

1.

Lucky Foot Stable

"A horse show! That's it! Why didn't I think of it before?" Mary shouted from her perch high on the bales of hay stacked in the loft of Lucky Foot Stable. Mary often went to the loft to think and was occasionally rewarded with a brilliant idea. "I've got to find Jody and see what she thinks! Come on, Finnegan!" She grabbed the knotty end of the creaky rope swing and swung herself down to the dirt floor, Finnegan the farm dog nipping at her heels and Colonel Sanders, the old white barn rooster, squawking indignantly at the uproar. Mary ran around to the side of the big white dairy barn and looked over the gate to the pasture field, where she could just make out Jody's form as she lay flat on her back on a horse blanket under the bare branches of the weeping willow tree.

"I knew that's where she'd be," laughed Mary. "I knew it, Finney!" and she flew across the pasture to share her latest great idea with Jody. Mary knew where Jody would be because Mary knew just about everything about Jody and her habits. Mary and Jody were friends. They weren't just good friends, or even best friends. They were, as Mary put it, "epic friends."

"Epic means: 'in the grand style, lofty in conception, and memorable!'" Mary liked to say. "I looked it up!"

Mary liked to say a lot of other things too. In fact, talking was one of Mary's favorite activities in the world, and Jody mostly liked to listen. But there were two things that brought them together and linked them forever ("never to be parted" they solemnly

agreed) and best of all, gave them something to do together all through the long days of summer vacation and endless wintry weekends.

These two things were...the ponies! Mary's pony was the color of milk chocolate with a silky white mane and tail and four white stockings. Mary imagined that she had been born of a wild mustang and transported across the untamed plains by gypsies. So, when it came time to name the spunky mare, Mary solemnly touched the end of a riding crop gently to her shoulder and said, "I dub thee Gypsy Amber. Gypsy because it sounds romantic and Amber for the amber waves of grain on the plains!"

Jody contented herself with the original name of her pony, since everyone knows it's bad luck to change a pony's name. While not nearly as wild and mythical a name as Gypsy Amber, Jody didn't mind. Jody's pony was simply named Lady.

Lady was the color of copper pennies with uneven white patches over her withers, a small patch of white on her hindquarters, two white socks on her front legs, and a wiry black mane and tail. Of course, Mary took it upon herself to invent a story suitable for Lady's background.

"Lady was an Indian pony who used to hunt wild buffalo before coming here," Mary claimed. "Her name is really Lady White Cloud, because her patches look like clouds. And anyway, I'm sure the Indians always name their horses that way."

Jody just smiled at Mary's imagination and continued to call the feisty mare Lady, Ladabucks, or sometimes just Lad.

"Jody Stafford, what in the world are you doing?" Mary asked with her hands on her hips, looking down at Jody looking up. "It's cold out here, isn't it?"

Jody pointed skyward at the lazy drift of the wispy clouds. "I'm watching the mare's tails and keeping Lady and Gypsy company, just like I always do. And when I get cold, I wrap up in the blanket. What are you doing?" Jody asked sweetly.

"I've been waiting in the stable for you to come in so I can tell you my great idea!"

"I didn't know you had a great idea, or I would've come in sooner," Jody said, sitting up and squinting into the sun. "What is it?"

"Well," Mary grinned, squatting down just enough so that Finnegan could lick her face. Finnegan was a herding dog -- black and white with little brown patches over both eyes and a real talent for rounding up the cows at milking time. "Finney, quit it. Jody, remember how we've been practicing our jumping and our circus act with the ponies and wishing we could show off how great they are to an audience, but nobody ever sees us?" Mary asked, all in one breath.

"Yeah," Jody said expectantly.

"Well, all of a sudden it hit me -- we can take the ponies to a horse show and enter some classes. Then everybody would see how great they are, and we could win all sorts of ribbons and trophies!"

Jody's hopeful expression suddenly fell at this pronouncement. "I don't know, Mare... we've never even been to a horse show, much less entered classes in one! We've just been stuck here on the farm, cantering around in the pasture, jumping logs and stuff."

"What about Secret Place?" Mary asked in a whisper, because the girls always whispered when they talked about Secret Place.

"Well, yeah," Jody said, "but it's still not anything like a horse show!"

"Jody, you'll see. You just leave it to me. We'll go get Willie and see if he'll take us to town to the feed store. That's where I've seen all the flyers about horse shows!" And off she flew across the pasture.

"But Willie's milking the cows! You know he doesn't like to be bothered when he's milking!" Jody yelled after her.

But Mary ran on, Finnegan yipping with excitement close behind.

The big pasture belonged to Mr. Robert McMurray, a very successful dairy farmer who didn't really like ponies all that much. But he had a little white horse stable with a green-shingled roof where the carriage horses used to be kept, and it wasn't very good for any other use. Jody's father often helped Mr. McMurray with building projects, so he generously allowed the girls to use the two stalls inside the stable. Mr. McMurray's ancient cowhand, Willie, had come up with the idea that if the cows ever got out of their pasture, Mary and Jody would be called upon to help Finnegan round them up with Lady and Gypsy - an exciting prospect indeed for the two girls, but one which so far, to their great disappointment, had not been necessary.

The girls named the little white barn Lucky Foot Stable because of the lucky white rabbit's foot they found inside one of the stalls while raking and sweeping them out on the first day. They promptly hung it over the stable door in the middle of an upside down horseshoe.

"Jody, you always hang a horseshoe upside down to keep the luck from running out," Mary had announced matter-of-factly while the girls swept and cleaned and

painted and scrubbed until the little stable became a neat and cozy home for Lady and Gypsy Amber.

Now Mary ran as fast as she could past the open doors of Lucky Foot, around the corner, through the milk house, and into the dairy barn. The cows lifted their heads in alarm at the sight of her flying by in search of Willie.

"What the..." Willie exclaimed, unbending himself creakily from a cow's udder as Mary stopped dead, breathless.

"Willie, Willie! Do you remember the other day when you said you had to go to the feed store today to get some salt blocks for the cows?"

Willie scratched his ear with a gnarly finger. "I guess I said somethin' like that, why?"

"Well, me and Jody want to come with you. Can we, please?" Mary beseeched.

Willie bent over again to wash a cow's teat, thinking over the question, while Mary hopped from one foot to the other waiting for his reply. If there was one thing Mary knew about Willie, it was that he never answered anything too quickly and sometimes not at all. Finally Willie turned his head without having to stand up and strain his back. "I reckon there's room in the truck, if you go over and clear the front seat off."

"Oh, thank you, Willie! We'll clear it off the best ever!" she exclaimed, and out the door she ran, leaving Willie shaking his head as he put the milkers on another cow.