

MR. WHO?

By Marilyn Halvorson

Appears here with the kind permission of the author.

IT WAS getting late the early October twilight was already washing the blue from the sky. Jodie reined Lady to a stop and waited for her friend, Eric, to ride up alongside them.

“Guess we’d better be getting home before dark, huh, Jodie?” Eric asked.

Jodie nodded. “Yeah, I guess so,” she said with a sigh. “I wish the days weren’t so short at this time of year. I really did want to see what was over that next hill.”

Eric studied the slope that stretched out ahead of them. “Just more trees, I bet. Same as on this side of the hill.”

“Well, maybe,” Jodie said. “But then again there could be an exciting discovery up ahead. You never know.”

Eric laughed and started to turn his horse toward home. “Anybody ever tell you you’ve got an overactive imagination, Jodie?”

Jodie laughed, too. “Only about forty times a day.” She nudged Lady with her knees and started to turn the mare around. Then, suddenly, she reined her in again. “Hey! What was that?”

Eric had already started down the trail. He stopped his horse and looked back over his shoulder. “What was what?”

“I don’t know. I thought I saw something move up there along the fence near the top of the hill.”

They both stared up the fenceline. “I don’t see anything,” Eric said. “Maybe a bird flew into the trees.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Jodie grinned. Or maybe it was my overactive imagination.” She turned Lady onto the trail for home again. Then she took one last glance back up the hill. “I did see something!” she yelled as she spun Lady around and sent her loping up

the hill. Eric's horse wheeled around and followed so fast that Eric was almost left sitting on thin air.

Halfway up the hill Jodie stopped and Eric caught up. Jodie looked puzzled. "I'm sure I saw it. Right near the fence up there." She and Eric both stared at the spot where she was pointing but in the dimming day-light all they could see were shadows.

"Maybe it was just the tall grass waving in the wind," Eric suggested.

"Maybe," Jodie said, "but I don't think so. Well, whatever it was it's gone now." She sighed, turning to Eric.

"No, it's not!" Eric said suddenly. This time he was the one to catch the movement in the shadows. "Let's go." They nudged their horses into a walk and moved slowly toward the mysterious spot.

As they came closer the pattern of light and shadow began to turn into a shape, the shape of a bird. A big bird with two huge yellow fog lamps for eyes.

"It's an owl!" Jodie said excitedly. "But why is he just standing there with his wings spread like that?"

"Shh," Eric whispered. "Don't scare him."

But with two people and two horses coming right at him, the owl was already scared. He flapped his wings hard. But he didn't go anywhere.

"Something's wrong with him," Jodie whispered, sliding off her horse for a closer look. The owl glared yellow fire at her, clacked his beak menacingly, and flapped his wings again, but still he didn't take off.

"Careful, Jodie," Eric warned. "Those things have fierce claws on them."

Jodie took a step closer. "What's wrong, owl? Are you hurt?" she said softly. The owl struggled again but not as violently as before. This time Jodie was close enough to see what was wrong. "Oh, no," she whispered. "Eric, he's got one wing caught in the barbed-wire fence. It's all torn up and bleeding."

Eric was beside her now. He shook his head. "Poor guy. He's really wrecked. Too bad we haven't got a gun."

Jodie spun around to stare at Eric. "A gun? What are you talking about, Eric?"

"You know what I mean. The only thing to do for a wild animal or bird that's hurt this bad is to put it out of its misery."

Jodie's eyes flashed. "Oh no it's not!" She peeled off her denim jacket. "Do you still have those wire cutters that you used to fix the hole in the fence?"

"Yeah, but . . ."

"Get them, quick. I'm going to wrap my jacket around him so he can't struggle and then you can cut the wire that's holding him."

Eric eyed the owl who was still clacking his beak fiercely. He looked awfully big with his feathers all fluffed out. "I don't know, Jode ..."

"Eric, do I have to do this by myself?"

Eric sighed. "Okay, okay, we'll do it. But here, at least put on my gloves. They're leather and he won't be able to get through them with his beak or claws."

Jodie put on the gloves and Eric got the wire cutters from his saddlebag.

"Okay," he said, "ready whenever you are."

Jodie nodded and took a step forward, holding the jacket out in front of her. "Easy owl," she said softly, meeting his hypnotizing yellow stare with a steady look from her own blue eyes. "Believe it or not, we're here to help you. Easy owl." Another step. The owl stayed still. The staring match continued. "Easy owl." Almost within reach. The owl started clacking his beak again. "Steady owl. I hope your clack is worse than your bite." One more step—then Jodie pounced. The next thing the owl knew he was wrapped in the jacket. "Got him!" Jodie yelled. "Cut the wire quick, Eric!"

Eric reached in close to the struggling bundle. With a sharp snap the cutters sheared off the barbed wire. Eric did the same thing on the other side of the trapped owl's wing. And suddenly Jodie was holding an owl that was free—except for her firm hold on him. Gently, she lowered the jacket-wrapped bird to the ground and very carefully pulled back the jacket so the owl could look out. The yellow eyes blazed with renewed fury.

"Look at him, Eric," Jodie said softly. "He's hurt, trapped, probably half-starved, and scared to death, but he's still looking at us like he's the king of the castle and we're the dirty rascals! That is one proud bird. He needs a really dignified name." Jodie paused to think for a minute. "I think I'll call him Mr. Poindexter."

Eric's eyes were almost as wide as the owl's. "Mr. *Who*?" he squeaked.

Jodie burst out laughing. “Hey! That’s better yet! Now all we have to do is get Mr. Who home where we can take care of him.” Cradling Mr. Who gently in her arms, Jodie started for home.

“Hey, you aren’t gonna *walk* all the way home, are you?”

“I don’t think I’ve got a choice. I can’t ride a horse and hold an owl at the same time.”

Eric thought a moment. “Sure you can. If I lead the horse. Here, let me have Mr. Who for a minute.” He reached out and carefully took the jacket-wrapped bundle from Jodie. “Okay, get on Lady” Jodie climbed on. Eric handed the owl up to Jodie and, holding Lady’s reins, climbed onto his own horse. Slowly, the strange procession made its way down the long trail back to Jodie’s place.

It was pitch-dark when they rode into the yard. In the glow of the porch light they could see Grandma pacing back and forth outside the back door. At the sound of the horses she turned and came striding out to meet them. “Jodie Anne McCrimmon!” she said, her voice taking on the angry tone it always had when she was worried. “Do you know what time it is? You were supposed to be home an hour ago and . . .” Her voice trailed off as she spotted the bundle in Jodie’s arms. “What on earth have you got there?”

“That’s Mr. Who, Grandma,” Jodie said holding out the jacket-wrapped owl to her grandmother. “We saved his life. That’s why we’re late.”

“Mr. *Who*?” Grandma said, reaching out to take the bundle.

“That’s right, Grandma, Mr. Who. He’s an owl and we found him with his wing caught in a barbed-wire fence.” Jodie slid off her horse and carefully pulled back a corner of the jacket bundle her grandmother was holding. Two fierce yellow moons glower in the night.

Grandma shook her head. “Well, for goodness’ sake, it is an owl. A great grey owl. And here I always thought of them as such big birds. This fellow’s light as a feather.” She laughed softly. “Maybe that’s because he is mostly feathers.”

Just then the door opened and Grandpa stuck his head out. “Isn’t *anybody* coming in so we can eat supper?” he asked. “My stomach’s wearing a hole in my backbone.” Then he caught sight of the bundle in Grandma’s arms. “What have you got there, Ellen?”

Grandma sighed. “You’ll find out soon enough, Harold. I think it just moved in with us.”

An hour later the horses were fed and put away for the night, Grandpa’s stomach—along with everyone else’s—had been filled, and Mr. Who had his own apartment, a cage Jodie had used to take her bantam chickens to the fair last fall.

The microwave beeped and Grandma opened the door and brought out a dish of freshly thawed hamburger. “Here you go, Jodie,” she said, “prime Alberta beef, but I don’t think Mr. Who is going to like it.”

“Oh, yes he is,” Jodie said, scooping up spoonful and reaching it in through the wire on the cage.

“He must be really hungry,” Eric said.

“Here you go, Mr. Who, supper!” Jodi said.

The owl shrank back as far as the cage would let him, trying to get away from the spoon.

Jodie sighed. “Come on, Mr. Who. You’re a ‘highly skilled predator of the deep forest it says so right here in the bird book. Highly skilled predators don’t try to escape from spoonful of dead meat.”

Grandpa looked up from his newspaper “That’s just the trouble, Jodie.”

“What do you mean, Grandpa?”

“That owl is a predator. He’s hunted his own meat all his life. To him, a mouse scurrying through the grass spells dinner. Showing him a spoonful of hamburger would be like handing a caveman a can of salmon and expecting him to understand it was food. It’s just too far beyond his experience.”

Jodie thought that over. Grandpa was probably right. “Okay,” she said, reaching for her jacket, “let’s go, Eric.”

Grandma shot them a sharp look. “Where do you two think you’re going?”

“Hunting,” Jodie said wearily.

“Oh, no you aren’t!” Grandma’s voice had taken on the no-nonsense tone that Jodie had learned not to argue with. “I’ve had a lot of critters in this house but live mice galloping around for the owl to chase is where I draw the line. Anyway, from the looks of the wound on that wing he needs a miracle more than he needs a mouse. I’m afraid we’ll just have to . . .”

Suddenly Grandma got a thoughtful look on her face. She grabbed a pile of papers from the back of the table. “Now what did I do with that leaflet I picked up at the mall in Red Deer last month?” She leafed through the papers, muttering to herself. “Hmmp, I’m going to win a million dollars from this one. Yeah, me and everybody else in the country.” She tossed that envelope in the direction of the garbage can. It missed. Grandma picked up another envelope. “Learn the simple trick of keeping aphids off your tomatoes in August,” she read aloud. “Tomatoes?” she said with a snort. “Won’t be aphids on them in August in this country. They’ll freeze to death first.” That envelope sailed into the garbage can. A perfect two-point shot. Grandpa caught Jodie’s eye and winked. Grandma was a sight to behold when she finally got around to sorting papers.

“Here it is!” Grandma pounced on the leaflet she’d been looking for. “Medicine River Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre. Sounds like just what the doctor ordered for your Mr. Whoever. It’s less than an hour’s drive from here, too.”

“Do you really think they could help Mr. Who?” Jodie asked.

“Well, I think they sure might give it a try. Says here they’ve rescued a lot of injured owls. There’s a phone number here, too.”

“Will you phone them, Grandma, please?”

Grandma shook her head. “No, I won’t,” she said. But before Jodie could say a word she added, “but you can. When you rescued the owl from the fence you took him on as your responsibility. Now it’s up to you to carry it through.”

Jodie stared at her and then looked over at Eric for support. Grownups were supposed to do the hard stuff—like talking to total strangers on the phone. But Grandma had picked up the phone and handed it to Jodie. “Here’s the number. Go ahead and dial. Ask for a lady named Carol Kelly.”

Jodie took a deep breath, organized her thoughts, and dialled the number.

“Medicine River Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre,” a pleasant voice said. “May I help you?”

Jodie cleared her throat. “Uh, yes. Can I speak to Carol Kelly, please?”

“Just a minute, please. I’ll call her.”

Silence on the line. Then, “Hello, this is Carol Kelly.”

“Hello, this is Jodie McCrimmon. We found an owl with his wing caught in a barbed-wire fence and we don’t know what to do.”

There was a short pause. “Where’s the owl now, Jodie? Is it still in the fence?”

“Oh, no. He’s not in the fence. He’s in the kitchen.”

“Oh.” The lady sounded a little surprised. “How did you manage to get him free of the wire?”

“My friend Eric had some fencing pliers with him. We cut the wire.”

“Good, Jodie. That was the right thing to do. Now, do you know where the rehabilitation Centre is located?”

“Grandma knows where you are, I think.” Grandma nodded.

“Okay. Can someone there drive up here with the owl right away?”

“Grandpa can, I think.” Jodie gave Grandpa a pleading look.

Grandpa sighed like a tired man who had just eaten his supper late and would like to spend the evening with his feet up. But then he grinned at Jodie. “Get your coat on, kid. We’re about to take a moonlight drive with an owl.” Grandma grabbed her coat, too.

“You comin’ along, Ellen?” asked Grandpa.

“Well, of course, Harold,” she said with a pretend scowl. “You know you’d be lost in ten minutes if I wasn’t there to navigate.”

“Can I come?” Eric asked.

Grandpa shrugged. “Why not? The more the merrier. Phone your folks and ask them first.”

Fifteen minutes later they were on the road, Grandma and Grandpa in the front seat of the Buick, and Jodie and Eric—with Mr. Who’s blanket-covered cage between them—in the back.

The trip didn’t seem very long. Finding the rehabilitation Centre was easy—because of Grandma’s expert navigating, of course. As they got out of the car a woman came to meet them.

“Hello,” she said, “I’m Carol Kelly. You must be the people with the owl.”

“That’s right,” Jodie said, carefully handing over the cage. “Here he is. His name is Mr. Who.”

Carol smiled as she gently took the owl. “Well, hello, Mr. Who,” she said very softly. “We’re going to see if we can fix you up.” She turned to Grandma and Grandpa. “If you have time you’re welcome to come in and watch while I examine the owl and start on its treatment.”

“Please, Grandma. Let’s stay.”

Grandma and Grandpa looked at each other. Grandpa nodded and grinned. “Come on, Ellen. Let’s see what we can learn about repairing owls. You never know when it might come in handy.”

All four of them followed Carol and Mr. Who to the examining room. They watched as she put on heavy gloves and skillfully brought the owl out of the cage, weighed him, and fitted a plastic band around his leg. By now poor Mr. Who was so tired he had even given up clacking his beak. He just stared sadly at the world through his enormous yellow fog lamps.

“Can you make him better, Carol?” Jodie asked in a small voice.

Carol turned to look at Jodie. “I don’t know, Jodie,” she said gently. “He’s had a serious injury and no one knows how long he was caught in the fence. He’s pretty badly stressed but we’ll do the best we can.”

The others watched as Carol gave the owl an injection and then ran a tube into his beak and down his throat. “What’s that for?” Eric asked.

Carol set a plastic pouch of liquid up so it drained down into the tube. “This is how we get some fluid into the owl right away. A bird that’s been trapped and injured like this comes in terribly dehydrated and we can’t wait till he feels up to eating on his own.”

“We tried to give him some hamburger,” Eric said, “but he acted downright scared of it.”

Carol nodded. “That’s a mistake a lot of people make. Trying to get an injured and terrified wild animal to eat. If one of us had been in a car accident and trapped in the car for days the last thing we’d want or need would be solid food.”

“I guess we made a lot of mistakes,” Jodie said.

Carol put a hand on her shoulder. “Don’t feel badly about that, Jodie. You cared enough to do the best you knew how to help this owl. Just learn from your mistakes and next time you’ll do even better. Okay, Mr. Who’s got his medication and his fluids.

Now what he needs is a warm, quiet place to rest. Come on, I'll show you the intensive care cage."

Carol took the owl to a cage and settled him onto a big woolly blanket. "That looks nice and warm," Grandma said.

Carol smiled. "It ought to be. There's a heating pad under the blanket." She tucked the blanket around Mr. Who and dimmed the lights until it looked like two big yellow eyes were floating loose in the dimness. "What Mr. Who needs now is to be left alone. Being around people is really stressful for wild animals, so we'll bother him as little as we can until he starts to feel better."

"Goodnight, Mr. Who," Jodie said softly. "Please get better."

Mr. Who never said a thing but the yellow eyes glowed at her like beacons in the night. She took them as a promise that the owl would come back home some day.

On the car ride home Jodie drifted off to sleep. She dreamed of being out in the shadowy early-evening forest. She heard a swish of wings and looked up. A magnificent great grey owl was swooping past. "Who are you?" called Jodie.

"*Who!*" replied the owl. Jodie woke up feeling happy. Mr. Who *would* be back someday.

Every day for the next three weeks Jodie thought of Mr. Who and wondered how he was doing. Grandma said she could phone the rehabilitation Centre, but Jodie wouldn't do it. She was sure it would be bad luck to ask. Carol had promised to let them know how Mr. Who made out. Jodie convinced herself that as long as they heard nothing from Carol, Mr. Who was still alive.

It was mid-November. Grandpa was reading the paper and Grandma was writing a letter when the phone rang. "You want to answer that, please, Jodie?" Grandma asked.

Jodie turned down the TV and grabbed the phone. "Hello?"

"Yes, could I please speak to Jodie McCrimmon?"

"That's me!" Jodie blurted out. Then, remembering the lesson on telephone manners they had in health class last year, she added, "Uh, speaking, I mean."

"Jodie, this is Carol Kelly from Medicine River Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre."

There was a long silence while Jodie took a deep breath and swallowed hard.

"Jodie? Are you there?"

"Yes, Carol," Jodie managed to say in a small voice.

“I promised to call you when there was any news about your owl.”

“Yes?” Jodie’s voice was almost a whisper this time.

“Well, you can get ready to celebrate, Jodie. Mr. Who has made a wonderful recovery. We moved him to the big flight cage today so he can exercise his damaged muscles and rebuild his strength to be released soon.”

“No kidding!” Jodie’s voice was almost a shout now. “He’s really almost better?”

“He sure is. Feeling fine and eating us out of house and mouse. That’s what we try to feed them, by the way. Mice, to keep their diet as natural as possible.”

Hmm, Jodie thought, remembering how she was getting ready to go mouse hunting before Grandma put her foot down the night they found the owl. At least Jodie had been right about that.

Carol was talking again. “So, if all goes well, your owl will probably be ready for release in a couple of weeks. We’d like to put him back in his natural habitat close to where you found him. Could you show us the place?”

“You bet I could!” Jodie said with a huge grin.

On the last Saturday in November, a warm chinook breeze was eating holes in the thin early-season blanket of snow. The woods smelled of pine needles and echoed to the calls of jays and chickadees. Grandpa’s old 4x4 farm truck was rumbling its way up the hill and into the deep forest. In the front with Grandpa were Grandma and Carol Kelly. In the back were Jodie and Eric and, safe in a cage, Mr. Who. The six of them were on an important mission.

Suddenly Jodie tapped on the back window. “Right here, Grandpa!” she called. The truck eased to a stop. Everyone got out. Eric carefully set the cage on the tailgate.

“Okay,” Carol said, “who wants to release Mr. Who?”

Everyone turned to look at Jodie. “Mr. Who is Jodie’s owl,” Eric said. “She should do it.”

Jodie shook her head. “Mr. Who isn’t *anybody’s* owl. He’s a wild animal and he belongs to himself. But,” she added with a grin, “I’ll fight anybody for the chance to let him go.”

Carol reached her gloved hand inside the cage and brought out the indignant owl. He looked fierce and insulted and much stronger than the last time Jodie had held him.

Jodie reached for him, but Carol stopped her. “Not with your bare hand, Jodie. I don’t want you for my next patient.”

Eric gallantly held out his gloves to Jodie. “She never has her gloves when she needs them,” he told Carol with a teasing grin in Jodie’s direction. Jodie gave him an “accidental” jab in the ribs with her elbow as she reached out to take a firm but gentle hold on the owl.

“Okay, Mr. Who, just settle down. Look around, you silly bird. You’re home. We brought you right back where you belong. And now we’re going to let you go. Just promise me one thing,” she said with a little catch in her voice. “Just let me know you’re around once in a while, will you?”

“Ready now?” Carol asked. Jodie nodded. “Okay,” Carol said, “just hold him up and let go. He’ll figure out the rest.”

Slowly, Jodie raised the owl into the air.

Then she released her grip. For a second the owl balanced on her hand. Then he flapped his wings. And suddenly he was flying. With the speed and silence of a grey ghost he swept off into the shadows of the deep forest. Left behind were an empty cage and five people who could hardly believe he had ever been there.

But Jodie believed. Because, for the rest of the winter when she stepped out on cold, crisp, moonlit nights she often heard Mr. Who letting her know he was around. He always identified himself by name.

“Who, Who, Who,” he said.