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Contents

Zipper and the Girls.....	9
Donkeys, Goats, and Elephants.....	18
Pony Tricks.....	26
A Mystery Pony Comes to Visit	36
A Lesson for Mystery.....	48
R2R Problem Solvers	58
Ruth-Ann Talks to God	69
Trish Solves the Mystery	72
A Solution for a Big Problem	76
New Lessons for Zipper and Mystery	82
Words of Advice About Keeping Your Pony Healthy	91



Zipper and the Girls

Ruth-Ann Chow slid the saddle and blanket off her little Paint horse, Zipper, and picked up a currycomb. She had just returned from a long trail ride with her two best friends, Megan and Kendra, and now the ponies were hot and sweaty.

The year before, the three girls had started a riding club called Ready to Ride (R2R). Since then they'd spent many hours together with their ponies: Zipper, Blondie, and Star.

Ruth-Ann brushed Zipper's back firmly with the plastic currycomb. She started at Zipper's withers and brushed in the direction of his hair, paying special attention to the dampest places. When she reached the area directly behind the

A FRIEND FOR ZIPPER

pony's front legs, where the cinch rubbed, Ruth-Ann brushed even more carefully, making certain she got every bit of sweaty brown and white hair. She smiled to herself as she came to the strange white patch that Zipper had on his left side.

Zipper was an overo-colored sorrel Paint. His penny-colored brown hair was spotted with jagged white patches. Some of the patches were smaller than Ruth-Ann's hand, some were much larger than her head. Ruth-Ann had always thought this particular spot looked like a lobster with a raised, open claw. She brushed the white "claw" firmly, as well as all the surrounding hair, and then walked around Zipper to begin cleaning his opposite side as well.

"Wait until you see the neat horse-training book my mom bought for me," Megan said. She ran a comb through Blondie's thick, creamy mane. Blondie was a Palomino mare. "I thought it was something the Ready to Ride Club could do together."

"Is it a book about jumping?" Kendra asked.

"No," Megan said. "It's a book that shows you how to train your horse to do circus tricks."

Zipper and the Girls

“Tricks?” Ruth-Ann asked. “What sort of tricks?”

“How to nod their head yes and shake their head no,” Megan said. “And how to count and smile and bow and stuff like that.”

“Our ponies won’t ever belong to a circus,” Kendra said. She scratched Star’s snowy white shoulder. “They’ll always belong to us.”

“Any horse can learn to do these tricks,” Megan said, “not just circus ponies.”

“I’ll show you a trick I’ve trained Zipper to do,” Ruth-Ann announced. She brushed his side and back with long smooth strokes and then pointed. “Look.”

“What?”

“I’ve trained Zipper to fall asleep when I brush him!” Ruth-Ann laughed. It was true. Zipper’s eyes were both closed, and his ears were so relaxed they flopped to the sides like ears on a toy bunny.

“I don’t know if that’s a trick,” Kendra said, “or just a lazy horse!”

“Zipper isn’t lazy,” Ruth-Ann said. “He’s just saving his strength for our rides.”

“I would like to teach Blondie to count,”

A FRIEND FOR ZIPPER

Megan said. “The book says that’s one of the harder tricks though, so maybe we’ll start with something easier, such as nodding her head when I ask questions.”

“I’d like to see the book,” Kendra said. “Then I can decide which trick I’d want to train Star to do first.”

Megan turned to Ruth-Ann. “Will you teach Zipper a trick?” she asked.

“Of course she will,” Kendra said. “Zipper will probably be the best trick pony of them all. After all, he can already untie his lead rope.”

“And he can untie the other ponies’ lead ropes too,” Megan agreed. The girls giggled as they remembered Zipper’s recent adventure, when he had untied himself from the hitching post and then walked around to free the other two horses. Star was already loose, and Zipper was working on Blondie’s rope when they had caught the escape artist in the act!

With a grin, Ruth-Ann picked up the curry-comb and started back to work.

Ruth-Ann knew she was the luckiest girl in the world. She had always loved horses. Even as a toddler, she had insisted on toy ponies and

Zipper and the Girls

picture books with drawings of horses of every size and shape.

As Ruth-Ann had grown older, she had begged for a horse of her own.

“We live in the city,” Mrs. Chow had said. “And we can’t keep a pony in our backyard.”

Ruth-Ann had imagined a pony would be fine in the yard. They did have a fence, after all, and the pony could graze on the lawn. Then her father wouldn’t have to mow the grass. Perhaps the pony could even live in the garage when it got cold outside!

But Mr. Chow hadn’t agreed with the idea either. “All I know about horses is they’re expensive,” her father had said firmly. “There will be no horses for anyone while we live here.”

Things had finally changed when Ruth-Ann’s little brother, Mikey, was born. The Chows decided to move their four children out of the city, and after much house searching, had bought a small farm in the country. There was space in the enormous yard for the two younger children’s swing set, slide, and sand box. Ruth-Ann’s older brother, Max, had begged for a dog of his own, and his parents had finally agreed he could

A FRIEND FOR ZIPPER

get one. Max had chosen a fluffy black and white Border collie puppy and named her Sadie. Mr. Chow had helped the boy build a doghouse near the swing set. And the farm had a slightly run-down corral which would suit a horse.

Ruth-Ann had an older cousin, Kaitlin, living nearby. She was fifteen years old and starting grade ten at the nearby Christian high school in the fall. Although Ruth-Ann and Kaitlin were far apart in age, they had one thing in common.

Horses. They both loved horses. Kaitlin had taken Ruth-Ann to a nearby stables and helped her enroll in riding lessons there. The stable had since closed, but during the short time Ruth-Ann rode there she had met two other horse-crazy girls her age—Kendra Rawling and Megan Lewis. Both Kendra and Megan had their own ponies, Star and Blondie, and Kendra's mother had managed to find the perfect horse for Ruth-Ann as well.

That horse was Zipper.

How many girls were that fortunate? Ruth-Ann doubted there were very many. She thanked God every day for letting her own a pony. She remembered Zipper in her bedtime prayers, and she often thought of him during grace, although

Zipper and the Girls

Mr. Chow never said anything about a pony at that time.

Everything about owning a horse was fun. Riding was the most fun, of course, but leading and brushing and feeding a pony—Ruth-Ann enjoyed all those things too. The only thing that Ruth-Ann would change would be to find a way to keep Zipper at her home all the time.

When the family had first bought Zipper, Mr. Chow had repaired the small corral near the chicken coop. That hadn't worked very well. Zipper had been bored living alone. He had decided that if there were no other horses to play with, he'd have to find someone else. *Chickens are better than nothing*, Zipper seemed to say. *They're fun to chase, and they squawk nicely when you get close. But they need to come out of the coop to be close, don't they?*

Zipper was smart enough to find a way to open the latch of the chicken coop with his teeth. Several times the birds had escaped for a few hours. Zipper had enjoyed chasing them around the corral, but Mrs. Chow had not enjoyed putting them away. Once, the chickens had been set free in the middle of the night, and

A FRIEND FOR ZIPPER

something—maybe a hungry coyote—had carried away three of the birds, leaving only a few feathers behind. Since then Mr. Chow had put a pony-proof latch on the coop, and the chickens finally quit escaping.

But Zipper remained lonely. He spent most of his time staring at the house. If Ruth-Ann or one of the other children appeared, he would trot over to the fence, begging for attention.

Zipper neighed sometimes and walked up and down the fence line, wearing a path in the dirt looking for someone to play with. He tried the gate to the chicken coop frequently, and followed Max's dog, Sadie, or the barn cats around the yard. *Why won't anybody be my friend?*

"Your pony is lonely," Mrs. Chow had said.

Ruth-Ann knew her mother was right. "Could we get another pony to keep Zipper company?" Ruth-Ann had asked.

"No more ponies," Mr. Chow said firmly. "Little girls can ride only one pony at a time."

Ruth-Ann had then suggested a donkey or maybe even a goat to keep Zipper company. But Mr. Chow didn't want to be responsible for any more animals and had turned down all her ideas.

Zipper and the Girls

Finally the family came to an agreement. Zipper would stay in the corral at the Chow yard during the fall, winter, and early spring. But as soon as the weather grew nice enough to ride, then he would live at the Lewises' farm with their other horses.

Ruth-Ann would like to have Zipper at home in the summer, so she could wake up in the morning and see his funny little white face with the sorrel goggles peering over the fence at her. Why, summer was the best time of the year to be with your pony! She loved to hear his little nicker when she walked to the corral with a flake of hay, and she loved the good horsey smell of his warm fur. But she didn't want Zipper to be alone all the time.

And riding with Megan and Kendra was fun. Of course, Ruth-Ann lived only a mile from the Lewises' farm, so she could have easily kept Zipper at home and ridden over every day to visit. But this way everyone was happy. Zipper was at Ruth-Ann's house for part of the year. He lived with his friends the rest of the time.

So Ruth-Ann brushed and scrubbed and smiled to herself. Ponies were wonderful. And Zipper was the most wonderful one of all.