

*Chapter 2*

THE ISLAND  
OF THE WILD THINGS

THE PONIES WERE EXHAUSTED, and their coats were heavy with water, but they were free, free, free! They raised their heads and snuffed the wind. The smell was unlike that of the lowland moors of Spain, but it was good! They sucked in the sharp, sweet pungence of pine woods, and somewhere mixed in with the piney smell came the enticing scent of salt grass.

Their stomachs were pinched with hunger, but the ponies did not seek the grass at once. They shook the water from their coats. Then they rolled back and forth in the sand, enjoying the solid feel of the land.

At last the stallion's hunger stirred him to action. He rounded up his mares, and with only a watery moon to light the way, he drove them through the needle-carpeted woods. The mares stopped to eat

the leaves of some myrtle bushes, but the stallion jostled them into line. Then he took the lead. So direct was his progress, it seemed almost as if he had trodden here before. Through bramble and thicket, through brackish pools of water, he led the way.

The moon was high overhead when the little band came out on grassy marshland. They stopped a moment to listen to the wide blades of grass whisper and squeak in the wind, to sniff the tickling smell of salt grass.

This was it! This was the exciting smell that had urged them on. With wild snorts of happiness they buried their noses in the long grass. They bit and tore great mouthfuls — frantically, as if they were afraid it might not last. Oh, the salty goodness of it! Not bitter at all, but juicy-sweet with rain. It was different from any grass they knew. It billowed and shimmered like the sea. They could not get enough of it. That delicious salty taste! Never had they known anything like it. Never. And sometimes they came upon tender patches of lespedeza, a kind of clover that grew among the grasses.

The ponies forgot the forty days and forty nights in the dark hold of the Spanish galleon. They forgot the musty hay. They forgot the smell of bilge water, of oil and fishy odors from the cooking galley.



When they could eat no more, they pawed shallow wells with their hooves for drinking water. Then they rolled in the wiry grass, letting out great whinnies of happiness. They seemed unable to believe that the island was all their own. Not a human being anywhere. Only grass. And sea. And sky. And the wind.

At last they slept.

The seasons came and went, and the ponies adopted the New World as their own. They learned how to take care of themselves. When summer came, and with it the greenhead flies by day and the mosquitoes by night, they plunged into the sea, up to their necks in the cool surf. The sea was their *friend*. Once it had set them free. Now it protected them from their fiercest enemies.

Winter came, and the grass yellowed and dried; but the ponies discovered that close to the roots it was still green and good to eat.

Even when a solid film of ice sealed the land, they did not go hungry. They broke through the ice with their hooves, or went off to the woods to eat the myrtle leaves that stayed green all winter.

Snow was a new experience, too. They blew at it, making little snow flurries of their own. They tasted it. It melted on their tongues. Snow was good to drink!

If the Spaniards could have seen their ponies now, they would have been startled at their changed appearance. No longer were their coats sleek. They were as thick and shaggy as the coat of any sheep dog. This was a good thing. On bitter days, when they stood close-huddled for comfort,

each pony could enjoy the added warmth of his neighbor's coat as well as his own.

There were no wolves or wildcats on the island, but there was deep, miry mud to trap creatures and suck them down. After a few desperate struggles, the ponies learned how to fall to their knees, then sidle and wriggle along like crabs until they were well out of it.



With each season the ponies grew wiser. And with each season they became tougher and more hardy. Horse colts and fillies were born to them. As the horse colts grew big, they rounded up mares of their own and started new herds that ranged wild — wild as the wind and the sea that had brought them there long ago.

Years went by. And more years. Changes came to Assateague. The red men came. The white men came. The white men built a lighthouse to warn ships of dangerous reefs. They built a handful of houses and a white church. But soon the houses stood empty. The people moved their homes and their church to nearby Chincoteague Island, for Assateague belonged to the wild things — to the wild birds that nested on it, and the wild ponies whose ancestors had lived on it since the days of the Spanish galleon.