

A dream of horse and rider on the wild, windy moor ...

The thunder of galloping hooves startled Jan out of her sleep.

Horses hooves? Surely not. Must be possums on the roof. She glanced at the clock. Large unblinking green numbers glowered at her. Three thirty in the morning. On a clear winter's night. Bright as daylight. Almost.

Sleep, sleep. Anything for sleep.

Groaning, she turned over. And saw a silhouette, of man and magnificent beast, back-dropped by a brilliant three quarter moon spilling its silvery light.

Jan's eyes widened to saucers. Man and beast?

The stallion reared on his hind legs and over the roar of the ocean at the bottom of the hill, she heard him snort and paw at the ground. Could see his eyes rolling as he fought for independence from his rider.

Rider. Darkly against the soft-lit sky, he steadied his mount, glared at her and wheeled, galloped off into the cold night, yet with fire and flame at his heels.

Some dream, Jan Ayrton. She sat up in bed and reached for her nightgown, slipping it over her head. A warm nightie was handy for midnight-and-beyond trips to the loo.

She padded to the window. Definitely a moonlit night. She hadn't dreamed that.

No horse and rider in sight. The thumping of his hooves must really have been the thudding of her heart as remnant dreams stirred her senses. Maybe it was because she'd forgotten to eat before she went to sleep last night.

She reached across her desk and switched on her computer. No sense wasting good writing time, she thought, and sat down to draw the muse through the whorls of mist.

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Again the startled awakening. Horses hooves. Dark rider. The ocean relentless in perpetual motion. The moon, nearing its fullness, illuminated the starry sky.

Out of the warm and snug bed linen, her eyes were firmly on the vision. She slipped into her nightie and eased out of bed as if sudden movement might startle the visitor, or at the very least, wake her up. She had to be dreaming again, for sure.

But no, no. A magnificent horse and rider, a mystery, was out on this dark night.

Well, at least it isn't 'a dark and stormy night'.

The horse pawed, grunted, snorted. Then Jan heard a quiet voice. "Settle, Mes. Settle. There's nothing to worry about here."

It was a soft voice, melodious. Kind.

The horse wheeled and danced in agitation.

"Steady, fella ..."

Jan drifted to the glass door just outside her room, opened it and let the chill of the June night slide past her.

"Good sweet St Mary!" The masculine voice carried through the night and the horse reared under his startled shout. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Jan gave him a scoff. "I could ask the same of you. This is the second night you've come pounding into the early hours to wake me. This is private property."

"Whoa." He calmed the horse then leaned forward in the saddle, high above her. He squinted. "And so it is. Who are you?"

She shivered as the breeze whipped past her. Pulling the nightie tight over her chest, she was suddenly aware her nipples had puckered in the cold night.

"I am Jan Ayrton. I'm a writer. And I rented this place to finish a book."

"Well, now. I used to know a writer, myself." The horse danced a circle and the rider pulled him back. "Are you not afraid to be here at this place on your own?"

How did he know she was here on her own? Jan swallowed the first ping of fear as it darted her sleep-deprived brain. "There's nothing to be frightened of," she said, and willed herself to believe it. "It's just that you woke me up."

He leaned back in the saddle, his hands draped over the reins as his gaze swept her from head to toe. "I would offer that something has to wake you up," he said.

Jan clutched the night-gown more tightly about her then scowled at this apparition. This was getting weird. "What do you mean?"

He looked down at her. "Miss Ayrton, you are not warm enough, that's clear. You need something more than that ... chemise," he said waving a finger at her. "To ward off the winter's cold you keep inside."

A blush crept over Jan's face. He wasn't talking about a nightie. The light was behind him and his hat was pulled low; she couldn't make out his features. Jan took a step back under the verandah as the horse danced close.

A brutal blast of sou-easterly whipped at his long-coat. "Go back to bed," he commanded and wheeled the horse, once, twice then charged off into the dark night.

Jan pressed her hands to her heart. A warmth had started low in her belly despite the gusty, chill wind that flicked leaves and twigs around her bare feet.

It was just a dream, her overworked mind. And how perfectly ridiculous it was.

She knew it was the same old thing which would eventually drive her mad, and now she was even dreaming about it. Just because there was no-one to fulfill her longing, no-one who made her feel wanted and loved, she was conjuring up ghosts to talk to her about it. She would not go mad. There were no ghosts. *How perfectly ridiculous.*

Jan stepped back indoors. Went to the computer again.

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The phone rang, jangling her out of the furious pace.

“Hi Jan. It’s Brad.”

“Brad?”

“From the green grocers. I’m ringing for your supply order.”

“Oh yes.” Jan rubbed her eyes and reached for the list she’d made.

Brad was a nice guy, a little bit strange perhaps. When she’d first met him, he looked at her as if he’d seen a ghost.

No, no, no. No ghosts. She had to concentrate on her work. Or go mad.

Last night’s distraction was proof of that. And writing was all she needed, if she could just push away those other thoughts of fulfillment, and love ... And ghosts.

Not that she hadn’t noticed Brad’s attention, and the way he looked at her, that dark-eyed, dark haired man with the handsome face. But it wasn’t to be.

She sighed and placed her order with him.

“I have to come out your way on Thursday for other jobs. How about I bring your stuff with me?” His voice curled around her, low and rumble. “Would save you a trip in, especially as the weather’s about to change for the worse.”

“It is?”

“Squalls from the south-east for two or three days. Lots of big rain, maybe flooding out your way.”

Jan thought about the boggy roads. Besides, it would certainly save a two hour round trip even if the weather stayed fine. “I should offer you lunch, then,” she said tentatively, and wondered how much time she’d lose by doing lunch.

“Great. Looking forward to it.”

Jan showered, got on with her day. Thursday was day after tomorrow. So why was her heart thumping now?

That night, she dropped off to sleep without anticipation. The day had been a good one, plenty of inspiration. Her editor would be pleased.

Loud, short, repetitive gusts of wind woke her. Except it wasn’t wind, but the horse, snorting against her window.

“Miss Ayrton.” The rider called softly, his silhouette against the gleaming moon.

Jan reached for her nightie, not worried he might’ve caught a glimpse of breast, or slim waist and legs as she stepped out of bed into the chilly night air.

He isn’t real, after all.

“Ah, there you are,” he said and sat back in the saddle, satisfied that she’d appeared before him. “Your hair reminds me of someone from long ago. Long and wavy.”

Jan blinked. “It does?” She touched her hair, a little surprised.

The horse scuffed the earth dangerously close to her feet. He certainly was a huge animal for a ghost. Seventeen hands, she estimated. But of course all big, black muscly stallions were seventeen hands. Any writer knew that. She didn’t step back this time.

“You’re not frightened by me and Mesrour?”

There was no baying hound nearby so Mesrour had to be the horse. "I'm not. Because you're not real, are you? How can I be afraid of something that's not real?"

He laughed delightedly. "Am I not real? Ah, well then in that case, you're right. There's no need to be frightened."

"What am I supposed to be frightened of?"

"Ah, Miss Ayrton. I think you know."

Jan concentrated on the lilt of his accent. She wanted to capture the inflections of it for her next story. One about a ghost and a black stallion. And a crazy woman wearing a thin nightie outside on a crispy winter's night.

The horse danced suddenly beneath him. "Think, Miss Ayrton," the gentleman said.

Jan thought. If he were real, she'd lose herself to him. She'd have to trust, and have to hope, and have to believe in things of the heart. All of which she did not, though she longed for it.

"I see you won't answer me. Well, I am real. I'm as real as that heart which beats in your chest. Fear is within you. It makes you cold." One of his leather-clad fingers stabbed at her.

"I'm only cold because I'm out here going loopy talking to a ghost," she said.

He laughed again. Mesrour's hooves pumped the ground and the rider sat forward.

Jan stared up into the handsome face above her. "If you're real, who are you?"

"I'm Rochester, from Thornfield."

The breeze whipped around her ankles, snaked under her nightie and chilled her face. She shivered. She didn't know him, though there was something vaguely familiar about him.

Right, Jan. Vaguely familiar about a ghost.

“Go back inside, Jan Ayrton. I’ll visit tomorrow, my last for a while. The moon wanes after.”

The moon wanes?

She didn’t want him to leave. “But—why are you here?”

He smiled and her heart rocketed. He was so handsome on his fine stallion, all fire and life and sensuous masculinity. Her belly warmed and despite herself, she stepped away from the source of its heat, preferring the reality of winter’s frosty bite.

“Perhaps just to awaken you, sweet Jan.” He pulled off a glove, and a cool, callused finger stroked her cheek. Touched her lips. “Perhaps to help bring you some winter’s warmth.”

Jan reached up to touch the hand on her face, but Mesrour backed up a length, the rider pulling on his reins. “Till tomorrow,” he rumbled, and they charged off.

Jan didn’t write that morning. Her tummy twisted and her brain fogged. Each time she thought of her visitor her heart wrenched and her hands shook. He was the handsomest man. The biggest man with the biggest horse. *The biggest ghost*. Although she didn’t know many ghosts. Well, not any, really. And he’d touched her.

Heat kindled like a flame tentatively come to life within, testing the air which would sustain it.

Sleep claimed her early that night, and there he was again, waiting under the supreme brilliance of the full moon.

Mr. Rochester. On his big, black horse, Mesrour.

Of course! *Jane Eyre*.

Was her subconscious drawing on that classical wonderful story? No, she chided herself. It was sleep deprivation coupled with an overworked imagination. Sure signs she would go mad.

“You need a man, Jan Ayrton.” A smile flashed from under the hat drawn low over his head again. “To keep you warm on these desolate nights.”

“I keep myself warm,” she flared.

“Every healthy woman needs a man, needs to find her warmth. And not in a prim and proper nightgown, but from deep within her soul.”

Sensual feathers of heat fanned her bones. Her face flamed. “It that so?”

Mesrour snorted in derision as he danced on his forelegs. *Oh. Even the horse has an opinion.*

“Yes, that’s so. You’ll thank me soon enough for the revelation.”

“I don’t need—”

“You do. You know it. There’s change coming.”

It was true. She’d felt something, but it was for him, for an apparition, for a figment of her imagination. For a drop-dead, gorgeous ghost.

His flashing gaze swept over her. “A man will come. Be ready.”

“And I suppose he’ll be just like you.” Ghost or not, she clutched at the neck of her nightgown.

Rochester looked up at the moon and for an instant, she saw his face. He was beautiful. More beautiful than she imagined. She was in love with Mr. Rochester.

“Perhaps he will be just like me.”

Clearly, even male ghosts had big egos.

He shrugged. "So don't be afraid." He tipped his hat and smiled broadly. "He comes highly recommended."

Turning the horse, he looked back at her. In that moment, moonlight and wild things crowded her heart and soul. Then he galloped off atop the impatient, mighty Mesrour, his coat whipping around the horse's flanks as the fierce wind gathered speed.

She went straight inside and sat down in the lounge-room. Hugged herself. Slapped herself. It was sleep deprivation, that's what it was. Her mind was overworked. Her body underfed. She rocked back and forth on the couch.

Good thing Brad was coming with her supplies today. She'd feed her body. She certainly couldn't afford this frivolous dalliance with ghosts. She'd be a ghost herself in no time if she didn't take stock. And she didn't want that.

She curled up on the large settee which faced the roiling, rollicking ocean. With the drapes open, the lunar glow spilled in, and against the howling of a gale-force southerly, she slept.

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"Jan. Jan!"

It was him. He was back. In the day-time? Damn persistent.

Jan's eyes flickered open and she squinted into weak sunlight filtering through the big glass doors.

Brad's large, warm hand was on her shoulder, shaking gently. "Are you okay? I could see you but when you didn't get up to answer the door, I came in."

"I had a rough night." She rubbed her eyes, not quite looking at him, embarrassed to be seen in the subdued nightgown, her feet bare and her hair messed by sleep. "I must look terrible. I don't feel good, either."

“It’s too cold in here. That change in the weather came through.’ He scrubbed hands through his dark hair then squatted by the settee. ‘Ah, how about I light the fire?’”

Rain slashed against the house, the wind gusted and rattled the windows.

“Oh, please do. I’ll just have a quick shower and get dressed.” She clambered up from the couch and headed for the bathroom. She stopped, turned and looked at him.

“You won’t—disappear?”

He smiled. Warm, familiar. “No way.”

Jan fled. Her tummy felt strange. As she stepped out of the shower, vigorously rubbing herself down with a big towel, Mr. Rochester’s brilliant smile and handsome face flashed before her.

My God—could he *see* her?

Oh dear, she needed food badly.

A big, woolly jumper and jeans would do for lunch with Brad. Her unruly hair, wavy and long *he’d* said, hung in damp ringlets about her shoulders.

Brad had lit the combustion heater and it crackled with life. In the kitchen, he’d used her groceries, had thrown together a tossed salad, and had pasta boiling on the stove. The combination of glowing fire, tasty food and a man cooking in her kitchen was irresistible. She should’ve thought of inviting him out her before—why had it eluded her?

She sat facing him at the breakfast bench.

“I have something to tell you, to show you,” he said without looking up, stirring the spaghetti before he chopped some bacon. “There’s something uncanny about you. About you and me. And I don’t know where to start.” Then he glanced at her. “Sorry to sound weird.”

Jan was mesmerised by his dark eyes and the strong face. A memory tugged at her mind like the last haze of a dream lost.

A man will come.

Her heart rate climbed steadily while she studied him. "What is it you do?"

"The family owns the general store as well as Thorn—"

"Do you own a horse?"

He stared back at her. "We've always had horses."

Her gaze roved over his face. Why hadn't she taken more notice of this face before?

"Mesrour?" she asked, when she could speak. "And Thornfield?"

"That's our stable name for the line we breed, and our stud farm." He frowned then smiled. "It's been happening to you, too, hasn't it?"

"Yes. A man on Mesrour the Horse." She gave a desperate, little laugh.

"For me, a woman with long, wavy hair." He touched her hair and then stroked her cheek. Touched her lips with his fingers.

Jan reached up and took his hand, felt the warmth vibrate through her, stirring deep within. "What was it you were going to show me?"

He looked down and she followed his eyes to the sepia photograph on the bench.

"Mr. Rochester!" Her fingers touched the stained features of the tall man standing by a beautiful woman.

"And my great grandmother, Jane Airlie Rochester. She was a writer, a woman on her own until my great grandfather found her and courted her. She's been coming to visit me." Brad looked at her, held her face tenderly in his hands. "Don't you see?"

"You look just like him," Jan said in wonder.

So, don't be afraid. He comes highly recommended ...

“And you look like her, Jan. It's us, isn't it? Don't you see?”

“Oh yes.” She gazed into his smoky, dark eyes. Moonlight and wild things crowded her heart once more. “I most certainly do.” She smiled back up at Brad and warmth bloomed in her under his gaze.

She looked down at the photo again.

Thank you, Mr. Rochester.

My pleasure, Miss Ayrton.