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Country Passions

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Extract

Chapter 1

Zoe slammed the back door shut and stalked across the car park to her car seething with temper. How dare Graham look at her with those lustful eyes? By what right? It was always the same when you had a child but no wedding ring on your finger; easy virtue was always the assumption. Well, believe me, Graham, this time you've backed the wrong horse. Zoe flung her visiting list onto the front passenger seat, climbed in and started the engine. She reversed furiously, went into first and almost ran down Dan as he went out to his car. Nothing less than he deserved. He always, *always* seemed to be waiting to pounce for some misdemeanour or other of hers. As she slowed before turning into the main road she recollected his reasons and shrugged. To hell with him. She glanced in her rear-view mirror and saw he was already waiting behind her. Right now he'd be saying to himself, 'Women drivers!' and criticizing her for not pulling away as sharply as he supposed he would in the circumstances.

As the traffic cleared momentarily, she swung away into the road, glad that Dan had turned left over the bridge and was not following her. Zoe loved driving. If only she could have a soft-top car then she'd have the roof down all year round, with the wind blowing her hair and invigorating her. But with drugs to be carried a vet's vehicle had to be secure.

Her first call was to Lord Askew's dairy herd. The daft old goat. But you had to admire him for sticking to his principles, even if they were as outdated as a horse and cart. Still, at least she didn't have to deal with him. She could leave all that to Dan

with his instinctive equine talents. Zoe's face screwed up when she thought that as though she'd tasted something very sour. Huh!

The stable courtyard was built as beautifully as the main house. What taste the Georgians had! Such beauty. She parked as close to the archway into the farmyard as she could and went to find Chris, the head stock man, her spirits lifting as she smelled the warm, comforting smell of cows kept inside because of the severe weather. There was one thing about cows – they were always even-tempered. Never resentful or irritable, unless they were in pain, just patient and willing. She tried calling his name. Must be at breakfast. Since he would have been up since five or so she decided to leave him in peace and went to sit on the mounting block in the stableyard for a while.

It was cold, almost beyond belief, but there was a brilliant sun shining with the crisp smell of frost in the air and Zoe loved it. Small animals! Give her large animals any time. OK, sometimes her strength ran out when she was heaving an unwilling sheep, or battling with a difficult calving, but by craft and guile, learned with experience, she usually managed. In any case, it always boosted a man's ego if she had to ask for help.

Sound carried well in the sharp air and she heard his lordship coming back from his early ride long before she saw him. She'd half a mind to leap off the mounting block and escape him but the sheer cussedness that possessed her this morning made her stay.

He'd not lost a single stone of his massive weight. Still the same florid face, the shoulders like giant hams, the big fleshy hands masterfully holding the reins, his thick legs tucked into his hugely shiny chestnut-coloured riding boots. Give him his due, he could ride. Impressive he was. His fine black horse, one of the biggest hunters she'd ever seen, took a very able rider to control him and was still lively even though he was sweating from his exercise. Professional politeness got her to her feet. 'Good morning, Lord Askew. Fine morning for a ride.'

Lord Askew swung down from the saddle, planted his great feet on the ground and said, 'Made all the better for seeing you, my dear. How are we this morning? In fine fettle, I see. What a pleasant sight; you match the morning! Happy New Year to you!'

'And to you, my lord.' Zoe remembered to say what she knew would please him. 'I see Lady Mary had considerable success at Olympia.'

'Indeed she did. Very proud of the gal I am. Not only Galaxy but Constellation too did well. Thank God that Dan of yours spotted Galaxy's problem.' The downturn of Zoe's mouth at the mention of Dan's expertise amused him. 'Breakfasted this morning?'

'No, I'm just waiting for Chris to finish his.'

Lord Askew's face lost its hail-fellow-well-met look. 'Call him out! It's what I pay him for.'

'I most certainly shan't. He'll have already been up at least three hours and he deserves to refuel. And for what I imagine you pay him for all the hours he puts in he's earned his break.'

Lord Askew, liking feisty women, said, 'Hmm. Well. You have breakfast with me then while you wait.' He ran an expert eye over Zoe and mentally licked his lips.

'Thanks all the same, but no. I've lots to do. Good morning to you, my lord.' She deliberately turned her back on him and went through the archway because she'd heard Chris's boots slurping along, almost beating a tattoo as his boot heels bumped along the cobbled yard.

'Hi Chris! Lead me to the offending cow. I'm in a mood for instant diagnosis!'

'Glad about that because she has me foxed and not half. Happy New Year to you!'

'And to you.'

They went companionably through into the largest of the cow byres and became lost in veterinary discussions, which were meat and drink to them both. By the time Zoe left, Lord Askew was

already back in the stableyard talking to Gavin, his head groom. Zoe waved to them both, calling out New Year greetings to Gavin, who sulkily acknowledged them. Obviously Gavin was getting torn to pieces over something. Lord Askew touched the peak of his cap to her and said nothing. How she'd hate to have him as her employer. Tied house, long hours and an attitude that said you owed Lord Askew something for the privilege of working for him. One day she'd have the most horrendous row with him, she knew she would. It was inevitable.

Beulah Bank Farm next and then along the cart track, which she used as a short cut to skirt past Magnum Percy to reach Pick's Farm. She enjoyed the drive to Beulah Bank, steep, twisting and very dangerous if it had snowed and afterwards frozen over. But today the icy patches would only be where the trees had prevented the sun shining on the road. Zoe decided to call into the Practice on the way with the samples she'd collected from the sick Guernsey at Lord Askew's and a quick coffee wouldn't go amiss.

She took them into the office to leave them with Joy. 'Here we are, samples to go off today, please.'

Joy glanced at the clock. 'It took a while there?'

'Well, Chris had gone for his breakfast so I had to wait.' Zoe leaned over the desk and asked quietly, 'You didn't hear from Duncan for Christmas?'

'How do you know I didn't?'

'Light's gone out of your face again, that's how I know. Thought you might hear, you know, festive season and all that.'

'Well, I didn't.' Joy fidgeted with a pen on her desk. 'Primarily it's all my fault, which doesn't help.'

'You mean Mungo?'

Joy stared at her and eventually nodded agreement.

'Duncan knows, obviously?'

The answer to Zoe's question was another nod from Joy.

'It could be described as banging your head against a brick wall. Mungo will never forsake Miriam for anyone, you know

that, and still you persist. You must be mad. Absolutely mad. No man's worth that kind of devotion.'

'Some are.'

'I know Mungo's an absolute prize, a total charmer in fact, but there are limits.'

Somewhat tartly Joy asked, 'You know all about men, do you?'

'Not all, but a lot. Anyhow, it's you who's been left with *nothing*, no lover, no husband, so just think on that. Going for a coffee, it's blasted cold out there.'

Zoe turned on her heel and left as abruptly as she'd come. The coffee with plenty of sugar in it revived her flagging spirits and she was off to Beulah Bank in no time at all.

This was the best bit of veterinary practice, all the darting about from one farm to another, never knowing from one day to the next where you'd be going, what problems you'd have to solve, who you'd be chatting to about the best subject in the world.

Beulah Bank Farm nestled in the foothills, sheltered from the wind by the high point of the moor above Barleybridge. Zoe always had the same thought as she arrived in the farmyard. If she had to choose somewhere else to live and she had the money she'd live here. The views from the back of the house were spectacular. She saw Megan waving to her from the kitchen window and waved back. She didn't go in but shouted through the window that she'd find Josh first and then come in for a word when she'd finished.

She found Josh sitting in a stable with the lad. They had a fan heater going, the electric light on and the lad was dealing a hand of cards onto the old trunk they used for a table.

'Hi, Zoe.' Josh pulled up a box for her to sit on.

'What's this, then? Here am I, slaving my guts out in all this cold weather, and you two are as snug as two bugs in a rug, playing cards.'

The lad winked.

Josh laughed. 'He's beating me. Would you believe it? Beating me.' He punched the lad on his arm.

Zoe, who had a soft spot for the lad, said jokingly, 'Well, it's not your brains is it, lad? It's your sheer native cunning.'

'Won two pounds off him this Christmas, I have.'

'Good lad. Just what I like to hear. Well, come on then, Josh, let's be having you. Rhodri said one of your ewes was in distress. Said something about her being special.'

They turned off the fan heater, put on their warm coats and stumped off with her to a sheep pen at the far side of the barn. 'She's early, been straining since first light. I've had a feel round and I don't like it. It's beyond me. I don't want anything to happen to her. She's Megan's pet sheep Myfanwy.'

'I'll have a look.' Zoe believed in hands on and didn't always bother with the elbow-length plastic gloves and . . . 'My word, you don't think it could be quads, do you? There's an almighty jumble in here.' She was silent for a moment and then said, 'There's an awful lot of legs. OK, old girl, OK. Zoe's doing her best. Has she had a multiple birth before?'

'Megan says she's had twins twice before, but then that's common nowadays. Bloody hell! You don't really think it might be quads?'

The lad's eyes grew large with interest. 'Is that four? I'd best boil a kettle like they do in films.'

Josh muttered, 'It's not a baby she's having, it's a lamb, you daft beggar.'

'I know. I know. But it's Megan's, shouldn't we do something special?'

Zoe, still feeling about inside the ewe, said, 'You can bring me a big bucket of hot water and a bar of soap, please. I'll need that.'

'Right!' The lad got up off his knees and dashed away, bent on doing the right thing. 'Bucket of hot water and a bar of soap. Bucket of hot water and a bar of soap.'

He came back with some towels too and the news that Megan was coming when she'd put the baby in his cradle.

Zoe was still knee-deep in straw, trying as best she could to disentangle however many there were inside Myfanwy. 'I've nearly got one of them. How's the mother looking?'

'Down in the mouth. Straining all the time.'

'Don't I know it. She's making it difficult.'

Zoe gave a heave, the nose and front feet of a lamb appeared, and then out on the straw popped one of the smallest lambs she'd ever seen, bleating though and struggling. Megan arrived at that moment and said, 'It's small.'

'Exactly. Can it go in your warming oven, Megan, just for an hour while I sort out the rest? Needs a bit of TLC. Not too happy about it. The lad'll give it a clean with some straw for you.'

'Quads or triplets, do you think? That must be why it's so small. Here we are, young lady.' Megan scooped up the lamb in one of the towels she'd sent in with the lad and, snuggling it inside her jacket, went back to the house.

Zoe managed to extricate another lamb, bigger and stronger than the first, and then the third. The fourth slipped out easily. She sat back in the straw. 'Well, there's a first time for everything and this is my first set of quads. Wonderful! I'll give Myfanwy a booster and some anti-biotic as a precaution, she's had a rough time. Give those lambs a good rub with the towel, lad, she's too weary to bother just yet. I'll do the injections and then we'll see if she'll let them feed.'

Josh was beside himself with delight. 'It's a first for me too. Brilliant. I can't believe it. Though a lamb in the house will be a lot of work for Megan with the baby, too.'

'Leave that to me. I'll get Old Man Jones on with feeding it. He needs to earn his living somehow.'

'You'll not. He's an awkward cuss, he is. The less I have to do with him the better.'

'Just you wait and see.'

Josh grunted, 'I'll wait a long time.'

'You won't. See, look, she's letting them suckle. Great,

they're real doers, this lot.' The lambs' little tails were waggling excitedly as they drew down their very first food from their mother's udder. 'If I was a sentimentalist I'd say, "Don't they look sweet?".' Zoe rubbed her hands and arms vigorously with the soap, rinsed them clean in the bucket and dried them off on her sweater.

'I'll leave you here and go see Old Man Jones.'

Josh shouted after her, 'Bet you a pound.'

'You've lost already,' came Zoe's voice on the wind.

In the sheep pen Josh and the lad knelt in the straw together, admiring the lambs and marvelling at the mother's loving attention. 'Wonder how little Tom Thumb's doing?' asked the lad.

'Tomasina more like. He was a she.'

'Oh! That's what we want, isn't it? Girls?'

Josh had to smile at the innocence of his double entendre. That was what both of them wanted but were unlikely to get.

Zoe tapped on the back door of the farmhouse and opened it shouting, 'It's me! How are we doing in the oven department?'

Leaving her boots outside the door, she padded into the kitchen and couldn't help smiling to herself. The pound was hers, no doubt about it. 'Good morning, Mr Jones. How is she?'

As far as he was able, in that he was crippled with arthritis, Megan's father turned to look at her. He was sitting in a chair by the cooker with the newborn lamb on his lap, trying to get it to suck from a baby's feeding bottle. 'Not so good. She's no strength to suck.'

'I'll watch for a moment.'

Mr Jones was right. She was eager but couldn't muster any energy for the life-giving milk.

'I've got just the thing in my car.'

Zoe returned carrying a syringe, which she used for dosing various noxious liquids such as worming potions. 'This is brand new, never been used, and I can't think of a better use for it at the moment than feeding this little scrap.'

She drew some of the milk into the syringe and handed it to Mr Jones. By dribbling the milk in drop by drop through the syringe so there was no effort on the lamb's part except swallowing, he managed to get some milk into her. Zoe's approving tone when she said, 'Your kind of patience is just what she needs,' gave Old Man Jones the impetus to volunteer to take over feeding.

He took his eyes from the lamb for a moment and said, 'Normally I would have thought it a waste of valuable time keeping a lamb like this alive, better to finish it here and now, but being one of quads and one of Myfanwy's I think we'll have a go.' He glanced towards the door to check that Megan wasn't within hearing distance and whispered, 'Megan needs a boost. Very low at the moment.'

'Ah! Right, I see. Post baby, you mean?'

Mr Jones nodded. 'Rough time at the birth, and she's not really recovered. So we've got to succeed. Can you put her back in the oven for me?'

Zoe took the fragile lamb from him and briefly hugged it, enjoying the homely smell of it and the weight of it in her arms; it reminded her of Oscar when he was newborn. 'There we are, young lady. You hang in there, for Megan. Right.' She placed the lamb on the blanket in the bottom of the oven and left the door ajar. Zoe was so moved by this lamb hovering between life and death she almost kissed it before she let go of it, but that kind of slushy behaviour to an animal was against her nature so she didn't. 'All I can say is thank heavens for an Aga. They do have their uses. Be seeing you, Mr Jones. Any probs give me a bell. Anytime. For some reason I've taken a shine to this lamb, seeing as she's one of my first quadruplets ever. What a start to the New Year.'

'We'll give it a damn good try. Many thanks and good morning to you, Zoe. Happy New Year.'

'And to you. And to Megan, of course.'

'Of course.'

Zoe took the cart track to Pick's Farm, leaving Magnum Percy undisturbed, and joined the tarmac road to the farm thinking about her lunch. At least today this was her last call, except for emergencies, so she'd treat herself to lunch in Barleybridge, do some vital shopping and go home.

She arrived home three hours later to be greeted by her mother in complaining mode.

'Zoe! Where have you been? I'm at my wits' end. Oscar's done nothing but race about all morning and it's been too cold for me to take him for a walk.'

'Didn't you take him to nursery?'

'No.' Her mother avoided looking at her so Zoe knew she'd not taken him on purpose.

'Why not?'

'Because . . .'

'Yes?'

'Because I couldn't be bothered.'

'So don't complain at me that's he's driven you crackers.' She walked into the sitting room and was aghast at what she saw. There were toys everywhere, apparently flung out of the toy cupboard then discarded, some of them without even being played with. There wasn't anything which annoyed her more. 'This room would have stayed tidy if only you'd taken him. Look at it. Just look at it.'

Hands on hips, her mother, with that icy tone Zoe knew only too well, said, 'Well, he's your son, you tidy it.'

A thought occurred to Zoe. 'Where is he?'

'I've no idea. I went out to the bin—'

'And left the door open, of course.'

'I was only out a moment and he'd disappeared.'

'How long ago was that?'

Her mother glanced at the clock. 'Ten minutes.'

'Half an hour more like! God! Mother, you need your brains examining.'

Zoe ran at a furious pace into every room in the house, which didn't take long. 'He's not in the house. Anywhere. Had he a coat on?'

'Of course not, he was in the house.'

'What then? The clothes I put out before I left?'

'Well, he didn't want his jumper on so he just had a T-shirt. Said it was his tickly one and he didn't like it. I hadn't the energy to insist.'

Zoe shrugged her coat back on again and rushed outside into the lane calling, calling, 'Oscar! Oscar! Oscar!' Eventually she spotted him coming out of a neighbour's gate.

'Mummy! Not in. All gone out.' He ran to her, arms outstretched. In her relief Zoe clasped him to her and swung him round and round.

'You're a naughty boy, do you know that? A very naughty boy. Granny's cross.'

'Mummy cross?'

Zoe nuzzled her face into the softness of Oscar's neck. 'Not cross, but very worried. Boys your age should never run off without someone with them. Don't do it again. Ever. OK?'

Oscar's thumb was in his mouth and his blond head snuggled onto her shoulder.

'Hungry?'

Oscar nodded.

'Then while I make lunch, you go say sorry to Granny. Right?'

Oscar nodded.

'Really sorry. She's very upset.'

Zoe carried him back up the lane to her house, closed the garden gate with the special catch she'd had fitted to keep him safe, though why she did that when he'd apparently already learned to undo it she had no idea, and then stood looking up at her house.

Twelve years she'd been qualified and what had she to show for it? A dream of a country cottage, which though small was

very lovely, a son whom she adored when she remembered, a mother who endeavoured on a daily basis to drive her out of her mind, a partnership bought with Dad's money, which meant a good job which she loved . . . but that was it.

Zoe hitched Oscar's weight onto her other hip and marched up the path, determined not to row with her mother if she could possibly help it. The sitting room hadn't been touched, the lunch not even started even though it was two o'clock and Oscar wouldn't have eaten since she'd given him his breakfast at half past seven, and her mother was stretched out in an easy chair with a G and T in her hand. Zoe's temper rose inside her like bile.

'I work damned hard to keep a roof over your head. I feed you, pay all the bills, shop for you, pay for your car, your pension is your own, what more can I do? All you're asked to do is look after Oscar. Taking him to nursery isn't that onerous, is it? You know, turn the key in the ignition, take off the handbrake and go. I bought the car, I pay for the petrol, what's hard about that? It must be easier than this.' Zoe waved her arm at the chaos in her sitting room.

Joan Savage took a sip of gin before she replied, 'I don't approve of nursery at his age. He shouldn't need to go. You should have married his father.' She paused and then added spitefully, 'Whoever *he* was.'

Zoe stood Oscar down saying to him, 'Lunch in five minutes, go play for a minute.'

'Hungry. Cri'ps? Biccy?'

'In a minute.' She leaned over her mother and with her mouth close to her ear she said, 'I've told you before, don't mention his father in his presence. I won't have it.'

'I haven't mentioned him because I don't know who he is. So how can I?'

Zoe looked at Oscar, at the blond hair, his fair skin and his big blue eyes, so unlike herself, but the familiar pang she usually felt

was missing. Maybe at long last she'd got over him. Then Oscar smiled at her. 'Juice?' he said and before she knew it, his smile had re-awakened the memories of his father.