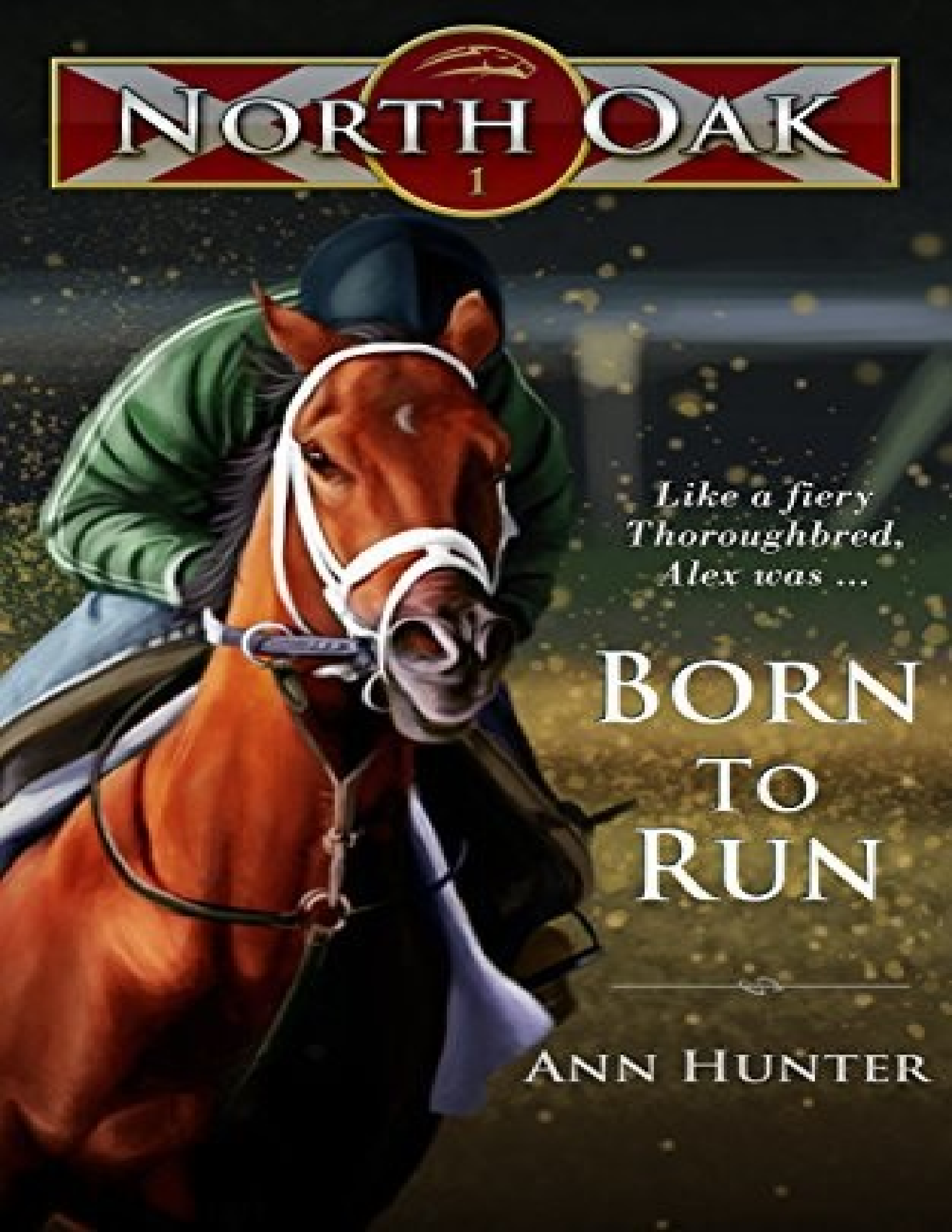




NORTH OAK

1

*Like a fiery
Thoroughbred,
Alex was ...*

BORN TO RUN

ANN HUNTER

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North Oak #1: Born to Run / By Ann Hunter

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For Eileen,

Who got me hooked.

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"Let us run with endurance the race set before us."

— Hebrews, 12:1

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RUN BABY RUN

A thread of smoke wafted from the barrel of the gun. Alex's foster mother crumpled before her. Alex stared, hand trembling, ears ringing. The gun tumbled to the floor.

"Alex, what have you done?"

Alex rounded to see her eldest foster sister, Carrie, horror-stricken in the doorway. Their other foster sister, Ashley, lay lifeless near Carrie's feet. Two bodies too many.

The acrid stink of gun smoke filled the room. A piercing breath stuck in Alex's throat. She looked around the room, staggering. *I have to get out.*

The window.

Alex threw it open. Cool, fresh air buffeted her face. The light of an October dawn streamed in as Alex leapt out the second story window.

She landed on the top of a parked van a few feet below and slipped on icy dew from last night's thunderstorm. The force of her fall popped her spine, igniting firecrackers in her ears. The purple Tennessee horizon flew up as her jaw smacked against metal.

A sudden numbness throbbed in the side of her tongue. Sputtering with the raw taste of iron, she rolled to the muddy ground, and swallowed back the blood in her mouth. She staggered to her feet and ran.

The slick grass chilled her tempered, bare soles. A clump of damp, black bangs stuck to her forehead and blocked part of her vision. She pushed them away, along with what had just happened.

Whether the cold humidity was choking her or the fear that police were about to find two lifeless bodies at Haven Point right behind her, she did not know.

Ashley was dead.

This was not how Alex wanted to spend her thirteenth birthday. She hadn't expected it to be perfect with the way their foster mother had been treating them at Haven Point, but why did it have to be this? She and Ashley were going to run away together. They were going to have a life of their choosing. All they needed was each other.

The image of her best friend bleeding in her arms, watching life leave her like a candle snuffed out, burned on Alex's conscience. *I should have*

stopped DeGelder sooner. Why didn't I stop her?

Alex skirted the local high school and scaled the chain link fence behind the baseball diamonds. The spikes of the fence caught her t-shirt and scraped her stomach. When she kicked and swung against the links, trying to free herself from its teeth, her shirt gave way with an audible rip. She fell backwards and rammed the ground so hard her breath rushed from her.

Don't stop, she thought, hugging her ribs with a cough. She wheezed and hacked, rolling to her knees. Each breath came in a ragged, sharp wave. She crawled toward the thicket of trees ahead, and braced against a tree trunk before clawing herself to a standing position.

There was a hard knot in her stomach. The world swirled for a moment, blurry around the edges, bright white in the center. She shut her eyes against it.

Ashley...

She had been taken away like everything else in the world.

Alex swallowed back bile. Blood roared in her ears while her heart hammered against her ribcage. She placed a hand over her heart as though that would slow it down. Her eyes opened to a smear of blood across her partially torn shirt.

Police sirens wailed a mile away. She did *not* want to go back to Haven Point. There was nothing left for her there. She tried to wipe the blood from her hands against her shirt, but it only made her clothes more gruesome. Carrie's words rang in her head, "*What have you done?*"

Alex whimpered. She kept wiping in desperation. She had not been there to protect Ashley.

This was supposed to be our day. Our new life. Alex thought if her heart could explode, really explode, it would be less painful than what she felt right now.

She took off through the woods, vaguely aware of the green and brown whizzing by, how the rain had softened the pine needles and ground debris poking at her toes. Petrichor invaded each breath.

When she emerged on Mobley Lane, loose gravel jumped from old asphalt, biting into her arches and sticking until velocity flung them off. Some of them stabbed her ankles and calves.

The sound of skin slapping on wet pavement seemed louder than the gunshot. She pumped her arms harder despite the pain in her legs and feet, sprinting as far away from her past as she could get.

The morning sun fully crested the Tennessee Ridge tree tops near Main Street ahead. Darting toward the apron of Ace Hardware, she dove into the center of a circular clearance rack she had watched an employee wheel outside. Alex peered between shirts as several police cars zipped by, sirens wailing.

Her lungs seized at the thought of getting caught and going back to that horrible place. Haven Point looked like a legitimate home for troubled girls on the surface, but Alex knew better.

If the social workers realized what really went on there, it would be shut down in an instant. The Open Arms Organization sounded like a benevolent charity, but it was nothing more than a shady subsidy of the Vantage Corporation.

Alex gulped when she remembered a girl, who had killed someone, that had passed through the home as a ward of the organization. She said Open Arms was trying to "sweep her under the carpet".

Vanessa DeGelder, the woman who ran Haven, gave the other girls nightmares by insisting the murder sentence would be death. An eye for an eye.

What have I done?

Alex's right forefinger throbbed as a phantom gunshot thundered in her head. She winced and sucked in air between her teeth. Her hand shot to the side and grabbed a shirt from the rack. She changed into it and left her torn t-shirt on the ground, then hopped out from her hiding place to snatch a pair of flip flops from a sales bin beside the rack.

Alex bit off the plastic tie binding them together as she started running again. She threw them on with an awkward hop and darted into the trees across the street.

Alex emerged hours later near the Austin Peay Memorial Highway going over the south end of Kentucky Lake, north of The Big Sandy. She watched cars motor across the causeway and chewed her lip, pacing. *What do I do?* She ran her hands through her hair. *Ashley would know what to do.*

A beat up blue car rattled behind her and slowed. She stared blankly at it, rooted to the asphalt beneath her. A man with two little girls buckled into carseats in the back rolled down his window and leaned out.

"Y'lost?"

Alex's mind ran wildly. "No," she said thinly. She glanced toward the water, then back to the man. The two young girls in the back seat swatted playfully at each other.

"Could I get a ride into town?" Alex asked. "We broke down on Ryden Road and someone told my mom the marina might have some gas."

The man squinted at her. His eyes wandered up and down with clear suspicion. "The marina? Most likely she ended up at the Exxon a stretch up the road from there."

Alex stuffed her hands in her pockets and shrugged. "Sorry. We're not from around here."

He sighed. "Get in. I need to stop for gas myself."

Alex's heart knocked like the engine of the jalopy. She prayed the man wouldn't notice how her hands shook when she buckled her seatbelt. Her eyes locked on the stretch of water and road ahead as the car rolled forward. From the corner of her eye, she noticed him glancing at her.

"You sure you're okay, kid?"

Alex nodded curtly.

"You look like you've been in a fight."

She pulled down the car visor to look in the mirror. Her jaw was swollen and bruised. Alex forced a smile and a nervous laugh. "You should see the other guy."

The man didn't seem amused. "How'd that happen?"

She put the visor back up and looked him square on. "We were boating yesterday and I lost my balance. Smacked it on the dock as I was getting out. I'm a total klutz like that."

The man nodded and leaned forward as they passed around another car. "Done that a time or two myself. I bet you were trying to be cool and not hold on to the piling as you got out."

Alex looked out the window. "Totally."

"Are you a stranger?" One of the girls piped up from the back. "Daddy says not to talk to strangers."

Alex turned on her hip. It scorched with a new soreness that grew hotter the longer she leaned on it. "My name's Sam. What's yours?"

"Emma and this is my baby sister Chloe."

Alex winked at them. "Now we're not strangers."

She saw the man smile. "You should call your mom. Let her know we'll be at the station soon so she doesn't leave. Here, use my cell phone."

He leaned forward and grabbed it from a small console beneath the radio tuner and handed it to her.

The phone was pretty basic. Alex wouldn't have any excuses about not knowing how to work the screens or anything. She stared at it in her hands and wondered if the man could hear her heart pounding.

She dialed a random number, then stared out the passenger window so he couldn't see the tears threatening to slip down her face, or her lips tremble. What would she say when whoever owned the number she just dialed picked up?

Ring.

Ring.

Alex's white knuckles grew brighter.

Ring.

She forced her throat clear as a sob tried to emerge.

Ring.

"Hi, you've reached Millie. Leave a message."

A rush of air escaped between Alex's tightened lips. "Hi, Mom, it's, um... Sam. Listen, don't leave the gas station. I caught a ride. Don't worry, though, they're nice folks. Love you."

Her fingers felt numb as she ended the call and placed the device back in the console. Alex stared through the passenger window and chewed on the tips of her fingers.

"Shame you got her voicemail," the man murmured. "I hope she gets it."

"Yup."

"You can text her if you want. I know when my wife texts me, I usually notice it faster than a voicemail."

"I'm good. Thanks."

"We'll be there in about five minutes."

Alex remained silent until they rolled in to the gas station.

The man leaned forward and looked around. "Do you see your mom?"

Alex shook her head and opened the door before the car stopped at the pump. "Maybe she's inside."

"We'll wait here as long as you need."

Alex shoved her hands in her pockets and skulked into the station convenience store behind a young man in an army green tank and shredded jeans. Alex strolled to the bathroom and locked herself in a stall.