked at her. 'I like your hair. Pretty funky, maybe I should dye mine too. A nice green maybe ...'

'Don't you dare,' his girlfriend admonished. Hastily, she turned to Holly and said: 'But I have to agree with him, it looks really cool. And I love your curls!'

'Thank you, same to you,' she smiled, thinking of the Disney character *Merida* at the sight of Alyson. A real Highlander, no doubt, even if her accent wasn't as thick as Rowan's.

'I can't wait to meet your horse,' Alyson then said. 'Won't you introduce us to her?'

'Sure.' While Tristan and Jake led the way in a discussion about potential baby names, Holly followed with Rowan on one side and Alyson on the other.

'So, is it going to be a boy or a girl?' Holly asked Rowan.

'We're waiting to be surprised, so we're collecting names for both,' she replied.

'I'm still in favour of it being a Morag. It's such a lovely name,' said Alyson. 'And if it's a boy, I'd vote for Alistair.'

'There are enough names like that around here, we want something more unusual.' Rowan shook her head. 'I want something literary, a name from a classic novel. I won't give up trying to convince Tristan of Mina or Westley.'

They had reached the pastures and the two men had already stopped at the gate to Rosie's pasture.

'That's not possible,' Rowan said. 'How the ...?'

Holly also stared at her mare, who was no longer standing alone in the field. Silvano was with her and the two of them were grooming each other as if they had known each other forever.

‘He jumped,’ reported the older lady, who had just come from another pasture with her chestnut. ‘Unbelievable, I didn’t know he could jump that high.’

‘Neither did I,’ Rowan muttered, shaking her head again. Holly could only stare at her horse.

‘Did you see it, Catriona?’ Jake wanted to know.

The woman nodded. ‘Jeez, I was really scared he’d get tangled up in the fence, but he went over it like the height wasn’t a big deal for him at all.’

‘Apparently, after Amelia and Freddie, it’s the next stable romance,’ Jake remarked dryly. ‘What a place, you should use that as an advertising slogan for yourselves, Tristan. Aon-adharcach Stàball – horse or human, we’ll find the right riding match for you.’

‘You’re disgusting,’ Alyson chided him.

‘You wouldn’t have me any other way,’ he returned with a grin.

‘Thanks, we don’t really want to know,’ Catriona interrupted.

‘Poor Hamlet, now he’s the fifth wheel,’ said Alyson.

‘The third wheel, it’s called,’ Jake improved her.

‘That Silvano would ever fall in love,’ Rowan sighed and stroked her stomach dreamily, as if Silvano was her oldest child who was now grown up, and she could hardly wait to hold another little one in her arms.

Holly sipped her coffee again and watched her

horse, who was now lying down next to Silvano in the meadow and, unlike the narrow, agile grey pony, didn't get all the way round when she rolled, which didn't seem to bother her at all. After less than an hour, Rosie already felt very comfortable and at home. Holly only hoped that she would fit in just as well with the stable community.

Chapter 2: New friends



That evening, Holly lay in bed in her new flat and stared at the ceiling. Strictly speaking, it wasn't her flat – she had found a room in a shared flat through an advert. Her one flatmate, Chiara, was also a student and a few years younger than Holly. Her other flatmate, Alejandro, was already in his early thirties and worked for an electrical company while he waited for his application for dual citizenship to be accepted. He had originally only come here on holiday, but then he had met Arthur, who worked at the local theatre, and had fallen in love. When Holly had asked him why he wasn't living with Arthur, Alejandro had explained that they wanted to take things slowly and get to know each other better before moving in together. Both Chiara and Alejandro seemed very nice and the rent for the room with shared living and cooking area was affordable. That was good, because Holly hadn't been able to save much in the past year and even now most of her money was going to Rosie. From next week,

she had a weekend job at Costa, but she wouldn't earn much more there than in the call centre where she had worked in London.

'Oh, Graham,' she whispered into the silence of the room. 'We had such big plans. I was supposed to finish university next summer and you were going to join your uncle's veterinary practice. Instead, I'm sitting alone in a room in the Highlands working as a barista. How fate can take you by surprise. Will I ever be happy again?' She rolled onto her side. 'You know, I sometimes wish I'd gone to Winchester with Dad that day to pick up our coffee table. I wouldn't be here now missing you so much.' She sighed. 'At least I seem to have found the perfect place for Rosie. Just think, she's fallen head over heels in love with one of the other ponies. I've never seen her like this before. Maybe at least she has hope for a future with someone she loves. Do you think I'll ever be able to fall in love again? Or is there only one for everyone and our few years together were all that fate granted me?' Something creaked and in the darkness she thought she saw the curtain in front of her window sway slightly, as if a gust of wind had come through the slightly open window. She had probably just imagined it. Holly rolled onto her back again. 'I know you wouldn't have wanted me to sink into grief. You would have wanted me to open up again. But I'm not ready. Not yet. Maybe one day.'

~

After Holly had spent the morning researching for a term paper on the influence of the British Empire on

the Scottish Highlands, she drove to the stables. Rowan had texted her in the morning to say that she would be putting Rosie out to pasture with Silvano and Hamlet, and that her horse had coped marvelously well with her first night at her new home.

When Holly's Land Rover pulled into the car park, it was a lot fuller than the day before and she prepared herself to meet a whole host of other horse owners. Not that she was dreading it, but she was a little nervous, even though everyone had been so friendly to her yesterday.

She had only just opened the driver's door when two children of primary school age came rushing towards her. It was the two she had briefly seen riding their ponies yesterday when she arrived.

'Are you the new girl?'

'Your horse is gorgeous; can I ride it?'

'Don't let her ride it, Mum says she has to get bigger first.'

'I'm big enough, Griselle rides a big horse too.'

'Can I have a ride in your car? That's so cool!'

Holly could hardly follow the two of them, they were chattering away so quickly and eventually they were both staring at her with bright and expectant faces.

'Er, yes, hello,' she began, a little unsure where to start. 'Well, I'm Holly.'

'Hello Holly.' A tall, slim woman appeared behind the two children. 'Tam, Simon, don't be so pushy and welcome Holly first. Introduce yourselves, it's only proper.'

The girl grumbled a little, then said, 'I'm Tam. And

this is my twin brother Simon.'

'I'm Calandra, the mum,' introduced the woman who had arrived with her children. She placed a hand on each of their shoulders. 'So, you let Holly arrive in peace for now. And Tam – Simon's right, you can ride bigger horses when you're bigger yourself. Besides, what would Dumplin and Donut say if you just abandoned them?'

'I wouldn't let her down, I could ride her and Holly's horse. Please, Mum, her horse looks like Black Beauty.'

'Only a bit fatter,' Simon whispered loud enough for everyone to hear, and when he met Holly's gaze, he quickly slapped his hand over his mouth.

'It's all right, she could really do with a few less stones, but I like to spoil her,' Holly explained with a smile. Then she remembered Dumplin and Donut, who Tristan had introduced to her yesterday after Calandra had picked Tam and Simon up and added: 'One day you can ride her. But your ponies are beautiful too, I met them yesterday.'

'You could ride them when we ride your horse,' Simon suggested. Tam poked him in the side. 'She's far too big for them.'

'Exactly,' Holly nodded. 'That's why you need to make the most of your time with them before you get too big too.'

'Right. Now, off you go, they're waiting for their food.' Calandra gave her twins a gentle push in the direction of the stable and the two left, whispering. As Holly and Calandra slowly followed them, the older one pointed to a woman standing at the edge of the

riding arena. ‘That’s Catherine and on the horse, Moriarty, is her daughter Griselle. She’s a bit older than Tam and Simon. By the way, if they ever get too pushy or anything, just tell them off. They need to learn that there are boundaries and that they need to respect when someone doesn’t want to chat to them.’

‘I think it’s good when children are open and curious,’ smiled Holly. ‘I always wanted a little brother or sister, but unfortunately I never had one.’

‘Maybe you’ll have children of your own one day,’ Calandra said with a shrug.

Holly winced at the thought of children. She had always wanted some, but Graham had found out at an examination scan that he was unable to conceive, and so Holly had begun to warm to the idea of giving her motherly love to animals in need. Graham had loved animals and, as well as Rosie, had had a cat and a dog from the animal rescue, both of which had been adopted by his parents after his death. Now Graham was dead, the thought of children seemed strange to Holly. Calandra must have realised that her comment had an effect on Holly and hurried to change the subject quickly. ‘They’re right, by the way: your horse looks like Black Beauty. Beautiful!’

‘Thank you.’ Holly endeavoured to smile. ‘She means everything to me.’

They entered the stables, where an older man was talking animatedly to a woman whose dark curls were beginning to grey at the top. She seemed upset.

‘Doreen, I told you I’d take care of it. Until I’ve fixed the trough, we’ll just put a bucket of water in Beowulf’s stall. Before Tristan and Rowan rebuilt the

stable, all the horses only had buckets to drink from, so Beowulf will be able to cope for a few days.’ The man remained calm as the woman, Doreen, nagged at him again.

Holly and Calandra exchanged a look.

‘Doreen, calm down. Think about your blood pressure.’ The man put a hand on her arm and to Holly’s amazement it actually seemed to calm her down. ‘We’ll be fine.’

‘I hope so,’ was all she said before stalking past Holly and Calandra.

The man ran his fingers through his tousled short hair. He was wearing a chequered shirt with holes in it, trousers with braces and wellies. He looked like a stable boy from a children’s book. He shook his head, then smiled at the two women.

‘You must be Holly. Welcome, I’m Hamish.’ Holly shook his outstretched hand. ‘Pleased to meet you.’

‘Hamish has always been here. Some say he’s been here since the first farmhouse was built here in the sixteenth century,’ Calandra grinned. ‘Kind of the good spirit of the stable.’

‘I’m not quite that old,’ laughed Hamish. ‘Although I sometimes feel that way.’

‘And that was Doreen,’ Calandra explained. ‘Best to just ignore her, she rarely has anything nice to say.’

‘She has her moments, they just don’t come out when people are around,’ Hamish objected.

Calandra grimaced as if she thought that was highly unlikely but said nothing. A whistle sounded and shortly afterwards Tristan appeared next to them.

After greeting them, he asked Holly, 'How'd you feel about a little ride to explore the neighbourhood? I can show you a lovely woodland path, the weather is lovely and needs to be used.'

'I actually wanted to give Rosie a few days to settle in,' Holly admitted.

'No problem, you can ride my Arwen. I'll take Maxim.' Tristan had told her yesterday that he and his cousin Isobel had rescued the chestnut from bad conditions and had been working with him for two years to build up his confidence. He had started with ground work and could now even ride him, although he was always careful to give Maxim the time he needed for everything.

Holly thought for a moment. It really was a beautiful sunny winter's day and, thinking about how a ride would clear her head, she finally nodded. 'I'd love to.'

She followed Tristan to the pastures and after greeting and feeding Rosie, she fetched Arwen. Tristan was already doing a few laps in the riding arena with Maxim while she tacked up Arwen. He looked so elegant that Holly hoped she was riding well enough to get on one of his horses. Indeed, Arwen responded to the slightest tug she gave, but the mare was composed and trotted relaxed beside Maxim as they left the yard and rode into the forest. The mare snorted and Holly patted her neck.

'She's never been off-road with Maxim before,' Tristan explained with a smile. 'You look good on her. I hope Rosie doesn't get jealous.'

'She's got Silvano now,' Holly said with a wink.

Tristan laughed. ‘I still can’t quite believe it.’ Then he said a little hesitantly: ‘I wanted to tell you that if you ever need a friend here, or feel alone, or are looking for someone to study with or push hay-bales with – I’m here. And the others too, for sure. It’s not easy being new anywhere – I didn’t know anyone when I first came here three years ago ... except Aiden, but he flew straight to London for a few months. I definitely don’t want you to feel like you don’t have anyone to turn to here.’

Holly bit her lip and when a few minutes of silence had passed, Tristan added thoughtfully, ‘That’s not meant to be intrusive, of course, if you’d rather keep to yourself, that’s perfectly fine. I just thought I ... well, I just wanted to offer you ... crap.’

He stared straight ahead through Maxim’s ears as Holly turned her head towards him. ‘I know what you mean, and I really appreciate it. I don’t think Rosie and I could have done better.’ She endeavoured to smile. ‘You’re all so nice.’

Tristan looked at her and smiled now too. ‘We are nice. Well, everyone except Doreen, but there has to be someone to gossip about.’

‘Gossip?’ Holly repeated in mock shock. ‘Tristan, that’s not very exemplary.’

‘I never said I was a good role model for anything,’ he replied with a shrug.

Holly was glad that the conversation had taken on a harmless tone. She left Arwen’s reins long enough for her to cross her arms in front of her chest. ‘You’re going to be a father soon, you should set an example.’

‘I’ll leave that to the godparents.’

‘Who’s going to be godparents?’

‘Alyson, Jake and Aiden.’

‘Three godparents? Wow, didn’t know that was an option.’ Holly only had two godparents, both of whom she had a good relationship with, although one lived in Northumberland and the other in the Cotswolds, so she rarely saw them.

‘All good things come in threes,’ Tristan claimed. ‘It was supposed to be just Alyson as Rowan’s best friend and Aiden as my best friend, but since Jake is also part of the group, somehow Rowan and I would have felt stupid not to include him. Although he’ll probably be the bad example instead of the good role model.’ Tristan laughed. ‘I love that man, but he’s really special, you’ll soon find out.’

Holly grimaced. ‘Okay ...?’

‘So, how would you feel about a wee run?’ Tristan didn’t wait for her answer but trotted his chestnut. Arwen followed almost of her own accord and Holly enjoyed the way the wind blew around her nose. When they came to a hill, Tristan nudged Maxim into a gallop and Holly pressed her legs a little firmer into Arwen’s sides so that the mare sped up immediately. Holly leant forward in the saddle so that Arwen picked up a little more speed and finally overtook Maxim. The gelding obviously didn’t like this at all, as he pressed his ears firmly back against his head and bucked. Tristan sat calmly and finally managed to bring his horse back into a walk. When Arwen slowed down as well, Holly looked at Tristan questioningly. ‘I guess he likes to be in front.’

Tristan shook his head. ‘That’s not it. I told you he

comes from a bad background. Not only was he mistreated by his owners, they also let him take part in illegal races. He was penned in a narrow track with other horses and beaten in order to run faster. That's why he hates it when other horses run too close to him.'

Holly turned pale. 'Oh God, I didn't know that. I'm sorry.'

He shook his head. 'It's okay, he's slowly learning that it's not bad and he doesn't need to expect pain when he runs with other horses.'

'Is that why he's in a stall on his own?'

Tristan nodded. 'Yes, at first he couldn't stand being around other horses. Now I can put him out into a pasture with Paula and Arwen, but he's still wary when they get too close.'

'Poor thing. How can anyone do something like that?'

'Humans are already bad with each other, how could they be any better with animals,' Tristan snorted. 'I hope I can find a suitable horse for him to share the stall with one day. It's just nicer for horses to have someone with them.'

'Maxim, Kili, Fili, Eli ... maybe another rescue animal will come your way,' Holly mused. 'My boyfriend always said that just when we need it most, an animal falls from the sky, just waiting for the right moment. Graham took Rosie in shortly after his sister was diagnosed with cancer and he almost despaired. Rosie gave him a purpose and kept him going. His dog had come to him the week he had his driving test, which he was dreading. And the cat had been given to

him by a friend because she didn't get on with her other cat, a few days after his old cat had been run over by a car. So you see, it really was like that with him, the animals needed him and he needed them. Maybe it's the same with Maxim – a mate will find him when the time is right and then they can be there for each other.'

'Your Graham sounds like a special man,' Tristan whispered sympathetically.

'He was.' Holly hastily wiped her eyes. 'He was.'

Chapter 3: 'Hot Mr MacDonald'



Although all the tables in the spacious Costa were occupied, Holly had imagined it would be more stressful. According to her colleagues, it was particularly busy today – a small queue had formed at the counter and Holly's colleague was going round to ask who just wanted a takeaway while asking the others to be patient until a table became available – but to Holly, used to London coffee shops, it seemed almost quiet for a Saturday afternoon.

'Holly, give me a hand with clearing the tables,' an older colleague instructed her – Harry, if she remembered correctly. He had given her a briefing on the routine and her duties this morning. She followed him and balanced three trays into the kitchen at the same time. Jordan was waiting at the dishwasher. The boy was only eighteen and was supplementing his pocket money by working as a kitchen porter, as the person who did nothing all day but load and unload the dishwasher was elegantly called. Bored, he glared at Holly

and wrinkled his nose noisily as he began to push the leftovers from a plate into a rubbish bin with his gloved hand. Holly was glad to be working as a waitress. Jordan's red face contorted in disgust as he threw a crumpled handkerchief towards the bin with pointed hands, missed, and then had to pick it up again to dispose of it. Holly hastily grabbed a spray bottle of sanitiser and a cloth. She went back to the café area to wipe down the tables. She was leaning over one when a familiar voice asked, 'Holly?'

She looked up and it took her a moment to recognise him. 'Aiden, hi.'

'You work here?' he asked, surprised.

'Looks like it.' She grinned. 'It's my first day.'

'Nice. Well, good luck then.' Aiden placed his cappuccino on the freshly wiped table and then opened the laptop bag he had slung over his shoulder.

'Yeah, er, thanks.' Holly hurried to the next table to be wiped down when she saw two of her colleagues, both her age and also students, waving wildly. She raised an eyebrow and strolled over. Livia, a skinny blonde hairdressing student, immediately leant over to her and whispered: 'You know him?'

Holly grimaced in confusion. 'Know who?'

'Well, Hot Mr MacDonald,' Alex said impatiently, shaking her dark curls. 'I can't believe it.'

Holly didn't understand a thing. 'Which Mr MacDonald?'

'Him!' Livia gestured inconspicuously towards Aiden, who had now opened his laptop and was running his fingers over the keyboard.