

The Girl and the Little Horse



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Lily skipped down the gravel path to the stable, her green rubber boots crunching with every step. The morning sun warmed her sky-blue overalls, and the yellow daisy patch on her pocket seemed to glow. She carried a small bag of carrots for the horses. Today was her first day helping at the stable, and her heart bubbled with excitement.



Inside the barn, tall Marta welcomed Lily with a wide smile. Her silver curls peeked out from under a straw hat, and her strong hands smelled of hay and leather. "You must be Lily," she said. "I'm Marta. I hear you love horses." Lily nodded so fast her blue ribbon bounced. "I do! More than anything!"



Marta led Lily past rows of stalls until they stopped at the very last one. A small dappled grey pony stood there, his head low and his back swaying just a little. His shaggy white mane hung over dark, gentle eyes, and a red halter with a tiny brass tag said his name: Pepper. "He's old," Marta said softly, "and he needs extra care."



Lily stepped closer, and Pepper lifted his head slowly. His stiff legs shifted, but his eyes were calm and trusting. "Hello, Pepper," Lily whispered. "I'm Lily. I brought you a carrot." The old pony sniffed her hand and took the carrot with soft, careful lips. Marta smiled. "He likes you already. Old horses know kind hearts."



Just then, Ben the stable hand ambled over, his ginger hair tucked under a grey beanie. He showed Lily a bucket of tools: a soft brush, a curry comb, and a clean cloth. "Old Pepper here needs gentle grooming," Ben said with a friendly crooked smile. "His coat gets itchy, and his stiff legs like a good brush. Want to learn how?"



Marta handed Lily a curry comb and showed her how to move it in small circles. "Start on his neck, where he can see you," she said. Lily brushed Pepper's dappled grey coat gently. Dust and loose hair floated away, and Pepper let out a deep, happy sigh. "He likes that!" Lily giggled. "His coat feels warmer already."



Next came the soft brush, gliding over Pepper's back and sides. Ben explained, "Old horses can't roll in the dust like young ones, so brushing helps keep them clean and comfortable." Lily worked slowly, careful around Pepper's swaying back. The little horse closed his eyes and leaned into the brush. "You're doing great," Marta encouraged. "He trusts you."



Pepper's shaggy mane was tangled, so Lily picked it apart with her fingers. She talked to him softly while she worked. "You're a good boy, Pepper. Such a handsome pony." His ears flicked toward her voice, and he nudged her shoulder gently. Marta nodded. "Talking softly helps him feel safe. You have a gentle way about you, Lily."



Ben showed Lily how to clean Pepper's red halter and polish the little brass tag. "A clean halter keeps his skin happy," he said. Lily rubbed the tag until it shone. "There," she told Pepper. "Now everyone can see your name." The old pony blinked his dark eyes and lipped at her sleeve. Lily laughed. "That tickles!"



Marta brought a soft cloth and warm water to wipe Pepper's muzzle. "His white muzzle gets dirty when he eats," she said. Lily dabbed gently, and Pepper stood perfectly still. "He's so patient," she said. "He's had lots of practice," Marta replied. "Older animals teach us patience, if we watch and listen."



After grooming, Lily led Pepper to a sunny spot in the paddock. His stiff legs moved slowly, but he seemed content. "Why does he walk like that?" Lily asked. Ben knelt beside her. "His joints are old, like a grandpa's. That's why gentle exercise and soft bedding help him feel his best." Lily nodded, understanding.



Lily noticed Pepper's water bucket was low, so she filled it with fresh, cool water. "Here you go," she said. Pepper drank while she held the bucket steady. Marta watched from the barn door. "You're learning that care is more than brushing," she said. "It's noticing what he needs before he asks." Lily beamed with pride.



Every day after that, Lily came to the stable. She made a peaceful routine: curry comb first, then soft brush, then mane and tail. Pepper waited for her at his stall door, his ears perked. "He knows your footsteps," Ben said. "You've made him feel special." Lily's heart felt warm and full.



One afternoon, Lily sat on an upturned bucket beside Pepper and told him all about her day. The old pony rested his white muzzle near her shoulder and listened. "You're my friend, Pepper," she whispered. "Old or not, you're the best little horse in the world." Pepper sighed happily, as if he understood every word.



Marta brought two apples, one for Lily and one for Pepper. "You've taught me something," Marta said. "Watching you care for Pepper reminds me why I love this work. Kindness makes old bones feel young again." Lily smiled her gap-toothed smile. "He makes me happy too. Taking care of him is my favorite part of the day."



As the sun set, Lily gave Pepper one last gentle pat. "See you tomorrow, friend," she said. Pepper nickered softly and nudged her hand. Lily walked home with hay in her hair and joy in her heart. She had learned that older animals deserve extra kindness, and that caring for a little horse had given her a friendship to treasure forever.