

## THE LAST RACE

By Billie Bierer

### CHAPTER ONE

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It was past midnight on the Fourth of July and fireworks in the nearby town of Camden, South Carolina continued to brighten the sky. A bay mare in the throes of labor, her hair wet and lathered, eyes wide with pain, whirled in a stall inside a barn at Richards' Arabians. The mare's legs buckled and she went down on thick bedding.

He was fourteen years old, and as he stood unmoving, forcing himself to breathe, he leaned into the stall door. Joe Richard's heart was pounding in tempo with the chattering cicadas outside the barn. In the hayloft overhead his father snored away, a sound easily taken for a bear in comfortable hibernation. A habit of his father's that Joe accepted along with a certainty that he could easily wake him, if needed.

Still . . . "Dang," Joe muttered, his eyes darting toward the loft. He gritted his teeth in frustration, with himself, with the mare and nature. "Please be okay," he whispered, clenching his jaws. His father liked him to complete difficult and challenging tasks on his own. His idea of what had to be accomplished by a boy in order to become a man.

The mare struggled to her feet and Joe's attention snapped back to her as she again circled and went down. The horse's groans tugged at Joe's heart and the bay stretched full-length onto her side, stiffening her legs in time with each new contraction as she visibly began to push. Joe reached blindly behind himself and felt for the wooden tray that held latex gloves, iodine, scissors, and a towel. He quietly brought the tray around to his side and slid the door-latch, then stepped carefully inside the stall with the mare. Moving slowly, he knelt down behind the horse.

The mare raised her head and pinned him with a blank stare. Her soft brown eyes held his. Nervously, Joe reached out and rubbed the horses' haunches. With a groan, the mare lay her head back down on the straw. "I'm here, girl. Everything's okay," Joe whispered. "Come on now, do your job." Creation: An event that never ceased to both amaze him and scare the holy heck out of him.