

*Chapter 7*

SHE CAN'T TURN BACK

**T**OM'S POINT was a protected piece of land where the marsh was hard and the grass especially sweet. About seventy wild ponies, exhausted by their morning's run, stood browsing quietly, as if they were in a corral. Only occasionally they looked up at their captors. The good meadow and their own weariness kept them peaceful prisoners.

At a watchful distance, the roundup men rested their mounts and relaxed. It was like the lull in the midst of a storm. All was quiet on the surface. Yet there was an undercurrent of tension. You could tell it in the narrowed eyes of the men, their subdued voices, and their too easy laughter.

Suddenly the laughter stilled. Mouths gaped in disbelief. Eyes rounded. For a few seconds no one spoke at all. Then a shout that was half wonder and



half admiration went up from the men. Paul Beebe was bringing in *the Phantom and a colt!*

Even the wild herds grew excited. As one horse, they stopped grazing. Every head jerked high, to see and to smell the newcomers. The Pied Piper whirled out and gathered the mare and her colt into his band. He sniffed them all over, as if to make sure that nothing had harmed them. Then he snorted at Phantom, as much as to say, "You cause me more trouble than all the rest of my mares put together!"

The roundup men were swarming around Paul, buzzing with questions.

"How'd you *do* it, Paul?" Wyle Maddox called over the excited hubbub.

"Where'd you find 'em?" shouted Kim Horsepepper.

Paul made no answer. The questions floated around and above him like voices in a dream. He went hot and cold by turns. Did he do the right thing by bringing the Phantom and her foal in? Miserably he watched the Phantom's head droop. There was no wild sweep to her mane and her tail now. The free wild thing was caught like a butterfly in a net. She was webbed in by men, yelling and laughing.

"Beats all!" he heard someone say. "For two years we been trying to round up the Phantom, and along comes a spindling youngster to show us up."

"'Twas the little colt that hindered her."

"'Course it was."

"It's the newest colt in the bunch; may not stand the swim."

"If we lose only one colt, it'll still be a good day's work."

"Jumpin' Jupiter, but it's hot!"

The men accepted Paul as one of them now — a real roundup man. They were clapping him on the shoulder and offering him candy bars. Suddenly he remembered the bar Grandpa had pressed into his hand. He took off the wrapper and ate — not because he was hungry, but because he wanted to seem one of the men. They were trying to get him to talk. “Ain’t they a shaggy-lookin’ bunch?” Kim Horsepepper asked.

“Except for Misty,” Paul said, pointing toward the Phantom’s colt. “Her coat is silky.” The mere thought of touching it sent shivers through him. “Misty,” he thought to himself wonderingly. “Why, I’ve named her!”

The little foal was nursing greedily. Paul’s eyes never strayed from the two of them. It was as if they might disappear into the mist of the morning, leaving only the sorrels and the bays and the blacks behind.

Only once he looked out across the water. Two lines of boats were forming a pony-way across the channel. He saw the cluster of people and the mounts waiting on the shores of Chincoteague, and he knew that somewhere among them was Maureen. It was like a relay race. Soon she would carry on.

“Could I swim my mount across the channel alongside the Phantom?” Paul asked Wyle Maddox anxiously.

Wyle shook his head. “Watch Eyes is all tuckered out,” he said. “Besides, there’s a kind of tradition in the way things is handled on Pony Penning Day. There’s mounted men for the roundup and there’s boatmen to herd ’em across the channel,” he explained.

“Tide’s out!” he called in clipped tones. “Current is slack. Time for the ponies to be swummed across. Let’s go!”

Suddenly the beach was wild with commotion. From three sides the roundup men came rushing at the ponies, their hoarse cries whipping the animals into action. They plunged into the water, the stallions leading, the mares following, neighing encouragement to their colts.

“They’re off!” shouted Wyle Maddox, and everyone felt the relief and triumph in his words.

Kim thumped Paul on the back as they boarded the scow for the ride back. “Don’t fret about yer prize,” he said brusquely. “You’ve got the Phantom sure this time. Once in the water she can’t turn back.”

But he was wrong!