

STORMY MISTY'S FOAL

By MARGUERITE HENRY

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to the boys and girls everywhere
whose pennies, dimes, and dollars helped restore
the wild herds on Assateague Island,
and who by their spontaneous outpouring of love
gave courage to the stricken people
of Chincoteague.



Prologue

LAND ACROSS THE WATER

In the gigantic Atlantic Ocean just off the coast of Virginia a sliver of land lies exposed to the smile of the sun and the fury of wind and tide. It almost missed being an island, for it is only inches above the sea. The early Indians who poled over from the mainland to hunt deer and otter and beaver named this wind-rumpled island *Chin-co-teague*, "the land across the water."

Today a causeway, five miles long, connects it with the eastern shore of Virginia. Sometimes, when the sea breaks loose, it swallows the causeway. Then the people on the island are wholly isolated.

But most of the time Chincoteague enjoys the protection of a neighbor island, a great long rib of white sandy hills. The Indians called it *Assa-teague*, or "outrider." They named it well, for it acts as a big brother to Chincoteague, protecting it from crashing winds and the high waves of the Atlantic.

For many years now Assateague has been preserved as a wildlife refuge for ponies and deer and migrating waterfowl. On clear days herds of the wild ponies can be seen thundering along its shores, manes and tails flying in the wind.

Assateague, then, belongs to the wild things. But Chincoteague belongs to the people—sturdy island folk who live by raising chickens and by gathering the famous Chincoteague oysters

and clams and diamond-backed terrapin. The one big joyous celebration of their year comes toward the end of July on Pony Penning Day. Then the volunteer firemen round up the wild ponies on Assateague, force them to swim the channel to Chincoteague, and pen them up for tourists and pony buyers who come from far and near. Of course, only the young colts are gentle enough to be sold. The money from the auction is used to buy fire-fighting equipment to protect the fisherfolk and chicken farmers who live on Chincoteague.

There is one family whom the firemen look upon as friendly competitors in their yearly pony sale. They are the Beebes—Grandpa and Grandma and their grandchildren, Paul and Maureen. Except for Grandma, whose father was a sea captain, they call themselves "hossmen." They are in the pony business the year around. Their place at the southern end of the island is known simply as Pony Ranch.



CHINCOTEAGUE AND ASSATEAGUE ISLANDS



STORMY MISTY'S FOAL



Chapter 1

BEFORE THE STORM

The clock on the shelf pointed to five as young Paul Beebe, his hair tousled and his eyes still full of sleep, came into the kitchen. Paul did not even glance at the clock, though it was a handsome piece, showing the bridge of a ship with a captain at the wheel. For Paul, his banty rooster was clock enough.

Grandpa Beebe was bent over the sink, noisily washing his face. He came up for air, his head cocked like a robin listening for worms.



"Just hark at that head rooster!" he grinned, his face dripping. He reached for the towel Grandma was handing him. "That banty," he went on as he mopped his face, "is better than any li'l ole tinkly alarm clock. Why, he's even more to depend on than that fancy ticker yer sea-farin' father brung us from France." He gave Grandma a playful wink. "What's more, ye never have to wind him up, and I never knowed him to sleep overtime."

"Me neither," Paul said, "even when it's cloudy."

The old man and the boy went thudding in their sock feet to the back hall, to their jackets hanging over the wash tubs and their boots standing side by side.

Grandma's voice tailed them. "Wrap up good now. Wind's bitter." She came to the doorway and looked sharply at Paul. "I got to brew some sassafras roots to perten ye up. I declare, ye look older and tireder than yer grandpa."

"Who wouldn't look tuckered out?" Grandpa asked in pride. "Paul took the midnight watch on Misty."

"This household," Grandma sputtered, "does more worritin' over Misty having a colt than if she was a queen birthin' a crown prince."

"Well, she is!" Paul exclaimed. "She's a movie queen."

"Yup," Grandpa joined in. "Name me another Chincoteague pony who's a star of a movin' picture like Misty is. And her being famous—well, it's made a heap o' difference to Pony Ranch."

Paul nodded vehemently. "Yes, Grandma. You know we sell more ponies because of her, and we can buy better fodder, and this summer I'm going to build her a fine stable and..."

"And I'll never hear the end of it!" Grandma grumbled. "Our place is a reg'lar mecca for folks comin' to see her, and when she has her colt—land o' mercy!—they'll be thicker'n oysters in a pie."

Paul and Grandpa were out the door. Grandma's sputtering bothered them no more than a mosquito before the fuzz comes off its stinger.

A faint light had begun to melt the darkness and there was a brim of dawn on the sea. The wind, blowing from the southwest in strong and frequent gusts, rippled the old dead marsh grasses until they and the waves were one.

As Grandpa and Paul hurried to the barn, a golden-furred collie leaped down from his bed in the pickup truck and came galloping to meet them.

"Hi, Skipper!" Paul gave him a rough-and-tumble greeting, but his heart wasn't in it. He caught at his grandfather's sleeve. "Grandpa!" he said, talking fast. "Buck Jackson's got some she-goats up to his place."

"So?"

"Well, if Misty should be bad off..."

"What in tarnation you gettin' at?"

"Maybe we'd ought to buy a goat, just in case..."

"In case *what?*"

"Misty couldn't give enough milk for her colt."

The old man pulled himself loose from Paul. "Get outen my way, boy. What's the sense to begin worryin' now? We got chores to do. Listen at them ponies raisin' a ruckus to be fed, and all the ducks and geese a-quackin' and a-clackin' and carryin' on. Everybody's hungry, includin' me."

"But, Grandpa!" Paul was insistent. "You yourself said April or May colts have a better chance of living than March ones."

The old man stopped in mid-stride. "It just ain't fittin' fer colts to drink goat's milk," he said gruffly. "'Specially Misty's colt." He clumped off toward the corncrib, muttering and shaking his head.

Paul skinned between the fence rails and ran toward the made-over chicken coop that was Misty's barn. He heard her whinnying in a low, rumbly tone. His heart pumping in expectancy, he unbolted her door. She came to him at once, touching nostrils as if he were another pony, then nibbling his straw-colored hair so that he couldn't see what he was looking for. Gently he pushed her away and stepped back. He looked underneath and around her. But there was no little colt lying in the straw. He looked at her sides. They were heavily rounded, just as they had been at midnight, and the night before, and the night before that.

"Surely it'll come today," Paul said to her, trying to hide his disappointment. "For a while it can live right in here with you."

But soon as school's out, I got to build us more stalls. Maureen can help."

"Help what?" came a girl's voice.



Paul turned to see his sister standing on tiptoe looking over his shoulder. "Help me pump," he added hastily.

"Paul! Maureen!" Grandpa shouted from the corncrib. "Quit lallygaggin'! Water them ponies afore they die o' thirst."

Most of Grandpa's herd were still away on winter pasture at Deep Hole on the north end of the island. There the pine trees grew in groves and the whole area was thickly underbrushed so the ponies could keep warm, out of the wind. And they could fend for themselves, living on wild kinksbush and cord grass.

But here at Pony Ranch Grandpa kept only his personal riding horses—Billy Blaze, and dependable old Watch Eyes—as well as a few half-wild ponies from Assateague. All winter long this little bunch of ragged creatures ran free out on the marshland, fenced in only by the sea. But every morning they came thundering in, manes and tails blowing like licks of flame. At the gate they neighed shrilly, demanding fresh water and an ear or two of corn. It was Paul's and Maureen's duty to pump gallons and gallons of water into an old tin wash tub and dole out the ears of corn.

"It's your turn to pump," Maureen said. "I'll let the bunch in, and I'll parcel out the corn."

"Don't you start bossing me!" Paul retorted. "One grandma to a house is enough." Then he grinned in superiority. "You pump too slow, anyway. Besides, it develops my muscles for roundup time."

As Maureen let the ponies into the corral, two at a time, they dashed to the watering tub and drank greedily. Paul could hardly pump fast enough. He drew in a breath. Cold or no, this was the best time of day. And no matter how hard and fast his arms worked, nor how many times he had to fill the tub, he liked doing it. It made him feel big and strong, almost godlike, as if he had been placed over this hungry herd and was their good provider. He liked the sounds of their snorting and fighting to be first, and he liked to watch them plunge their muzzles deep in the water and suck it in between their teeth. He even liked it when they came up slobbering and the wind sent spatters against his face.

Usually Misty was first at the watering tub, for she ran free with the others out on the marsh. But now that her colt was due she was kept in her stall, where she could be watched constantly. So Paul watered her last. He wanted her to take her time and to drink her fill without a bunch of ponies squealing and pawing at the gate, getting her excited. But today, even with the tub all to herself, she acted skittery as dandelion fluff—not drinking, but playing with the water, blowing at it until it made ripples.



Paul grew alarmed. Why wasn't she drinking? Did that mean it would be soon? Or was she sick inside? He stopped pumping and gave himself up to bittersweet worry. It could be this very morning, and then he'd have to stay home from school to help dry off the colt and to see that Misty was a good nurser.

"Paul! Maureen!" Grandpa's voice boomed like a fog-horn. "Put Misty in and come help me feed." He stood there in the barnyard with his head thrown back, shrilling to the heavens: *"Wee-dee-dee-dee! Wee-dee-dee-dee!"*

The call was a magnet, pulling in the fowl—wild ones from the sky, tame ones from the pasture. Geese and ducks and gulls, cocks and chickens and guinea hens came squawking. Above the racket Grandpa barked out his orders. "You children shuck off this corn for the critters." He handed them a coal scuttle heaped high with ears. "I got to police the migrators. Dad-blasted if I'll let them Canadian honkers hog all the feed whilst my own go hungry."

Faster than crows the children shelled out the corn until the scuttle held nothing but cobs, and at last the barnyard settled down to a picking and a pecking peace.

Grandpa scanned the sky for stragglers, but he saw none. Only gray wool clouds, and an angry wind pulling them apart. "Looks like a storm brewing, don't it?"

Paul laughed. "You should've been a weatherman, Grandpa, 'stead of a hossman. You're always predicting."

"Allus right, ain't I? Here, Maureen, you run and hang up the scuttle. I can whiff Grandma's bacon clean out here, and I'm hungry enough to eat the haunches off'n a grasshopper."

It was a bumper breakfast. The table was heaped with stacks of hotcakes and thick slices of bacon. Grandpa took one admiring look at his plate before he tackled it. "Nobody," he said, "not nobody but yer Grandma understands slab bacon. Over to the

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