

Storm Warrior (The Grim Series) (12 page)

“Thank you,” she said, sliding the bills into her pocket without counting them. “I’m sure the amount is just fine. Shall we go inside now? I don’t know about you fellows, but my feet are killing me.”

She poured iced tea for the three of them at her kitchen table, thankful that she’d been too rushed to eat breakfast that morning because the dishes would likely still be there. She put the cookies on a plate in the center and sat down. The rest of the groceries sat on the counter, and they could stay there for the time being. She hoped the milk and margarine and such could manage the wait.

“You look tired, Doc,” said Leo. “I’ll bet you put in a long day—and here we are taking up your time.”

She smiled at him. “I don’t get many visitors, so it’s a treat. And all my days are long, it seems. I’ve got Jay and Grady hunting for another vet for the clinic.”

“Now that’s smart thinking,” nodded Leo. “You’ve got a lot of regular customers now. Why, the last time I brought Spike in, there wasn’t a single chair left in the waiting room. That receptionist of yours, Anne-Marie, she brought one in straightaway though. Kindhearted girl, that one.”

“Like Morgan.” Rhys smiled.

As her hormones swooned yet again, Morgan focused her eyes firmly on her drink. *There’s no such thing as a coincidence this big.*

That a good-looking Welshman would appear in her life right now was about as plausible as the moon being made of cheese. And what about the similarity between his name and that of her missing dog?

Jay would have a field day with this, I just know it.

“So has Leo’s dog bitten you yet?”

“Ah, Spike. We get along well.”

Leo simply nodded in agreement—although Morgan could swear he was trying not to laugh. She leaned toward Rhys. “Are you kidding me?” she said in a stage whisper. “Grady had to have stitches in his thumb the last time Spike came in.”

The old man burst out laughing, and Rhys chuckled too. “The dog is formidable for his small size, but most of it comes from fear. Now that he cannot hear or see, he is easily frightened and feels he must attack first in order to be safe.”

“That makes a lot of sense,” she admitted. Did Rhys really understand animals, or was he just repeating what Leo had told him? Come to think of it, Morgan wasn’t sure that even Leo understood Spike quite that well.

“So, Rhys, you must have a job?” It was out of her mouth before she could stop it. So much for being subtle, but she was keen to hear his answer.

“I’ve found much to turn a hand to, thanks to my friend here.”

“Rhys has been boarding with me, Doc,” said Leo. “He’s already made over my entire yard—and you oughta see my garden now. It’s never looked so good. Rhys caught me up on a lot of chores around the house too. Split a whole season’s worth of kindling for my stove, so I can look forward to a smaller fuel bill this winter. ’Course now all my neighbors are competing for his time, and they’re able to offer a wage. He’s a man in demand.”

A man in demand...I’ll bet he is.

Morgan shook her head to rid it of the sudden enticing image of a shirtless Rhys swinging an ax as his bared muscles gleamed with sweat. For a moment, she considered swallowing the ice cubes in her drink. Whole. Anything to cool herself down.

Rhys chose that moment to place his hand over hers, and every nerve in her body seemed to jolt with sudden electricity. “I have yet to apologize for the last time we met,” he said. “You showed a great deal of courage when you found me, though you must have felt fear.”

“I’m not admitting to it,” she said, sliding her hand out from under his and putting it in her lap out of reach. She held his gaze boldly despite the fact that her insides were fluttering. “But Nainie used to say that without fear, there could be no brave deeds.”

“Your grandmother was very wise.”

“Yes, she was.” She had to admit, it was refreshing to find someone so easy with Welsh terms. Most people thought

nainie

was some sort of childish endearment. But then, this man also knew about the Tylwyth Teg. His accent, his name...He was either a superb actor or the genuine article. Maybe with Leo present, she’d finally get some answers. “So, Rhys, tell me about—”

She jumped as her pager went off. Pressing the noisy device on her belt into silence, she flipped open her cell phone and speed-dialed the clinic dispatcher all in one smooth, practiced movement. A horse had gotten itself tangled in a wire fence at the Kendrick farm, and the hysterical owner couldn’t free the animal. The situation was beyond bad—what Jay would describe as a red-hot mess.

“What have I got for help?” Morgan asked the dispatcher. Any accident involving a horse required as many skilled hands as possible. The big animals usually panicked, making things worse for themselves and endangering the humans around them.

Knowing this, the dispatcher had automatically paged Jay and Grady, plus all three of the clinic technicians as well. Jay and Russell were already up to their armpits in a

bovine C-section—apparently someone had forgotten to notify the dispatcher that Morgan was taking her own shift tonight. No one else was answering their pages, and she remembered why: Grady had taken the other two techs, Cindy and Melinda, to a distant farm fair, not for fun but for further training.

Murphy's Law

, she sighed inwardly. She thanked the dispatcher and flipped her cell closed.

Normally a veterinarian would draft the owner at the scene, but she knew that this particular farmer would be of little use. She needed to find somebody else and fast—

“What troubles you?” asked Rhys.

—and the universe had plunked a

very

able body right in front of her. Morgan shoved the phone into her jeans as she stood up.

“I’m sorry, guys, but I’ve got one hell of an emergency. Leo, I need to borrow your

man in demand

.”

“Seems to happen a lot these days,” the old man chuckled. “I’ll put your groceries in the fridge for you before I go, but I warn you, I may have to eat some more of these cookies first.”

She gave him a quick hug. Then turned her attention to his companion, who had stood up when she did. He towered over her, all rugged power and muscle, but she was assessing his usefulness this time, not his appeal. Morgan had a patient waiting, and she was all business now.

“Rhys, I need your help.”

“My sword arm and my shield are yours to command,” he said solemnly.

Uh-huh.

“Actually it’s your hands I’m going to need.”

The only thing in their favor was that the Kendrick farm was just a few roads over from her own. Morgan was grateful for that and for the double suspension in the clinic truck as she drove as fast as she dared over potholes and gravel.

She spotted the horse as she turned into the Kendricks’ driveway. The big dapple-gray Percheron was on her side in a drainage ditch by the machine shed, thrashing wildly as an older woman, Julie, stood by in helpless tears. Instantly Morgan was out of the truck and had the rear hatch open, grabbing pliers, bolt cutters, and two sets of rope hobbles. Finally, she snatched the big blue gym bag of medical supplies for large animals.

She ran for the scene, only to find that Rhys had gotten there first. To her amazement, he was seated on the ground with the horse’s head in his lap. He gripped one of the horse’s ears in his hand while his other hand stroked the sweat-lathered neck. The big mare was quivering as he spoke soothingly to her in a language that sounded

somewhat like Welsh, yet Morgan didn't recognize the words. Whatever he was saying, the animal must have been listening because, miraculously, she had stopped thrashing.

Rhys looked up and nodded at Morgan. "Her name is Lucy. She'll not move now," he said.

Morgan approached cautiously, instinctively kneeling in a spot where she was less likely to be kicked, and surveyed the damage. It was bad, very bad. She glanced over her shoulder at the owner's reddened eyes. It would do her no good to watch this. "Julie, why don't you go to the house and put on some coffee? We've got a handle on things here, but it's going to take some work, and we'll need a break afterward."

The woman fled gratefully.

"You did that woman a kindness," said Rhys.

"It'll be kinder if I don't have to put her horse down." Morgan took a deep breath and took up the hobbles. "I've got to restrain the legs so I can work on them."

"The mare will be still, I promise you that."

"What, are you magic or something?"

"I need no magic for this. I took my first steps under a horse's belly, and I was riding before I could walk. Believe me when I say that this fine *ceffyl* will lie quiet for you."

From anyone else it might have sounded like boasting, yet Morgan sensed that Rhys was merely stating facts. And only someone truly experienced with horses could have calmed the panicked animal.

I hope you're right.

Morgan applied the hobbles around the fetlocks just the same, but she breathed easier while she did it. Then felt carefully along the terrible wounds and began snipping the rusted wire.

Hours later, they shoved and heaved with all their strength, encouraging the big mare to roll to her knees. The horse hesitated for a long moment then fought her way to her feet. She was unsteady but remained standing, sides heaving. "There, my

cariad

," Rhys crooned, allowing her to rest her head on his shoulder. She shivered but was quiet.

"The mare will heal. And she'll be sound," he declared to Morgan, who was checking the animal for any wounds that might have been missed.

She shook her head. "We don't know that for sure. So many of the lacerations are deep. And that left rear leg is a helluva mess." Morgan shoved her hair from her face, leaving a broad smear of blood across her cheek.

She looked exactly like a warrior after battle, Rhys thought admiringly. And a true fight it had been to stop the bleeding and put things right. He'd counted 253 stitches in all, and

every one of them was finely done. No warrior of his clan had ever received such skilled treatment of his wounds, nor had even the best of gladiators. “Skin and muscle are very badly torn, but the sinews are not cut. More than that, the mare has a strong will to live.”

“She’s going to need it. It’s going to take a ton of antibiotics to stave off infection. And she’ll have to have round-the-clock care. I couldn’t suture some of the deeper wounds—they have to drain, and they have to heal from the inside out. Everything will have to be checked over and fresh dressings applied twice a day, maybe more at first.” Morgan sighed. “I know poor Julie can’t manage it. She’s just too squeamish.”

Rhys’s eyebrows went up and she explained. “Don’t get me wrong, she loves her animals and treats them well. But most farmers learn to give shots, dose livestock, treat injuries. Not Julie. She once brought a dog into the clinic twice a day for two weeks, just so we could give it a pill. The dog was perfectly calm, but Julie just couldn’t deal with the whole idea. Besides, this horse is going to need to be watched by a trained eye for symptoms of septicemia, edema, any number of things. I’d rather not move her, but there’s no help for it. Lucy will have to be taken to the clinic.”

“A very busy place, and noisy as well. And who will be watching the mare throughout the night?”

Morgan sat on a stump with a deep sigh. “The clinic *is*

busy. We have three vets and three technicians, and all of us run full tilt full time. But I’ve got to give this animal a chance. I have a couch in my office; I can sleep there for a while. I’ve done it before.”

Most recently, she’d done it for him, Rhys thought. “Let me do it.”

“Do what?”

“Bring the mare to your farm and let me have the care of her.”

Morgan studied him for a long moment. “You’d have to stay with her,” she said at last.

“Of course.” Rhys studied her as well. She was a clever woman and knew full well that there was much more than the horse involved. If she agreed, she would be granting him a high level of acceptance. She would be welcoming him onto her turf, the same turf she’d sent him away from only a short time before. He’d gone because she’d wished it and because he was still half-stunned with the shock of being a man once more. But he wouldn’t leave again. He had a vow to fulfill.

“Well, there are hired man’s quarters off the back of the stable. Nothing fancy, but it’s got plumbing and electricity. The place hasn’t been used for a couple years, though. Not since Jay and his wife stayed there for a week while their house was being painted.” She ran her hands through her hair, considering. “Right now it’s dusty and God knows how many mice have moved in. Jay fixed the shower, but I couldn’t speak for how well the woodstove works—they didn’t use it. There’s a bed and a table and chairs, but that’s all. It wouldn’t be much better than camping, especially now that fall is almost here.”

He shook his head. "I'll sleep in the stable where I can hear the mare if she stirs. You've no cause for concern over my comfort. I've spent the night in fields many a time, waiting for foals to be born." That the open fields had been far better accommodations than his Roman captors had allowed him didn't bear mentioning.