

chapter 20

a necessary distraction

“Are you sure it’s absolutely necessary?”

As Esther lay sleeping, I made myself at home in the chair next to the bed. Sheila left to pick up some things in town while Ruby made up sandwiches in the kitchen. When she brought one to me along with a glass of lemonade, I just sat there in a daze. It had been quite a morning. I was hungry, but too exhausted to eat.

When the doctor arrived, Ruby scurried back to the kitchen and offered him a sandwich too. When he turned her down, I could tell that she was upset. She was a nice lady, and she was trying so hard to be a kind host, but all of us were too self-absorbed to appreciate it. I decided to eat the sandwich, not because I wanted to, but for her sake. As I sat there sipping my drink, the doctor came in and immediately suggested that I leave the room.

“Are you sure it’s absolutely necessary?” I asked.

“Yes, I think so,” he said. “You can wait outside, but I’d like Ruby to stay and assist, if that’s all right with you, ma’am.”

“Yes, I can help,” she said eagerly.

I let out a heavy sigh as I stood up and trudged out. I had never talked back to a doctor before, but at that point, I felt like doing it. When I got to the end of the hallway, I heard the door to Esther’s room shut. I didn’t want to leave her, but if it was absolutely necessary, I was willing to do whatever it took.

I went out to the front porch and sat down on the steps. Zeke noticed me sitting there and came over to say hello. I greeted him as he flopped down at my feet and let me scratch him behind his ears.

It was a nice distraction for me. I loved dogs, especially friendly ones. Zeke was an old mutt, but I could tell that he was intelligent. He seemed to know that I was upset about something, and he was doing what he could to help make it better.

About a half hour later, the doctor came out with Ruby close behind. They were talking about Esther's condition, but they didn't sound too worried about her. The doctor thought Esther's symptoms indicated a case of mononucleosis, but he wanted to confirm the diagnosis with the blood sample he'd taken. He said that he would call later with the results.

As he drove away down the road, Sheila met him in her little yellow speedster. She nearly drove off the road as she swerved around his car, but thankfully, she didn't go in the ditch. She pulled up into the driveway, skidded to a stop, and then hopped out and ran over to us. As she handed a bag of groceries off to Ruby, she waited for a few seconds and then inquired about Esther.

"How is she doing? Is she awake yet?" Sheila asked.

"She's still asleep," Ruby replied. "Esther hardly opened her eyes, even as the doctor did his examination. She was so groggy. I don't even think she recognized us."

"Did she say anything?" I asked.

"The doctor asked her a series of questions, but she only answered a few of them," Ruby replied. "I tried to talk to her, but she didn't seem to know I was even there."

"Does she know I'm here?" I asked.

"I didn't get a chance to ask her that," Ruby replied. "I'm sure you can surprise her later if you like."

"Okay, thanks," I muttered, upset at the sad situation.

I slumped down on the steps of the porch next to the dog again. I liked surprises, and I'm sure Esther did too, but the situation seemed completely hopeless. I think Ruby could tell that I was upset. She sat down beside me and put her arm around my shoulder. I just looked at the ground as she tried to comfort me.

"You need something to do while you're waiting for Esther to wake up, don't you?" Ruby suggested.

“I don’t know, maybe,” I replied.

“I tell you what,” she said with a smile. “This morning, my man, Jake, said he could use a hand today. He’s out in the barn right now. Why don’t you go and see what he’s up to?”

“What does he need help with?” I asked, grateful for any distraction that would take my mind off Esther for a while.

“He’ll let you know,” she replied. “I think he mentioned doing some work in the high paddock.”

“All right, I’ll go and see what’s up,” I said.

As I walked away to the barn, Zeke got up and followed along behind. I reached back and patted his head as he wagged his tail. I could tell that he liked me. I hoped Ruby’s man would come to the same conclusion. Zeke and I walked around and into the barn, where Jake was busy shoveling manure into a wheelbarrow. When he saw me, he stood up and let out a weary sigh.

“Hey there, mate,” he said, reaching out to shake my hand. “I’m Jake McLaren, Ruby’s husband. She said you’d be Leo, a friend of our Esther girl. Is she feeling any better?”

“No, she’s still asleep, but the doctor isn’t too worried,” I replied, giving his hand a firm shake. His hands were hard as rocks, and he had a strong grip. “You’ve got a nice spread here, Jake.”

“Yeah, it’s a handful,” he said. “My hired man has been off to the South Island for a week, and I’ve been trying to keep up.”

“I’d be happy to help with whatever,” I replied. “I’ve moved a fair amount of manure in my day, so just give me the shovel and take a load off, if you like.”

“Aw, I’m about done here,” he said, “but the tractor’s all gassed up and ready to go, down by the shed. How about you bring it around and we head out to the hayfield.”

“Sure, I can do that,” I replied.

“Cheers, mate,” he said. “I’ll be finished here shortly.”

As I turned to go, Zeke followed me out, and together, we located the tractor and hay wagon down the hill. I hopped up into the weathered seat and examined the big machine. I hadn’t seen one that old in a long time, but it wasn’t anything I couldn’t handle. I kicked the

footbrake loose, jammed the clutch down, and pushed the starter. As expected, it fired right up. It sounded old and rough, but it was clearly well cared for. When I threw it into first gear, the big red tractor lurched forward. I figured that it was at least fifty years old, and it probably had another fifty in it, thanks to Jake's faithful care. I drove it up the hill and around to the barn door as Zeke jogged along behind, happily wagging his tail.

When I pulled up, Jake was waiting there with a contented grin. He was holding an extra pair of leather gloves and a jug of water. I could tell he was pleased that I knew how to drive his big baby, and I was honored that he'd trust me with it. Being up in the bouncy seat brought back a lot of good memories from my summer in North Dakota, working on my uncle's farm. Besides, it was nice to have something to do while I waited for Esther to wake up.

As I slowed to a crawl, Jake hopped up onto the wagon and sat down. When I glanced back, he pointed to the field up the hill past the horse pasture. I could see dozens of hay bales scattered across the field, all waiting to be picked up. I knew what we were getting into. It would be a load of work, but I was more than ready for it.

I steered the tractor along the outside of the field to a metal gate about halfway up the hill. When we got there, Jake hopped off and pushed it open. Zeke scooted through before it closed again, and then we made our way along the edge of the field to the first line of bales. As I inched the tractor along, Jake threw the bales onto the wagon. He wasn't a big man, but he was strong. He tossed them on with ease, arranging them in a tight pattern that crisscrossed at each level to ensure they wouldn't fall off. At the top of the hill, I put the tractor into neutral and jumped down.

"It's my turn!" I shouted, grabbing the gloves. "You make it look easy, Jake. I have to admit; I'm a little out of practice."

"You'll be fine, boy," he said with a smile. He took a long drink from the jug of water and then offered it to me.

I put the gloves on and shook my head. "Not until I've done my share of the work," I said with a determined look.

"Sure, mate," he replied. "Have at it."

Jake climbed up onto the tractor as I walked ahead and waited for the wagon. As it rolled by, I threw the bale on, just like Jake had done. Then, I jogged ahead and got another one. Doing the lifting was the toughest job, and it didn't take long to become completely exhausted. All afternoon, Jake and I worked our way across the field, swapping jobs back and forth. It was hard work, but it felt good to get the blood pumping in my system.

By the time we were nearly halfway across, the wagon was already five layers thick. I rode on top of the bales as Jake carefully pulled the load down to the side of the barn. Together, we launched them up into the hayloft, and then we went after another load. It was another grueling job, but we got the rest of the bales loaded onto the wagon. I drove the second load to the barn as Jake steadied the bales, piled extra-high on the wagon.

When we finished stacking them in the barn, the day was nearly spent. The sun was sinking behind the hills in the west as cool blue clouds floated slowly to the east. Jake and I stood quietly in the farmyard and finished off the last of the water as Zeke patiently watched nearby. It had been a long day, but a good one. I was sweating like a racehorse, and my arms and neck itched from all the hay everywhere. I wasn't thinking about the pain and discomfort, though. I was just happy to be of help, and I could tell that Jake was pleased with my work. It felt good...no, it felt great. I knew I'd earned his respect that day, and that's all that mattered.

As we stood there, Ruby came out onto the porch and called us to supper. We decided to leave the tractor right where it was at and call it a day. As we walked to the house, Zeke tagged along behind. I could tell he was just as tired and thirsty as we were. As Jake made his way into the house, I turned aside and filled up the dog's water bowl with fresh cool water. Zeke appreciated it, and he went right to taking his fill as his tail wagged with delight.

As I trudged up the steps to the house, my thoughts went back to Esther. I opened the screen door, hoping she would be standing there waiting for me, but she wasn't. My heart sank, but the warm light from the kitchen and the smell of good food was a pleasant distraction after

such a long and grueling day. I never could have imagined that's where I would end up that day, surrounded by strangers somewhere in the back country of New Zealand. It felt a little odd to be there, but it felt like coming home too.

As Jake and I washed up at a sink in the laundry room, Ruby hovered around the dinner table. I heard her talking to herself as she made sure everything was just so. As far as I was concerned, everything looked amazing and it smelled delicious. I figured it must have taken her all afternoon to put together such a grand feast. I wondered if she and Jake ate like that every day. I didn't think so, and it made me admire her for the generous hospitality.

There was a huge roast in the middle of the table along with a steaming bowl of mashed potatoes and gravy. There was a big bowl of cooked peas and carrots, a tray of rolls, and a big pitcher of milk too. Ruby had even added a vase of fresh flowers and two candles as a decorative centerpiece. It reminded me of all the Thanksgiving and Christmas celebrations back in Iowa with my family. The only thing missing...the only *person* missing...was Esther.

The meal was wonderful. Jake sat at the head of the table. Sheila and I were on each side. Ruby's place was on the end across from Jake, but she didn't stay put for very long. As we enjoyed the home-cooked feast, she kept on jumping up to get more milk or mashed potatoes or gravy. During the meal, her plate of food remained mostly untouched as she kept right on serving us.

I didn't know how she had the energy to do it. She had probably worked on the food for hours, and when it came to it, she couldn't sit still long enough to enjoy it. She seemed to feed on something else, though. As Jake finished off his plate, he offered a compliment that made her beam with pride and joy.

"Oh, mother," Jake said as he leaned back in his chair. "This is one cracker of a feed you fixed up for us. That roast really hit the spot, eh. I've just been lollygagging out in the paddock all afternoon, and here you've been working yourself to the bone over this grand feast. You're quite a woman, I married, yes, quite a woman. Ain't she the sweetest thing, now, ain't she?"

Jake glanced at Sheila and me, fully expecting us to agree with his conclusion about his amazing wife. We both nodded our heads as we stuffed our faces with more mashed potatoes and gravy, not to mention a second helping of the juicy roast.

Ruby beamed with pride as she hovered around the table, waiting on our every whim and fancy. Jake filled his plate full with a second helping; then he dug in and finished it off with ease. I couldn't figure out where such a small man could put it all. He must have had a hollow leg or something because he even had room for pie and ice cream and another glass of milk. As we finished our dessert, Ruby finally sat down at the table and started in on her own plate.

I offered some feeble words of appreciation for the delicious feast, but my words couldn't come close to the grand eloquence of her husband, Jake. It was easy to see that they were still in love. They tried to conceal it, but both Sheila and I could tell. When Jake gave a wink across the table at his beloved wife, Sheila grinned across at me and let out a soft chuckle. I just grinned back at her.

After the meal, Ruby tried to clear the table, but Sheila and I made her go and sit down in the living room with Jake instead. We did the dishes as Ruby tried to sit still and relax. Jake went to reading the paper in his chair by the fireplace. After a while, Ruby couldn't take it any longer, and she came back to put away the leftovers. We said that we'd do it, but she wouldn't be deterred. She knew where everything went anyway, so we let her have her way.

When Sheila and I finished the dishes, we went out and sat in the living room for a while too. As I sat there, I realized how tired I actually was. Ruby noticed it too. Before I could say a word, she jumped up and started down the hallway for the linen closet. She came back with a couple of extra blankets and directed me upstairs to another spare bedroom where my duffel bag had been placed. As I sat on the bed, Ruby returned with towels and an extra pillow too. She insisted that I take a shower before bed, so I did as I was told. Actually, I was too tired to care, but if Ruby said I needed to take one, I was going to do it. After all, I didn't want to offend her, especially if she was planning on feeding me like that every day.

After my shower, I lay down in the big bed and proceeded to melt into it. It was so soft, and I was so tired. I knew I'd be asleep in a matter of seconds. As I lay there, I suddenly realized that I hadn't checked on Esther – not since being ordered out of her room by the cranky doctor. The entire day had flown by like a whirlwind, and at that point, I was too tired to move.

I got up anyway. It was a struggle to roll back out of that comfy bed, but somehow, I managed to do it. I snuck downstairs and tiptoed down the hall past Jake and Ruby's room to the spare bedroom where Esther lay sleeping. When I turned the handle, it made a loud squeak, and I worried that it would bring Ruby running to check on things. I waited for a few seconds, but nobody stirred, so I slowly pushed the door open and slipped inside.

The room was dimly lit with a small lamp on the bedside table. I went over and examined Esther lying there peacefully. I wanted to wake her up, but I thought better of it. I decided to sit down in the armchair nearby instead. I pulled it closer to the bed and then sat back and watched her sleep for a while.

"When are you going to wake up?" I whispered quietly. "You *are* going to wake up, aren't you?"

I pulled the edge of the covers back and found her hand tucked up close to her chin. I couldn't help but reach out and carefully take hold of it. As I wrapped my cold fingers around her warm hand, Esther let out a soft sigh and pulled my hand closer to her. I waited for her to open her eyes, but she didn't. She just fell back asleep...and a few seconds later, I did too. After all, I was exhausted, but I was exactly where I wanted to be...

...with the girl of my dreams.