



*There is no secret
so close as that
between a
horse and his rider.*

~Robert Smith Surtees

Chapter 9

It only took a couple more sessions in the round pen before Cindy felt confident that a foundation of trust had been built with Arion. He stopped aggressively swinging his hindquarters and she worked up to touching him with a long pole Russell had found for her. It was much heavier than the bamboo one used at the adoption. Cindy could only lift it for a few minutes before her arm started to ache. Arion was curious about it though and seemed to enjoy having his withers scratched.

After two and a half weeks of working Arion almost daily in his pen and touching him with the pole, Cindy decided to touch him with her own hand. The decision arrived spontaneously one morning, immediately upon waking.

After dressing and eating a piece of toast, Cindy

made her way to the barn with butterflies in her stomach. She had imagined this day since first adopting Arion.

After feeding and doing morning stall cleaning, Cindy walked to the round pen, relieved to find no one in sight. Patty had wanted to be there when she first touched the horse, but Cindy knew she would only worry. Plus, it seemed like sort of an intimate moment. Cindy didn't want to share it with anyone. She thought about the first time she sat on Diamond's back, the year the mare turned three. It was like riding the Hammer Head at the fair. Anticipation and raw panic swirled together in a sickening wave when she made up her mind to go for it. And afterward: the rush of adrenalin, the pride of overcoming fear. To think of putting her hands on Arion, a truly wild animal, scared and thrilled her more than any fair ride.

Sun roasted her back as Cindy stood by the pen, a hand on the latch. The only sounds were the flies buzzing and Arion's tail swishing as he munched his hay. He looked at her, but didn't bother to move away as she entered the pen.

"You gonna let me touch you today, Ri?" As she talked, Cindy imagined smoothing her nerves down, like a wayward patch of mane hair. *Be calm yet alert.* That's what one training book had to say about working with wild horses. Right.

She clicked the latch shut behind her and moved toward the horse. He turned and faced her. Arion appeared calm but Cindy knew at the slightest provo-

cation the horse could explode. She kept her body language quiet. Walking to the center she withdrew several feet of coiled lariat rope and slapped it lightly on her leg. Arion began circling her at a trot.

After a couple of laps Cindy laid the rope at her feet and dropped her eyes. Arion slowed and then stopped with an ear flicked her way. She repeated this pattern a couple of times on both sides before allowing the horse to just stand. At this point Cindy usually touched him with the pole and then quit. It rewarded the horse for being attentive and quiet. This time Cindy took two steps toward Arion's shoulder, stopping just before it appeared that he might move.

Arion raised his head, his neck muscles taut. Cindy took two more steps and stopped. Arion shook his head and pawed the ground a few times. She waited, her eyes averted, until he relaxed. Then she stepped forward again.

Cindy was now only a few feet from the horse. She knew animals sensed fear and wondered if Arion could hear her heart thumping in her chest. Sweat trickled down between her shoulder blades. Another step or two and Cindy could touch him if she reached out her hand.

Arion arched his neck in her direction while his body leaned slightly away. She smelled his warm salty scent but took care not to scare him by making direct eye contact. The horse's ears moved back and forth as he contemplated what to do. Just when she thought he might move away, he dropped his head and reached

out to smell her hand. Cindy shivered when she felt his hot breath and prickly whiskers on her finger tips.

Ever so slowly, Cindy raised her arm and reached out to the horse. She laid her hand lightly on his withers. Arion snorted and she felt his muscles tense and gather as if to run away. When he didn't, she brushed her hand down his shoulder and immediately took a step back and away.

The rush of adrenalin made her feel light headed. While chills ran down her spine, sweat dripped from her forehead. The horse took two steps forward. Cindy stepped back again, exhaling heavily. Arion stopped and looked at her.

“Good for you, Ri. I think we are going to be friends.”

Cindy walked out of the pen and nearly skipped all the way home.

After that, Arion allowed Cindy to touch him, but he remained aloof and watchful. Protective of his space. Diamond was an affectionate horse, a talker who nickered whenever Cindy appeared. Like she was a friend the mare looked forward to seeing. Arion, on the other hand, tolerated her out of necessity. Sort of like the established lunch time cliques at school.

In high school there was a social order to observe—jocks sat together, brainiacs, cheerleaders, freaks. You didn't have to like each other really, just respect your position in the herd. It was good to have a fall back anyway, people to look for in case you got stuck at a school function without a real friend. *In case of emer-*