

## The Kelpie Girls

Of all the high school cliques, the only ones I ever feared were the Kelpie Girls. The athletes were usually kind to me, despite my lack of physical prowess. The cheerleaders were nice to me, even if I wasn't as pretty as they were. The energetic theatre kids were friendly to me, and I got math homework help from the geeks if I asked. But the Kelpie Girls? I wanted nothing more than to be one of them.

My friends didn't understand my fascination.

"They're lunatics, Steph," my friend Ruby told me, whispering harshly as we looked over to their table during lunch. "You think anyone who can ride a kelpie is right in the head?"

"I've never talked to them," I said. "There's four Kelpie Girls, so people clearly can still tame kelpies."

"People die trying to bridle them!" Ruby urged. "My cousin Claire tried to bridle a kelpie last year. She lost three fingers and nearly drowned. My grandma says anyone who can ride a kelpie has sold their soul."

"That's something left over from the witch hunts. Kelpies scared people who couldn't control them, so they've been demonized. They kill fewer people than bears."

"Bears don't hunt people," Ruby said, looking over to the Kelpie Girls.

I didn't care. Despite their questionable common sense, the Kelpie Girls were respected for taming the uncontrollable. I envied their fearlessness and wanted that kind of confidence. I had to become a Kelpie Girl, no matter the price.

My "in" with the Kelpie Girls was Amanda. She was a slender girl with dark braids that she wound up into a bundle during the school day. We were both freshmen in my math class, and she

usually sat next to me. I had lent her pencils for tests and let her copy my notes when she had been absent once. As far as I was concerned, the biggest difference between us was her kelpie. The youngest and newest member of their group, I figured that Amanda would have the best advice for joining the Kelpie Girls.

I'd seen Amanda ride her mare, Fury's Shadow, around the swamp where the Kelpie Girls kept their kelpie paddock. They'd jump logs and barrel ride around rotting tree trunks. The large, black horses galloped around fields, swam in chest-deep in the water, or leap over branches six-feet off the ground. The swamp was only a few minutes from my house if I went on foot and I would go down and watch the Kelpie Girls practice long before my desire to be one of them was actualized. Further in, there was a body of water in the trees that locals called 'The Dead Pond' because anything that went in was fair game for the kelpies.

On Fridays, we had math last period. Once the bell rang and everyone left, I tried to follow Amanda without seeming too eager. I wanted to make my arrival by her locker seem casual and unplanned, but I'd missed most of the lesson trying to work out how to start the conversation.

"Hey, Amanda!" I said, trying to catch my breath. "Do you have any plans for this weekend?"

"Riding." Amanda shrugged, packing her notebooks into her backpack. "Katie wants to take everyone to the beach...really open up and see how fast we can get the kelpies going. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious," I said, twisting my fingers together behind my back. "I see you practicing from time to time in the swamp. It looks like fun."

"It is!" Amanda took her head out of her locker and grinned at me. "It's hard to describe until

you've done it, but there's nothing quite like riding a kelpie."

"Fast?"

"It's more than the speed, Steph!" Amanda explained, moving her hands with wide eyes. "It's a constant rush! I know Fury's Shadow would never hurt me, but there's so much power riding underneath you. I mean, a horse is fine, but there's no comparison to a kelpie."

"What makes it better than a horse?" I asked.

"Kelpies are smarter, for one," Amanda said, closing her locker and standing with her backpack hanging off her shoulder. "They're also able to navigate more terrain, they don't get spooked half as easy, and they're able to defend themselves. Katie said her kelpie ate a wolf once."

"Ate a wolf?"

"Yup!" Amanda said, starting to walk toward the buses. "Nothing left but the head and some bones. It was almost like Onyx was leaving a message for any other predator that thought she was a common horse. I never worry about leaving Fury's Shadow alone at night."

"Sounds cool!" I said, nearly running to keep up with her. I had read about the appetites of kelpies, but never imagined they were as brutal as people thought they were.

"Yeah." Amanda nodded. "Have you seen kelpies run?"

"I've seen the ones at your paddock," I said. "My mom's family has a bad history with kelpies, but I've always been drawn to them. My house is a few blocks from where you all practice riding by the bog."

"Would you like to come closer?" Amanda asked. "They're fine from a distance, but you can't get a sense of what a kelpie is until you're facing one."

“You wouldn’t mind?”

“I don’t see the harm in watching. We have good control and they won’t bite if you don’t do anything to make them mad.”

“When should I meet you?” I asked.

####

Amanda told me to meet them at the beach at seven o’clock sharp. I told my mom I wanted to go for a long run on the beach with Ruby when she asked why I needed a ride. If she knew I was going to meet the Kelpie Girls, she’d never let me go.

“Grandpa Jack wants us to come up to the farm next week,” Mom said. “He lost another mare earlier this week and he could use some help.”

“Another attack?” I asked.

“Kelpies broke through the fence looking for stray mares,” Mom said. “That’s the third time it’s happened this year. I’m just happy no one got hurt. Ever since Luke had his brush with a kelpie, I get so nervous thinking kelpies are so close to the farm.”

“Luke charged up at it with a stick,” I said. “He didn’t even have a plan. It was pretty stupid to—”

“He was just trying to fight it back,” Mom said. “If that monster had gotten too close to the house, it might have crashed through the front door and eaten the rest of them. If Luke hadn’t distracted it, your grandpa wouldn’t have been able to get his shotgun in time.”

“It’s not like kelpies kill the mares,” I said. “They’re just looking for mates.”

“The fewer of those monsters in the world, the better,” Mom said. “You have to remember when you were almost attacked two summers ago.”

I'd never told Mom about what had really happened. I'd never told Abby or Amanda or anyone that I had tried before. The encounter was short and ill-advised. I'd been filling the water troughs for a pair of horses that shared a paddock when I saw a black form come up from the woods. When I saw it my body locked up, every muscle bound with fear. The kelpie leaped over the fence like it wasn't there and walked right up to me. The monster sniffed at my hair and clothes, but didn't attack. The huge, red eyes looked at me with curiosity rather than violence. I almost reached up when I heard a gunshot, hitting the kelpie in the eye and killing it. My parents and grandpa had fussed over me, but I was more traumatized by the murder than the kelpie approaching me. The accident had sparked a fire in my heart. The legends about kelpies said that a bridle would bind them to a rider, but my encounter had bound me to the idea of bridling one. "I guess 'monster' is a matter of perspective."

The rest of the trip was in silence, my mother was stewing in her hatred while I tried to keep my excitement hidden. After she dropped me off, I sat on a bench, pretending to tie my shoes as she drove away. Then I waited for the Kelpie Girls.

Their arrival sounded like a landslide. I shot up from the bench and looked toward the road, seeing the black masses charging towards the beach parking lot. As they got closer, I could feel the pounding of their gallop in my bones where it resonated deep in my heart. The kelpies charged into the parking lot and stopped as a unit just short of running me over. For the first time, I could see the ember bright irises of their red eyes and saw their sharp teeth snapping at anything close enough to present a target.

I'd seen the Kelpie Girls in the hallways and at their paddock but never said anything to any of them besides Amanda. In the context of school, they were ghosts who only appeared if you

said their name. On the backs of their kelpies, however, they were royalty. The Kelpie Girls looked like valkyries on their steeds, conquering the last truly wild force of nature in the world. They looked more confident than anyone I had ever met before. Amanda beamed astride her titanic mare with coal-black fur, eyes like fire, and hooves like obsidian striking the dark asphalt.

The second Kelpie Girl in the line, Sophie, was a sophomore girl who had been a cheerleader before she joined the ranks. She had red hair tied back into a loose ponytail and vibrant green eyes. She leaned forward and looked at me while she calmly rubbed her kelpie's neck. On the third coal-black steed was Whitney, a sophomore with a buzz cut and sharp, angular features. She had to pull her kelpie's jaws from snapping at a seagull, and I shuddered at the control she exerted in such a simple action. Katie was a senior with a blonde braid that reached the middle of her back and grey-blue eyes that looked like the raging sea behind me. She looked down from atop her giant steed with an amused smile. Katie dismounted first and dropped down to meet me, leading her kelpie behind her by the bridle. The rest of her group followed suit and lined up in front of me, each girl standing with her kelpie.

"So," Katie said. "Amanda says you wanted to see the kelpies up close. What do you think?"

"They're big," I said, "but that's an understatement. I've heard the stories, but they don't do kelpies justice."

"You've done some research, then?" Katie asked. Her stern expression had softened as if I'd answered a question the way she wanted.

"Yes," I said. I looked up and met her kelpie's eye, the bright red eyes measuring me as critically as Katie was. "They seem like an...interesting...challenge."

"He is a challenge, Steph." Katie broke her gaze with me to thump her hand against the black

horse's chest. "He certainly is. Do you ride?"

"I used to ride at my grandpa's farm. They weren't anything like kelpies, but I'm at least familiar with the basics of horseback riding"

"I can see why you want to have your own," Katie said. She was smiling now that she'd found something we had reached a common ground.

"You can tell?" I asked.

"No one asks to watch kelpies run unless they're interested in riding," Katie said, baring her teeth rather than smiling. "Besides, you don't strike me as someone comfortable just watching."

"This is pointless." Sophie sighed. She leaned on her kelpie's withers and played with its mane. "She'll get in the way if she doesn't have a kelpie of her own."

"We don't know that," Amanda said. "You have to admit, it's smarter to ask for information before jumping into the bog looking for one."

"I barely knew anything when I tried to bridle my first kelpie," Whitney said, stretching. "It doesn't take knowledge or wisdom. If she wants to ride, then she's got to prove it to a kelpie, not one of us."

"I thought you could give me advice for my first try," I said. "There's a lot of conflicting information online and I want to know how you did it..."

Katie took a deep breath, sizing me up with her stormy gaze. After a minute or two, she turned back to the others. "Get started without me," she told them. "I'll catch up."

I watched Amanda and the others tugged the reins, squeezed their legs and clicked their tongues to get the enormous horses to start moving. The kelpies all galloped from the parking lot, kicking up sand as they charged along the shore and splashed through the water. The steeds

rushed down the length of the beach and turned sharply right along the coastline. The momentum of the kelpies running made the rest of the world blur as I watched them. It was like following a jet take off with the naked eye: either the background was meaningless or the kelpies were nothing but a streak of motion. I had to remind myself to look back at Katie because the kelpies' powerful strides were so hypnotic.

Katie was still scrutinizing me, twisting her mouth into a firm scowl as she looked for some flaw or quality I had that she wanted to find. She looked up at her kelpie, then back to me.

"You think you can handle this?" Katie asked, jerking her chin to the steed. "Just because you've had a few horseback riding lessons with some old show mare on your grandpa's farm?"

"I know the risks."

"Do you?" Katie smirked like she was talking to a naive child. "You know how dangerous it is? In the old days before cities, kelpies were hunters who would drag people to their doom. People still die by the hundreds every year trying to bridle a kelpie cause they're not prepared to do it or too stupid to care. What makes you think you can bridle one more than anyone else?"

"I don't know, but I have to try," I whispered, less confident than before. "You ride one, you know how it feels. My parents would rather I settle for riding 'some old show mare.' My great-grandpa was killed trying to bridle a kelpie and my family has hated them ever since. Except, I want to ride a kelpie."

"You feel different, so you want to feel special?"

"I don't want to be afraid of something I want because other people tell me it's scary. I've looked a kelpie in the eye and I know they aren't worth being afraid of. I want to know it's not a fluke that I survived."



Katie examined me again, then walked back to her kelpie. I was expecting her to put her foot in the stirrup, hop into the saddle, and ride off with a snide remark. But she stopped at her kelpie's side and looked at me again, more of a warning than a threat.

"There's one I've seen in the pond near our paddocks," Katie said, tightening the saddle around her kelpie's ribs. "Deeper back in the trees and out of sight of the main road. He's feral and even more dangerous than the ones we ride. But if you want to bridle a kelpie? You have to be sure you want to for the right reasons."

"What are the right reasons?" I asked. Katie looked toward the other girls, in full gallop down the beach as they whooped and hollered along the water.

"Everyone has a different reason," she said. "For Whitney, it was power when she felt powerless. Sophie felt like she was just a puppet for her parents and boyfriend, so she went to the opposite extreme to find herself. Amanda wanted control of something when it felt like she was losing her grip on everything she knew. Power, freedom, control...it all depends on what you need."

"And you?" I asked.

Katie glanced over at me and gave me a slight smile. "I wanted to make sure no one would ever hurt me again. There's a certain respect that comes with claiming your own monster and I wanted that."

I nodded. "Do I need to know my reason now?"

Katie smiled brighter and hopped up onto the kelpie's saddle. She took the reins and shifted the animal's position to the side. "The reason you go in with might be different from the reason you leave with. Think about it..."

Katie spurred her kelpie forward and the monster bounded past me with a low whinny. I took a few steps back, almost tripping over my own feet as the kelpie charged to the beach. My heart was pounding as Katie's kelpie joined the rest of the herd.

I spent the next hour or so watching the kelpies run back and forth along the beach. They stampeded through the wet sand as easily as any other terrain. The monstrous horses would snap and bite at one another as they charged, but the riders kept them under control through a magical bond. The Kelpie Girls would hang on as their mounts leaped and bounded over the stone jetties that protected the beach from erosion. After warming up, they lined up on one end of the beach and raced against each other, over and over again. Katie didn't lose a single race.

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The next week, all I could think of was the Kelpie Girls and seeing their midnight-black steeds charge through the sand and water. I spent more time with Amanda after school, hoping to get help. Ruby still sat with my at lunch, but if she knew what I was planning, she'd do everything to talk me out of it.

"I tried bridling twice," Amanda told me one afternoon. "The first time, I couldn't keep my nerve and ran when I saw a kelpie raise its head out of the water. It was four weeks before I could even think about trying again."

"How did you catch Fury's Shadow?" I asked. "Did you use bait?"

"Steph, you *are* the bait." Amanda laughed a little. "The kelpie will come for you if you look like easy prey. Letting go of control like that wasn't easy for me, but it's what I had to do to bridle Fury's Shadow. While we all had different experiences bridling, every kelpie fights to keep their freedom. If you're going to expect anything? Expect a fight."

I did all the research on bridling a kelpie I could during my free periods, but every website I came across warned me not to approach a wild kelpie. There were a handful of success stories, but it was hard to find good news between the thousands of horror tales that made local and national news. As the weekend approached, I was no more confident in how to catch a kelpie. I was also more resolved than ever to earn one.

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On Friday after school, I bought a lead rope and the nicest bit and bridle I could afford. I found one made of nice, red leather with brass rings to hold the pieces in place. I decided to buy one big enough to fit a Clydesdale and hoped the magic would control the kelpie long enough for me to tighten it.

When the sun came up on Saturday morning, I told my mom I was going out to get breakfast with Ruby. Instead, I ran over to the bog. The Kelpie Girls watched me walk into the bog with my coil of rope in my hand. If Amanda's advice told me anything, a wild kelpie would only show itself if I was alone. Still, I felt like they were all supporting me as I walked into the bog to face my trial.

My boots got stuck in the mud and made a slimy, sucking sound every time I took a step. The muck stank of decay, and birds tweeted overhead as I marched forward. I slipped the bridle around my shoulder until I would need it. I found the massive pond where kelpies would bring their prey, the surface rippling to assure me there was movement under the pond. Small bones floated on the surface and the birds dared not land this close to where the kelpies waited.

A primal fear clutched my chest, and the hairs on the back of my neck prickled. The rational part of my brain wanted to run and join the soccer team, the drama club, the mathletes...anything

but going further into this place so still that it made a graveyard seem cheerful. I was halfway through planning what I'd say when returning the bridle when another voice told me to keep going. It was small and quiet, but the shock of hearing it cut through the icy grip on my chest. I marched into the murky water, urged on by the furious spirit that was welling up in me.

I stepped out, knee-deep in water so cloudy I couldn't see my feet. I was alert as I scanned the bog around me. Every log I saw out of the corner of my eye looked like a horse's head for a split second. I gripped the rope until my hands ached as I took a few cautious steps into the pond. I didn't venture beyond waist-high water, waiting for the kelpie to come for me. It was late fall and I was freezing. My clothes were already becoming waterlogged and cold.

I ran my hands across the water, trying to disturb it more to draw out a kelpie from hiding. My heart was pounding so loud in my chest I could feel it in my ears. I tried to steady my nerves and focused on any movement that might have been a kelpie. It took almost five minutes of shivering in the freezing water before I saw the hunched back of a kelpie slipping under The Dead Pond.

The curve of the kelpie's back came around my left side as it swam to try and flank me. I barely moved my head, so the hunter wouldn't know that I could see it. It felt like the kelpie could sense every twitch of my muscles. I held the rope in my right hand and ran my left hand over the surface of the water, hoping it was tempting bait for the kelpie. I also hoped I was fast enough.

After it turned out toward the depths of the pond, I lost sight of the kelpie dove into the murky water. I wondered if I'd scared him off with the rope or if it had seen me watching its dark form under the surface. In the stillness, I just listened as the twittering of birds fade away. The

only sounds were the water lapping against the shore and my stomach roiling with fear. Staying as still as I could, I waited for the water to break.

The black form rushed toward me, like a shark swimming to a wounded animal. I couldn't run, even if I wanted to. It took every ounce of my will to quell my fear as the kelpie burst through the water, jet black with eyes like fire. The horse's mouth opened wide into a loud whinny as it bared its sharp teeth at me, swinging its hooves wildly. I jumped to the side to avoid being trampled by the kelpie. I'd coaxed him into the shallower water, but there were other advantages that it had over me.

The kelpie neighed and charged, splashing up water as we rushed toward each other. I stepped to the side, making the horse crash chest-deep into the water. While the kelpie was swimming, I threw my rope around his neck and clutched the rope with both hands. The kelpie pulled and reared, swinging its massive hooves at my face. I had to balance keeping the rope taut around the kelpie's neck and avoiding getting trampled. The stallion pulled, dragging me through the mud and then suddenly turning to charge at me. I dug my heels into the dirt just to rush to the side. The kelpie's huge shoulder would shove me to the side, but I managed to keep my grip. The monstrous horse plowed through the water and dragged me in, forcing the murky swamp water up to my nose. I pulled myself, hand over hand, through the water and climbed onto his back.

The beast rushed back to the shore and reared, trying to throw me. I squeezed with my legs, clenched with elbows, and held as tight as I could manage. The kelpie underneath me jumped and splashed in the water, bruising my ribs. Each time his hooves slammed into the swamp, it felt like my insides were tossed around. The kelpie turned sharply, bucking and twisting. My whole body was dragged up and down his back, thrown from side to side. I felt every impact as

the kelpie fought to throw me off and my muscles ached as I fought to stay on. I slipped from the kelpie's shoulders, hanging from his neck and nearly getting trampled by the massive hooves. Tightening my grip on the lead rope, I pushed off the ground, heaved myself onto the kelpie's back, and squeezed his ribs with all of my strength. Pulling, I managed to get my leg over his wide back. I gripped the coils of rope tight and held onto the thick, mossy mane. The kelpie threw his head from side to side, snapping his teeth at me. The spittle from his lips and mouth flew up and hit my face. I pressed hard against the animal's sides and weathered the abuse as the kelpie tried to throw me off his back. The stallion let out a furious whinny and charged into the water, carrying me with him.

The kelpie dove down as deep as the bog would allow. I nearly screamed at the shock of the cold water and barely managed to hold my breath. I had to keep my eyes open in the filthy water to avoid the logs, branches, and heavy stones that were submerged beneath the pond. My lungs burned and my vision blurred. The force of the water pushing against threatened to pull me off and leave me completely vulnerable to the kelpie's hunger. The beast twisted, rolled, pushed off against the muddy bottom, dove, and slammed my body against the murky depths. Each hit was a fight to hold: hold my breath, hold the lead rope, hold my nerve. The kelpie breached the pond's surface and I was able to get a few greedy breaths before being taken back under.

I threw my head back to get my hair out of my face and kept my grip on the rope and mane as my opponent galloped back on land. The kelpie bucked and splashed, a little more manageable as he started to lose his vicious edge. I could feel each heavy breath as the kelpie slowed from bucking to jumping to trotting. The angry whinnies turned into more subdued panting and he slowed to a stop. Thinking it may have been a trick, I waited until the kelpie was nearly standing

still before I relaxed any of the pressure on his sides.

When I was confident he wouldn't run, I hopped down and slipped the bridle off my shoulder. The kelpie stayed still, too tired to do much more than glare at me. In every story I'd read, this was the most dangerous part. Before putting on the bridle, the kelpie was still a wild and unpredictable animal. Once I had the bridle on, he would be bound to me, but he would also fight to keep from being tamed. I reached up, the bridle in one hand and my rope in the other.

I didn't break eye contact with the kelpie as I slipped one loop over his nose and the other up over his ears. The kelpie's bright red eye glared at me, no less spirited and angry now that exhaustion set in. I reached up and set the bridle around his face, pulling up rather than pushing. The kelpie panted as the leather passed over his snout. The bit was stuck at his mouth and he refused to open his jaws. Reluctantly, I let go of the lead rope that was around the kelpie's thick neck.

The kelpie lifted his head, using the last scrap of will he had to try and slip free of the bridle. I reached and put a hand on his nose before the snout got out of my reach, trying to soothe him with my words. I guided his nose down by stroking it and shushing with any breath I could spare. The kelpie refused to open his mouth as the bit clattered against his sharp front teeth. I took a deep breath and pushed my finger up into the corner of his mouth. I could see the fangs at the front and back of the kelpie's jaws, but my position in the gap of the maw would keep my finger from being sliced off. Pushing his gums open, I pulled rest of the bit into place.

The kelpie was calmer as I reached up, pushed his ears through the leather loop, and latched the throat lash into place to secure the bridle. The fire in the kelpie's eyes was still bright, but it was warm rather than blazing. I set a hand on the dark-colored snout and ran my fingers down

his nose. After petting him a little longer, I took the lead rope and guided the kelpie out of the wild swamp. *No*, I corrected myself with a smile, *my kelpie*...

I led my kelpie through the mushy bog and emerged, sopping wet, sore, and exhausted. The Kelpie Girls sat in a ring of lawn chairs sharing lunch and talking in quiet voices. Sophie glanced up and saw me first, patting Katie's arm and pointing at me as I walked toward them.

The Kelpie Girls were all standing by the time I arrived with my beast. The kelpie and I were both panting after our ordeal. I'm sure we both looked a mess, but it only further cemented my connection with the animal.

"Goddamn!" Whitney broke the silence, giving me and my kelpie a wide berth. "She did it! I knew she'd come out, but I thought she'd be missing a few fingers rather than come out with a kelpie."

"How'd you catch a stallion like this?" Sophie asked as I led my kelpie over to the stable. "And on your first try!"

"Just like anyone else," I panted, "quickly and carefully."

I released my kelpie from bit and bridle into the paddock with Amanda's kelpie. I knew I could halter it again without repeating our fight in the woods. Watch him for a minute, I felt confident that the kelpies wouldn't kill each other and finally relaxed my wobbling legs. Amanda brought me a water bottle. I poured a little on my sweating brow, then chugged the rest. The chill in the air caught up with me as Katie threw a rough, riding blanket over my shoulders to warm me up. With my kelpie bound to me and in the paddock nearby, I sat in the nearest lawn chair and shivered for a few breaths. I wasn't sure if it was fear or adrenaline, but my hands were shaking as I tried to collect myself.



“What was your reason?” Katie asked. “Do you know?”

I shrugged and took a few potato chips from the big bag on the table. “I wanted to know who I was and the only way to do that was to push myself. The first time I tried, I froze because I had always been told to be afraid, but I could feel I wasn’t. I wanted to be brave and face something that terrified me. Playing soccer or joining a band is fine, but that isn’t who I am. I realized that in the swamp. I needed to feel that fear and know I could face it. I had to earn a kelpie on my own merits.”

“And earn him, you did,” Kate smiled. “Self-worth is a very good reason.”

“What’s his name?” Amanda asked.

“They just met,” Sophie said. “How could she have a name already? Besides, it’s not like he’ll listen better to one name over another.”

“Sometimes you know,” Amanda shrugged. “I knew when I met Fury’s Shadow.”

“Night Tempest,” I said. “His name is Night Tempest.”

“That’s a fine name.” Katie smiled. “Welcome to the Kelpie Girls.”