



Logan McAllister surfed the internet looking for a girl with heart and soul. Skylar Alexander wanted a friend she could believe in. Neither knew where their first conversation would lead.

Rein In Your Heart

By Marilyn Anderson

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Marilyn Anderson

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Chapter One

Skylar Elizabeth Alexander leaned her head against the window as the airline workers struggled with the last suitcases on the soggy loading ramp. The DC 10's engines hummed, ready to take her home. Clutching the large clasp envelope to her chest, she wanted to shut out her two-year nightmare as raindrops splashed against her window, slid down the crevices, and fell onto the puddled parking area by the runways.

It had been raining like this almost eighteen months ago when she'd landed here in Italy. The cold, pounding rain had soaked Monster, her eleven-year-old bay quarter horse gelding as they splashed from the plane to the quarantine area. Groggy from the tranquilizers for the overseas trip, he had staggered in his padded helmet, heavy blanket, and leg wraps that reached past his knees. But today, she was going home alone...and she'd probably never see him again, closing a part of her life and leaving her hollow and empty.

She didn't care what Ben did to her; all she wanted was home. As the jet inched away from the terminal toward their takeoff runway, Skylar closed her eyes. Sleep had eluded her for countless nights, and tonight was no different. But tonight, she headed toward Arizona under tragic circumstances.

The plane dipped to the right before it leveled off, and the captain turned off the seat belt sign. Skylar leaned her head against the seat, remembering her final two days at AQHA Youth World Show. Tension was thick, and pressure was everyone's enemy. Adding to hers was the fact that she was leaving for Italy after her final class. Her bags were gone, leaving only a single trunk waiting for her show equipment.

Skylar and Monster, whose registered name was Imashyboy, had caught everyone's attention, including the judges. Skylar could still hear Mike's words, ringing in her ears as if it were only yesterday. "Head up, eyes straight, shoulders back, think of Logan, and smile. Baby, it's showmanship time." When she had closed her hand around the coveted sterling silver world champion buckle, frustration escaped

as the exhilaration of being the best in the world set in. But Mike, her trainer, her friend, her mentor, ached because he knew she was leaving him forever. He'd done all he could for her, and if anyone in the world deserved the championship, this team did.

Logan Spencer McAllister, her love, had flown in for the horsemanship finals on Saturday. The tension of the horsemanship competition was almost devastating. Keeping Skylar focused and on track was hell on any trainer, but especially for Mike because he was losing her too. As Mike and Logan stood side by side with arms crossed over the top rail of the warmup arena, Monster felt her legs but responded to cues from her mind as her hands remained motionless. Mike still marveled at their talent after all the months of coaching them while Logan watched her with love and admiration. And Sondra, her mother, just loved her. One hundred and twenty-seven world class riders later, Skylar and Monster took their victory lap for their second world championship.

She still hurt as she thought about their final hour in the stall. Logan had held her, rocking back and forth, dizzy with her very existence. They talked little; they felt everything. When she lifted her head from his shoulder and looked into his eyes, she said, "Be sure to write me and give me all the details of your college life, promise?"

"We need to talk about that." Logan cleared his throat. It was now or never. "I'm not going to college."

Skylar felt like he'd kicked her in the pit of her stomach. "I thought you were set."

"Things change; people change. I'm buying the welding business from Harry. He'll help me for a while, but his health is bad. Nobody knows how long he'll be able to work. My dad's cosigning the note with me, and Harry is owner-financing the deal." Logan licked his lips before he went on, watching her, trying to read the indecision in her eyes.

"Then you're staying in Painted Rock?" Skylar said quietly.

"Does that bother you?"

"I want you to be happy."

"Could you be happy in Painted Rock?" Logan almost whispered.

"If certain things were right."

“Are you disappointed in me?” Logan knew his news would hit her hard. It was a grownup decision, and one he’d made without consulting her.

“I’m a little surprised. Maybe I’ve been gone more than I thought.”

“I wanted to tell you in person. You’re the only one besides the Coopers and my parents who knows. Not even Jim, or the whole world would know.” Logan smiled at the thought of his best friend trying to keep this news a secret.

“I’m proud of you,” Skylar said, looking him straight in the eye.

“Really?” Logan replied, a smile playing at his lips as he brushed her hair behind her ear. She wasn’t playing with him. She meant it.

“Don’t look so surprised. It takes guts to go after something you want. I’m not going to college in the usual sense either. Maybe we’re just renegades,” Skylar said.

“I’ve got a part-time job at the mill at night as a backup to the business just in case things get slow in the winter. I may need a buffer.”

“A part-time job and a business? What about roping?” *Too much* thought Skylar.

“Weekends. Jim and I will work it out.”

“And your social life?” she asked, rubbing her hand down his arm.

“My social life is going to Italy.”

“You can’t be a hermit while I’m gone. Eighteen months is a long time. You’ll get lonely, and so will I.”

“Skylar,” Logan took her hand in his. “I’ll be lonely, but for you. I don’t want to date anyone else. I don’t want to dance with anyone else. A year and a half will be nothing compared to the rest of our lives. If you want to go out, see a little of Italy, or a lot of it, I understand. You have the opportunity of a lifetime; take advantage of it. I’ll work in Painted Rock and wait for you.”

But have you waited, Logan? Skylar asked the darkness broken only by the lights on her plane’s wings.

Mike had finally taken Monster from her, loaded him in the van, and waited until the last minute before he told her she had to leave or miss her plane. Skylar hugged him tightly and kissed him on the cheek, silently thanking him for his work, faith, and support. Then quietly, she handed him the showmanship buckle. She’d never forget the way

he looked at her when she said, "I won this one for you. Keep it for me until I get back."

"But I may never see you again," he said.

"I'll be back to check on you. You have my word on that."

Logan stood away from them. He felt no jealousy toward Mike; he respected the depth of their friendship and always would. But when he saw the pain in her eyes when she turned to him to say good-bye, he choked. When she handed Logan the horsemanship buckle, his tears mixed shamelessly with hers as he kissed her. They didn't care who was around, or what they thought, because tonight and these final moments were all they had.

Skylar climbed in the truck, looked back at them, and held up one finger, then four, then three. Logan knew what she meant, but Mike asked, "What's that?"

"I love you, in Skylar language," Logan said with a sad smile.

"There goes one hell of a woman, but she'll be back; she's not really leaving either one of us," Mike said before he walked silently into the barn, lost in his own thoughts.

Logan nodded as he watched the truck round the corner at the far end of the road. Skylar didn't know he was already making plans for her return.

#

Skylar turned on her light and asked the flight attendant for a blanket. Maybe the memories made her cold; maybe the temperature was dropping as the plane climbed high over the thunderstorm; or maybe her apprehension was getting the best of her. She shivered as she remembered the first few months at her new job.

The plane had landed in Italy almost eighteen months ago on a rainy, cold night that matched her spirits. Skylar had felt dead, empty, lost, and so alone. Ben Adkins, who'd gotten her into this mess, began drinking the first hour of the trip and was still sleeping when they had landed. Skylar had moved the horses to quarantine, retrieved their luggage, and met the grooms and drivers. The owners of their stable had been out of town. So much for the reception. Welcome to Italy.

When Skylar saw the “first-class” facility Ben had described, she’d almost cried. If “first-class” meant stalls with broken boards, doors hanging sadly on their hinges, paint peeling from everywhere still painted, exposed wires, and naked light bulbs, then they had the right place. Ben stood against the door for support and asked her opinion. Skylar summed it up in a look, her disappointment clear, but Ben was hopeful about their repair budget. She had more guts than he thought, and secretly, he hated her for it. She was so much like his sister.

Skylar was petrified the first morning she had to teach her English class at the University. Secretly, she was glad her students couldn’t understand a word of English. Standing in front of the class, she looked young, confident, beautiful, and very blond in a roomful of dark Italians. As she called roll, her soft Arizona accent rolled into the room and echoed in the silence. She remembered how blankly they’d stared at her when she asked if anyone understood any English. “If I asked them about soccer, someone would have an answer,” she muttered. Recognition flickered across the face of a good-looking boy in the corner seat by the window, and Skylar asked Marco Antonio Pencialliano to stay after class. Skylar smiled as she thought about how startled he’d looked when she talked to him in English, but he laughed when he confessed the Dean planted him to be sure she was all right.

From that day forward, Marco and his sister, Gina, became her friends and her family in this foreign country. They showed her the hot spots of Italy, took her to out-of-the-way places known only by locals, and asked her to spend the holidays with their family. Marco tried to fix her up with a couple of his friends, but she soon refused. They were nice enough, but she wasn’t interested in romance because her heart was back in Wyoming with Logan.

Even though neither Marco nor Gina rode or cared much about horses, they went to the quarter horse shows to watch Skylar and her students perform. And Skylar’s students excelled—from the smallest six-year-old to the amateur reiner—she treated them all like they were grand champions. And they showed like they were. Ben had been pleased with her progress, but then he’d expected nothing less from her. Skylar spent hours with her students after school, at night, and on weekends preparing for the shows across Europe, and they became

known as the competition when their vans and trailers rolled into the grounds. Her students were her means of survival against her loneliness until she met Zack.

Zachary Andrew Coleman III showed up at the arena ten days after Skylar came to work. Skylar saw him leaning on the fence in the far corner of the arena, watching or waiting for something to happen. Zack wasn't Italian...blond hair, blue eyes, slim build, Wranglers. He and Skylar could have passed for brother and sister.

Skylar still recalled the sullen look on his face when she'd approached him; he ignored her because his eyes were only on Monster. Skylar saw the passion that separated real riders from weekenders. He'd told her he didn't have time to ride, but he'd heard about the American teachers. Skylar smiled, remembering his excitement when she asked him to cool Monster out for her so she could work a young reining horse for a client. Tears stung her eyes as she thought of Monster. She'd done the right thing by selling him, but it still hurt and always would.

As the months stretched on, Zack rode Monster more than Skylar did. He came every afternoon to help her with whatever she needed, and Skylar realized that his sullen attitude covered his loneliness. Zack's father was the American ambassador, and his mother was a socialite by choice with little time for her son. Zack was forgotten, until he met Skylar, but she would never forget him. He blossomed under her friendship. Listening to her, he was ready for his first show with her bay gelding after only a couple of months. All Skylar could think about was how proud Zack looked when he placed third in novice youth western pleasure, a big accomplishment for a thirteen-year-old boy who had never ridden until she met him. Because of Zack, Skylar realized she was born to teach.

As the first month flew by, two negatives in her arrangement surfaced. First, Ben's drinking and womanizing didn't decline. Skylar had been living in Ben's spare bedroom, but she soon converted a feed room at the arena into her own small apartment. Marco and Gina had helped her move out, find second-hand furniture, and settle in. Ben was furious with her, but Skylar couldn't live with his coming in drunk

at two in the morning on weekends. His life was his life, but she didn't want to watch him destroy his marriage or jeopardize his job.

When she moved out, he demanded she leave her passport with him; she couldn't get out of the country with it. He insisted it was for her protection, but he really wanted to be sure she stayed until the end of her contract. Reluctantly, she gave in.

And second, was Logan. Skylar wrote him every week and didn't expect him to write as often as she did, but half dozen letters in seventeen months weren't enough. She asked her mother what she thought, but Sondra offered no advice. Skylar wondered if he had someone new. He could've been married, for all she knew. She felt let down and hurt, but her heart wouldn't turn loose. A fine thread of hope, or faith, held on and made her keep writing, keeping things light. Made her keep trusting him and believing he still cared about her. Made her mask her disappointment and stall her inquisitions. But that seemed ages ago, long before her nightmare had started...the day before her life's priorities exploded.

Only yesterday morning, she'd been teaching her class at the University. Reviewing for semester exams and listening to two of her students recite a dialog in front of the class, Marco eased himself into her classroom and motioned to her. She stared at the envelope in his hands, an overseas cable marked "URGENT" in bold red letters. Skylar saw the concern in his eyes, and with trembling hands, she took it from him.

Marco cleared his throat, feeling the contents weren't good. Watching his friend run her finger under the flap, he saw the color drain out of her face as she read the words...*Skylar. Come home. Cancer. Brain tumor. 30 days or less. Love you. Need you. Mom.*

Skylar couldn't breathe. Marco took the cable from her hands, read it, and put his arms around her. "God be with you," he said as he guided her to the empty classroom next door and excused her class because of an emergency. Picking up her purse and Logan's picture, he silently walked her to the Dean's office. There was nothing to say. The Dean assured her that her class would continue until the end of the term and asked her to return to Italy to teach. Skylar shook her head; she was going home, and Italy would become a memory.

Marco took her to the bank and arranged for her funds to be wired back to the States, made a plane reservation for the next day, and left messages for the owner of the training facility and Ben. Then he took her to his house, asked his mother to help with the packing, and got her trunks out of storage.

Marco had hundreds of questions he wanted to ask and thousands of things he wanted to say, but there was no time. And she had to decide about Monster. If she wasn't coming back to Italy, he had no idea what to do with her horse. Skylar had told him about the strict quarantine regulations passed because of the West Nile virus threat. Almost no horses were allowed back in the United States if they had been out of the country for more than six months, and Monster had been in Italy almost a year and a half. As Skylar walked past his stall, Monster stuck out his head as he always did, and her tears started. Marco agonized over what to say or do until she asked him to call Zack's father.

Zack deserved Monster, and Skylar knew his family had the money to buy him. Zack loved him almost as much as she did, and Monster needed a good home. Her future was so uncertain at this point. Selling him seemed to be the most logical, but also the most painful answer.

When Marco's call went through to Zack's father, Skylar took the phone. Surprisingly enough, Zack's father never hesitated at the price, or the prospect of the sale; he only asked about payment instructions. Marco held her as she sobbed. All of this was happening too fast, and all of it was too final.

Wiping her eyes on the sleeve of her blouse, Skylar tried a half-hearted smile. "Now what?"

"Let's pack. Then I'm taking you to dinner...just you and me," Marco said quietly.

"Marco, I don't feel like eating. I feel like dying." Skylar choked on the word.

"That's why we're going to dinner." He argued and threw the first trunk on her bed as she began packing her clothes. She was taking her show clothes, her show equipment, and some personal belongings. Pictures, Logan's sign, and a few personal items disappeared into the trunks. She didn't want many memories of this year and a half; they

were all too painful. “Your ticket will be at the airport tomorrow. Don’t forget your passport.”

Skylar stared at him blankly. “Ben has my passport. He took it from me as soon as we came here.”

“Skylar, you must get it before we go to the airport, or you won’t be able to board the plane. Why did you give him your passport?” Marco asked.

“Because he demanded it. You don’t understand. I’m afraid of him. He drinks and gets real nasty. I’m no match for him.”

Marco was furious and went down to the office to call him again. Ben was keeping her captive here, and Marco already knew they’d have major problems with him. It was already six o’clock, and he figured that there was no way he would find Ben at the office at this hour. Ben’s secretary confirmed that he would be out for the rest of the day. Marco made an appointment for nine the next morning—she would get her passport if it took the Ambassador to do it.

#

Skylar barely slept that night. She kept thinking of Logan, wishing he was with her. She closed her eyes and remembered the intensity and the gentleness of his eyes when he looked at her. She needed him and prayed he still needed her. She no longer felt strong, confident, or self-assured. The cable had shattered everything. Life was the pits. She drifted off into a fitful sleep, and it seemed that only minutes had passed before Marco tapped on her door.

Gathering the last of her possessions, she walked down the aisle to his truck. Stopping for one last look at Monster, she slipped her arms around his neck as he nuzzled her shirt. Zack had come to see her the last night, and his excitement filled the barn. He wrote notes on everything about Monster, gave her the information to transfer his papers, and floated out of the barn.

Zack knew how hard it was for her to sell him, and he hugged Skylar before he left. He was a little taller than she was, even though he was only fourteen, and he thought she was so tiny. He’d never really noticed it before because girls didn’t interest him yet, and he’d never thought of her as a girl. Skylar was his friend, and he hurt, just like she

did. He promised he'd send her pictures and keep Monster in shape. The facility's owner had already started looking for another instructor, but all her students knew they'd never another like Skylar. They came along once in a lifetime, and Zack had been lucky enough to know her. She erased his "tough guy" attitude and helped him to be a well-adjusted teenager. He'd give Monster a good home; almost as good as he would've had with her. Rubbing the star on his forehead one last time, she carefully locked his stall door and nodded to Marco. She didn't trust herself to speak, but she did look back one last time before she left the barn. Marco could hardly stand to watch her. So much...so fast...so final.

Marco tried to distract her on the way to Ben's because he knew she was nervous. Striding into the oil company's offices, Marco waited patiently at the receptionist's desk before she showed them down the hall to Ben's office. The stocky, gray-haired lady behind the desk seemed ill at ease. Looking first at Marco and then at Skylar, she asked them to sit down and buzzed Ben on the intercom. She frowned with his reply. "I'm sorry, he won't be able to see you this morning," she said.

"You don't understand. He has her passport; she's leaving today; and she must have it. He can't hold her hostage," Marco said through a clenched jaw.

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry isn't good enough. May I use your phone?" Marco saw Skylar's hands shake as he dialed a number and waited for an answer. "Zachary Andrew Coleman II please; this is Marco Pencialiano calling."

She looked at him questioningly. What was he doing?

Marco explained their situation to Zack's father. They were running short of time, and he went straight to the top. "Thank you. The ambassador will be here in shortly. Mr. Adkins may not see us, but I doubt if he turns away Mr. Coleman. What do you think?"

Ben's secretary shook her head and waited until the ambassador and bodyguard came down the hall within minutes. She knocked softly on Ben's office door, waited until he gruffly answered, and showed

them all in. Closing the door behind them, she waited in the corner beside the safe.

Ben's eyes narrowed as he saw Skylar standing between Marco and Mr. Coleman. "What do you think you're doing?" he spat at her.

Before she could even open her mouth, Zack's father said, "I understand you're holding her passport. As Ambassador, it's part of my official capacity to ensure Americans are treated fairly, even by other Americans. Give Skylar her passport so she can go home."

"She's not finished here yet, and she's not leaving until she is." Ben shouted.

"Her mother's dying. She's leaving today." Turning to Ben's secretary, Mr. Coleman asked, "Where is it? I know you know where it is. If you don't turn it over right now and let her go home, I'm calling the police. Do you both understand? This is sexual harassment, bordering on false imprisonment. He may not understand, but I'm sure you do," Coleman said to Ben's secretary.

Looking from Ben to Coleman to Skylar, her composure broke as she looked at the blond girl standing between the Ambassador and her friend. If she'd known how young Skylar was, she'd never have hidden her mail. Without a word, she worked the combination on the safe. Taking the folder with her passport out of the safe, she handed it to Skylar before she pulled out a bulging clasp envelope. "These are yours, too."

Skylar saw her name in bold red magic marker, *Skylar Alexander...Personal and Confidential*. Looking at Ben through narrowed eyes, she said, "How could you?"

Shrugging, Ben said, "Go home. I never want to see you again."

Skylar hesitated a moment before she said, "Good luck. You'll need it when I'm not around to make you look good."

"Get the hell out of here," Ben said roughly. He hated Skylar just as he hated his sister. She'd gotten breaks in the show ring because she was a girl, while he'd clawed and climbed his way to the top. Women were worthless play toys to Ben, but Skylar wouldn't play his game.

Marco took Skylar by the elbow and backed out of the room.

“I wouldn’t have made it if you hadn’t come to my rescue,” she told the Ambassador as they waited for the elevator. “Thank you,” she said, shyly.

“My son is happier than I’ve ever seen him now that he has Monster. I’m the one who’s been rescued,” Mr. Coleman said, smiling at Skylar.

“And I never could resist rescuing a lady in distress. It’s the Italian in me.” Marco grinned at her when he saw her begin to relax. “What’s in the envelope?”

“I don’t know.” Sitting her purse on the elevator floor, she opened the clasp. Her mouth dropped open as she said, “Oh my God.” Three bundles of letters, neatly tied in packages of a dozen each, were all addressed to her in the same neat block handwriting. “Letters to me.”

“From?” Marco pressed on.

Meeting his eyes, she tenderly replaced them in the envelope. One word, one look, said it all. “Logan,”

“Your missing piece. Love is in the air. Now you can go home.” Marco smiled.

#

Skylar started reading Logan’s letters as soon as the plane leveled off. Ben’s secretary had neatly arranged them in chronological order, letting her live through the past eighteen months in one sitting. Learning about his business and laughing at his roping stories, the hours flew. Logan had moved out, but he didn’t say where he was living.

Jim and Dana were married and expecting. Jim, a dad. He’d probably be a good one. Even if he wasn’t much older mentally than the baby would be.

She laughed at the description of their Thanksgiving dinner and cried over parts written just for her. How could she have ever thought he’d find someone else? She’d doubted him, and all he was doing was working himself into the ground to keep from being lonely. Logan had been as miserable as she’d been, and she hadn’t even known it. It took several hours to read them all, but she found peace afterward. She could hardly wait to talk to him. She’d call him Saturday afternoon.

Hugging the envelope to her chest, she closed her eyes and slept. How could her world fall apart right now? With Logan by her side, maybe she could make it.



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