

## Welcome

“You’re right, Jody, Star of Wonder is the perfect name for him,” Mary whispered as they gazed at the newborn foal sleeping peacefully in the straw. “Look, the star is exactly in the middle of his forehead, just like his father’s. It even has five points, like a real star. And it’s a wonder that he’s here!”

“I know,” replied Jody. “I still can’t believe we didn’t figure it out. Lady was getting so fat and grumpy and I didn’t know why!”

Mary and Jody sat side by side on the thick bed of straw in Lady’s stall at Lucky Foot Stable, in awe at the gift that had been given them on this cold clear Christmas morning. Colonel Sanders, the old white barn rooster, ruffled his feathers and peered down from his roost on the top board of Lady’s stall while Gypsy Amber, Mary’s pony, hung her head over the stall next door and nickered softly as if to say, “Welcome, Star of Wonder.”

“Mary, look, under the stall door!” Jody giggled. “Poor Finnegan wants to come in and see what’s happening!”

A black nose and two front paws were all that could be seen of Finnegan, the farm’s herding dog, as he snuffled and scratched at the packed clay under the door.

“Maybe we should let him in,” Mary said sympathetically. “After all, he is the one who woke us up to tell us about the baby!”

Mary and Jody were “epic friends” brought together by the love of their two ponies. They had camped out in the stable overnight on Christmas Eve trying to stay awake until midnight to

hear the animals speak, a legend that Mary had read about in one of her many books. But they had both fallen asleep just before the stroke of twelve, only to be awakened in the morning by Finnegan's whining and scratching at Lady's stall door. When Mary got up to investigate, she experienced the shock of her life at the completely unexpected sight of the black and white foal struggling to stand on his spindly legs as Lady, his proud mother, gently licked the top of his head.

"Ok, Finnegan, you can come in if you promise to be quiet and calm and not wake the baby!" Mary giggled, carefully opening the stall door. Finnegan's whole body wagged as he entered the stall, but upon seeing the sleeping foal, he stopped in his tracks, pricked up his ears, and cocked his head as if to say, "What in the world is that?" Mary and Jody covered their mouths to keep from laughing out loud at the look on the dog's face.

"Finney, meet Star of Wonder. We know you weren't expecting him, and neither were we, but he's here and we're going to help Lady take care of him," Mary explained.

Lady snorted and pinned her ears back at the sight of the intruder, and Finnegan took a step back, not sure what to do.

"Lady, it's alright -- you know Finnegan! He's not going to hurt Star. He just wants to see him," Jody said, petting the hapless dog to show Lady that he was no threat. Lady shook her head up and down and extended her nose for Finnegan to sniff, and they were friends again.

"Mary, I just thought of something!" Jody exclaimed. "I don't know what time it is, but I bet it's almost milking time. We've got to get Willie!"

Willie was the old cowhand on Mr. McMurray's dairy farm where Jody and Mary kept the ponies. While he spent most of his time taking care of the cows, he sometimes helped the

girls with the ponies -- like the time that past spring when he hauled Lady to a horse show in the back of his old red pickup truck. The girls were now gazing at the result of that trip, when Lady had gotten herself into a paddock with a beautiful black stallion.

“You’re right, Jode. I’ll go see if he’s here yet!” Mary started to jump up in her usual way, but remembering to be quiet around the foal, she raised herself gently from the straw. Before she reached the stall door, she was greeted by a familiar voice.

“Well, what in tarnation do we have here?” Willie said, looking through the open door and tugging on his ear lobe.

“Willie! I was just coming to get you! It’s a foal! Lady had a baby! We didn’t even know! We fell asleep before midnight, and Finney woke us up this morning, and here he was in the stall!” Mary exclaimed all in one breath.

“Hmph,” Willie said, taking off his hat and scratching the side of his head.

“Willie, is that all you have to say? Isn’t it a miracle?” Jody whispered.

“A miracle? I don’t know about that,” Willie smiled. “I reckon I can figure out how it happened.”

“Oh, Willie, we did figure out how it happened. I mean, we knew Lady was in the paddock with the stallion at the horse show, but we just never thought about it -- even when Lady was getting all fat and lazy!” Jody continued.

“Willie, you don’t even look surprised!” Mary said suspiciously. “Willie -- you knew all along, didn’t you? You knew and you didn’t tell us!”

“Hmph,” Willie replied with a hint of a smile playing on his lips.

“Well, if you wanted us to be surprised, you did a good job!” Jody cried. “We were surprised, alright!”

“Now, who do you think has been givin’ that old plug extra grain and makin’ sure she was gettin’ all the hay she needed to make sure that baby was growin’ the way it should in her belly?” Willie asked. Normally Jody would be offended at Willie calling Lady an “old plug,” but she was still trying to absorb the fact that Willie knew about Star all along.

“Willie, guess what we named him?” Mary said, forgetting to be mad at Willie for keeping such a big secret.

“You named him already?”

“Of course, we’ve been in here with him for an hour!” Mary exclaimed. “When we were trying to stay awake last night to hear the animals talk, we decided to sing Christmas carols, and the one we knew the words to was *We Three Kings*. So we sang it, and the chorus goes, ‘Star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright.’ So since he has that perfect bright star, and he’s such a wonder, we named him Star of Wonder -- Star for short. And it was all Jody’s idea,” she continued generously.

Just as if Star of Wonder had heard his name called, he raised his head from the straw and blinked, first at Mary, then at Jody, and finally at Willie before raising himself to a more upright position. He blinked again, shook his head, and blew through his nose. Then, just as Lady had done, he stretched his neck and offered his muzzle for Finnegan to sniff.

“He’s a right cheeky thing, ain’t he?” Willie chuckled.

“Look, he’s trying to get up again!” Jody giggled.

The gangly foal stretched out his front legs in the straw and raised himself up as far as he could, trying to push off with his hindquarters. Wobbling to and fro, he managed to get his rear

end off the ground just long enough to lose his balance and flop back down on his side.

“You girls move out of the way and give him some more room,” Willie instructed. “He may look small, but if he lands on you, you’re gonna know it.”

“But Willie, can’t we help him? If Jody gets on one side and me on the other, we could help him up!” Mary exclaimed.

“You just let him get up on his own,” Willie said. “He’ll get it in a minute. He already know how to stand, he’s just got to figure it out.”

So Mary and Jody backed up against the stall boards while the determined foal tried once again to get his impossibly fragile legs under him. As he rocked back and forth, Lady nickered her encouragement and nuzzled him gently until he finally stood, legs splayed but sturdy enough to help him stay up. Now he only had to turn himself around far enough to get his muzzle under Lady’s belly where the nourishing first milk was. As if Lady knew he would have difficulty with that maneuver, she turned her own body around to accommodate him.

“He’s already nursed once, Willie. We watched him.” Mary said.

“I see he’s got the stallion’s black color but Lady’s white patches across his withers. And look at those white stockings all the way up to his knees and hocks. He’s gonna be a real looker,” Willie said admiringly.

The foal felt along Lady’s side with his muzzle, pushing and snuffling, trying to find the right spot, but he couldn’t quite remember where he had nursed only an hour before.

“Oh, Willie, can’t we help him now? He just needs a little guidance,” Jody implored.

“Well, I reckon it couldn’t hurt. Just push his head down a little and guide his mouth up to her udder, and then he’ll get the picture.”

The girls almost ran into each other in their eagerness to help the foal find Lady's milk. Mary stood back in deference to the fact that Lady was Jody's pony but braced herself against Star's body to help him stand while Jody guided his muzzle low enough to find Lady's udder, swollen with milk. Then all was quiet except for the sounds of suckling as the foal took to his task with enthusiasm. Willie, watching silently from the stall door, suddenly turned away.

"Well, I've had enough of this foolishness," he said gruffly, rubbing his gnarly hand across his eyes. "Got to get to the barn. It'll be milkin' time before you know it."