

## THE NEW GIRL

By Sean Stewart

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THERE WAS A NEW GIRL coming to groom the unicorn. He didn't much like the look of her. She was skinny and plain and she slouched. Her straight brown hair was short and ragged, as if whoever cut it didn't care what it looked like. An old dress of her mother's was hitched around her waist with a twine belt. More dirty twine tied a pair of men's boots tight around her ankles.

She was carrying a comb and a shovel. She tossed the shovel over the outer fence and then let herself in the first gate and stood for a moment, looking at the unicorn. "It smells the same," she said.

He didn't answer.

"Your manure. Smells just like a horse's. I was hoping it would be different."

"Where's Polly?" he said.

"Oh well, no surprise, really." The girl closed the first gate behind her, locked it, and stood the shovel against the inner fence.

"I don't want you in here. Your manners are bad and you haven't washed this morning." His great eyes narrowed. "And you've kissed a boy. I can smell it."

She opened the inner gate. "And I'd have done it again, if he'd been worth it. But don't worry: The boys in this village are all clods. Dumb as turnips, every one." She closed the gate behind her, and latched it. "My name's Meg."

"I know your name. It's a small village."

"No kidding."

"Polly had beautiful manners. She always washed and she had some respect. Please tell the mayor I wish to have her back."

"See, there's something we both want," Meg said. She looked around the unicorn's enclosure: crude wooden trough, bales of old hay next to it. At the far side, a dirty canvas canopy in case he wanted to get out of the rain or snow. And all around, the

high wooden fence, like a dingy mockery of the mountains ringing little Lammerton Vale. "I didn't cheer when they told me I had another stall to shovel out. But pretty blond Polly is gone, you see. She ran off with a soldier last night. Didn't even leave a note. Her brother Mick's chasing after them to try and fetch her back. Don't wager on it, I say. I say she's gone for good."

"Gone?" The unicorn remembered the morning they had met, Polly coming into the high meadow, a slip of a girl then, no more than nine, and the innocence in her eyes. She had snared his heart at that moment, long before she whispered her secrets in his ear and laid her bridle on his neck.

Plain dirty Meg shrugged, her face hard. "Quite the lass, Polly was. Yours isn't the only broken heart in Lammerton this morning."

The next morning came dark and cold. Winter was on its way. Somewhere behind the mountains the sun had come up, but it would be another two hours before they saw it, tucked down here in the valley. Meg was wearing the same clothes when she came to the unicorn's paddock: the worn felt shirt, the too-big dress, her father's cast-off boots. She let herself through the outer gate, then turned and latched it behind her. "Polly's brother Mick is back, did you hear?"

"Yes. They brought him to me to be healed."

"They say the soldier's friends snapped him into kindling," Meg said. "Will he live?"

"Yes." Mick had gone into shock by the time they carried him to the paddock in the middle of the night. The touch of the unicorn's breath had stopped the bleeding inside, but the young man's jaw and hip had been badly broken.

"Will he be lame?" Meg said.

"Probably."

"Will he be ugly?"

The unicorn didn't answer.

"Some sister," Meg said.

"She didn't know."

“Were you there?” Meg said. She let herself through the inner gate, kicked it closed, dumped her broom and comb, and latched the gate behind her. “No. You were here in your cage.”

“Polly would never have let them hurt Mick if she had known.”

Meg clasped her small, hard, dirty hands over her heart. “Ah, his love is gone, but his horsey heart still is true.”

The unicorn looked at her. “Does it make you so angry, that Polly was prettier than you?”

Meg colored.

“Or did you want that soldier for yourself? Did you love the way he looked in his fine red coat?”

“I don’t give a snapped straw for the soldier and neither did she,” Meg said furiously. “He was a way *out*, you see? A way out of Lammerton, and seeing the same two dozen people at church every Sunday, and talking about the weather, and pulling eggs out of hens until they don’t lay enough and wringing their necks after, and taking care of your mother who’s either drunk or crying.”

“Polly’s mother doesn’t drink,” the unicorn said.

“Shut up.”

Meg mucked out the unicorn’s paddock. Then she took the big currying comb and starting brushing his mane.

“Polly would not have left if she didn’t love him,” the unicorn said.

“You have another big day ahead of you,” Meg said, brushing hard. Each stroke stung his flanks but he held still. “There’s an archery meet over in Copsfield today. The men will be down after breakfast to touch their bows to your horn for good fortune. Maybe, if you’re lucky, they’ll take you along to be their mascot. I might even have to braid a ribbon in your tail.” Meg spat. “You came to Lammerton for love,” she said. She looked around the little paddock with its double gate and canvas canopy, the wooden trough and the apple tree branches, naked now with winter coming. “Look where it got you.”

Meg slipped through the gates very quietly the next morning, looking at the ground. There was another loop of twine holding her left boot together, and she wore a greasy sweater over the felt shirt.

It was a dull November day, cloudy and spitting with small cold rain. Meg mucked out the unicorn's paddock in silence. Then he stood under the canopy at the back of the corral while she brushed his coat. "Sorry about yesterday," she said.

"It's been hard since your father left," the unicorn said gently.

The brush stopped on his flank. "How did you know?"

"Polly told me. We used to talk a lot."

"Ah." The brush began to move again. "It is a small village, isn't it?"

"Polly said he went to the city to seek his fortune."

The rain picked up, drumming on the canvas canopy and dripping from its edges into the muddy paddock.

"What is it like to be free?" Meg asked. "Where you were before Polly found you, up in the mountains? Is it beautiful?"

"Yes." The unicorn felt her against his flank, one hand pulling the comb, the other following after, stroking his mane. The bones in her thin forearms. The warmth of her. "It is very beautiful, and very cold. The mountain streams are like cold wet sunshine. The eagles fly with all wild creation under their wings."

"Were you lonely?"

"No. Not then."

"Would you be, if you went back now?"

"I don't know," the unicorn said.

"No one to brush out your mane," Meg said. "No one to put a pretty ribbon in your tail." She grinned, just a little. "It's not so bad, being a pet."

He flinched, a tremor going through his powerful shoulders.

A silence. "Sorry. That was mean."

"It's true," he said.

Meg finished currying his tail and bent to check his hooves. She didn't have Polly's gentle touch and her hands were hard, but they were sure. "You've handled a lot of stock," the unicorn said.

"Had to, since Dad . . . you know."

He raised his rear right hock for inspection. "I think there's a pebble in this one."

"Yeah." Meg pulled a clasp knife from her pocket and dug the stone out with it. "There."

"Polly wouldn't have done that, you know. She would have called the farrier."

Meg dropped the hoof. "She wouldn't want to hurt you."

She stayed there for a minute, squatting on the ground, not looking at him. "You know what? I don't blame Dad. Not one tinker's spit. I'd have left us, too, if I were him. I suppose that makes me a terrible daughter."

"It's not wrong to want to be free," the unicorn said gently.

When Meg was sad her mouth turned down at the corners and made her look ugly. "Isn't it wrong to walk out on the people who count on you? What about them? What about the ones left behind? What about the ones who can't just choose to be free? Should I run off with some brute in a red coat so I don't have to watch my mother drink herself to death? Or do I stay in Lammerton and watch the sky get smaller and smaller until I'm too old and scared to leave?" Meg was crying. "I am so scared. I am so scared of being alone."

He let her cry. When she was done she wiped the tears away with the back of her dirty hand, smearing mud on her cheeks. "Why are you being so nice to me, anyway?"

"I love," the unicorn said. "It's what I do."

That night she came back. From far down the meadow he saw her yellow lantern swinging, startling the crows. The rain had stopped, but the clouds remained and there were no stars. The night had turned cold. Ice crept over the puddles where the rain had filled his hoofprints. As she came closer, he could hear the grass, stiff with frost, brushing against the hem of her skirt.

She held the lantern low and close to her body, where it would light her way without being seen by any villagers up late. She put it down next to the outer gate, facing away from Lammerton. She blew on her cold hands and rubbed them together before lifting the latch and pushing the outer gate open. The cold wood squeaked and she froze. A moment passed, and then she slid inside.

She left the outer gate open and unlatched.

“It’s freezing,” Meg said. Her breath smoked in the cold air. “You should be under the canopy.”

“This is a summer’s day to what I’ve seen in the mountains. Nights I’ve stood on a ridge no man has named and the wind has come like winter’s breath. The stars like ice broken across the sky.”

“I can’t leave Mum,” Meg said. “Not now. Not even soon.”

“You can’t take care of her forever.”

Meg raised one eyebrow. “This from the beast that gave up his life to wink good luck on babies’ birthdays? To nod his horn as a charm for a good harvest of pumpkins or a nice barrel of beer?”

“What if your mother is still alive when you have grown into a woman? Will you leave then, or will you stay here in Lammerton?”

The thin winter wind made Meg’s bangs flutter like rags on a washing line. “I don’t know. Someday I’ll leave, though. I swear it to you.”

“Where will you go?”

“The city, I suppose. Like Dad.” Meg shivered and blew on her hands again. “I’m not cut out for the mountains. Too lonely, there.” She pressed her hands against her ears. “Lord, it’s cold out tonight. I told Mum I was off to the outhouse. Even in her cups she’ll miss me if I’m not back soon.”

She backed out of the paddock, leaving both gates open and unlatched.

He looked at her. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

Slowly, Meg shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

He followed her to the edge of the fence. “I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

She shrugged. “I’m always in trouble.”

“I’m not surprised,” he said. She grinned.

Meg stooped to pick up her lamp. Shadows jumped and swayed on the cold ground. “Live,” she whispered fiercely to him. “Be free.”

She turned as if to hurry off, but stopped. With her back to him she said, “Will I ever see you again?”

“Do you want to?”

“Yes. Even if it’s only once. Even if it’s not until I’m old and living in the city and about to die, I want to see you again. Can I?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s hard.” She shivered, facing the great dark mountains. “I can love, too, you know.”

She felt the touch of his breath on the back of her neck, warm as summer, but she didn’t dare look back and let him see her crying.

“I know,” he said.