

CHRIS PLATT

Willow King



Thirteen

King spent the next thirty days recovering from his injury. He was turned out in a small pasture by himself for the first couple of weeks. Moving was painful, and he hobbled from one patch of grass to another.

Katie's heart went out to him. She remembered when she was younger and she had been put in a partial body cast to correct a problem her short leg had caused with her back. She had been so sore, and moving had been very painful.

Jan climbed onto the fence next to her, breaking her reverie.

"He looks like he's walking on eggshells," Jan observed.

"He's really hurting," Katie agreed. "It took me almost a half hour to walk him to this pasture, and it's only a couple of hundred yards from the barn. The poor guy almost fell down several times."

"What happened to Cindy?" Jan asked. "After all the damage she's done, I hope her father grounded her for life."

Katie frowned. "I don't even want to hear her name. I heard some of the stable hands talking. They said that she's grounded to the house for a couple of weeks, and she's restricted from the stable area for a month. If it wasn't for

Cindy's stupid trick, King could have won his first race by now."

At the mention of his name, Willow King raised his elegant head and nickered, staring thoughtfully at Katie as he chewed on a mouthful of the tender grass.

"See? He thinks so, too." Katie jumped down from the fence and offered King an apple. He stretched his neck to receive the treat, then munched happily while Katie petted his neck.

"You told me that John says he'll be walking better pretty soon," Jan said. "This horse sure has a lot of heart."

"Yeah," Katie said as she scratched him behind the ears. "I should take some lessons from him. He's a lot braver than I am," she said, thinking of the one and only time a boy had asked her to dance, and what a fool she'd made of herself. Katie wondered if she'd ever get another chance to dance with Jason—and whether she'd have the nerve to try it again if he ever did ask her. But after the way she had behaved, she sincerely doubted that he would ever ask her again.

"You're a lot braver than you think you are, Katie."

Katie shrugged off the compliment. She wished she had as much confidence in herself as Jan had. "Anyway, King won't be ready to train until his thirty days are up. He won't have enough time to get ready for the big race." Katie kicked at a big lump of dirt. "It's so unfair! By the time King's stood around for a month, he'll have lost a lot of the endurance we've helped him gain."

"Maybe not." Jan hopped off the fence and came to stand in front of Katie.

"What do you mean?"

King paused in his grazing as if he, too, were interested in what Jan had to say.

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“Remember Mr. Simon and his horse pool? A lot of the horses he was swimming were broken-down horses that couldn’t take the pounding on the racetrack.”

Katie brightened. “You’re right. He said that swimming kept their wind built up while they were healing. I bet that King will be walking well enough in a week that we could take him out to the pool and start swimming him again.”

“I’ll call Mr. Simon tonight,” Jan offered.

“Thanks, pal. You might have just saved King’s career.”

By September, when King should have been racing, he was just starting back into training at the track. But thanks to the horse pool, he bounced back quickly, and they were able to enter him in a race much sooner than they had originally anticipated.

School had started. Katie was in eleventh grade now, and the homework was tougher than ever, but with King’s race coming up, she just couldn’t keep her mind on the tasks at hand. When the bell rang, ending the school week, she dashed home and quickly packed her suitcase. Her mother had agreed to drive her and Jan to Portland that night. King didn’t race until two o’clock the next afternoon, but Katie wanted to spend as much time with him as possible. Jason would drive up and meet them a couple of hours before the race.

Katie was a nervous wreck the next morning. She woke feeling sick to her stomach, so she ate a light breakfast and hurried to the track.

“You look like an old mother hen,” John said as he watched her fuss over King. “If you keep brushing that horse, he’s not going to have any hide left.”

“But I want him to look pretty,” she protested.

“All horses look good when they’re in the winner’s circle.”

He chuckled. “Come on, now, get on out of there. You’re making me nervous just watchin’ you. We don’t need to get this colt worked up before his race.”

Katie gave King a pat, and he nuzzled her pocket looking for a treat. “Sorry, boy, you know the rules. No food until after your race. We don’t want you getting a stomachache while you’re running.” She straightened his forelock and looked into his brown eyes. “But I’ve got a bag of carrots in the tack room. They’re all yours if you do well.”

A half hour before the race, they started preparing King. His hooves were picked, and he was brushed again until he gleamed. Katie brought blue carnations to weave into his mane and tail. They matched the color of silks the jockey would wear. Blue was her favorite color; it was a good sign.

“Do you think we’ve got a chance to win this one, John?” Katie asked as she fumbled nervously with the mane and tail comb.

“Every horse in this race has a chance to win it. That’s horse racing.” He flipped through the pages of the *Daily Racing Form*. “The biggest competition will be that colt Raging Wind. They’re priming him for the Kentucky Derby.”

Katie’s stomach flopped. Did they stand a chance against a Derby horse?

John folded the paper and put it in his hip pocket. “Don’t go looking so worried, Katie girl. We’ve got as good a shot as he does to win this race. King’s every bit as good as Raging Wind—maybe a little better.”

Katie smiled. John was right. King was a champion, and today he was going to prove it.

“You got your new license?” John asked.

She nodded.

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“Make sure you keep it on you, ‘cause they’ll probably ask for it.”

Mrs. Durham, along with Jan and Jason, stopped by to wish them luck before going over to the grandstand. “Mr. Ellis said he would be in the paddock if you needed any help saddling,” Katie’s mother said. “We’ll meet you over there.”

Jason stepped forward and took her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. “Good luck, Katie. I’ll be waiting for you on the front side.”

Katie blushed furiously. When Jason looked at her like that, it made her feel as if she had a thousand butterflies whirling in her stomach.

When the call to the gate came, they bridled King and flushed his mouth with cool water, then took him out to stand in the shed row.

“Keep him here until the gate pops on the race before King’s. I don’t want him getting excited when he hears those other horses running down the backstretch. I’ll holler when it’s time to bring him for his race. You all right, girl? You look a little pale.”

“I’m fine, John. Just a little nervous.”

John laughed. “You better get used to it. This colt’s got a lot of races in him.”

King sensed her nervousness and began to fidget. She put a hand on either side of his bit and gently shook it, just as John had showed her. The colt became interested in the game and forgot his dancing around.

Katie listened to the sound of the announcer as he called the loading of the gate. It was a six-furlong race—three-quarters of a mile—so the starting gate was on the backstretch. She was close enough to hear the doors slam and the

gate men yelling directions to one another as they loaded the nervous animals. When the last one was in, she heard the starter say, "Everyone get tied on." Then the bell rang and the doors clanged open. The pounding of hooves echoed up and down the barns.

King jumped when he heard the commotion, lifting his tail in the air and blowing a great gust of air through his nostrils.

"Whoa, boy. Save your energy for your race."

She heard John call, so she led King out, handing him to the man on the pony horse who was to take him to the front. She cut across the infield with John.

The paddock area where the horses were saddled contained twelve stalls, each painted in a different color. John took King from the pony horse's rider and brought him into the saddling stall. They had drawn the number-two post, so they would be one of the first to be tacked.

When all the equipment was in place, Katie took King out to walk around the circle. This helped loosen him up, and also gave the public an opportunity to see what they were betting on. As they made their rounds, she heard lots of oohs and aahs. Katie smiled proudly and patted King on the neck.

"Bring 'em in," the paddock judge yelled. Because it was King's first race, the official had to check King's tattoo and body markings against the registration papers to make sure the right horse was racing. He grabbed King's lip and rolled it back, reading the smudged blue-black numbers and letters. When he was satisfied that they were correct, he compared King's markings with those described on the papers. He walked behind King and brushed at the small patch of white on his right heel.

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“This white isn’t listed,” he said as he stood and surveyed the paperwork again.

“Let me see that.” John took the papers from him and a frown furrowed his brow.

Katie didn’t like the look on either man’s face. “What’s that mean?” she asked with rising panic.

John turned to her and shook his head. “It means they can scratch the horse,” he said.

“No,” she whispered, afraid that if she said it any louder, it would come out a scream. “We’ve come so far, how can something as simple as a few white hairs stop us?”

“It’s the racing rules,” the paddock judge offered. “But I’ll tell you what I’m going to do. Everything else checks out. I’ll let you run him today, but you’ll have to get these papers fixed before you race him again. Contact the jockey club tomorrow, and they’ll take care of it.”

“Thank you!” Katie gave him her best smile.

King entered the track to the sound of the trumpet calling the horses to the post. They paraded at a walk in front of the audience, then trotted or galloped back to the gate. Her mother and friends sat up in the clubhouse with Mr. Ellis, but Katie preferred to stand next to the fence with John.

The first horse was loaded into the gate. Katie’s nerves were stretched so tightly that she thought she would burst. King stood behind the gate, and she held her breath, praying that he wouldn’t give the loaders any trouble. He stepped into the number-two hole, and Katie let out her breath—then held it again in anticipation of the start.

“They’re off!” the announcer yelled into the microphone.

From where she stood, Katie could see King striving to take the lead. Two other horses were running with him, the

rest of them trailing behind.

“It’s Raging Wind in the lead, with Simple Lad and Willow King running neck and neck behind him,” the man with the microphone announced.

“Get him out of there, Randy!” John instructed the jockey, as if he could hear him. “He’s trapped on the rail. He’s got no place to run.”

Katie watched as King held his ground, neither able to pass the leader nor draw to the outside. She knew Randy was doing his best. He had been the Ellis farm’s jockey for many years. He had worked King several times and was familiar with the colt. Before the race, he had told Katie they had a good shot at winning.

Katie lost sight of King as the leading horses went into the turn and the rest of the pack caught up to them.

“He’s got to do something now,” John said. “Get him out of that hole!”

Katie’s heart sank as she saw the blue colors fade back into the pack. What had happened? Had King run out of breath? Were his legs hurting again?

The announcer broke in. “Willow King seems to be having some difficulty. He’s fading fast, and Usurper has moved up to battle for the lead.”

Katie put her forehead on the cool metal of the fence. She couldn’t bear to watch. All her hopes were being crushed beneath the pounding hooves of the racing horses.

“Here he comes!” John jarred her arm, then slapped his hands on the fence. “Come on, King!” he screamed.

“Willow King is making a comeback on the outside,” the announcer said. “Look at him run! He’s passed Usurper and is moving up to challenge the leader, Raging Wind.”

Katie’s head snapped up. She could see a patch of blue

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coming on the outside. “You can do it, King!” she screamed with all her might. She jumped onto the cement ledge the fence rested on and strained her eyes to see what was happening.

The pounding of hooves as the horses entered the home-stretch and the roar of the crowd was deafening. She could see King on the outside of the pack, but from her angle, she couldn’t tell if he was running first or second.

“It’s Raging Wind and Willow King coming down to the wire...Raging Wind and Willow King...” The announcer paused for emphasis. “And at the finish line, it’s Willow King by a nose!”

Suddenly, Katie’s mother, Jan, Jason, and Mr. Ellis were surrounding her and John, patting them both on their backs and shouting congratulations. Jason picked her up and swung her in a circle. In the midst of all the commotion, she looked up to see a man staring at her and frowning heavily. He quickly walked away. Katie turned back to her friends, not giving the strange man another thought.

“Here he comes, Katie.”

As King trotted back to the winner’s circle, his sides were heaving and sweat dripped from his body. He held his head proudly and looked every bit the winner he was.

“Grab him and lead him into the winner’s circle while I get everyone herded into there,” John instructed.

They posed for the win photo, and Katie was sure that all they would be able to see of her would be a big set of teeth. She was smiling so hard, her face hurt. After the picture was taken, she waited for the jockey to undo King’s saddle. She noticed the man who had given her a dirty look talking to the jockey of Raging Wind. He still didn’t look very happy. After a short discussion, he took the second-place horse by

the reins and led him back to the stable. Katie quickly put him out of her mind. She had a winner to cool down and a celebration to start. Now was not the time for dark thoughts.

Jason met her at the barn with a bucket of warm water and King's cooling-out blanket. "John says we've got to go to the test barn. Grab King's halter and let's go. We'll bathe him there."

Katie picked up the halter and lead rope and followed Jason to the test barn. This was where the horses were tested to make sure they ran legally, without any drugs in their systems.

Katie and Jason showed their identification to the guard at the gate, then entered the area. The afternoon was cooling down and steam rose from the colt's sweat-soaked body. In the distance, the bugle sounded, calling the horses to the post for the next race. Tired as he was, King pricked his ears and listened, then pawed the ground and snorted.

"Looks like he's ready to go again!" Jason said.

Katie laughed as she dunked the sponge into the warm water and squeezed it over King's coat. "He may be ready to go again, but I don't think I could handle the pressure. I was so nervous during the race. When he ran into trouble on the last turn, I almost died! I'm glad we've got another couple of weeks before we have to do this again."

Jason patted her shoulder. "You better get used to it, kid. I think we'll be doing a lot more of this in the future. How about if we all go out for pizza tonight to celebrate the win? I'm buying."

"That would be great. I'll ask my mom and Jan."

A radio played in the background and the chords of Jason's favorite song drifted across the test barn. He looked at her, but she immediately turned away, reaching for the

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scraper to remove the excess water from King's coat. She despised herself for being such a chicken. She knew the dance. There was nobody watching. What was her problem?

"You know you owe me a dance," Jason said.

"I know," she said quietly. "And someday I'll do it, just not now. You know...with King and all..."

"That's okay, Katie. I'm a patient guy. And my foot's almost healed..." he teased.

Katie laughed and prepared to throw the sponge at him, but the smile froze on her face. Standing just past Jason's shoulder outside the test barn stood the tall man with the beady eyes who had given her such a sour look.

"What's the matter, Katie? You look like you've seen a ghost." He turned to look at the barn opposite the test area, but there was no one there.

"It's nothing," she said as she forced a smile to her lips. It was probably all in her imagination. The man just had an unpleasant face, and it only seemed like he was glaring at her. She put him out of her mind. "Let's talk about that pizza."