

Keeping the Peace

(Aspen Valley Series, Book 1)

HANNAH HOOTON

‘The book is well paced and the kooky characters absolutely believable. I laughed a great deal.’

***** *The Romance Reviews*

‘Keeping the Peace has everything from a great storyline to some hot romance! The female

Dick Francis.’ ***** *The Filly Forum*

‘Evocative imagery and crisp writing sets this story apart from the competition.’ ***** *Natalie*

Keller Reinert, bestselling author

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MAP-READING was bad enough when it appeared all of the road signs for the narrow country lanes had been pinched for scrap metal. But add to the mix an unfamiliar car and less than a hundred miles driving experience, then one would begin to understand how Pippa was feeling.

The small hire-car juddered as if in disgust at being made to travel at twenty through the potholed West Country. Pippa ground the gears, frantic to change down and keep from stalling. Living in London, she hadn't needed to drive anywhere and had only ever used her driver's licence for ID when getting into clubs. Of course, when she did need to use a car, there was always Ollie.

She allowed herself a smug smile. She had been dating in-between-roles actor Ollie Buckingham for three years now. He had a gorgeous red sports car over which he was terribly protective. Also charming and creative, Pippa liked to think that had he not had an audition first thing tomorrow, he would have offered to be her chauffeur for the day. On the other hand, she wanted to sort this business out herself. Dave Taylor's posthumous involvement somehow made it more personal. Anyway, Ollie had never been too keen on Pippa's rather capricious uncle. Or the countryside for that matter.

'It wouldn't be so bad if any of the roads had signs on them,' she grumbled. She batted down the centre fold of the map onto the steering wheel. Squinting ahead into the darkening afternoon, she saw the outline of some life form approaching and it wasn't a cow or a sheep. Pippa sighed with relief. A human at last!

She stopped the car and wound down her window. 'Excuse me,' she called to the jogger.

The young man, his face shiny and his sandy blond hair damp with sweat, slowed to a halt beside her. He rested his hands on his thighs to catch his breath.

'Y'right there?' he said with a deep Irish brogue.

Pippa's eyes widened. She knew she was lost, but Ireland... was it possible? She shook her head, ridiculing herself. There was no way she could drive to Ireland on one tank of fuel.

'Not really.' She gave him an apologetic smile. 'I'm trying to find Aspen Valley Racing Stables. I think I must have taken a wrong turning somewhere.'

‘That you have, but you’re not far off course. Go back the way you came, take the first road on your right. That’ll take you for a mile or so to the old oak. Aspen Valley is the next turning on your left after that.’

Relieved that she was still in England, Pippa closed her eyes, reopening them to find the man grinning at her. Could he tell what she was thinking?

‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘God knows where I would have ended up if you hadn’t stopped.’

‘Helensvale more than likely or at worst, Bristol. But you’re all right. You’ll be there in ten minutes.’

‘Thanks for your help.’

‘Not a bother. Good luck.’

Pippa watched his disappearing figure in her rear-view mirror before moving again. This could be tricky. She hadn’t done a three-point-turn since her test eight years ago and certainly never on this sort of road.

‘Maybe three is a bit ambitious,’ she muttered a few moments later as her fourth manoeuvre wedged her across the entire road.

A loud hoot from her left made her jump. Frantically, she rammed the car into First. The car shot forward into the hedge.

‘Bugger, bugger, bugger. Shit, shit, shit.’ She hauled the wheel anti-clockwise and the car groaned. It lurched backwards as she dragged it into Reverse. The silver Land Rover waiting flashed its headlights at her.

‘I know you’re there, you prat,’ Pippa exclaimed. ‘What do you expect me to do?’

It tooted its horn again.

Her blood already pumped with panic, Pippa experienced the cocooned safety of road rage for the first time. ‘Oh, for fuck’s sake!’ she yelled, slamming her palm on her horn in response. ‘Just have a little patience!’ She saw the driver’s arm appear out of the window in a heavenward gesture. Pippa gritted her teeth. ‘You are just going to have to wait.’

Two minutes later, she sank back into her seat. The Land Rover blasted past, rocking her car from side to side, and roared off round the next blind bend.

‘Arsehole,’ she muttered, drying her palms on her skirt.

At a more sedate pace, she followed in its wake. Before long, she found the road the jogger had referred to, almost hidden by the bordering hedges. With a triumphant smile, she identified the oak tree and a red and white sign heralding Aspen Valley Racing Stables. The bumpy driveway snaked up a rise, flanked by post and rail-fenced paddocks. Long distorted shadows seeped across the emerald-lush grass from several horses grazing with the setting sun warming their supple bodies. Up ahead she could see two barns. Beside them was a large block of brick stables and offices shaped into an EI block with the stables making up the E and the I consisting of offices and store rooms. Her blood chilled momentarily when she noticed a silver Land Rover parked at a haphazard angle in the gravelled car park up ahead.

‘This should be interesting,’ she said as she pulled up beside it. With a quick check of her reflection in the mirror, she tucked a tendril of her short dark auburn curls behind her ear and stepped out into the cool dusk. It really was a lovely end to a gorgeous day, and in spite of the trauma of driving the three-hour journey from London, she had rather enjoyed herself. Moreover, it was bound to get more interesting now, Pippa thought, tripping in her heels over the uneven surface towards the buildings.

Despite the Land Rover parked out front, the place appeared deserted. Only snorts and whickers from the stables’ residents broke the silence. She was tempted to tiptoe amidst the calm. She stopped at the first stable and peeked inside. Suddenly, half a ton of horseflesh came hurtling towards the door, teeth bared, ears pinned back. Pippa gave a startled yelp and jumped out of harm’s way. She yelped again as she collided with a neat cutlery set of pitchforks and spades leaning against the wall. They crashed to the ground around her in a crescendo of sound, the tinny intrusive noise echoing around the block. With her hands clutching her head, Pippa cringed and looked around to see if anyone would come to investigate. Several inquisitive equine heads appeared over their respective half-doors before a heel scraping against concrete behind her caught her attention.

‘What are you doing?’ the owner of the heel called out across the yard.

Pippa pushed her sunglasses onto the top of her head, revealing her blue eyes. She pasted a smile on her face and walked towards the man, appraising him as she approached. Her smile became more genuine as she got closer. He looked in his mid to late thirties but, Pippa thought, you can never really tell with these outdoorsy types. Tall with broad shoulders covered by a flying jacket, he had dark hair and stern brows. He made no attempt to return Pippa’s

smile; his tapered mouth instead set in a grim line above a jutting chin. He stood with his hands on his blue-jeaned hips.

‘I’m looking for Jack Carmichael.’

‘Well, you’ve found him,’ he replied with a curt nod.

Really, Pippa thought indignantly. He could be a bit more polite, considering she might well be a customer. Which she was. For now, anyhow. She wondered if he recognised her from their previous meeting on the road. ‘I’m Pippa Taylor. My uncle was Dave Taylor... he owned a couple of horses here,’ she added when he didn’t say anything.

‘I know who Dave Taylor is,’ he said. Sighing, he softened his tone, ‘I’m sorry to hear about his death.’

‘Thanks, it was a bit of a shock. But you know Uncle Dave – he always loved the element of surprise.’ She attempted a cheery laugh without success.

Jack Carmichael shifted uncomfortably. He gestured to the office behind him. ‘Would you like to come in and have a drink?’

The idea of a vodka and Coke suddenly became very appealing. ‘Ooh, that would be nice.’

She followed his broad jacketed back into what was obviously a reception judging by the big professional office unit directly opposite the door. Standing in an expanse of slate-coloured carpet, Pippa was drawn to the two meagre framed photographs on the glaring white walls. The bright-patterned silks of the jockeys frozen in time injected the only real colour into the room. According to the captions, neither Virtuoso nor Black Russian belonged to her uncle.

Jack strode over to an adjoining room on the left. ‘Tea or coffee?’

‘Oh – um – coffee please.’ Damn, that vodka and Coke was looking even more attractive now that it wasn’t on offer. She followed him as far as the doorway to a kitchenette and watched him briskly prepare their drinks. A kettle, imitating a jet engine, made it impossible for conversation. Pippa fiddled with her necklace as she stood against the doorframe. She wasn’t used to someone else making the coffee, being a waitress by day, and by night Ollie always insisted she made better coffee than he did. Which was true, even if she did say so herself.

‘Milk? Sugar?’

‘Milk and two sugars please.’ She watched him heap two Matterhorns of sugar into a Jockey Club coffee mug and half a pint of milk. He left the second mug a thick black, stirring it twice

before tossing the teaspoon into the sink with a clatter. Pippa wondered how much sleep this man managed every night with that much caffeine raging through his system.

‘Come through,’ he instructed. He led the way back across the reception to the other side where another door led into a second office. He put her coffee down on the heavy wood desk before settling himself in the high-backed leather office chair round the other side. Pippa perched on the visitor’s chair, her gaze drawn to a display cabinet along one wall featuring various trophies and salvers and bronze works.

‘You’re lucky you caught me. I’m only here because I left my wallet.’

Her attention recaptured, she smiled apologetically. ‘Sorry, I should have rung ahead to make an appointment.’

He sat, impassive, not contradicting her.

Pippa cleared her throat self-consciously. ‘I wanted to speak to you about Uncle Dave’s horses.’

‘I suspected as much,’ he replied, blowing on his drink.

Pippa primly chose to ignore him. ‘Uncle Dave’s left just about everything to me –’

‘Well done,’ he muttered into his coffee before taking a sip.

Pippa bristled. ‘I haven’t done anything *well*. It’s not like I’ve been working on my inheritance for the past twenty years. I – oh, never mind. Anyway, he left me two racehorses. What would I want with a racehorse?’

‘Nothing by the sounds of it.’

‘I have no interest in horses,’ Pippa continued. ‘From what I’ve heard, they’re just a drain on the bank balance.’

‘Just about sums it up, yes. What are you trying to say? That you want to sell them?’

‘Yes. Would you be interested in buying them?’

Jack’s deep attractive laugh would have been much more appealing had it not been at her expense.

‘Not even if I could afford them,’ he chuckled. He put his mug back on the desk to avoid spilling it and smiled at Pippa, the crow’s feet at his eyes deepening.

‘Why not?’

‘Because –’ Pippa saw him quickly glance at her bare-fingered left hand holding her drink, ‘– Ms Taylor, I train racehorses. I don’t own them. You might be able to get a late entry in the HIT sales next month.’

Pippa frowned. What the hell was a HIT sale – where hitmen were paid to shoot horses? ‘HIT sales?’

‘Horses In Training. I’ll get my secretary to enter them.’

Okay, Pippa reasoned with herself. That made more sense. ‘And what do I have to do?’

‘Make sure the last bill is paid, and that’s it.’

‘Don’t I need to meet the new owners, to make sure they won’t mistreat them or something?’

Jack frowned in bemusement. ‘Have you had *anything* to do with racing before now?’

‘The most I’ve had to do with horses was through Uncle Dave and a pony ride on a seaside holiday in Brighton.’

‘How old are you?’

‘Twenty-six. Why? That seaside holiday was some years ago,’ she said, her back stiffening in defence.

‘No particular reason. Your uncle must have been well into his seventies when he died.’

‘My parents are older than average if that’s what you’re getting at. I’m an only child.’

‘One enough for them?’

‘No, they knew perfection when they saw it. Why ask for more?’ Pippa smiled into her coffee mug, feeling strangely triumphant when he gave a reluctant chuckle.

‘And may I ask what you do for a living?’

‘You may. I work at Vivace Restaurant in London.’

‘Restaurant manager?’

‘No. Waitress actually.’ Her curt response made her blush in attrition. How she would like to be able to say yes, she was the manager at Vivace’s. She’d been waiting four long years to say it. And it seemed just as likely to happen now as when she’d first joined the restaurant. She pushed it to the back of her mind. ‘How much do you think you could sell them for?’

Jack shrugged.

‘I wouldn’t put a very high reserve on them.’ He hesitated and looked at Pippa with narrowed blue eyes. ‘You know what a reserve is, don’t you?’

‘Of course. I shop on eBay all the time.’

Jack snorted. ‘I’ll take you to meet them in a minute if you want.’

‘Yes, please. It does feel rather grand owning two racehorses. What are their names?’

‘Astolat and Peace Offering. They’re not as grand as you might think. I don’t know what kind of inheritance Dave has left you, but he certainly wasn’t making a profit out of those two.’

‘But he enjoyed having them though, didn’t he?’

Jack paused to consider this for a moment. ‘Yes, I suppose he did.’ He looked at his watch. ‘Have you finished your coffee? I’ll take you to see them quickly.’

Pippa was only halfway through her drink. Nevertheless, she nodded. ‘I’m sorry if I’m delaying you for anything.’

Jack grunted. She wasn’t sure if it was an acknowledgement that she was or an assurance that she wasn’t, although she suspected the former.

Hurrying in his wake, she struggled in her heels to keep up with his long strides. He paused as they passed the archway leading to the car park. His eyes narrowed at the hire-car sitting beside the Land Rover.

Pippa held her breath, feeling his eyes travel from the vehicles to her. ‘How many horses do you train?’ she blurted.

He regarded her for a moment longer, re-evaluating her now that recognition had set in. Waiting for him to comment on her driving skills, Pippa raised a challenging eyebrow.

Jack dropped his gaze and carried on walking down the long line of stables. ‘About sixty at the moment,’ he said.

She breathed a quiet sigh of relief and trotted after him to catch up. ‘At the moment?’

‘Some still haven’t come back from their summer holiday. When the National Hunt season starts proper, we should have about a hundred.’

‘Wow,’ Pippa said in awe. ‘When is that?’

‘A couple of weeks’ time.’

‘Poor Uncle Dave. He picked a bad time to pop his clogs when he was always so excited about racing.’

‘Is there ever a good time?’

‘I guess not.’ Gazing around her, she almost walked straight into Jack as he stopped beside a walkway to some fields behind the stable block. He scowled at her pink slingbacks.

‘You’re going to need more suitable footwear than that.’ He disappeared through a dimly-lit doorway to their right. A moment later he reappeared holding a dirty pair of Wellington boots aloft.

‘Try these.’

Pippa looked in horror from the boots to Jack and might have argued had his eyes not clouded indigo with brimming temper. She went to take off her shoes, hopping around on one foot until an uneven paving slab sent her reeling. She grabbed the closest thing there was for support... which was Jack’s shoulder. He stiffened at her touch and she mumbled a hurried apology. She took the Wellies and pulled them on, trying to ignore how ridiculous she must look in her short skirt and oversized boots. Looking up, she saw a faint glimmer of amusement in his eyes. She flashed him a warning look that forbade him from saying anything.

He turned away to lead them out to the fields, but wasn’t quick enough to hide a suppressed smile.

‘How far away are they?’ she asked.

‘Next paddock.’

‘Do they always live outside? Even at night time?’

‘In summer, yes. Your two should start coming in round about now, although since your circumstances have changed, you might prefer them to just stay out.’

‘Why would I want that?’

‘It’s cheaper. And you’re not intending to race them.’

‘But the person who buys them will probably want to race them.’

‘Your choice,’ Jack shrugged.

He stopped alongside the fence to the second paddock. Pippa could see a small group of five grazing horses at the far end. He gave a loud piercing whistle, making her wince and want to cover her ears. The horses all threw their heads up and as one, came cantering over, play-biting and bucking.

‘Don’t you worry they’ll hurt each other?’ Pippa asked.

‘They’re only playing. The bully on the far left is Astolat,’ Jack said, pointing at a big dark bay horse who was snapping his teeth at his companion. ‘And that at the back is Peace Offering.’

Pippa detected the slight resignation in his voice as he identified the smaller, slighter-looking bay happily bringing up the rear. An odd sense of excitement stole over her as the stampede halted before the fence and she was introduced to her new horses. *Her* horses. It did feel terribly grand, especially as they were racehorses.

And this year’s Derby winner is Peace Offering, owned by Pippa Taylor.

It had a certain ring to it, although she was a bit hazy about race names. Her uncle had been a fan of jump racing or National Hunt racing, and as far as she could recall, the Derby didn't have any jumps in it.

And this year's Grand National winner is Peace Offering, owned by Pippa Taylor.

That sounded better.

Jack frowned at her smug smile and reached forward to stroke Peace Offering's nose. Pippa hung back, pushing her hair behind her ear with a nervous hand.

Jack's furrowed brow softened. 'Come pat Peace Offering. He won't bite.'

Pippa remembered those snapping yellow teeth as they'd galloped towards them and hesitated further. 'I can see them okay from here, thanks,' she said with a small anxious smile.

'He's an old softie. Come on.' Taking her hand, he guided her forward and placed her palm beneath his onto the horse's long bony nose. 'See?'

For a moment, Pippa was only aware of the heat radiating from his hand as it engulfed hers. Then her attention became engrossed by the horse. She looked in wonder at the big kind eyes fringed with sweeping lashes and the white blaze that spilled down from his forehead to his nostrils. It made him so pretty. As if he had been a plain-coloured horse who'd had his make-up done.

'He's beautiful,' she murmured.

'Maybe I shouldn't have shown them to you,' he said, releasing her hand. 'You don't want to get attached when you're about to sell them.'

Pippa let her fingers trace the delicate contours of the horse's nose, between his velveteen nostrils, smiling as his whiskers tickled her palm. She let her hand drop and nodded. 'I know,' she sighed. 'He's so pretty though, I'm sure he'll sell well.'

'I wouldn't be too sure about that.'

'Why? Isn't he very fast?'

'Quite simply, no. Astolat is half-decent at least.'

'That's a pity. Never mind, I know someone will see that he's a sweetheart.'

Jack gave a snort of derision. 'I've got to get a move on. Are you travelling back up to London tonight?'

'No, I've got to go see a house - or a cottage, I'm not sure which yet, that used to be Uncle Dave's.'

'More inheritance?'

‘Something like that. Although they told me not to expect too much. Apparently, it’s a bit of a shambles. I’m sure it can’t be as bad as all that though.’

‘Good luck,’ Jack said with more doubt than sincerity.

‘Thank you,’ Pippa replied sweetly. ‘Nice to meet you Peace Offering. Nice to meet you Astolat.’

Jack rolled his eyes and began to walk away.

Pippa skipped after him back onto the main path. ‘Thank you for showing them to me.’

‘My pleasure,’ he said, sounding like it was anything but. ‘I’ll have Gemma send you the details of the sale next month.’

‘Who’s Gemma?’

‘My secretary.’

Poor girl, Pippa thought, having to put up with his moodiness. She shot a rueful glance at the horses still milling by the fence behind them and sighed. ‘It’s such a pity.’

‘What is?’ Jack looked at her suspiciously.

‘Having to sell them.’

His blue eyes narrowed. ‘You having second thoughts?’

Pippa shrugged. ‘Can’t afford to have second thoughts. But wouldn’t it have been fun?’

‘You’re better off without them.’

Half a stride behind, Pippa frowned at the negative attitude radiating from the unyielding set to his shoulders. ‘Don’t you train horses for a living?’

Jack looked at her sharply. ‘Yes. Why?’

‘Well, you don’t sound like their biggest fan.’

‘I’m just being realistic. You could never afford two racehorses on a waitress’s salary.’

Despite having said much the same thing less than a minute before, Pippa raised her chin involuntarily in a stubborn stance.

Is that right sunshine, she challenged silently.