

POTZ & PANZ

AND THE BIG SCREEN DREAM

A BARNYARD WESTERN ADVENTURE — BOOK ONE



GINA BAILEY

**POTZ & PANZ AND THE
BIG SCREEN DREAM**



A Barnyard Western Adventure

The Potz & Panz Barn Stories

Book One — Potz & Panz and the Big Screen Dream

Book Two — Coming Soon

Book Three — Coming Soon

Book Four — Coming Soon

**POTZ & PANZ AND THE
BIG SCREEN DREAM**



A Barnyard Western Adventure

Book One of The Potz & Panz Barn Stories

By Gina Bailey

Gold Touch Brands LLC
Richmond, Virginia

Potz & Panz and the Big Screen Dream

Book One of The Potz & Panz Barn Stories

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*For the ones who remember,
and the ones who make the remembering possible.*



*"No horse story begins with the race.
It begins with the feet."*

— Panz

"The barn wall is waiting."

— Potz

THE BARN CREW

— Characters of the Old Red Barn —



POTZ — A retired racehorse with a gift for imagination and an appetite for drama. He believes the barn wall deserves stories and refuses to stop believing it until it gets them.

PANZ — A retired racehorse with a memory like old leather — worn smooth in the right places and still strong where it counts. He says what is true even when it isn't welcome.

OLD HANK — The rancher. A man who listens with his hands and says everything that matters in two words or fewer.

ELLIE — Old Hank's granddaughter. She brings the modern world to the barn door with patience and good humor.

CLUCK MORRIS — The rooster. Self-appointed inspector, announcer, sheriff, deputy, and judge of most things he has not been asked to judge. Permanent occupant of the official bucket.

MABEL — The barn cat. She arrived without invitation, stayed without apology, and has been the most reliable ruling authority ever since.

BOOTS McGRAW — The old ranch dog. He has seen enough to know which arguments to enter. His opinions arrive late and land exactly right.

DAISY BELL — The cow. She has a bell, a soft voice, and a gift for walking directly to the heart of a thing while everyone else is still checking the saddle straps.

OLD GHOST — The goat. He chews things. Most of them are objects. Occasionally one is a good idea.

TICK & TACK — The barn mice. They operate as a pair, finish each other's sentences, and have strong feelings about cheese.

SILVER — The young goat. Still figuring out which things are worth keeping and which are worth chewing.

FLASH — A turtle of few words and ancient patience. He carries his home on his back. Nothing sticks because nothing needs to — he simply outlasts it.

WHISKERS — The old barn cat. She arrived as a stray kitten during a thunderstorm and has lived in the rafters ever since. She knows every crack, every board, every mouse tunnel. She speaks rarely, but when she does, the barn listens.

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A Note from the Author



This book started the way most true things start — with a quiet moment that refused to stay quiet.

I was thinking about horses. About the particular kind of patience a horse has when it is waiting for something it believes is worth waiting for. About what it would mean for an animal who had run hard all its life to stop running and find that the barn — the still, wooden, hay-smelling barn — was the most interesting place it had ever been.

Potz and Panz arrived first. Then Cluck, who arrived as though he had always been there and had simply been overlooked. Then Mabel, who makes no apologies for her opinions. Then Boots, who carries old patience the way a good saddle carries long miles.

The barn in this story is a real kind of place. Not a specific barn — but the kind of barn that exists in the part of American life where people still repair things instead of replacing them, where animals earn their characters over years of honest work, and where a good story told in the right light is worth every minute of the telling.

These are the stories Potz and Panz remembered. I just wrote them down.

I hope they find you in a good light.

— Gina Bailey

Richmond, Virginia, 2026

How This Book Is Organized



Potz & Panz and the Big Screen Dream is the first book in The Potz & Panz Barn Stories series. The sixteen chapters are grouped into four parts, each available as a standalone or as part of the complete volume.

Part One — The Barn and What Came Before

Chapters 1–4 | Available individually

Potz discovers boredom, the barn wall, and the word ‘televisor.’ The barn crew gathers. Old stories begin arriving.

Part Two — The Stories That Found Them

Chapters 5–8 | Available individually

Outlaws, gold miners, handsome saddles, and jumping beans. Every memory has a story.

Part Three — The Closer It Gets

Chapters 9–12 | Available individually

A great train race. A question of speed. A gunfighter's horseshoe. A reward that came home.

Part Four — The Wall That Waited

Chapters 13–16 | Available individually

The television arrives. The barn gathers. The screen finally lights up.

CHAPTER ONE

The Boredest Horses in the Barn

Potz had been staring at the very same knot in the weathered barn wall for exactly twenty-three minutes, and his eyes were beginning to water. It was a stubborn, gnarly thing, that knot. It was situated about four feet off the straw-strewn floor, right where the rough-hewn pine boards of his stall met the upright post. In the dim, amber gloom of the afternoon, the knot was the only thing that didn't move, which made it the most interesting thing in the entire world to a horse with nothing else to do.

At first, when the sun was high and casting a sharp yellow square through the high clerestory window, the knot had looked remarkably like a freshly baked buttermilk biscuit—the kind Old Hank sometimes brought out in his pocket, smelling of lard and woodsmoke, with a golden-brown crust that flaked off in delicious, salty crumbs. Potz had licked his chops, his jaw moving in a slow, hopeful chew, imagining the rich taste of flour and butter. But as the minutes ticked by and the shadows in the barn began to stretch, the biscuit seemed to rise and expand. The grain of the wood swirled around it like cold, high-altitude winds, and suddenly, the biscuit was gone. In its place stood a majestic mountain, its peak capped with a crust of dried pine sap that gleamed like eternal snow in the high Sierras. It was a lonely mountain, the kind a brave stallion might climb to bugle his defiance at the moon.

But then, near the end of his long vigil, as the sun began to lean heavily through the vertical cracks between the boards, casting long, dusty beams across the barn floor, the mountain underwent one final, miraculous transformation. The light struck the curved edge of the knot just so, throwing a deep shadow beneath its rounded crown. Potz gasped softly, his nostrils flaring. It was a cowboy hat. Not just any hat, either, but a fine, high-crowned Stetson, tilted rakishly to one side, just like the one worn by the daring riders who used to gallop through the fairgrounds in the golden days of his youth. It was a hat that spoke of adventures, of long cattle drives under starlit skies, and of dusty trails that led to the edge of the world.

"It's a Stetson, Panz," Potz whispered, his voice hushed with a reverence usually reserved for fresh oats. "A real, high-crowned beauty. If I could just reach my nose through the boards, I bet I could flip it right onto my ears."

Panz stood in the very next stall, his dark bay coat gleaming like polished mahogany in the filtered light. He did not turn his head. He did not even twitch his ears, though a

large bluebottle fly was currently contemplating a landing near his left temple. Panz possessed the calm, stoic expression of a horse who had seen far too much human foolishness, and far too many of Potz's sudden enthusiasms, to be easily rattled. He let out a long, slow breath through his nostrils, a sound like dry autumn leaves scraping across a gravel road.

"It is a knot, Potz," Panz said. His voice was a deep, gravelly baritone, dry as a salt flat and twice as steady. "It was a knot yesterday when the rain was coming down, it was a knot this morning when the rooster woke us, and it will be a knot tonight when Hank shuts the big double doors. It is a piece of pine wood that died about forty years ago, and it has absolutely no intention of becoming a hat."

Potz sighed, a heavy, dramatic sound that rustled the straw around his hooves. He lowered his head, letting his chin rest for a moment on the smooth top rail of the stall gate. "That is the least imaginative answer available, Panz. It's downright depressing. Here we are, two of the finest, most experienced horses in the territory, and we're reduced to arguing with pine boards. Retirement is heavy. It's like carrying an extra sack of flour on your back, only the sack is filled with nothing but hours."

Panz shifted his weight from one hind leg to the other, his iron shoes making a dull, familiar clink against the hard-packed dirt floor. "Retirement is quiet, Potz. And quiet is what you want when your joints start to sing a song of their own every time the weather changes. You should be grateful. No plows to pull, no saddlebags to carry, no quick turns on rocky ridges. Just sweet alfalfa and dry straw."

"Quiet is just boredom with manners," Potz grumbled, tossing his head so his forelock flopped into his eyes. "It's boredom dressed up in a clean shirt and sitting on the porch. I don't want manners, Panz. I want a bit of dust. I want to hear a crowd hollering. I want to feel the ground shaking under my feet again."

Before Panz could offer another piece of his sensible, unyielding philosophy, a sudden, sharp burst of sound shattered the afternoon stillness. It didn't come from the barn, but from the ranch house, situated some fifty yards away across the dusty yard. It was a wild, chaotic jumble of noises—the frantic, rhythmic thudding of galloping hooves, the high-pitched wail of a fiddle playing a fast, bouncy tune, a sudden shout of triumph, and then, cutting through the din, the loud, gravelly voice of Old Hank himself.

"Ellie! Ellie, hand me that television clicker! The picture's gone all fuzzy, and the horse is running sideways!"

In the barn, the effect was instantaneous. Potz froze, his ears instantly snapping forward like twin compass needles pointing toward the house. The pine knot, the Stetson, the biscuit, and the mountain all lost their magic in a single heartbeat. A new

word had entered the barn, a strange, heavy, three-syllable word that seemed to kick open a door that had been shut for years.

"A televisor," Potz whispered, his eyes wide with a sudden, burning curiosity. "Panz, did you hear that? Hank called it a televisor. What do you suppose that is? Is it a new kind of saddle? Maybe one with silver studs and a deep seat that makes a man feel like a king? Or is it a wagon? One of those fancy new-fangled ones that don't need horses, the ones that go screeching down the road smelling of grease and bad intentions?"

Panz's ears twitched now, a subtle sign that his interest had been piqued, though he would rather have died than admit it. He turned his head slowly, looking at Potz through the wooden slats of the partition. "I have never heard of a televisor. And if Hank is shouting at it, it is likely something that breaks easily and costs more than a good plow."

"Maybe it's a ghost window," Potz suggested, his voice dropping to a thrilled murmur. "A window you can carry around in your pocket, and when you look through it, you don't see the corral or the water trough, but you see things that happened miles away, or years ago. Or maybe... maybe it's a thunder bucket! A big iron tub that catches the lightning and holds it so you can read the newspaper after dark!"

"A thunder bucket," Panz repeated, his tone dry enough to ignite dry grass. "Poz, your mind is like a wild colt that's spent too much time in the locoweed. There is no such thing as a thunder bucket, and if there were, Hank would be the last man on earth to keep one in his parlor. He's afraid of his own shadow when the clouds gather."

"Unknown things are where I do my finest thinking, Panz!" Potz declared, puffing out his chest and standing as tall as his old shoulders would allow.

"And they are where I do most of my worrying," a new voice chimed in.

It was Mabel, the practical, sharp-tongued black-and-white barn cat. She had been napping on the high tack shelf above the harness hooks, curled into a neat, furry crescent. The sudden noise from the ranch house had clearly interrupted her third afternoon nap, and she was not pleased about it. She stood up, stretching her front legs forward until her claws clicked against the cedar wood, then arched her back into a high, black-and-white ridge before leaping gracefully down onto the top of Panz's stall door. She sat there, her tail wrapped neatly around her paws, her green eyes glittering with a mixture of amusement and disdain.

"I can tell you exactly what a televisor is, since I am the only one in this drafty establishment who actually ventures beyond the threshold of the human house,"

Mabel said, licking one white paw with meticulous care. "It is not a saddle, Potz, though I'm sure your backside would find a way to complain about it if it were. And it is certainly not a thunder bucket. It is a large, heavy wooden box that sits in the corner of the parlor, right next to Hank's favorite armchair. It has a big glass front, like a window that's gone cloudy, and when Hank turns the little brass knob, the glass begins to glow with a strange, pale blue light."

"A glowing window!" Potz crowed, looking triumphantly at Panz. "I told you! A ghost window!"

"Let me finish, you oversized bundle of hay," Mabel snapped, her whiskers twitching. "It doesn't just glow. It talks. It sings. It makes the sounds of guns firing, trains whistling, and people shouting. And the most remarkable thing about it is what it does to the humans. When that box is glowing, Hank and Ellie will sit there, perfectly still, staring at it for hours. They don't move a muscle, except to put a piece of salt-pork or a biscuit into their mouths. They look like they've been stuffed by a taxidermist."

Potz's jaw literally dropped. "Anything that can make humans sit still for more than five minutes must be incredibly powerful," he said, his voice hushed. "I've seen Hank try to sit on the porch, and he's up every three minutes to chase a chicken, spit over the rail, or scratch his knee. If that box can freeze him in place, it must be magic."

"That," Mabel said, looking down at Potz with a cool, appraisal, "is the very first intelligent thing you have said all morning. Though, to be fair, the competition was practically nonexistent."

From the high rafters above, a low, dusty purr drifted down, followed by the soft, dry rustle of old hay.

"The box is not magic," a soft, raspy voice murmured. "It is only a mirror that remembers."

Every animal in the barn looked up. High in the darkest, dustiest corner of the rafters, where the ancient cedar beams crossed to support the tin roof, a pair of long, silver-grey whiskers caught the thin sliver of sunlight. It was Whiskers. She was the oldest animal on the ranch, older even than the barn itself, some said. She had arrived as a tiny, shivering grey stray kitten during a terrifying midnight thunderstorm many, many years ago, when Old Hank was just a young man with a single horse and a dream of a ranch. Hank had found her tucked inside a wet leather saddle blanket, her tiny body shaking with cold. He had dried her near the woodstove, fed her warm milk from a spoon, and she had lived in the barn ever since. She knew every crack in the cedar siding, every knot in the pine boards, and every secret mouse tunnel that wound through the foundations. She rarely came down from her high perch, preferring to

watch the world go by with the quiet, watchful patience of an elder. She spoke very rarely, but when she did, even the horses stopped to listen.

"A mirror that remembers," Potz repeated, his voice filled with wonder. "What does it remember, Whiskers?"

"It remembers the world before it got so small," Whiskers said, her voice like the dry wind rustling through winter sagebrush. "It remembers the dust of the trail, the sound of the great herds, and the men who rode them. It shows them what they used to be, so they can pretend they are still there."

"Maybe the wall is lonely," a gentle voice suggested from the adjacent pen.

Daisy Bell, the sweet-tempered Jersey cow, leaned her soft, white-rimmed muzzle over the railing of her pen. Her large, dark eyes, soft as velvet and filled with a deep, philosophical calm, looked at the plain, unadorned boards of the barn wall. She chewed her cud with a slow, rhythmic, comforting sound—*crunch, slide, crunch*—that always made the barn feel a little warmer.

"The wall has been staring at nothing but us for twenty years," Daisy Bell continued, her voice a soothing, low melodic hum. "And we are very nice, of course, but we are not very exciting. Perhaps the wall would like to see something else. Perhaps it is waiting for its own pictures."

Potz fell in love with this idea immediately. "Yes! Exactly, Daisy! The wall is lonely! It wants to see the high country again. It wants to see the grass waving in the wind. Panz, look at the wall! Doesn't it look like it's waiting for something?"

Panz stared at the rough wooden boards. He looked at the knot, then at the empty space above it, then back at Potz. "The wall is waiting for Old Hank to paint it, which he has promised to do every spring since the turn of the century. It is not lonely, Potz. It is wood. It has no feelings, no dreams, and certainly no desire to see a picture show."

Yet, even as Panz spoke, he had to admit—only to himself, of course—that the barn seemed different today. The air felt charged, heavy with the weight of things half-remembered. The sound from the ranch house seemed to be drawing closer, the vibrations of the fictional hoofbeats traveling through the dry soil, up through the foundations, and into the very soles of their hooves.

From across the yard, Hank's voice drifted through the open door once more, louder this time, as if he had opened the window to let in a breeze. "This old televisor still brings back the good ones, Ellie! Just look at that bay stallion go! That's a real horse. Not like these pasture ornaments we've got in the barn now."

Potz stepped closer to the partition, his chest pressing against the solid wood. "Panz," he whispered, his voice trembling with a sudden, wild hope. "Did you hear that? He's talking about a bay stallion. Panz... what if that box brings back horse stories? Our stories? What if it knows about the time we raced the wind at the fairgrounds? What if it knows about the big cattle drive of '98?"

Panz's ears flicked back, then forward again. He looked down at his own dark hooves, buried in the golden straw. "That is not how things work, Potz. The humans do not care about our memories. They only care about the stories they can sell for a nickel at the picture house. Our stories belong to us. They are written in the dirt we walked on, not in some glowing box."

But despite his stern words, Panz didn't sound entirely convinced. His voice had lost some of its sharp, skeptical edge, replaced by a quiet, reflective tone that Potz recognized instantly. The memories were there, just beneath the surface, waiting for a single spark to set them alight.

"A horse story deserves a screen," Potz said, his eyes shining as he looked at the blank barn wall. He could almost see it now—the wall glowing with the bright, vivid colors of the fairgrounds, the white flags snapping in the prairie breeze, the thick clouds of yellow dust rising from the track, the roaring of the crowd, and all those glorious, thundering moments that nobody in the barn believed properly because they had occurred before Mabel was a kitten or Daisy was a calf. "It deserves a proper audience. It deserves to be seen!"

"A horse story deserves accuracy first," Panz retorted, though there was a soft tug at the corner of his mouth. "And if your memory is the one doing the drawing, the screen will need to be twice as wide just to fit your ego."

"Accuracy is a very fine thing," Potz agreed magnanimously, "especially if it makes me look good. If the television wants to show me stumbling, it can just skip that part and show the gallop."

"If noise worked, Cluck would own the entire county," a dry, gravelly voice rasped from the doorway.

Boots McGraw, the old sheepdog, slowly dragged his weary body across the threshold of the barn. He was a shaggy, grey-and-white beast, smelling strongly of trail dust, old leather, and greasewood. One of his ears had been torn in a long-forgotten argument with a coyote, and his left eye was clouded with a milky film, but his right eye was as sharp and clear as a winter sky. He let out a long, creaky sigh as he collapsed onto his favorite pile of empty burlap sacks near the harness rack, resting his heavy chin on his front paws.

"I've spent ten years listening to humans shout at things that aren't there," Boots said, blinking his good eye. "And I've spent twelve years listening to Potz tell stories where he was eight feet tall and breathed fire. If that glowing box in the parlor is anything like Potz, it's ninety percent wind and ten percent wool."

"Do you know the televisor, Boots?" Potz asked eagerly, leaning his head over his stall door. "Have you seen it?"

"I've seen the back of it," Boots muttered. "It's full of dust and hot copper wire. Hank dropped his pipe behind it last Tuesday and I had to squeeze my nose under there to get it out. Tasted like burnt soot. But I know stories, Potz. I've tracked them from here to the Sweetwater. And I know that most of your stories need a witness with a very strong stomach and a short memory."

Before Potz could protest this slander, a sudden, bright burst of feathers and noise erupted from the center of the aisle.

"Make way! Make way for the official inspector!"

It was Cluck Morris, the rooster. He was a magnificent, absurd creature, with feathers the color of a fresh prairie sunset and a bright red comb that sat on his head like a crumpled crown. He was incredibly self-important, convinced that the entire ranch revolved around his morning crow, and he had a terrible habit of interrupting every conversation with a loud, theatrical squawk. He hopped onto a rusted metal bucket in the center of the aisle, puffing out his chest until he looked twice his actual size.

"I hereby declare myself the Temporary Inspector of Mysterious Glowing Objects and Televisor-Related Phenomena!" Cluck announced, flapping his wings dramatically. "As the undisputed leader of the poultry yard and the sole keeper of the morning light, it is my solemn duty to ensure that this... this *televisor* does not interfere with the natural order of the sunrise!"

Mabel didn't even open her eyes. "That title is entirely imaginary, Cluck. Just like your courage when the ranch cat walks by."

"Most great offices begin that way," Cluck huffed, straightening his feathers with a haughty peck. "One must have vision! One must have style! If the humans have a box that glows, then I must inspect it. I shall stand upon the windowsill and peer through the glass! I shall draft a report!"

Panz shook his head, his ears flattening slightly. "This explains far too much about the world. Give a chicken a bucket, and suddenly he's a senator."

From the depths of the dry feed bin, two tiny, whisker-twitching faces peeked out. They were Tick and Tack, the two field mice who had moved into the barn during the great oat harvest of '24 and had refused to leave ever since. They were inseparable, always speaking in a frantic, overlapping rush, as if they were running a race where the prize was the last word.

"Did somebody say glowing?" Tick squeaked, his front paws patting his chest.

"Glowing and buzzing! Like a big blue beetle!" Tack added, his ears vibrating.

"We saw the light through the parlor window!" Tick said.

"It looked like a blue ghost!" Tack chimed in. "A ghost that smelled of warm glass!"

"And copper!"

"And old newspapers!"

"Be quiet, you two," Mabel hissed, though she didn't move. "You're giving me a headache, and I've already had three of those today."

Nearby, Old Ghost, the ancient white goat with a beard like a bunch of dry grass, drifted out from the shadow of the tack room. He was completely unimpressed by the excitement. He had a small piece of blue denim overalls hanging from the side of his mouth, which he was chewing with a slow, grinding motion that sounded like gravel being crushed.

"I've eaten things that glowed," Old Ghost remarked, his yellow, horizontal-slit eyes staring blankly at the wall. "They don't taste like much. Mostly lead paint and disappointment. If you want a real story, talk to the leather. It's got more flavor."

The barn was now fully awake, the air thick with the murmur of voices, the rustle of straw, and the steady, comforting smell of animals who had spent their lives together.

It was at this moment, with the chatter of the barn reaching a steady hum, that a very slow, scratching sound began near the bottom of the tack room door. It was a sound of ancient patience, of a heavy weight being dragged millimetre by millimetre across the packed dirt floor.

From the dark, dusty space beneath the lowest grain shelf, a rounded, dark dome emerged. It was a shell, thick and patterned with thirteen yellow-and-brown plates that looked like the weathered tiles of an old Spanish mission roof. It was Flash, the ancient box turtle. He was the oldest resident of the ground level, carrying his house on his back wherever he went. His legs were short, scaly, and thick, ending in ancient, blunt claws that moved with a careful, meditative rhythm. Slowly, with a deliberation

that made the horses look like lightning, Flash extended his wrinkled, leathery neck. His skin was the color of old river mud, and his eyes, hooded by heavy, wise eyelids, blinked with an ancient, unhurried calm.

He stopped in the middle of the aisle, right between Panz's stall and the feed bin. It took him nearly three minutes to adjust his position so that he was facing the gathered animals. He took a long, slow breath, his wrinkled throat expanding and contracting with a soft, whistling sigh.

"Two... cents," Flash said. His voice was a deep, raspy whisper, so slow that each word seemed to have its own time zone, separated by long, thoughtful pauses. "The... world... is... full... of... screens. But... nothing... sticks... to... a... shell. A... shell... keeps... the... weather... out. A... box... only... keeps... the... humans... in."

Potz leaned down, his large nostrils blowing a soft puff of warm air that ruffled the dust around the turtle's shell. Flash did not pull his head back; he merely closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again, unbothered.

"But Flash," Potz said, speaking slowly in an attempt to match the turtle's pace. "The box shows stories. It shows horses running. It shows things that happened long ago."

"Stories," Flash whispered, his head turning a fraction of an inch toward the open barn door where the rain was starting to fall. "Stories... are... like... mud. If... you... move... too... fast... you... get... covered... in... them. If... you... move... slowly... you... can... walk... right... through... and... keep... your... shell... clean."

"Well, I for one have no intention of keeping my shell clean if it means sitting in a corner all day," Cluck Morris proclaimed, hopping off his bucket and strutting toward the door. "Adventure requires action! It requires a splash! It requires—"

"A good soaking, if you don't get out of the doorway," Mabel interrupted dryly.

The barn went quiet as the rain outside grew heavier, turning the dusty yard into a sheet of glistening grey. Puddles began to gather near the threshold, shining like small, dark, polished mirrors. Potz looked into the nearest puddle and saw his own reflection. His coat was greyed around the muzzle, his eyes wise but tired. His hooves were wide and flat, showing the wear of thousands of miles of rocky trails. They looked older than he felt inside.

From the ranch house, Old Hank's voice rose again, clear and appreciative. "Listen to that horse move, Ellie! Clean feet, steady step. That one knows exactly where to land. You can hear the quality in the shoe."

Potz looked at Panz. Panz looked down at the dark, shining puddles near the door.

"The barn has its first doorway," Potz whispered, his voice trembling with excitement. "Look at the puddles, Panz. They're like little windows. They're showing us the road back."

Potz lowered his head, stretching his neck so he could inspect his own front hooves in the cool, grey reflection of the puddle. He turned his foot slightly, looking at the dull iron shoe.

"Panz," Potz asked, his voice suddenly small and tentative, like a colt asking for directions. "Were my feet ever pretty?"

Panz closed his eyes, a tiny, fond smile touching his nostrils.

Boots McGraw let out a long, theatrical groan from his pile of burlap sacks, burying his nose beneath his shaggy tail. Mabel leaned forward on the stall rail, her green eyes shining as she smiled a secret cat smile.

And from the high, dark rafters, Whiskers' long grey whiskers twitched as she watched the barn go completely silent, waiting for the first great memory to step out of the shadows and onto the dry straw.

"Your feet," Panz said softly, opening his eyes to look at his old friend, "were once the talk of three counties. But only because you spent so much time looking at them instead of the road."

And with those words, the grey rain outside seemed to fade, and the smell of the fairgrounds of thirty years ago—the scent of fresh pine shavings, hot apple pies, and polished leather—flooded into the old barn.



CHAPTER TWO

The Prettiest Feet on a Filly He Ever Saw

The rain had been falling since long before the first pale light of dawn had managed to filter through the cracks of the old red barn. It was not a violent storm, but rather a slow, determined summer drizzle that seemed to have settled in for a long stay. The constant, rhythmic drumming on the rusted tin roof created a low, vibrating hum that filled the high rafters and made the entire barn feel like the inside of a great, hollow fiddle. Outside, the world had softened into shades of slate grey and misty green. The dirt yard of the ranch had turned into a muddy canvas, and along the threshold of the wide double doors, a neat row of puddles had formed, catching the grey light and turning the doorway into a shimmering line of small, liquid mirrors.

Inside his stall, Potz shifted his weight. He lifted his left front hoof, inspected it with a critical, down-turned eye, and then set it back down into the clean, golden straw with a soft rustle. A moment later, he lifted his right front hoof, rotating his ankle slightly as if trying to catch the light on the curve of his worn iron shoe.

"I am trying to discover," Potz announced to the empty air, "whether age has improved my general foot arrangement, or if they have simply become more... distinguished. What do you think, Panz? Do you find that my left fetlock has acquired a certain classic dignity over the years?"

Panz, who was standing in the adjacent stall with his nose resting quietly on the top of the wooden partition, did not open his eyes. His dark bay coat, usually gleaming like polished mahogany, looked soft and dusty in the cool light of the rainy afternoon. He let out a long, slow breath through his nostrils, a sound like dry autumn leaves scraping across a gravel road.

"Your feet, Potz," Panz said, his voice a deep, gravelly baritone that was as steady as an oak post, "are currently attached to your legs, which is the only arrangement that matters. Feet were designed by the Almighty for three very specific purposes: standing upright when you're supposed to be standing, running when something is chasing you, and surviving whatever bad ideas you happen to have before breakfast. They were not designed for admiration, and they certainly were not designed to be stared at like they were fancy china plates on a parlor sideboard."

"That is a very narrow, unpoetic view of hoof anatomy," Potz grumbled, tossing his head so his warm brown forelock flopped over his eyes. "A horse's hooves are his foundation, Panz! They are his connection to the great, wide earth. If a horse cannot take pride in his foundation, how can he be expected to carry himself with the proper dramatic flair? A brave stallion must have a commanding presence, and a commanding presence begins at the ground."

"A commanding presence begins with a quiet mouth," Panz replied, still without opening his eyes. "And a firm grip on reality. You've been lifting and lowering those hooves for twenty minutes, Potz. If you keep it up, you're going to wear out the straw before Hank even brings the evening feed."

From his comfortable nest of burlap sacks near the tack room, Boots McGraw, the old ranch dog, let out a soft, wheezing grunt. He was a shaggy, grey-muzzled creature who had spent his youth chasing cattle and his middle years chasing rabbits, and now spent his retirement chasing the warm spots where the sun hit the barn floor. Today, there was no sun, so he had settled for the thickest pile of sacks he could find, his chin resting heavily on his front paws.

"Staring at 'em won't make 'em any younger, Potz," Boots muttered, his tail giving a single, lazy thump against the floor. "And it won't make 'em any faster, either. I've seen you run in your day, and while you had plenty of steam in the boiler, you always did have a habit of looking at your own shadow to see if it was keeping up with you."

"That was not vanity, Boots! That was tactical self-observation," Potz declared, puffing out his chest. "A good runner must always be aware of his form."

"A good runner," Panz remarked, "watches the trail, not the shadow. The shadow has never been known to trip over a rabbit hole, whereas you have a personal relationship with almost every ditch in the territory."

Before Potz could draft a suitable and dignified defense, a sudden gust of wind swept through the wet yard, carrying with it a sharp, crackling burst of sound from the open parlor window of the ranch house. It was the unmistakable, tinny voice of the television, drifting across the wet air like a tiny, distant horn.

"Clean feet, steady step!" the television voice boomed, the words jumping across the puddles and echoing faintly against the barn's hand-hewn beams. "That one knows where to land, folks! Look at that stride! Clean as a whistle and steady as a clock!"

In the barn, the effect of the voice was instantaneous. Potz froze, his ears instantly snapping forward like twin compass needles pointing toward the ranch house. Even Panz opened one dark, intelligent eye, his ears twitching back and then forward again,

catching the distant cadence of the human machine.

Panz's eyes narrowed. It was not an expression of anger, but rather the deep, inward look of a horse who had just walked into a room filled with old, familiar ghosts. The sound of those words—"clean feet, steady step"—seemed to pull at something deep in his memory, like a lead rope tugging on a halter.

"Did you hear that, Panz?" Potz whispered, his voice hushed with sudden excitement. "Clean feet, steady step! That televisor is talking about hooves! It's talking about the very thing we were discussing! Do you suppose... do you suppose the televisor is watching us right now? Do you think it saw me lifting my left front leg?"

"The televisor," Mabel the black-and-white cat said, leaping gracefully down from the high tack shelf and landing with a silent puff of dust on the top rail of Potz's stall, "does not care about your dusty old hooves, Potz. It is a one-way window, as I have explained to you three times already. It talks, but it does not listen. It shows pictures, but it is entirely blind to the straw under your nose. If it is talking about clean feet, it is likely showing one of those shiny, pampered city horses that Hank likes to gawk at—the ones that have never seen a muddy ditch or a burr in their lives."

"Staring doesn't count as footwork," Boots added from his sacks, his voice thick with sleep. "Unless you're a goose, and I've never seen a goose win a race yet, though they do plenty of staring before they hiss at you."

"Is this about me, Panz?" Potz asked, ignoring Mabel and Boots entirely, his large brown eyes fixed on his friend. "Is that television voice talking about... about the race? The one at the Fairgrounds? The big one?"

Panz let out another long sigh, his head lowering slightly as the memory took full possession of him. "It is not about you, Potz. But it is about the truth of what happened. And the truth is something you've been trying to outrun for thirty years."

"I did not outrun it," Potz said defensively. "I merely had a different perspective on the terrain."

"The terrain," Panz said, "was flat, dry, and perfectly visible to anyone who wasn't busy looking at a chestnut coat with white socks."

High above them, in the dim, cobwebbed rafters where the dust of forty summers clung to the massive pine beams, a soft, dry rustle stirred the air. It was a sound like dry leaves scraping across a stone floor. Two long, grey whiskers poked out from the shadow of a heavy cedar collar beam, followed by a pair of pale, watchful green eyes. Whiskers, the ancient grey tabby cat who had lived in the high rafters since she was a wet, shivering kitten, looked down upon the gathered animals. She rarely spoke, but

when she did, her voice carried a quiet, undeniable authority that made even the boisterous Cluck Morris hold his tongue.

"The barn," Whiskers murmured, her raspy voice drifting down through the warm, dusty air of the upper rafters, "remembers what the barn has seen. And the barn saw two young, foolish colts leave this yard with their heads high, and return with one of them covered in mud and the other covered in glory."

"I was not covered in mud!" Potz protested, though his ears went slightly back. "It was a very localized splashing!"

"It was a thorough bathing," Panz corrected.

"Tell the story, Panz," Mabel said, settling her paws beneath her chest and purring a soft, expectant purr. "I do love a story where Potz ends up in a puddle. It makes the rain outside feel so much more comfortable."

Panz shifted his weight, his iron shoes clinking against the hard-packed dirt floor, and as he began to speak, the grey afternoon in the barn seemed to dissolve. The drumming of the rain on the tin roof faded, replaced by the memory of a hot, bright September sun and the wild, chaotic music of the county fair.

Thirty years ago, the Annual Fairground Mixed Horse Race was the biggest event in the entire territory. The fairgrounds were a swirling, dizzying kaleidoscope of color, sound, and smell that could make a young horse's brain spin in his skull. The air was thick and rich, a heavy perfume of freshly planed pine shavings in the stock pens, hot apple pies cooling on long wooden tables, roasted peanuts, grease from the wagon axles, and the sweet, dizzying scent of spun apple sugar. Red and blue banners snapped smartly in the autumn breeze, and from the grandstand, the brassy notes of a community band rose and fell like the wind.

Young Potz had been nearly beside himself with excitement. His warm brown coat had been brushed until it shone like a fresh chestnut, and his mane had been neatly combed by Hank's own fingers. He couldn't keep his feet still. He danced from side to side in his temporary stall, his nostrils flaring as he took in the sights and smells, his tail arched like a flag.

"Do you smell that, Panz?" Young Potz had brassily declared, his voice high and eager. "That is the smell of victory! That is the smell of a crowd that is waiting to see the fastest horse in the valley show them how it's done!"

Young Panz stood in the stall beside him, his dark bay coat gleaming like a wet river stone. He was already wearing his racing halter, his ears pinned slightly back, not with anger, but with the intense, focused concentration of a professional. He was deeply annoyed by the poor starting-line manners of the other horses—a pair of scruffy mules who were braying at a popcorn wagon, and a wild-eyed pony who was trying to bite the wooden rail of his pen.

"The crowd," Young Panz had said, his voice already possessing that dry, gravelly edge, "is waiting for the race to start so they can go back to eating their pies. And victory doesn't smell like apple sugar, Potz. It smells like sweat, hard leather, and keeping your eyes between your own ears."

"You have no sense of the grand occasion, Panz!" Potz had laughed, tossing his head. "This is a stage! We are actors in a great drama!"

"We are draft horses and saddle stock running in a circle because humans have nothing better to do with their money," Panz replied. "Keep your eyes on the track, Potz. The south turn is dusty, and the inside rail has a soft spot near the water trough."

But Potz's eyes were already far from the track.

Just then, a hush seemed to fall over the immediate vicinity of the stables as a handler led a newcomer down the central lane. She was a chestnut filly of uncommon grace, her coat the color of a freshly polished copper kettle, with a neat, perfectly symmetrical white star right between her wide, intelligent eyes. But it was her legs and feet that stopped every horse in the lane dead in their tracks. She had four clean, matching white socks that rose exactly to her knees, and her black hooves had been oiled and polished until they gleamed like little midnight moons, reflecting the bright autumn sun with every step she took.

Her name was Miss Sunday Shoes, and she walked as if the earth had been measured and laid out specifically for her benefit. Each step was placed with a delicate, rhythmic precision, her hooves touching the dirt with a light, musical *clip-clop* that sounded like a song.

Potz's jaw had literally dropped. His ears snapped forward so hard they nearly touched at the tips, and his eyes went wide and glassy.

"Look at that, Panz," Potz whispered, his voice hushed with an awe that was almost religious. "Look at those socks. Look at those hooves. She's... she's walking on music. I've never seen a filly with such exquisite competitive foot placement."

"Eyes forward," Panz had grunted, his own ears twitching slightly as the filly passed, though he kept his head perfectly straight. "She's a horse, Potz. She has four legs and

a tail, just like the rest of us. And those polished hooves won't do her any good if she gets caught in the dust behind the mules."

"You don't understand, Panz!" Potz insisted, his head turning as he watched her handler lead her toward the starting line. "That is not just walking. That is an exhibition of supreme hoof artistry! I must study her technique. I must observe how she lifts her hocks. It is a matter of professional development."

"No horse," Panz said, his voice firm and flat, "ever lost a race from too much honesty and looking where he was going. But many a horse has lost a race from staring at a pretty filly's white socks when he should have been watching for the mud."

"That," Potz declared with a grand wave of his nose, "is an entirely untested theory. I believe a creative mind can do both."

"A creative mind," Panz muttered as the starter began to call the horses to the line, "is about to get a mouth full of dirt."

The starter's flag, a bright piece of red silk tied to a willow branch, snapped down with a sharp, clean crack.

The race began with a wild, explosive surge of energy. The ground shook beneath them as fifteen horses broke from the line in a chaotic tangle of hooves, flying dirt, and straining muscle. The roar of the fairground crowd rose into a single, deafening wall of sound that seemed to push the horses forward.

Panz ran clean. He took the inside rail immediately, his stride steady, rhythmic, and efficient, his head low and his eyes fixed on the path ahead. He didn't waste an ounce of energy on showmanship; he simply moved forward like a well-oiled machine, his iron shoes digging into the dry earth and throwing small, neat clods of dirt behind him.

Potz ran fast too. He was young, and his chest was full of thunder. The wind whistled through his mane, and the pure, intoxicating joy of speed filled his blood. He felt strong, his muscles contracting and releasing with a perfect, powerful rhythm, the world opening up before him like an endless, golden road. For a few glorious seconds, he was exactly what he had always dreamed of being—a creature of pure, unbridled speed, leaving the rest of the world in his dust.

He was running neck-and-neck with Panz as they rounded the first turn, the two of them moving like a team, their shadows stretching long across the dry grass of the infield.

"We're doing it, Panz!" Potz lunged forward, his breath hot and heavy. "We're leaving 'em all behind!"

"Watch the track," Panz grunted, his eyes never wavering from the dirt ahead.

But as they reached the backstretch, Miss Sunday Shoes made her move. She came up on the outside, her copper coat gleaming in the sun, her four white socks flashing in a beautiful, dizzying blur of speed. She wasn't straining or sweating; she seemed to be floating over the ground, her polished black hooves barely kissing the dirt before lifting again.

She drew even with Potz on his right.

Potz turned his head.

It wasn't a big turn. It wasn't a long look. It was just a glance—a single, curious peek to see if her feet really did look as pretty when she was running as they did when she was walking. He wanted to see how those white socks looked against the golden dust of the track.

"Just a quick study of her stride," Potz thought to himself.

But a fraction of a second is all the trail needs.

The fairground crowd blurred into a streak of red and blue. The track beneath Potz's hooves suddenly shifted. Panz, who had been running half a length ahead, had noticed the dark, glistening patch of ground near the old water trough three strides back and had lightly, effortlessly shifted his weight to the left, avoiding it by a matter of inches.

Potz, his head turned to the right, saw nothing but copper hair and white socks.

He hit the mud.

It was a deep, black, treacherous puddle, fed by a leaky valve on the fairground water wagon. It wasn't just wet; it was thick, greasy clay that grabbed at a horse's shoe like a cold hand. Potz's left front hoof sank three inches into the muck. The sudden resistance threw off his balance.

With a startled gasp, Potz stumbled, his chest dropping toward the ground, his nose nearly grazing the dirt. His rear legs swirled as he tried to find purchase, his hooves sliding in the slick clay. For a terrifying second, it looked like he was going to turn a complete summersault in front of the grandstand.

"Whoa!" Potz scrambled, his heart leaping into his throat. He recovered his balance with a desperate, ungraceful heave of his shoulders, stumbled again on the slippery

edge of the hole, and finally managed to find solid ground.

But the race was gone.

By the time Potz had gathered his legs beneath him and found his rhythm again, Panz had already crossed the finish line, clean and steady, half a length ahead of the rest of the field. Miss Sunday Shoes had crossed even cleaner than Panz, her white socks remarkably spotless, her head held high as she claimed the victory.

Potz limped across the line a distant fifth, his left side, his chest, and his beautiful brown face covered in thick, dripping black mud.

In the shade of the big cottonwood trees near the judge's stand, the post-race inspection was underway.

"The mud rose!" Potz had declared, his voice shaking with indignation as Hank used a handful of straw to scrape the thick clay from his shoulder. "I tell you, Panz, it was an aggressive, upwardly mobile puddle! It wasn't there when we started the race! It leaped out of the ground like a toad and grabbed my hoof!"

Boots McGraw, who had been lying under a nearby spectator wagon to escape the sun, poked his shaggy grey head out from between the wooden spokes.

"Mud don't rise, Potz," Boots had said, letting out a dry dog-laugh that sounded like a cough. "I was watching from right here, and that puddle was sitting there as quiet and peaceful as a sleeping pup until you went and stepped right in the middle of it. Mud didn't rise; you just stepped wrong with an awful lot of confidence."

"I was performing a tactical analysis of Miss Sunday Shoes' stride!" Potz insisted, his ears burning under the mud.

At the judge's stand, the committee was pinning a large, glittering blue ribbon to Miss Sunday Shoes' halter. The gold letters on the silk read: *BEST FEET AND CARE - FIRST PLACE.*

Potz had stared at the ribbon with a mixture of envy and admiration. "Look at that, Panz. She won. And her feet still look like they've never touched a road."

"Her feet are pretty," Panz had said, watching the filly being led away by her proud handler, "because she knows what they're for. She cares for them, and she uses them properly. She didn't look at you once during that run, Potz. She kept her eyes on the finish line."

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