

An excerpt from
Year of the Black Pony
by Walt Morey

YEAR OF THE BLACK PONY

CHAPTER 1

I WAS LATE. I took off from the house running fast as I could. I rounded the barn, crossed the pasture, and started up the long slope that led to the top of Christmas Ridge. I ran until my throat was dry and my heart felt like it was about to jump out of my rib cage. Then the slope turned steep. I quit running and climbed the rest of the way.

The spine of Christmas Ridge is about fifty feet wide. It stretches for miles splitting the valley almost down the middle. There's an odd nest of big rocks up there about thirty feet high. I climbed to the topmost one and stretched out on my stomach. The valley rolled away beneath me, a spring-green carpet of new grass speckled with clumps of trees and brush. In the middle stood our typical homesteader's board-and-bat cabin, the two outbuildings, and the pattern of fences and gates.

My breathing gradually settled back to normal and my heart stopped pounding. I kept listening and looking. There was nothing. I was too late. I was about to get up and leave when I heard it. A faint rumble rode the morning silence like the roll of distant thunder. It swelled in volume. I got to my knees in excitement. My heart was hammering again.

They burst around a shoulder of the ridge a hundred yards away—fifteen or twenty horses running hard. They were Sam Fletcher's young stock that he let run loose on the open range. They followed the ridge every morning to feed in some distant part of the valley. At night a hired hand rode out and drove them home.

I had eyes for only one. The black pony in the lead. He ran like he loved being free. His head was up, sharp ears forward, black mane and tail flying in the wind. The sun made his black coat glisten like satin. The big muscles across shoulders and legs rippled like light flashes on water. They pounded past right under the rock where I crouched. I watched until they were out of sight. The whole thing took maybe two minutes.

Every Saturday since the winter weather had broken I'd climbed up here to watch that pony pass. The sight of him did something to me I've never quite been able to explain. He was more than tremendous strength and speed and beauty of motion. He set me dreaming. Thinking of him running so free, so eager, so full of the love of life, I could lose myself and forget for a time some of the bickering and quarreling that went on at home.

It hadn't been that way before we moved from Michigan two years ago. But this past year things changed. It was particularly bad last night. Ellie had one of her numerous bouts of sore throat and was asleep. I pretended to be but I heard every angry word Pa uttered. He had a nasty temper and for the first time I was afraid he might do Ma bodily harm.

I couldn't blame Pa altogether for the trouble at home. And certainly it wasn't Ma's fault. Somebody had to be strong. It took stiff-necked courage and grit to ranch in the Oregon country in the early 1900's. Pa used to say she had a ramrod up her back. "You don't give an inch. You get stiff-necked about it, brace your feet, and refuse to budge," he often said angrily.

Pa had no experience farming or ranching. He'd worked in a sawmill for years. But he always hated it. 'I'm sick of getting up, of carrying a lunch bucket, going to work, coming home. I'm sick of living by a whistle.' He wanted to get away, do something on his own. But sawmilling was all he knew.

Then a friend told him about ranching in the Oregon country. "Great place," he said. "Land's dirt cheap and grass is belly deep to a cow. Raise beef cattle. Nothin' to it, Harry. Let 'em run on the open range the year round. Maybe feed 'em a little wild grass hay a couple months in the winter. The rest of the year you just sit back in your rockin' chair and watch their bellies swell into money." The friend knew of three hundred acres for sale. There was a house on the place and a couple of outbuildings. "All ready to go to work," he'd said. "A widow wants to sell. It can be bought cheap."

Pa said happily, "That's for me, Mabel. No more lunch bucket. No more livin' by a whistle. I wanta take a day off, I'll take it. I'm gonna do somethin' for myself."

Ma had been raised on a farm. "It won't be that easy," she said. "It's a hard life with lots of work and long hours. You don't know anything about ranching."

"So I'll learn. If other men can do it, I can too. I'm workin' long hours now."

Apparently Ma believed him. Here we were, Ma, Pa, Ellie, and me about five miles from the little town of Sunrise. We had three hundred acres of land, nine head of cattle, a milk cow, one horse, a dozen chickens, and a board-and-bat cabin. It was all paid for out of our small savings. It was a terrible mistake.

That first year Pa learned he didn't take to ranch life. He had no interest in the land, crops, or animals and he had no intention of learning. He missed the monthly paycheck he'd got since he was sixteen. Here he earned much needed money only when he sold something, which wasn't often, or when he worked for some of the other settlers. He was handy with tools and did quite a bit of that.

Pa was not a good self-starter. All his life he'd either been told what to do or had to keep up with a machine. Ma knew what needed to be done on a ranch but Pa didn't take kindly to a woman telling him. He missed the smell of sawdust and the sound of a saw slicing through a log. And he especially missed the gossip and companionship of old sawmill friends with whom he used to stop at a bar on the way home nights, have a drink, and hash over happenings at the mill. Here he had only Ma, Ellie, and me. That is, until he got to going to town about once a week.

Pa had met the Graysons, half brothers, Arlo and Oliver. They owned a hardscrabble hill outfit a few miles out of town. Nothing grew on it but sagebrush and jack rabbits. Most of their time was spent in town, in the Pastime, when they had money. Nobody thought much of them but Pa.

Even a twelve-year-old boy like me could see that sitting and drinking and swapping yarns with them was a little like being back home in Michigan talking and laughing with Pa's mill friends.

That wouldn't have been so bad but Arlo and Oliver got pretty wild when drinking, and Pa, with his quick temper and the aggravation of being stuck out here where he didn't like it, got quarrelsome. The Sheriff ordered the three of them out of town when they started a fight in the Pastime one day and broke up a table. After that Ma went to town with Pa whenever she could, to sort of ride herd on him.

It was getting warm on the rock. The spring sun was swinging straight overhead. I climbed down and headed home. I didn't want any trouble with Pa. He walloped me for being late getting home, or for not milking on time, or letting the woodbox get empty. If he knew I'd been sneaking up the ridge just to see a horse he'd tan me good.

When I rounded the barn Nellie was hitched to the buggy in front of the house and Ma and Pa were standing beside it talking. Pa was going to town but Ma didn't have on her coat and hat so she wasn't going with him. She must be staying home to nurse Ellie.

Pa scowled at me and said, "You been out galavantin' around the country again? Seems you're doin' a lot of that lately."

"I was just looking around," I said.

"What's to look at in this God-forsaken country? Sagebrush, jack rabbits, and boulders," he said bitterly and climbed into the buggy.

I didn't answer.

Ma said, "Now, remember, Harry, flour, salt, coffee." She ticked off on her fingers. "And don't forget Ellie's medicine and get back fast as you can. She needs it."

"Sure, sure." He scowled at me again. "You keep that woodbox full and pump some more water for the cattle and quit rammin' around the country." He picked up the reins and clucked to Nellie. They went out of the yard, the reins hanging halfway to the ground.

Ma started to call after him, "Harry, pick up the reins," as she had so often. Then she just shook her head and turned back into the house. Pa would never learn.

Time dragged. Noon came. The sun started swinging down the sky toward Christmas Ridge. I filled the wood-box and cut more wood, gathered the eggs and pumped the trough full of water for the cattle. Ma had Ellie gargle salt water and kept putting hot towels around her throat. She seemed to be feeling better. In between times Ma would step outside, shade her eyes, and stare up the valley looking for Pa. We both knew he'd met the Grayson brothers in town and was spending what money he had left with them in the Pastime. Ma's lips got tighter and tighter, her back straighter. I suspect she'd have ridden in after him if we'd had another horse, or even walked the five miles if she could have left Ellie. Ma was that kind of determined woman.

The sun started bouncing along the top of Christmas Ridge. I drove Fawn in and went to the house for the bucket to milk. Then I heard a horse and buggy come into the yard. We both ran to the door.

It was Sheriff Peck. He was in our buggy and driving Nellie. His saddle horse was tied behind. Pa wasn't with him.

I got an odd feeling in the pit of my stomach as I watched him get out of the buggy and walk to the porch where Ma and I waited. He said, "Mrs. Fellows, your husband has met with an accident."

Ma said, "I guessed as much when I saw you driving Nellie. Is he hurt bad?"

"Yes," he said, "very bad."

"He never would hold the reins up the way he should," Ma said. "Did the horse run away and throw him out?"

"No, ma'am, it wasn't like that at all. There was a fight."

"A fight?" Ma asked.

The Sheriff nodded. "With Frank Chase, out on the Creek Road. I don't have all the facts yet. But I will have. Way I heard it, it was an accident that got Harry."

"How bad is he hurt?"

"I wish there was another way to say this, ma'am." He shook his head. "Harry was hurt fatal. He's dead."

Ma just stood there for maybe half a minute and looked at the Sheriff. Then she said in the quietest voice I've ever heard her use, "You said a fight. But it was an accident. How can that be?"

"The fight was only part of it," the Sheriff said. "Harry drowned in the creek. It's pretty high this time of year with the spring run-off, you know. There'll be a hearing in Judge Beam's chambers in a couple of days to establish just what did happen. Not a trial, you understand, a hearing." His voice went on and on, giving Ma the few facts he had so far.

But I wasn't listening. I was looking at Ma. Her dark head was up and her back had that ramrod-up-it look that Pa hated. Never before or since has she seemed so tall, so calm, so composed. But there was a terrible tenseness about her as if she held all the emotion and shock a human could stand in her two clenched fists and would not let it out. For myself that odd feeling kept growing and growing in my stomach until it was more than I could bear. I ran back into the house and slammed the door.

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