

The White Horse

by

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Jodie sighed with relief as she hung the last clean bridle on its hook in the tack room. Dusk was stealing across the yard and she was tired. Running a livery yard was hard work and all the tasks took so much longer when there was only her to do the work.

She was just putting the saddle soap away when the phone rang. For a moment, she wondered if it was Mum. But it couldn't be - she was in a plane, thousands of feet above the Atlantic and well out of the reach of mobile signals.

Instead, she recognized the voice of Toby Roe from the garage in the village. "There's a man here with a spot of trouble. I thought you might be able to help."

"What with? I don't know anything about cars."

"Don't be daft," said Toby. "I can sort out his car myself in the morning. In the meantime, he needs somewhere to stable the horse he has in his trailer."

"I don't know," said Jodie. "Mum's not hear to ask, but we have got an empty loose box."

"Then let him use it. He says he'll pay twice what you usually charge if you'll help, and you should never turn good money down."

Jodie was sure Mum would say the same. So she agreed and set to work laying a thick bed of straw in the spare stable. She had just finished when she heard the clatter of hooves entering the yard.

She went out to greet her new customer and stopped in surprise. Never before had she seen a horse look so totally dejected. He trudged behind his owner, his head drooping and his feet barely lifting high enough to clear the ground. Despite the mild spring weather, he wore a thick turnout rug which somehow added to the impression of misery.

The man stared at her through narrowed eyes. "So you're the young lady who's going to look after my horse. You look a bit young. Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

Jodie disliked him instantly. But she forced herself to smile and tried to be polite. "Please don't worry," she said. "I may be young, but I'm very well trained. Your horse is in good hands."

"I hope that's true. Only the best is good enough for him." The man's thin lips parted in a cold smile while his eyes glinted with greed. "Very valuable this horse is, very valuable. He's going to make my fortune, he is."

Jodie's dislike grew. No wonder the horse looked so unhappy with this horrible man as his owner. She walked over to the animal, speaking gentle words of welcome and was pleased to see his head come up a little and his ears prick forward.

Now she could see how beautiful he was. His head was perfectly proportioned, and his ears finely tapered. But it was his coat that took her breathe away. It was white, pure white. There was no way she could call this horse a grey. He was so white he almost glowed.

Jodie took the lead rope and moved towards his stable. "I'll just get him settled with some hay and take off his rug," she said over her shoulder.

"No, you mustn't," shouted the man, as he ran forward and blocked her path. "The rug stays on. I insist on it."

"But he'll be too hot and anyway I'll need to groom him."

"No, the rug stays on," He seized her shoulders and glared at her. "Do you understand? Whatever happens you must not take off the rug."

Jodie pulled back away from his grasp, her dislike for this man turning to loathing. "All right," she said with her heart pounding. "I understand. I won't touch it."

To her relief, after one final reminder about the rug, he turned on his heel and strode out of the yard. She was glad to see him go. He was definitely the most unpleasant man she had ever met.

Feeling calmer now she was alone, she turned her attention to her new charge. He seemed happier now his owner had gone, but he was restless. Jodie stayed with him for a while, soothing and stroking him to try to settle him into his new surroundings. Eventually he turned his attention to his bulging haynet, so she left him and returned to the house for her long overdue supper.

It was late in the evening when she heard him calling, his neighs long and desperate like no other horse she had ever heard. She struggled into her coat and boots, grabbed a torch and ran down the garden to the yard.

She needn't have bothered with the torch. A full moon bathed the yard with pale white light, and she saw him straight away. He had stopped calling and was standing with his head over the stable door, his neck arched and his ears pricked forward.

He was looking straight at her, waiting for her. Was it her he had been calling? Even as that thought formed in her brain, another came, deeper somehow and unlike her own.

"Yes," it said. "Come. Help me."

Unsure if she had imagined it, she went into his stable, breathing in the welcoming scents of horse and straw. He looked even more beautiful in the moonlight, his coat even whiter. But he was restless, kicking at the straps of the rug and biting at the cloth.

As she stepped towards him, he grasped her cuff with his teeth - not viciously but gently like a mother cat carrying a kitten. Slowly he pulled her arm towards the front buckle of the rug.

"You want me it take it. off, don't you?" she said.

The thought that wasn't hers came again. "I must be free," it said.

"But I promised. What will he say when he finds out?"

"He won't come back if you take it off. When I am free, he will know that he has lost."

Aware that something very strange was happening, Jodie reached out. and slowly unfastened the stiff straps. Then she took hold of the rug and, with one sweep, she pulled it to the ground.

As soon as he felt his burden lift, the horse shook himself from nose to tail. It was only as the movement stopped that Jodie took in the full impact of what she could see. No longer imprisoned by the rug, the mighty wings glimmered in the moonlight as if they were made of moonbeams.

"Pegasus," she gasped. No wonder the man had said the horse was valuable. He was more than that. He was beyond price - too magnificent a creature to be controlled by man.

Jodie needed no prompting to know what she must do now. As soon as she threw open the stable door, the great horse stepped forward into freedom. She walked beside him to the paddock, her hand resting on his shoulder.

When they reached the open gate, he stopped and rubbed his head against her. "Thank you," came the thought inside her mind. "You have done well." He swung his head round, seized a feather from one of his wings and gently placed it in her hand.

Without further pause, he galloped forward. His huge wings flapped once and then he was flying into the night sky. He circled once over the stables as if to say farewell. Then he turned and flew upward towards the moon.

Jodie watched until he was completely out of sight and then still longer, unaware of time. At last, the chill night air forced her to turn back to the house, the feather in her hand glowing in the moonlight as if it was made of moonbeams.

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