

A Roll  
IN THE  
Hay

LOLA KEELEY



# Chapter 1

MOVE TO THE COUNTRY, THEY said. Friendly people, beautiful animals, and rolling green fields as far as the eye can see. That was the promise in the brochures, on the websites, and in the welcoming words of everyone Tess Robinson had unveiled her grand plan to. She'd spent the past two months as a walking, talking advertisement for the excellent life choice of leaving the big city and starting fresh in the bucolic Scottish countryside. It made for the sort of heartwarming, inspirational story where Julia Roberts might play her in the film, or at least she would have done, fifteen years earlier.

Except the countryside wasn't supposed to be a dirt track with more holes in it than Swiss cheese. It cut through a field that was neither rolling nor green, but distinctly brown, and strewn with the occasional empty lager can or discarded plastic bag. The smell of manure hung on the breeze, and the only resident near the field to provide local charm was a geriatric sheep that kept bumping into the fence.

"You have reached your destination," the car's navigation system announced.

Checking her phone, Tess cursed under her breath at the predictable lack of signal. Welcome back to the countryside. As she fumbled in the glove compartment for the road map she hoped was still there, Tess couldn't help wondering if she had made a huge, life-changing mistake in leaving London. She blew the hair out of her eyes each time it got in her line of sight, which did nothing to improve her bubbling irritation.

As the icing on the cake, the rain started coming down in sheets, reducing the world to a grey, streaky mess that barely extended a few feet beyond her windscreen.

The map didn't help much at all. Her best bet would be turning around somehow and getting back to the nearest real road. Easier said than done, given the track was narrow as hell, with piled stone walls on either side. The car was practically touching them just sitting there. Turning around, even in a fifteen-point turn, seemed preferable to carrying on down the marshy field and ending up stuck in the mud. Tess decided to get the hell out of there.

She missed her zippy little Mini that she'd used to get around London—not that she'd driven much in the city. That faithful little car had been traded in when she invested in this hulking SUV that was supposed to handle every situation, but there didn't appear to be a button or a Bluetooth command for undoing bad navigation.

"Waffles, pal, I can't believe it, but I think I'm lost. And we're only about thirty miles from where I grew up." She turned around to where her gorgeous golden Labrador was staring at her from his travel crate, his usual morose expression exaggerated by his temporary confinement. "Don't worry, as soon as I find the right road, we're getting out to stretch our legs."

*Knock, knock, knock.*

Tess jumped at the sound. Her seatbelt dug into the side of her neck. The fist rapping on the driver's side window seemed like it was going to come through the glass. Tess saw a looming shape with a dark hood, but the rain was streaking too fast for a clear view. Her heart kickstarted a new frantic beat, but she took a deep breath and forced herself to stay calm. A glance in the rearview confirmed a proper country Land Rover had appeared behind her. She'd been so focused on Waffles, she hadn't noticed anyone approaching the car.

As she slid her window down, Tess was greeted, not with the gnarly ancient farmer she expected, but a blonde woman her own age or maybe a little older, using her Barbour wax jacket like a personal tarpaulin to keep the rain off her buoyant, blown-out curls—the sort that somehow always fall into place. Even in the middle of nowhere she looked like someone who'd just stepped out of a shampoo advert.

"I'm sorry—" Tess began.

"Never mind, sorry." Posh, then. English. Looked it as much as she sounded it. The type that would chase a teenage Tess and her friends off

her land. “Can you get your impractical toy of a car out of the road? Just go forward. There’s a wider part in a hundred yards where you can turn.”

“Right, yeah.” Tess gunned the engine before wondering when exactly this woman got the right to tell her to do anything. “You know, I really was just getting my bearings. I wouldn’t have been here a minute longer, so you can just get back into your car and—”

“You’re on my land, and I’d like you to not be,” Blondie snapped. Some things really didn’t change when it came to the landowning snobs in this part of the world. “I’ve already been delayed this afternoon, and I have appointments yet to attend. Urgent ones. So do move along, otherwise I’ll be shunting you through one of those stone walls to make room.”

Charming. Absolutely charming. Just went to show that nice clothes and pretty hair and perfect make-up didn’t make a lady. Even one who could technically be described as attractive. Apart from her attitude, anyway.

No way, not happening. Tess didn’t want to speculate on exactly how badly she needed to get some action if she was looking at road rage as a potential dating opportunity.

“Well?” came the impatient demand.

Waffles, bless his protective instincts, barked at the tone.

The woman glanced to the back of Tess’s car. “Have you got a dog in there? Poor mutt.”

“Yes, I have, as it happens,” Tess says. “And he’s a retired guide dog, for your information, not some mutt. Not that it would matter if he were.”

Waffles added his own bellowing bark, as if proudly agreeing.

That at least got Blondie to step back from the open window, striding back to her car like the world was depending on her.

Right. Better to get on and get out of the way. Rolling down the road in second gear, Tess peered through the rain. Sure enough, there was a widening where the walls disappeared. Pulling over to the left, she waited as Lady Snooty whizzed past. Not exactly the battered farmer’s model, but she’d had the cheek to judge Tess’s car?

Not surprisingly, there was no wave or tooted horn in acknowledgement, just the roar of a powerful engine and the spit of gravel.

Turning back in the direction she came, Tess shook her head. Her car would be just fine, and it was far from a toy. It was about twice the height

of her for a start, with more bells and whistles than she could ever possibly learn.

Edging back towards the main road, she could see where she went wrong. A rookie mistake, one that might have been avoided if she'd stuck around the area long enough to learn to drive instead of bolting for university at the first possible opportunity. Now, twenty years later, here she was, moving her whole life back, all to go into business with her best friend.

Margo was that same best friend Tess had met in their first week of university, which seemed a century ago at least. What a peculiar kind of fate that Margo, from deepest, darkest Essex, should have ended up in this wee corner of the Scottish Borders where Tess was born and raised. They were over an hour south of Edinburgh but far enough from the English border for Tess to be resolute in her Scottishness.

Heading the right way this time, she soon hit town. Well, *village* was a better word for it. The shop names had changed, and the cars parked along each side of the road were bigger, flashier, newer, but Tess recognised it. She'd come here a lot as a child, the next nearest spot of civilisation from the ramshackle farm where she'd grown up. In a movie, this would be where the soundtrack swelled in notes of joyous homecoming. For Tess's money, the banjos from *Deliverance* would have been more on the mark.

The foreboding lasted only as long as it took to park outside the vet's surgery, a sprawling cottage of a property that had been the doctor's office back in Tess's childhood. At least the rain had stopped as quickly as it started. She barely had the car door open before Margo came bundling out, still wearing her deep-green lab coat and blue latex gloves.

"There you are! We were expecting you an hour ago!" Margo collided with Tess in a hug that even rugby would deem an unfair tackle, but Tess absorbed the warmth of it with a patient smile. "Don't tell me you got lost? In your home town?"

"Okay, it's not actually my home town. And I wasn't lost!" Tess argued, but they were both already laughing. "There was an accident on the motorway, and then I made a simple wrong turn—which, by the way, would have been fixed in two seconds if some mouthy piece with a big car hadn't tried to run me off the road to get past."

“I don’t think you can talk about big cars, Tess,” Adam said, coming outside with a little more decorum. He’d stopped to take his lab coat off, at least.

“Oh, like you wouldn’t be zipping around here in a Porsche if it could handle the roads.” Tess wriggled free of Margo and gave Adam a much gentler hug that didn’t risk breaking any bones. “You two look disgustingly well. And happy.”

Adam and Margo beamed at each other. It was only a little nauseating. Margo wasn’t much taller than Tess, who barely topped five feet. They’d always contrasted each other—Tess pale and red-headed, Margo with her dark brown bob and Italian complexion that looked tanned even when she wasn’t really. Adam had that long, lean build of someone who had grown up in fresh country air, his dark hair getting a little salt and pepper. They made a handsome couple.

Only a bleep announcing some kind of next appointment reminded them that they were supposed to be doing anything else.

“Listen,” Adam said, “I’d love to stay and welcome you properly, but—”

“Go,” Tess urged. “I’ll come help out in a minute. Just want to stretch my legs after so long in the bloody car. And Waffles must be bursting by now.”

“Oh, of course he came with you!” Margo exclaimed.

Tess opened the back door and unlatched his crate. Waffles bounded out with his usual enthusiasm, a trace of pup still in him despite being fully grown.

“Well, I was hardly going to put him on the van with my furniture. That’s not going to be here for ages yet. It’s in storage until I get confirmation on the new place.”

“I’m just glad to see him.” Margo was already on the ground, giving Waffles the rough cuddles he lived for.

“You two can get back to work, I’ll be fine.” Tess whistled for Waffles to come to heel. He did, with obvious reluctance, and she fixed his leash, tugging on the well-worn leather of it. “Me and Boy Wonder here are going in search of caffeine and a bowl of water.”

“Don’t go too far, please?” Adam straightened his tie. He looked very smart for someone who spent a fair part of his week with one arm up a

cow's backside. "We've got a potential new client coming in this afternoon, and she could really get our new three-way off with a bang, so to speak."

"*Partnership.*" Tess sighed. "I really thought the three-way joke would have worn off by now, Adam. Is the coffee across the road any good?" She nodded to the café facing the surgery. It was past a roundabout with a delightful little garden in the middle, set around a white gazebo, of all things.

"It's kept us alive this long." Adam shrugged. "Mine's an Americano if you're buying. Now, I have a pug waiting for me."

Tess waved him off and crossed the road with the dog in tow, giving a token glance in each direction. The traffic through the village certainly hadn't increased.

The café at least belonged to the right century, with its Wi-Fi stickers in the windows and a display confirming they took cards and contactless payments. Better than Tess had hoped for, and ducking through the doors confirmed the space was light, airy, and filled with just enough comfortable chairs. The smell of freshly ground coffee competed with something sweet baking. Tess was drawn towards the counter like a cartoon character following wavy lines of deliciousness.

"Well, you must be the new vet," the statuesque black woman behind the counter said as soon as Tess stepped up. She looked to be in her early fifties. "We've been waiting for you."

"Have you?" Tess heard her own Scottish lilt deepening upon finally talking to someone whose accent matched hers. "Was the order for an Americano and two lattes in the newsletter as well?"

That got her a smile.

"Joan, by the way," Tess was informed as the coffees were being poured. "Margo said you were from around here, but I don't know your face."

"I've been away a long time. And we didn't really come here to Hayleith very much."

"You still got family here?"

"Nah." Tess shook her head. "My mum passed a few years ago, and everyone else had moved on by then. Like me, going off to Glasgow and then London, I suppose."

Joan selected lids for the coffees, taking her time fitting each one. In London that would have had Tess's impatience bursting through, but already the long drive and quiet surroundings had mellowed her just a little.

“That’s a shame. Are you staying over at the vets’ house? Margo and Adam certainly have the room.”

“For a few days, yeah. Then I’ll start settling in. Oh, I’d love to stay and chat,” Tess lied through her teeth. As soon as the cups were placed in their cardboard holder, she clutched them. “It’s just, you know, first day and all that. Got to show willing.”

Leaving with a weak smile, she collected Waffles from where he’d been taking advantage of the water bowls by the café entrance.

They took their time sauntering back to the surgery, Waffles sniffing every inch of ground and Tess sipping at her coffee while balancing the others. Only one car passed them the whole time, and there was nobody out on the street to awkwardly say hello to. Tess caught sight of a sign for the local pub, The Spiky Thistle, just down past the vet’s.

When she reached the practice’s doors, a growling pug was eyeing its very tall owner, who was clutching a bag full of medication and bearing a grim smile of determination. That one would be back before long. Dogs refusing medicine always made for reliable repeat visitors, and sometimes at Tess’s London practice it had felt like half of her actual job.

There was no one on reception, so Tess pushed through the door marked “Staff”, calling out “coffee!” as she did. She stopped suddenly and stared. The chatter in the room dropped off at her shocked expression, and only one person returned it.

The blonde from the wrong road.

“As I was just saying,” Margo picked up the conversation again, “our expansion is possible thanks to this lovely addition to the practice. Tess Robinson is one of my oldest friends, and we trained together at Glasgow. Tess, this is Susannah Karlson. She owns the big estate just north of here, and—”

Waffles took advantage of Tess’s slack grip on the lead to promptly betray her and start sniffing around Susannah. She couldn’t be entirely evil, because she paused to pet him before interrupting.

“Oh no,” Susannah cut in. “Absolutely not. I didn’t think you had the capacity for the Midsummer Estate anyway, but employing grown adults who can’t even drive? What good will she be to me at 4a.m. in the snow when one of my horses has colic?”



“Um, actually I can drive perfectly well,” Tess argued, placing the coffees on the table so her hands could settle on her hips. “Although I’m not sure a stable owner who can’t handle a bout of colic alone is going to be much judge of a vet’s skill.”

*Oops. Temper, temper.* Tess had never been good with people putting her down. Anything in the region of assuming she was “less than” had historically not been great either. This woman, this *Susannah*, was a waving red rag, and Tess was absolutely the antagonised bull.

“I’m sure what Tess meant to say, Lady Karlson—” Adam began, but he seemed a little shellshocked.

“I knew this was a waste of my time. First, she makes me late for my previous meeting and now she insults my intelligence. I’m well aware of how to treat colic in my horses, but thanks for that lovely condescension. I think I’ll stick to one of the big chains. An estate the size of mine needs professionals at the top of their game. Clearly this isn’t where I’ll find them.”

With that, she swept out in a cloud of expensive perfume and gently bouncing curls.

Tess stared after her, mouth falling open. Seriously, how did women get their hair to do that? Tess had tried everything short of a perm, and still her hair lay straight and a little limp.

“Okay,” Tess said, turning back to her friends. “I have no idea how that just spiralled, but I promise you, I am going to bring in new business. We don’t need to be working for someone who treats us like dirt, do we?”

Adam and Margo looked at each other with that silent couple talk that concluded with a head tilt and a raised eyebrow.

“It’s fine,” Margo assured them both. “It was a long shot anyway; you heard her. Maybe we’re not big enough for her new stud farm and whatever else she’s got going on up there.”

“Stud farm?” Tess groaned inwardly. The chance of working with horses had been the biggest draw about coming back to the country. That was what got her into being a vet in the first place. “I’m sorry, guys.”

“Listen, we didn’t have her on the books when we made our plans, so things are no different,” Adam said. “I’ve got some neutered tomcats to wake up gently, but what do you ladies say to takeaway tonight? The house is just next door, Tess, if you want to get settled in?”

She smiled and accepted the key that Margo had thoughtfully put on a University of Glasgow keyring. Her own place, just down the road and tucked in behind the pub, wouldn't be ready for a couple of days. Tess had looked at it a few minutes ago.

“Come on, I'll show you and Waffles to the guest room,” Margo said. “Then I've got a call out to check on some pigs. You can tag along, if you like, or just get unpacked.”

They linked arms for the walk across to the house and, for the first time in an hour, Tess breathed all the way out. It was still going to be good, she decided. This was going to be the right move for her.

Or else.

## Chapter 2

SUSANNAH ALL BUT ABANDONED HER Land Rover on the drive. Up until last year she'd always parked with consummate care, partly out of consideration for her late husband, who shared the driveway, and partly because of his relentless good-natured mockery of her driving skills. She stormed through the grand front doors, irked by the heft of them as they groaned their way open, but it was quicker than walking all the way around to the back. Bloody tedious, really.

The place felt too damn empty, a museum with just one living exhibit.

Spotting dust on the marble bust that dominated one corner of the room—some military-minded ancestor or other—Susannah remembered that she still had to recruit a new housekeeper. In truth, the staff had been trickling away as soon after the funeral as they could get away with, and months later, Midsummer was a stately home down to a skeleton staff. One or two quitting would have been understandable, but losing so many suggested either carelessness or a deep loyalty to her husband that didn't extend to her own management. Reflecting on that for too long didn't exactly make Susannah feel fantastic about herself.

"There you are!" Finn came hurtling towards her across the entrance hall like a security guard who had just noticed Susannah shoplifting lipstick. "I've had nothing but calls for you today."

"I'm sure you coped, and besides, I had business in the village."

"Of course I did, but what's the point in being the best executive assistant ever if you can't complain about how hard it is to be brilliant?" Looking as fashionable as ever in a dark grey shirt and skinny black tie paired perfectly with tapered trousers and low heels, Finn offered a cheeky grin.

Susannah had long since given up on trying to keep up with her PA, style-wise, just accepting the gentle criticism that was sometimes levelled at her outfits.

“Anything that can’t be ignored in favour of a late lunch?” Susannah asked.

“Nope.”

“Correct answer. Honestly, I’ve just wasted part of my day getting stuck behind some incompetent on the access road who made me late for saying goodbye to Kenny on his last day. It’s bad enough I’ve lost him running my stables after ten years, but now he’ll think I don’t care one jot. Then it turns out this imbecile, who can barely find third gear, is after our vet business. I think *not*.”

“Oh, the new one? Tilly, Tammy, something like that. Margo was talking to my source about her in the café last week.”

Finn knew absolutely everyone in the village, but in keeping an air of drama about most things, Joan Barnes, café owner, became a *source* for the purposes of telling the story.

“Tess, actually.” Susannah frowned. She had trouble remembering the names of some of her relatives most days. Why had Tess-the-terrible-driver made such an impact? Maybe it was the dog. Susannah had always had a soft spot for big, dopey Labs. “Come on, keep me company while I raid the fridge for some lunch. We really need to step up the search for a new personal chef. I’m living on what I can mine from the deli counter and whatever I can persuade Joan to stock me up with.”

Having never really learned to cook beyond a burnt omelette, Susannah was missing access to a chef most of all. Even though Francine had refused to live in or work full-time and insisted on only being called *Chef* at all times, she had been a damn fine cook.

Luckily there was a platter of charcuterie and a goat’s cheese salad from Joan’s last delivery. There was plenty for Finn, too, so Susannah retrieved a bottle of white from the wine fridge and poured a glass for both of them.

“I assume,” Susannah said, picking at some Serrano ham with her fork, “that at least half of those calls were from my dear sister-in-law?”

Finn nodded, rolling their eyes at the same time behind dark thick-rimmed glasses. “Her snivelling assistant wanted to remind you that she had sent her lawyer’s letter, which I already told him you received. Then,

apparently, Robin wanted to visit, even though I said you had no free time this week. And then she phoned herself ‘by accident’, but I think it was mostly just to irritate me. Actually I know it was, because she took the opportunity to misgender me at least three times. It’s bad enough she can’t use ‘they’ when referring to me, but the way she calls me ‘girl’ all the time like she’s winning some kind of point...”

“Christ, I’m sorry.” Susannah set her cutlery down in disgust. And maybe a little to avoid throwing anything. “You shouldn’t have to put up with that level of ignorance. Not just because she has it in for me.”

“Oh, to hell with Robin. It’d hurt more, all her snotty digs about both of us, if I cared about her in the least. Luckily for us, I don’t. I’ve counted all my damns, and I don’t have a single one left to spare for her.”

“I wish I could be above getting irritated by her,” Susannah admitted with a sigh, picking out a slice of salami. “You’d think at some point she’d realised her brother died and actually grieve for him instead of chasing his money.”

“Chasing the money he left *you*,” Finn corrected, since they both knew nothing else about why the will was being contested. “And trying to get control of your house and land.”

“Yes. That. I know we didn’t have a conventional marriage, exactly, but we did care for each other. Most importantly, we both poured our hearts and souls into preventing this place from turning into a draughty old mausoleum. Robin wouldn’t be so interested if she knew how much bloody work it had taken, and how much of Jimmy’s money we spent.”

“She’d have a good go at spending the rest, though.”

“Yes, she would. Meanwhile I have a massive estate to run, and most of the staff who left when Jimmy died haven’t been replaced. As much as I don’t fancy it, let’s get that big vet company out to see us. They must have at least one specialist who knows horses.”

“You really don’t want to give the town vet a chance?”

“Didn’t I just say that they’re not getting my business? The first two tried to “nice me” to death, which you know I can’t stand. Then the new one needs Google Maps to work out the difference between her elbow and her... well, you know.”

Finn smirked, lifting their wine glass. “Thank you for being so delicate. Always such a lady, Suze.”

“Lady of the manor, and don’t you forget it.”

“Your wicked sister-in-law certainly won’t.”

They both took large sips of wine in solidarity. Susannah tried not to think about all her unread emails, about the pile of paperwork in the office waiting for her signature. Right now there was just well-seasoned meat and the satisfying crunch of vegetables, along with Finn’s calming company. No need to dwell on family unrest, or mouthy little vets with ponytails and altogether too much attitude.

“So the vet was really bad, huh?” Finn asked.

Susannah jumped a little at the sensation that she’d just had her mind read. “Never seen anything like it. I mean, she sounds local, so how she got lost I don’t know. She was driving a tank she can’t even handle, and there I find her, blocking the road like nobody else might ever want to use it. Which, fine, people take wrong turns. But she was quite content to sit there aimlessly as though the world would solve the problem for her. All thought and no action, well, that never got anything done. And like I said, it made me late for saying goodbye.”

They were interrupted by the church-bell sound of the front doorbell. All that was missing were a dozen choirboys and it could have been a Sunday afternoon airing of *Songs of Praise*.

“I thought we were getting that changed,” Susannah complained.

Finn got to their feet, straightening their shirt while still chewing on some rocket.

“Replacing the doorbell is on the list. It’s just about three hundred places from the top.”

“Oh, go answer the door.”

“Fine.”

Susannah had a feeling she already knew who it was, and raised voices a moment later confirmed it. She wiped her hands with the napkin and took a final mouthful of the wine. It wasn’t going to end until she put in an appearance.

“Robin!” Susannah made sure her utter lack of surprise was obvious as she strode out into the entrance hall. “I didn’t see your name in my calendar. And, Jonathan, here you are again, like the proverbial bad penny.” She tossed Robin’s assistant a withering look.

“Getting an appointment with you is nigh on impossible,” Robin replied in her schoolmarmish voice, snippy as ever. She was the picture of a country wife in her sensible brogues and two layers of tweed. The streaks of grey that were apparent in Robin’s hair when Susannah last saw her a few weeks before had been covered up by an aggressively auburn hair dye. And while she wore no other make-up, there was a swipe of ill-suited coral lipstick at Robin’s lips.

All that was missing was the husband—but Robin, who was in her fifties, had never married. She’d somehow gotten the impression that although neither she nor Susannah could inherit Jimmy’s title, the house and its land would come to her, despite the generous inheritance she’d received from their father, and the fortune she’d made investing it.

Jimmy had explained, before he met Susannah, that his money would go to some sort of charitable foundation; but the facts had never made much of an impression in this particular family feud.

“I’ve been trying to reach Finn here all day,” Jonathan chimed in, “even on the private office line Lord Karlson gave me when I worked here. If we can’t get an appointment, then what else can we do but show up?”

Robin toted Jonathan around everywhere these days like a talking handbag, and Susannah never got a better impression of him than as a sneaky little brother just bursting to tattle at the first opportunity. The fact that he dressed like the unpopular kid in a cartoon didn’t help his case, right down to the fussy dark curls on his head. Well into his thirties, he had the permanent air of a man chasing his lost youth.

“Well, as you probably know from Jimmy saying it often enough, running this estate is a busy job. Not a lot of free time to chat.” Susannah did her best to keep things on civil terms, but Robin’s sheer entitlement drove her crazy. They’d all been born to certain advantages, but Robin was so grasping about wanting what everyone else had. Jonathan was even worse, on her behalf, and whenever he cast a glance towards a vase or a painting, Susannah had the overwhelming urge to make sure it was fixed in place.

“If you’re not up to the job, there are actual *family* members more qualified. Which is why I felt I had to start this dispute in the first place. And, really, you should be referring to my late brother as Lord Karlson

in front of the help. You know what they say about familiarity breeding contempt!”

“It breeds in-laws?” Susannah muttered under her breath.

“Honestly, Susannah, if you would just accept that you’re in over your head, then this wouldn’t need to be acrimonious. You’ve always been helpful. When I take over, I’m sure I could find some sort of project to keep you busy.”

“Oh, could you?” Susannah advanced across the black-and-white marble floor, wishing it looked less like a dusty old chessboard. She could change that if she wanted. Maybe she could invite Robin over to watch someone taking a sledgehammer to it. “And I suppose you’d still throw me out of my house? My home?”

“Now, listen here—”

“No, I don’t think I will. Finn, please show Robin and Jonathan to their car. We’ve got a lot to do this afternoon.”

Finn did their best to corral Robin, but she was on one of her missions and wouldn’t back out without getting the last word. It was funny that no matter how much Susannah looked, she could see nothing of Jimmy’s kindness or quiet nobility in his sister’s face. With her pursed lips and beetling eyebrows, she displayed only temper and sourness. He had always chafed at her snobbery too, how she threw around titles as if they made some people more worthy than others.

His greatest weakness, though, had been opportunistic men like Jonathan, after money and status when Jimmy had been offering simple, discreet affairs. Susannah had spent years turning the agreed blind eye as men had come and gone from the periphery, as women had quietly drifted in and out of her own life in turn.

“You’ll be hearing from me. And my solicitors. You’ll regret fighting me on this,” Robin warned as Finn finally guided her out of the door and down the drive, Jonathan scurrying in their wake.

That left Susannah alone in the cavernous entryway, surveying the kingdom she never exactly asked for.

“Fucking hell, Jimmy. Couldn’t you have broken it gently to your sister before you died? How long am I going to pay for this?”

The house held its stifling silence, of course. Susannah was getting used to the echoing emptiness with each passing day. Everything of Susannah’s



had come from a lot of hard work. She came from a titled family in her own right, one older and, in fact, far more distinguished than the Karlsons. Unfortunately, her father had been careless with his gambling, his drinking, and his temper, meaning their estate had all but been stripped for parts while Susannah was yanked in and out of boarding school depending on whether the fees had been paid on time.

Then, like something out of a depressing pulp novel, Susannah had gotten herself into trouble at one of the draughty old schools for sneaking vodka and kissing girls, a shame that even her usually shameless parents couldn't endure. She'd learned the hard way that her value was in snaring a husband who'd keep them all in a more reliable kind of luxury.

She'd never expected to find a kind man with secrets of his own. Jimmy had simply been looking for a business partner, a wife to keep the other ladies charmed on shoots and endless, tedious dinners. Even with money and power, Jimmy hadn't ever been able to confront where his real preferences lay.

"I need another drink," Susannah said to no one, but she ignored the kitchen and its wine. Heading upstairs to the first floor, she made a beeline for the heavy oak door, last on the right. The one thing she had achieved in this first year of widowhood was redecorating their once-shared home office, making it uniquely her own. The old décor, the wooden panels and the Oxford-library desk lamps, had been too much a reminder of her dear, departed partner. Though they'd never shared a bed, they had shared countless hours in this room plotting and planning, trying to get the best out of the estate.

Susannah stood by the fireplace a moment, the bland oil paintings replaced with splashy modern art on canvases that broke up the clean white lines of the walls as she'd redone them. The days and nights they'd worked in here, her one great frustration had been that Jimmy was reluctant to modernize. Now she had the freedom to do just that, but still the obstacles came on every side.

The office also had the benefit of a crystal decanter filled with a fine single malt, not to mention the overstuffed sofa by the huge windows, where her next stack of paperwork was crying out for attention.

"Here's to you, my old man," Susannah said after pouring a generous measure into a heavy-bottomed glass. No ice, no splash of soda. Just the

unadulterated peaty taste of a twenty-year-old whisky that she'd taken a shine to. "I rather think if I'm going to piss off your sister, I'm going to go all the way with it. It's time I stopped hiding behind the details of keeping this place afloat and tried the full-steam-ahead approach."

The views out over the stunning, peaceful gardens were a balm every time she looked at them. They were all in the order of manicured lawns and geometric hedges.

Her parents had never made it to Midsummer to spoil the idyll with their entitled, drunken behaviour and pointed homophobic remarks. They'd passed in a boating accident just a few weeks before Jimmy made his proposal-cum-business-arrangement, and the prospect of a fresh start had helped Susannah through her very complicated grief. Yes, this was the place to take refuge. And the place to revive her old, ignored plans.

The first note on the pile was a reminder of her earlier appointment at the vet's. Susannah sipped her drink and snorted at the sad little sticky note. She was about to scrunch it up and toss it into the wastepaper basket, but her hand stilled before letting it fly.

Were they really so bad? Enthusiastic in the wrong ways, perhaps, but Susannah already knew how the stables would run, as a planned sanctuary for former racing and workhorses. She had the money to throw at it, but the real costs would be the veterinary care for those poor animals who'd lived a life of exertion and stress. The estate had always kept horses, but just for family riding or the odd local hunt, back in the dark days when those had still been legal.

Was it so terrible to take a chance on the plucky local vets? And even if that Tess woman was new in town today, she was almost certainly from around the area. Susannah had grown up far enough away to notice the difference. What was her story? She was not that young, close to Susannah's own forty-two years at a glance, so there must have been a life somewhere up until this point.

It was just another headache in a day full of them. The crunching of tyres on gravel signalled that Robin and Jonathan had finally gone, with their lawsuits and threats.

Susannah wished she had more people around to talk to—one of those rambling families with an aunt or a cousin just down the road. She was in the wrong part of the country for that now, even if her family could

have provided the numbers. She took her phone out and skimmed the contact list. Friends left behind in Leeds, Manchester, that brief spell in London. Then the “couple friends” she’d gone out with, most often business associates of Jimmy’s, who had been all right in a small-talk kind of way. No one who would appreciate a mid-afternoon rant about the difficulties of running a country estate.

Before long, she was lost in the stack of invoices and letters offering services she neither needed nor fully understood. Just another sign to push forward with her own way of doing things. If her thoughts occasionally turned to the feisty vet in a pale green sweater that hadn’t hidden a single curve, well, that was just the novelty of something new disrupting sleepy countryside life.

Susannah sipped at her drink and started signing papers with a sigh.

## Chapter 3

TESS WAS ON HER HANDS and knees on the spotless linoleum of the smallest examination room, the one that would technically be her office from now on. The dark green material of her scrubs felt familiar, like maybe her life hadn't actually changed beyond all recognition. Meanwhile, there was a six-month-old tabby kitten wedging himself under the medication locker in the corner, and his owner was already panicking that he'd escaped the table.

"Does this often, does he?" Tess asked.

"He gets into everything," the kitten's owner groaned, trying to juggle the bags she was carrying and a toddler who thought hide and seek with kitty was the funniest thing he had ever seen.

Tess suspected that Mr Giggles up in his mother's arm was probably what kitty was hiding from, far more than the vet. "Come on, little fella," Tess encouraged, wedging her hand under the cabinet and scraping her knuckles through her latex glove in the process. It was worth it when she got hold of the loose skin at the back of his neck.

In a protesting jumble of fur and skinny legs, the tabby rejoined them in the world.

Tess snuck a peek at his back end while transferring him back to the metal table to examine him. "Vaccinations today, yes? But he's getting quite mature. You'll need to book him in to get neutered."

The owner pulled a face. "My husband says we shouldn't do that to him," she explained. "Says it's cruel doing that to any man." She smiled at Tess as if she should agree and find it just as cute.

"Due respect, Mrs McDonald, it's your cat I'm after neutering, not your husband." Looking at the sticky toddler hands getting all over

Mrs McDonald's sweatshirt, Tess wondered if she should offer it as a favour anyway. It was all just a little snip and a stitch."

"Does he really need it done?"

"Only if you like your house not marked with stinky sprays every time a new smell comes into it. And you don't want your garden overrun with pregnant girl cats and their kittens."

"Oh. Well, yeah, I'd better book him in, then. I'll just tell my husband after the fact."

"Glad to hear it. These days, we give them the good drugs for it, so he'll be happy enough when he wakes up."

The chatter had let her pet the tabby into a purring state of contentment with her ungloved hand. He was a sweet little thing, even if he was called Neville, poor cat. Now it was time to quickly betray his newly won trust, and Tess reached for the needle she'd prepared before his great escape attempt.

"Right," she announced, and the injection was over before he could squirm away. "He might be a little drowsy later, so don't worry if he's slow about his food or sleeps more. He might not be in the mood to be around the kids, either."

"Oh, they never leave him alone," Mrs McDonald said. "So curious, especially at this age. He's very patient, though."

Tess resisted the urge to scoop the kitty up and adopt him. In truth, he would be fine. Plenty of family pets endured the grasping-kids phase with no problem. She just always felt a bit sorry for them, much like when she took Waffles around to her nieces, who had only just outgrown trying to ride him like a pony.

With Neville in his carrier, Tess showed the little family back to reception.

"How's it going?" Margo asked. "You're not too disappointed to start with domestic pets, are you?"

"Me? No," Tess said, although it wasn't entirely truthful. It wasn't like she expected to be wrangling pigs and sheep on day one, but part of the appeal of coming back to a country practice was getting out in the fields and dealing with challenges a little bit heftier than gerbils. "Got plenty of practice with kittens."

"Well, this next one might be more interesting." Margo nodded at Tess's tablet that displayed her next patient's details.

“Thunder?” Tess called out to the reception room. None of the waiting patients looked much like a Thunder. Then the internal doors swung open, and a Great Dane came bounding in from the patio.

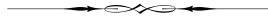
Tess just managed to brace herself in time before giant paws were on her shoulders and a happy face was inches from her own.

“Down, Thunder,” said a weary voice from somewhere behind, and the dog complied with a soft whine.

“Right, let’s take you in here, big fella,” Tess said.

With Thunder out of the way, his owner came into view. He was a short man, not much taller than Tess herself. He followed Thunder as though the dog were the one taking him for a walk, the sturdy leather leash only just keeping them connected.

Now this was a bit more like it. Tess fished out a fresh set of gloves and checked her pockets for the healthy dental treats she liked to dish out.



Adam was in the staff room when Tess slipped in for a brew, reading the *Guardian* on his tablet and half-watching the sports news muted on the decent-sized television mounted on the wall. “How’s it going?” he asked, barely looking up. “Finding everything okay?”

“Oh yeah. Turns out you and Margo organise things the same way I do.” Tess flicked the switch on the kettle. “Like a home away from home. Or something like that.”

“How’s it all coming along with your London affairs?”

Tess shrugged. “It’s the usual boring whatever. Sign this, pay for that. Selling my flat was the easy part, but there’s always something from the practice. Every time I think it’s finalised, there’s one more form, one more letter.”

“That can’t be much fun.” Adam came over to nudge Tess aside with a gentle bump of his hip. “Margo told me how it went down with Caroline and all. She really did you dirty, and I’m sorry.”

“Hey, I didn’t want to share a practice with the woman who cheated on me. So trust me, this is the best outcome.” Tess watched Adam pour the water into their two mugs rather than look him in the eye. She hadn’t done a whole lot of talking out loud about the mess with Caroline, save for a few therapy sessions that tapered off once she made the plan to move back

to Scotland. “Although the least she could have done is make the process a little smoother. I think she was hoping she could frustrate me into walking away and leaving her with everything. Some people really are that entitled.”

“You think you know someone,” Adam empathised.

Tess gave Adam a considering look before sighing. “Caroline was lovely...until she wasn’t,” was the best reply she could muster. “I’ve learned a valuable lesson, at least. Whatever happens, I’m keeping business and pleasure separate. We were supposed to be equal partners—in the house, in the practice—but Caroline was pulling all the strings. It’s only now I’ve got anything that’s just mine. Independent Tess from here on in. Any chance of a biscuit with this? I’m starving.”

Adam checked the jar next to the kettle. “Fresh out. I’ll pop across the road, get something to cheer you up.”

“I’ll go,” Tess replied. “I saw some cakes in there yesterday that might just do the trick.”

Grateful for an excuse to flee talking about her ex, Tess grabbed her leather jacket from the coat rack and slipped out.

The café was much busier today, full of people looking for a mid-morning caffeine fix and, by the sounds of it, a dose of the local gossip. The low burr of shared conversations came to a sudden halt as Tess walked in, but she gave a vague sort of tight smile until everyone went back to pretending they hadn’t stopped and stared.

“Two slices of carrot cake, please, Joan.” Tess aimed for friendly. “Sorry I had to dash yesterday. Can I get a cuppa with that too?” Her tea would be going cold back at the surgery, but she was in no rush to return for more pitying looks from Adam, and her next patient wasn’t for twenty minutes.

“What kind?” Joan gestured to the selection of teas behind her. “Or did you mean real tea? Hard to tell with you big-city types.”

“London didn’t spoil my appreciation for a proper cup of tea,” Tess replied. “Never really went in for that herbal stuff.”

If it was a test, Joan’s nod suggested Tess had passed. It reminded her of her own mum, whose constant worry until she passed away five years ago was that Tess would have her head turned by too many urban and sophisticated things. Every phone call had featured at least five minutes of fretting that Tess was losing her natural accent or forgetting where she came

from. Maybe if she had actually done those things, Caroline would have found her more suitable as a long-term prospect.

“Settling in okay?” Joan fetched the carrot cake from the glass display unit between them. She sliced it up with steady hands and a very big knife.

“Yeah, it’s great so far. Was a bit tired from all the driving, but I feel much better today. I’ll have to explore the village a bit. Haven’t even been to the pub yet, just raided Margo’s wine rack last night. Although what kind of name is The Spiky Thistle, anyway?”

Joan gave a haughty little sniff. She boxed up the cake and tied it with a strip of ribbon before Tess could say all the presentation wasn’t necessary. “You might want to look farther afield if you’re the drinking type.” A small gold cross glinted against the dark skin at Joan’s throat, the light wrinkles there the only outward sign she was middle-aged. Tess felt a familiar sinking sort of panic. She’d never had great luck with organised religion, and even less so in small towns like Hayleith.

“Oh, I’m not judging, silly girl.” Joan said, picking up on the way Tess had tensed. “I just don’t care for what we call a drinking establishment around here. I much prefer the Kilted Coo, two towns over. But a lot of people just drink at home of an evening. Unless there’s something on.”

Relaxing again, Tess accepted her boxed cake and waited for her tea. When the rest of her stuff arrived, she would have to dig out a travel mug or two. All these cardboard cups were a waste, and she had enough worries as it was without feeling responsible for polluting the whole planet. “I’m sure I’ll check it out,” she answered as the milk was poured in without her having to ask. The strong but milky tea was exactly how she liked it. “Can’t be going to the same place all the time.”

“Good.” There was clearly more to Joan’s dislike of the pub, but Tess knew better than to ask.

She had the strongest memory all of a sudden, of being tiny, in her school uniform with a puffy anorak over it, waiting in place after place as her mum exchanged life stories with perfect strangers. Those strange pangs of missing her had gotten less frequent in the past five years, but it still felt disloyal to remember that impatience of a little kid who just wanted to get home instead of listening to boring grown-ups.



“Thanks for this,” Tess added as she tapped her credit card on the reader. The cake box and cup carrier were in her hands a moment later. “You don’t do loyalty cards, do you?”

Joan’s glare could have reduced a lesser woman to stone, but Tess held her head high.

“I just like collecting the little stamps, that’s all. Maybe you can consider it.”

“I’ve been running this place for ten years. I know what people like,” Joan said. “And I ran the pub for long enough before that. I know what I’m doing, but thank you, Dr Robinson.”

“I wasn’t trying to—”

“I know! You’re fine, girl.” Joan shooed her away, her lime green nails contrasting beautifully with the dark skin of her hands. “Give Margo and Adam my love. Tell her I got in that coffee that she likes.”

“Will do,” Tess says, relieved to be escaping. “Maybe I’ll see you in that Kilted Coo sometime?”

“Maybe you will. Maybe you will.”

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PLEASE PURCHASE

# A ROLL IN THE HAY

BY LOLA KEELEY