

COMMENDED: NICOLE MURRAY

THE GOLDEN HORSE

The palomino mare moved restlessly in her stall as Monique brushed the mud off her golden quarters.

"Aurora, do stand still," Monique said softly to the mare. Aurora turned and nudged the girl.

Monique soon had the worst mud off the beautiful mare and went to fetch Aurora's bridle and saddle. She looped the reins round the mare's neck, slipped off the halter, and coaxed the horse's mouth open to take the mild snaffle bit.

The saddle was quickly girthed in place, and Monique led Aurora out into the riding school's dusty yard.

"Louise, Aurora's ready. I'm taking her out now." Louise Atkinson, the riding school's proprietress, leaned out of the feed room where she was doing accounts amid bins of hay, chaff, oats and pellets and sundry horsey items.

"Righto, Moni," she said. "By the way, did I tell you some people are coming to see Aurora tomorrow? If they buy her we will be able to buy a new riding school pony and have some improvements made to the school. Aurora is absolutely no good for a riding school, she's far too well schooled and spirited."

"Oh, Louise, no!" cried Monique, horrified. "You can't sell Aurora!"

"I must, I'm afraid. She's a burden to the school at the moment." Monique knew there was no use in protesting any further.

"How much are you asking for her?" she asked.

"Oh, about \$500," replied Louise, "although I think she's worth a lot more. Now off you go on your ride. It may be your last." Despondantly, Monique turned the responsive mare and rode her away.

"\$500," she muttered. "Oh, Aurora! And I've only saved up \$350. Whatever will I do?"

It was a very dismal ride, and Aurora **didn't learn anything** at all, because Monique was too miserable to teach her anything.

When the pair got back to the stables, she offered to pay Louise \$350 straight away, and the other \$150 when she got the money.

"No, Moni, I'm sorry, but I need the money in a lump sum, and immediately." Monique turned away so Louise wouldn't see her tears.

The next day Monique groomed Aurora until she glowed gold and cream. She polished the supple tack until it shone, and she spent the whole morning with Aurora, because it would be the last.

At 2.30 p.m. a white Mercedes pulled up beside the sign which proclaimed in no uncertain lettering, *Wattle Gully Equestrian School*, and a tall, dark-haired girl in immaculate fawn jodhpurs and black leather top boots stepped out of the passenger seat. From the driver's side emerged a balding man on the verge of going to fat. He wore a dark blue suit, and carried a black briefcase. Monique, watching from the stable, felt her heart skip a beat at the sight of the wealthy-looking pair. She was certain there was no way they would pass up a marvellous mare like Aurora.

Sadly, Monique bridled and saddled Aurora, as Louise went out to meet the prospective buyers. Very soon Louise called Monique.

"Lead her out, will you Moni?"

Unwillingly, Monique led Aurora out to the critical gaze of the man and girl. Their looks were at once approving, and Monique knew Aurora's fate was sealed.

Louise asked Monique to mount Aurora and put her through her paces, which she did. Then the girl tried her, and seemed extremely pleased, although she only rode her at the walk and trot, and only for a few minutes. When the man began bargaining with Louise, Monique took Aurora and sadly led her back to her stall, where she took all the tack off the mare. Then she stood and spoke in a choked voice to the sympathetic horse. Presently, Monique heard footsteps, and turned to find the girl approaching rather cautiously.

"Hello," she said. "I'm Josephina Timms-Thygesen. What's your name?"

"I'm Monique Ryan," said Monique brokenly.

"Is this your horse?"

"No, it's Louise's. The riding school's."

"My last horse was a smasher," said Josephina, boastfully. "I won every showing competition I entered. I'm going into jumping now, of course."

"Aurora is a good jumper. I won a rosette at the Pony Club gymkhana on her," said Monique, quietly.

"The Pony Club gymkhana?" snorted Josephina. "You really *went* to that potty little affair?"

"It was fun. I'm not a pot-hunter," replied Monique sadly, remembering the friendly competitors and the general good humour of the day.

"Nor am I," Josephina hastened to assure her, before walking away.

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The next afternoon, after school, Monique went to Wattle Gully again, feeling desolate and empty, but her job as a groom was still there to be done.

Much to her astonishment, when she walked into the yard Aurora's head peered over the half door at her.

"Aurora!" cried Monique, rushing to pat her. Louise stepped out of the feed room.

"The Timms-Thygesens decided to agist her here, Moni. I'm afraid you won't be allowed to ride her, but you can still see her. Don't do anything silly like riding her without permission if you can help it, Moni. I'm being paid a monumental sum for agistment and I can't afford to lose it."

So Monique only partly lost Aurora, and for that she was very grateful.

The next day, Josephina came to ride Aurora. Full of curiosity, Monique went down to the arena to watch. Josephina mounted, and adjusted her stirrups. Aurora danced sideways, for Josephina was unintentionally jerking the reins. The wealthy girl gave Aurora a sharp jab in the mouth to halt her. The mare stopped and shook her head.

Josephina gathered up her reins until she had Aurora's soft mouth in a stranglehold. Then she squeezed with her legs. Aurora did what she had been taught to do for this aid, which was usually given with less severity. She went backwards.

Josephina gave the mare a stupendous kick and she shot forward into a gallop. A sharp yank on the reins pulled her back to a disunited canter, and Josephina, who did not notice the roughness of the incorrect gait, kept the puzzled mare going. Monique was horrified by this display of bad horsemanship.

Finally Josephina stopped 'schooling' Aurora, and took her over to Louise's elegant jump course, which was set at two feet. She took Aurora round once, with her mouth held tightly once again, and the mare struggled to get over the small jumps. She could not stretch out over the jumps and had become very frightened. As Josephina put her at the jumps again, she worked her tongue over the bit, and took off at a gallop down the paddock with Josephina tugging fruitlessly at the reins. At the end of the field was a four-foot gate which Aurora had often gone over with Monique astride. Stretching her neck out hard, the mare gathered herself and leaped over the gate. Josephina rolled from the horse's back, hit the gate and fell to the ground. Thoroughly upset, Aurora galloped back to the stable.

Monique's first thought was for Aurora, but when she saw that the mare was heading homewards, she ran to help Josephina.

"Are you all right, Josephina?" she cried. The girl rolled over. Her face was ashen, and blood ran freely from one arm.

"Oh, no," thought Monique, bending down. She knelt and pressed her hand to the gash on the upper part of the girl's arm.

"I've a handkerchief," said Josephina faintly, tugging it out of her pocket.

"Thanks," Monique said briefly, grabbing it and padding it against the wound. Louise came dashing across from the stables.

"Is anything broken?" she asked. Josephina moved each of her legs, then tried her arms.

"Oh! Agh! This one . . . it hurts, and I can't move it." She began to cry.

"Call an ambulance, Moni," directed Louise. "Then call Mr Timms-Thygesen. His number is in my personal directory, beside the phone." Monique rushed off to do so.

Very soon an ambulance, making a great deal of authoritative noise, drew up outside the stables and the white Mercedes was close behind it. Within a few minutes explanations were made briefly, Josephina was loaded into the ambulance, and the two vehicles rushed away as swiftly as they had come.

"Moni, I saw what happened," Louise said. "I think the Timms-Thygesens will probably sell Aurora now, and goodness knows who to. How awful that Josephina should prove such a bad rider."

Monique took Aurora, panting and frightened, back to her stall and bedded her down despondently.

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The next morning, the white Mercedes drew up in front of the riding school again. Mr Timms-Thygesen got out and helped Josephina out of the passenger side. She had a plaster cast and a sling on her arm, and she limped slightly. Louise went out to meet the couple.

"Mr. Timms-Thygesen," she began.

"No, Miss Atkinson," he interrupted. "Let me speak. Josephina, myself and my wife have discussed yesterday's incident, and have decided we will be selling the mare. However, as far as I can see, since the mare is potentially dangerous, I have decided she is only fit for the abattoir. She won't return what I paid for her, but it is the safest way."

Monique heard every word of the speech, and cold hatred and rage filled her at this injustice. She bridled Aurora, leaped onto her bare back, and cantered towards Louise and the Timms-Thygesens.

"You can't kill her!" she screamed, as she drew near. "Aurora can't help it if Josephina is such a rotten rider!" Aurora galloped past the startled threesome, and Monique urged her on up the road. She didn't know where she was going, only that she must save Aurora from such a fate. Soon she pulled up out of consideration for the horse and walked her away into the bush. Aurora's sides heaved but she walked proudly and Monique loved her fiercely for her courage.



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Soon the pair came upon a corrugated iron shed, and after checking around, Monique led Aurora in. The inside was warm and musty and there was a bin full of straw with a nest of mice in it. Monique decided to spend the remainder of the day there. She unbridled Aurora and let her walk around the large, dilapidated shed. Then she sat down and pondered the situation.

"I've stolen you, Aurora," she told the mare. "That's what it amounts to. Well, I'll take you back to Louise tonight. I hope you will be safe at Wattle Gully."

The day passed very slowly. Monique was extremely bored and about lunchtime she became rather hungry. The shed was very hot in the midday sun, so Monique bridled Aurora and led her outside into the cool shade of a tree.

Evening fell, and amid fluting bird calls, Monique rode Aurora slowly back to Wattle Gully riding school.

Louise was grooming a recently acquired horse, Spectre, when Monique and Aurora arrived. There was no sign of the white Mercedes.

"Hi, Moni," Louise said. "I knew you'd come back." Monique dismounted wordlessly and led Aurora into her stall.

"Mr Timms-Thygesen wanted me to ring him if you returned. Will I?" Louise asked, following Moni into the stall.

"I don't know. Does he still want to murder Aurora?"

"No, I don't think so. He seemed to be rather surprised that you cared so much for her."

"I bet he's never loved an animal in his life. Animals are only status symbols to his sort," Monique said callously. Louise was about to reply when the shrill voice of the phone broke in. Monique followed the riding teacher inside to the phone. Louise answered it.

"Hello? Yes, Mr Timms-Thygesen? Wait a minute." She turned to Monique.

"Will I tell him you're back?" Monique nodded.

"I can always steal away with Aurora again if he has any more brutal thoughts."

"It is his horse, and anyway, your parents would worry," said Louise, turning back to the phone.

"Yes, yes . . . well, I . . . no the horse is fine. Moni? She's

fine too. No nothing broken . . . yes, she's here." Louise handed the receiver to Monique.

"Hello?" Monique said, cautiously.

"Miss Ryan? I'm so glad you're safe. It was very foolish of you to ride off on that dangerous horse. Why, Josephina is a very good rider and . . ."

"No!" Monique cried into the phone. "She is quite hopeless, one of the worst riders I have ever seen. She could have ruined Aurora, who is a marvellous horse. She needs a beginner's pony and a lot of lessons!" After that outburst, both Monique and Mr Timms-Thygesen were silent. Then the stunned man said quietly, "Are you sure? I had no idea! Josephina won two firsts on her last pony . . . no, you're probably right. She doesn't look nice on a horse. Well . . ."

"I'll pay you \$350 for Aurora," offered Monique, rashly. "It's all I have, but I can't let her be sold or killed."

"Wait, Miss Ryan. Let me make an offer. I will present you with the dubious animal, if you will agree to teach Josephina to ride properly. For safety's sake . . . Will you do it?"

"Oh, yes, Mr Timms-Thygesen! Thank you, oh thank you!" She banged down the receiver and ran out to the stable, dragging Louise along and explaining as she went.

"Oh, Aurora!" she laughed, sobbed, hugging the surprised mare. "You're mine at last. At long last!"

