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*To my family  
For my boys*



*After the Round* © 1988 by Ann Lyne

Lonely people have enthusiasms which cannot always be explained. . . . When something touches their emotions, it runs through them like Paul Revere, awakening feelings that gather into great armies.

—Mark Helprin, *Winter's Tale*

# ONE

IT WAS RAINING hard and the lightning was getting close. I ran the red gelding down the path in Dunn's Gap and listened for that moment when a horse is at a full gallop and none of his feet touch the ground, because during that split second, we're flying. I pretended we were racing a train as the trees whizzed by, their branches scraping my jacket. I lay down on the horse's neck to

avoid a low branch. Water dripped off my riding hat into my mouth, tasting of sweaty nylon. I spat it out and wiped my face on my sleeve while I kept my eyes up, banking around a muddy turn.

As we galloped, the rain came down in a roar. I was soaked through. The reins were slippery and I fought to keep a grip on the horse. I dug my fingers into his dirty mane and around his martingale strap to hang on. I'd tied his tail into a tight mud-knot, wrapping it around itself into a ball so it didn't fall past his hocks. It would be easier to get the mud out later.

The red horse took the bit in his mouth, bore down, and ran for it like he was loose in the field. He must have forgotten I was there. His ears were forward and he wanted to go, but it was slick, and running like this in the mud was dangerous. If he stumbled, he could send us both down the ravine. One shoe clinked loudly against an old rusted pipe that was gushing rainwater down into the creek below, but it didn't interrupt his stride or worry him one bit. I listened to the confident, rhythmic hoo-beats, and I grinned.

Quick thoughts began to flicker in and out of my mind. This was the last of the big summer storms and the last day before school started. Every time I thought about it, I felt sick to my stomach. I hated school. I couldn't sit in a plastic desk all day, couldn't stand being inside under those awful lights with those teachers staring down at me. If you had to squeeze yourself into a girdle to stand up and try to teach a bunch of hillbilly kids—well, that was just pathetic. I hated the way it smelled at school, the way the rednecks in the hallway would yell and scream like they owned the place.

One time I'd heard a boy say, "That's Jimmy Criser's girl—they live in that shitty little gray house behind Hardee's." When another boy laughed, I looked at him and said, "Well, at least my daddy ain't a drunk like yours." We all know things about each other in Covington. And people who make fun of me wish they hadn't.

All these kids thought they were cool, but I knew they'd never amount to a damn thing. They'd work in the paper mill until the day they died. I know that sounds mean and angry, but I'm not either one. We have a life to live that could stop any minute, and I guess I can't believe this is how some people want to spend it. It makes me sad as hell. I want to ask them, don't they want to know what's out there? I sure do.

One day, I'd win the Bath County Horse Show up in Hot Springs, where all the rich kids competed every June. I'd jump every fence perfectly on a big, shiny, braided hunter, and I'd jog my horse into the ring to claim the silver cup and tricolor championship ribbon. The wealthy kids lining the rail would say, "Damn, that girl can ride anything." Melinda, my mother, would stop cursing horses and love them like she used to, and her dirtbag of a boyfriend would fear me. The kids at school would whisper to each other, "How'd she learn to ride like that?" And some kid might say, "She's the best rider I ever saw."

I stood up in the stirrups and planted my hands on the red horse's withers to slow him down. He pulled against me, and I wondered if I'd have to run him into the bank to make him stop. I couldn't hear Wayne's horse at all. The creek always ran hard and loud back there behind Coles Mountain. It probably sounded just like this two or three hundred years ago. I wished for an instant that I could have lived back then and spent my days running through the woods on a horse. If you were fourteen in those days, Jimmy used to tell me, you worked just like the adults, didn't waste your time at school. Kids were baling hay with a team of horses at nine years old.

The red horse tore around a turn, his ears shot up, and he slammed to a stop. My feet came out of the stirrups, and I had to tighten my knees like a vice to hang on. What the heck had he seen? Maybe June, hiding behind a tree?

The horse snorted hard, and finally I saw what he saw: a hickory had fallen across the path, gotten caught in another tree. Damn, he had good eyes. I could barely see it. Some horses can stand right next to a locomotive and not mind one bit, but others will damn near tear the barn down if a woodchuck runs by. I was right. This red horse didn't shy at anything. His eyes were locked right on that fallen tree in a way that made my palms sweat.

I waited a moment for Uncle Wayne to catch up. I heard the smack of another horse's hooves, and my uncle galloped out of the fog on his brown horse and stopped too. His horse was blowing hard with his chest lathered up. Uncle Wayne squinted, his face slick from the rain running off his baseball cap. He cursed. It would take forever for us to backtrack, and the hill was too steep to walk the horses around the fallen tree. They'd be up to their hocks in mud, and I imagined us sliding down the hill, a tangle of reins and hooves, into the ravine. Horse people are always walking that line between being brave and being crazy. Sometimes it just depends on how things end up.

The red horse looked at the fallen tree and pulled on the reins, wanting to go. It must have been four feet high, and I had never jumped anything that big. The horse faced the jump and squared himself up for it.

"Hell no!" yelled Uncle Wayne.

I felt the horse coiled like a spring underneath me, and I dug my heels into his sides. He planted his hind feet in the mud, got his hindquarters up under himself, and took three big strides. But he got in too close. He sprang out of the mud and must have cleared that fallen tree by a foot. I tried to hang on, but even though I had a handful of mane, I was left behind. When he landed, he shook me loose. I fell hard in the mud, and everything stopped.

I heard Uncle Wayne's voice calling, "Sid!"

Still holding the reins, I put my hands to my face, opened my eyes, and realized the horse was gone. The bridle lay next to me—I guess I'd pulled it right off his head. Now he was running around Dunn's Gap wearing nothing but a saddle in the pouring rain.

Wayne was on foot in the woods twenty feet away, trying to get to me. He swore again as he helped the brown horse pick his way through the rocks and briars. Finally they made it through, and I looked up at Wayne's face in the rain. I could see the outline of his skull in his tan skin, and his blue eyes sparkled like big aquamarines. Maybe he was the Grim Reaper, coming to take me to heaven.

"What's the West Virginia state flower?" he asked me.

"The satellite dish," I said.

I felt for my teeth to make sure they were all there.

“Damn it, girl!” he shouted. “You’re lucky you didn’t kill yourself!”

I sat up, dizzy and confused, my riding hat lying in the wet weeds. When I inhaled, pain shot out from my ribs. I had a metallic taste in my mouth from the shock. I felt like my bones had crashed into each other.

“When you ride my horse, you damn well do what I tell you,” he said.

I was ashamed.

“I just found that red horse in an auction pen last Thursday,” he continued. “I don’t know a thing about him—”

“He can jump,” I interrupted.

“Well, that’s good, ain’t it?” Wayne said sharply, looking me in the eye. He was scaring me. Sometimes he looked exactly like Melinda. His little sister, my mother.

He put his hands on his knees and stood up.

“We better go find that half-necked horse ’fore somebody calls the sheriff,” he said.

We walked together down the path, the wet brown horse hanging his head. I slipped a little in the mud, and Wayne grabbed my elbow. “Watch yourself. Slick as a fat baby’s ass out here.”

We found the red horse by the side of the road looking embarrassed, with one stirrup caught on a farmer’s mailbox.

## TWO

I HAVE RED HAIR and green eyes, but I’m not Irish. My ancestors were from England and came over here in the 1600s. One of them, Colonel Criser, fought in the Revolutionary War. He was surrounded by the British, but he fought them off with his men and made their supplies last long enough to get out. He was in some kind of trouble at one point for saying bad things about the minutemen, but nobody knows what he said. That’s just like a Criser, getting mad and shooting off his mouth.

Even though my family has been here since the very first boat from England, before the *Mayflower*, it doesn’t mean we were rich and had a whole bunch of slaves fanning us on the porch. I’m sure my ancestors were as poor as dirt. I hope they didn’t have slaves, or if they did, I hope they were nice to them. If I came into this world and realized my family had a bunch of slaves, I’d be really nice to them. It always cracks me up when kids at school get mad about illegal Mexicans coming up here. I want to say, *Good thing my grandfather didn’t feel that way about yours or he’d have sent him packing*. Nobody could send *me* packing but an American Indian.

It took us a full hour to get back to the barn at Wayne’s place. We untacked the horses in the run-in shed while the rain leaked through the roof and made big puddles in the sawdust.

“Get that tack dried off. Hang the saddle pads up, and put some Absorbine on his legs after running him like that,” Wayne said. Grumpy as usual. Every time I finished one thing, he gave me a list of ten more.

I pulled the dirty orange bottle of Absorbine off the shelf, cupped my hand, poured the green liquid into it, and held it against the ligaments under the horse’s knee. The horse blinked and looked around at his new home. I always felt sorry for a new horse—just showing up in some new barn, no friends, no idea of how he was going to be treated. Horses weren’t like stray cats or dogs, who could escape and live by their wits. They were property.

I figured this horse knew right away I was a good rider, but that didn’t mean much. He could easily have been sold to a cuss of a man who beat him with a stick or to a lady who kept him in a bed of pine shavings for the rest of his life. That used to make my heart ache, but not anymore. I knew if you wanted to be a good horseman, you’d better remember they ain’t pets. As Jimmy and Wayne had told me many times, *Whatever you do, don’t marry your horse*.

When I was about eight, I saw Wayne smack a horse in the head for rearing up and striking at him with his front feet. I yelled at him to stop, and he said, “Damn it, girl, that horse could kill you. You think real hard before you feel sorry for him.” He and Jimmy were rough when they had to be, so horses didn’t cross them.

Now Wayne took good care of his horses because they’d be more valuable that way, not because they were his pets. I think Wayne did things when he was younger that he wasn’t proud of now, such as shooting up a horse with a little painkiller before a show or poling—teaching a young horse to jump by raising the pole up while he’s in midair, making him hit his hooves. These things are illegal now. But horses knew not to mess with him or he’d lay them right out.

The Absorbine soaked into the horse’s skin. I cupped my hand again, poured more, and rubbed it onto my lower back, feeling the icy shock and smelling the menthol.

Wayne picked up a fifty-pound sack of feed from where the Southern States delivery man had stacked them beneath the overhang. He slung it over his shoulder. I did the same, breathing out so I could hoist it up, feeling the pain in my ribs. I looked at the veins in my skinny forearms and wished they’d pop out of the muscle like Uncle Wayne’s did. I could be a weightlifter, my arms would still look like a couple of broomsticks.

I ripped a bag open and poured the feed into an empty barrel, then picked out a small black chunk of molasses caked with raw oats and put it in my mouth. It was sweet but dry, and I chewed, pretending I was a pony. I covered the feed barrel and locked it. The gray Shetland would eat himself to death if he got in there. I’d seen ponies who couldn’t stop eating when they got their faces in a sack of sweet feed, and they’d keel over right there in the feed room. Many times I had helped a vet run a tube down a pony’s nose into the belly and pump it full of mineral oil. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn’t. I’d be happy if I never saw that again. A horse rolling in the straw groaning with colic was a horseman’s worst nightmare. By that time, he’d usually twisted a gut and there was nothing left to do.

“Get that donkey some hay.”

Wayne had a no-good donkey that stood out in the field and ignored everyone. He’d had him about a month.

“What’s his name?”

“That donkey don’t have a name.”

“You got a name for him. You had him a month.”

“I just call him Donkey.”

“Come on.”

“Mr. Wilcox.”

I laughed at him. “Who’s that?”

“I don’t know. Just a name,” he said.

Submarine stood in my way, chewing on a flake of fescue. He was an old skewbald pinto, huge feet and knees, a little swaybacked, large head and a big belly. He had strong hooves and a powerful build. Jimmy bought him for himself on a lark when they were doing work for a fellow over in Pig Run. Uncle Wayne said Sub was the soundest horse he’d ever seen. Although most horses threw a shoe at about six weeks, Sub kept his shoes on so long, the blacksmith had to pry them off at twelve weeks. Now he just stood there chomping on the hay. He was past his prime and was a sad sight, with his long whiskers and manure stains on his white spots. He wasn’t doing nothing but taking up space. He was always in the way, and it made me angry.

I shoved Sub’s hindquarters over and cut my eyes at the red horse. “How much you think you can get for him?”

Wayne sized up the horse, shifting his toothpick from one cheek into the other and back. The horse had some old splints in his front legs, but they didn’t seem to bother him.

“He’s a short-coupled firecracker,” I said. Short-backed horses tend to be hotheaded, for some reason. “Looks like one of the old-time Thoroughbreds with Arab blood, not these brittle ones you see on TV.”

Wayne smirked at me, probably for repeating things I’d read in books. But he knew I was right. He leaned against the wall, crossed one leg over the other, and thought.

“He pulls on your hands,” I said, still trying. I wanted Wayne to like the horse as much as I did. “But his mouth ain’t hard—he just wants to go. He’s an athlete. We might try a different bit to slow him down.”