LITTLE SURE SHOT

MATT RALPHS



ANDERSEN PRESS

First published in Great Britain in 2023 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 2SA, UK
Vijverlaan 48, 3062 HL Rotterdam, Nederland
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher.

The right of Matt Ralphs to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

Copyright © 2023, Matt Ralphs

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

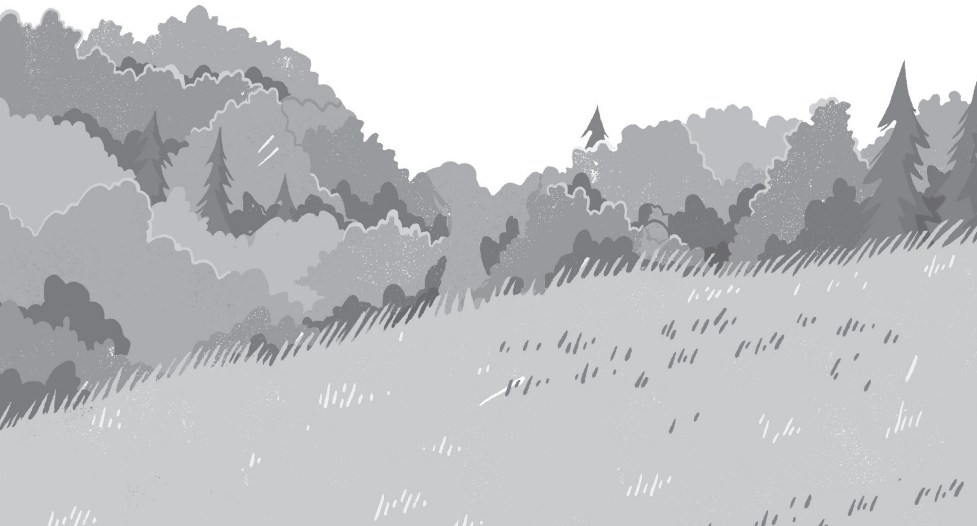
ISBN 978 1 83913 201 8

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

For Annie



PART ONE



1

EARLY WINTER, 1865

I'm right on the edge. I always wait here a spell so I *feel* the change. On my skin. In my heart. Behind, a breeze slips through the chopped-down wheat stalks. Sounds like a sigh. Above, birds call to one another and the sun flies higher still in a wide blue sky. It don't feel like winter's on the way. Maybe it won't come this year.

I must be quiet as a mouse, so I take off my boots, put them on a tree stump – *and don't forget them on the way back like you usually do, Annie!* – and creep into the woods. The woods. My favourite place in the world.

After the open fields, everything here feels . . . closer, darker, mysteriouser. Out there is warm dirt and sharp stones. In here is cool moss and soft leaves that squidge between my toes. Chilly air makes my skin prickle and come out in goosebumps. I breathe deep the smell of mulch, mushrooms and tree sap.

Pa's taught me the trees. One glance at their bark patterns and leaf shape's all I need. 'Beech, aspen, oak, hickory, maple,' I murmur as I pass. Yellow-gold leaves drift down around me – the trees are shedding their summer clothes.

I stop to listen. Branches creak like our stable door. Leaves rustle like Ma's best dress. Somewhere, deep in the green, a woodpecker raps. But there's no sign of who I'm hunting. Not a whistle nor a footstep. But he's in here *some*where, I know it.

Ma laughed when I told her this, but I reckon, even though it's darker, I see better *in* the woods than *out*. Good enough to see that someone's kicked a path through that leaf drift over there . . . I sidle round the outside (you won't catch *me* leaving a trail) and head deeper into the woods, darn certain now that I'm on the right track.

I reach the creek where me and John sometimes net for crawfish. (John's my little brother. I'm five. He's four.) The bank is steep and deep. So's not to slip, I climb down slowly using the sticky-out tree roots to hold onto, then I jump over the water at the bottom. The mud on the opposite side feels slimy-delicious and turns my feet black.

Ah! Fresh boot prints, near where the water bubble-rushes through a narrow bit between some rocks. Keeping low and quiet like our barn cats when they're stalking rats, I follow the prints to the top of the sloping bank . . . and peer through the long grass.

Ahead is the fallen oak, with its roots all twisted and pointing every which way. And there's Pa, crouched behind its trunk, back towards me, with the stock of his Kentucky long rifle pressed into his cheek. He's totally still, like he's

been frozen, then I hear the *snick* as he pulls back the rifle's hammer. I wonder what he's aiming at. A rabbit? A turkey?

Whatever it is, now'd be the perfect time for me to win our little game. You see, if I sneak up on Pa without him noticing (which is hard cos Pa's got bat ears) he has to give me a mint humbug. That's the rule. But spoiling his shot for a candy would land me in *big* trouble, so I'll just have to wait.

I count ten breaths, then ten more (ten's as high as I can count), and then that old rifle looses off a *crack* that echoes far away through the trees. Smoke billows, a pair of doves burst from a nearby bush, and I hold in a cry of delight.

'Dang it!' Pa says.

That means he's missed. He stands up with a grunt and stares hard into the trees.

Now! I scamper towards him, fast, low, silent as a shadow. I see red mud caked on his old leather boots, a kite-shaped sweat stain between his shoulders, tufts of grey hair curling out from under his straw hat. I'm *so close* . . . but as I reach out to tug his shirt he whirls round and shouts, 'Got you!'

'Dang it! When d'you see me?'

'When you were about halfway close. Saw something from the corner of my eye and thought to m'self that's either a giant turkey or Phoebe's trying to sneak up on me again.' He winks and makes a great show of unwrapping a humbug and putting it in his mouth. 'Mmm, delicious,' he says. I shrug like I don't care, but between you and me, I hate losing.

'Better luck next time, my girl.'

I look longingly at the rifle. Pa once said, 'Phoebe, a rifle in some men's hands is a weapon, a terrible thing that can take another's life fast as blinking. But for us it's a tool we use to put food on the table.' And he does too. Rabbits, turkeys and quail for Ma to skin or pluck then turn into stews so delicious my mouth's watering just thinking about 'em.

'Can I help you reload?' I ask.

'Tell you what. You talk me through proceedings just like I taught you – with no mistakes, mind – and I'll let you take the shot. How's that?'

I nod eagerly. Shooting's miles better than getting a humbug.

'All right then . . .' Pa picks up the rifle. 'First step?'

'Put the hammer into the half-cock position.'

Balancing the rifle by holding it part ways along the barrel with his left hand, Pa uses his right thumb to pull back the hammer (that's the metal bit near the stock). He moves smoothly, like he's done this a thousand times . . . I think he fought in a war a long time ago so I s'pose he got lots of practice then.

'Why half-cocked?' he asks.

'Stops the rifle going off by accident.'

'Good. What's next?'

'Open the frizzen and add powder to the pan.'

Pa pushes forward an L-shaped lever (that's the 'frizzen')

then takes a paper tube (the 'cartridge') from his satchel. He bites off the top and carefully pours a thimble's worth of gunpowder into the rounded dish set below the frizzen.

'Close the frizzen, then put the rest of the powder down the barrel.'

Pa snaps the frizzen back into place, then turns the rifle so the barrel's pointing up. There's a trickle as he pours in the rest of the powder.

'Position the wad and ball.'

Pa rests a tiny square of cloth and a lead ball on the end of the barrel then presses them down with his thumb.

'Ram them into the breach.'

Pa pulls a thin steel rod from under the rifle barrel, twirls it round between his fingers, fits it into the barrel's mouth, plunges it down once, twice, three times, then yanks it out.

'Primed and ready to fire,' he says. 'Good girl. Now, come on over to the tree trunk.' I kneel and Pa sets the rifle down beside me. 'Right, now tuck the stock nice and tight into your shoulder. It'll kick some, so be ready. Ma won't be happy if I bring you back all bruised and out of joint. That's it . . . Now, sight down the barrel.'

'So's I can see where the bullet's gonna go.'

'Yep. But remember that little lead ball will start to drop the further away it gets—'

'So if my target's far away, I need to aim high.'

'That's my girl.' Pa's knees crack as he squats next to me.

'Take a moment with the rifle. Get a feel for the weight and how it's balanced. In time it'll feel like it's part of you, like another limb.'

Keeping the rifle rested on the tree trunk (I ain't strong enough to hold it up yet, but I will be one day), I trail my fingers over the sharp flint fastened in the hammer, the smooth, gunpowder-dusted frizzen, and the U-shaped spring underneath.

'Comfortable?' Pa asks.

'Mm-mmm.'

'Then make ready to fire.'

I pull the hammer back with my thumb, loving the way it clicks into place.

'Dandy. Now. See that maple yonder, with the branch shaped like a plough handle sticking out? I want you to shoot it clean off.'

I look up at him, a bit disappointed. 'Can't I shoot something for the pot?'

'Naw, you ain't practised enough. Remember, you must always try to kill an animal in one shot so it don't feel any pain. You might miss the vitals and only wound it, and there's no worse sight than a rabbit flopping about with a broken spine.'

I shudder. The branch will do for today, I guess. I curl my finger around the trigger, press my cheek into the stock and peer down that long barrel.

'Line her up,' Pa says, 'and fire when ready.'

The branch is a bit to my left, so I shift position, letting the rifle move with me until it's on target. Then I let out a breath and squeeze the trigger. Heat licks my face as the flint strikes a spark from the frizzen and sets off the gunpowder in the pan. The rifle bucks into my shoulder, but I keep my eyes fixed on the branch.

It shatters halfway along and tumbles to the ground, just as I knew it would.

2

Pa lets me carry his rifle part of the way home. It's heavy and nearly twice as tall as me, so the only way I can manage is by leaning it against my shoulder and holding it steady with both hands.

'A good way to get to know your rifle is to carry it everywhere,' Pa says as we emerge onto the sunlit field, 'but you'd best give it back before your ma sees. You know how she gets.'

'I wish she wouldn't make such a fuss,' I sigh. 'It ain't even loaded.'

'Well, she worries,' Pa replies, tucking the rifle under his arm, 'and that's because she cares about you.'

'But she never scolds Mary Jane or Lydia or the others as much as me.'

Pa laughs. 'That's because your sisters help Ma with the laundry, the cooking and the canning like they're supposed to.'

'But I hate doing that stuff.'

'I know. You're different to your sisters, for sure. I wonder why that is.'

I shrug.

'You're certainly a better shot than I was at your age,' he continues, 'and that's a God-given gift we mustn't waste.'

'But Ma told me off yesterday for just *looking* at the rifle.'

'That's because you were supposed to be cleaning the windows. You listen to your ma and do as she says. All right?'

'All right.'

'Good girl. And when you finish your chores we can go tracking and shooting in the woods to our hearts' content.'

'That's a deal,' I say, feeling more cheerful. 'That branch sure did explode, didn't it?'

'Sure did.' He gives me a humbug. 'But rabbits and quail won't stay still like that branch, so you'll need to practise on moving targets.'

We walk slowly down the track between our two biggest fields. Our farm sits in a dip in the land, and it's all surrounded by trees. Now the wheat's cut I can see right to the horizon. Ohio – that's where we live – is pretty darn flat s'far as I can tell, and it's mostly covered in woodland.

Huh . . . That's probably why they called Woodland Woodland . . . Woodland's the nearest town, although it's still a fair ways away.

'How about you throw sticks in the air for me to shoot?' I suggest.

'But you might hit me,' Pa laughs.

'I sure wouldn't! But you could stand behind a tree if you wanted.'

He thinks on that for a spell. 'Could work. We'll give it a try, anyway.'

'Tomorrow?'

'S'long as you do your chores.'

We reach the bottom of the slope where the fields end and the hard-packed, tree-scattered yard begins. Our cabin sits right in the middle. Ma and Pa built it before I was born. It's got a porch, two chimneys (one for the kitchen stove, one for the fire), three windows and one door.

Then there's the stable where Maple lives, Pa's shed with his workbench and tools all hanging neat and tidy, the water pump that sounds like a donkey's bray when you heave the lever, and way over on the other side of the yard so the ripeness don't reach the cabin, is the latrine.

Lydia, my second-to-eldest (and most annoying) sister, is sitting on a bench on the porch darning a stocking. Her freckled face lights up when she sees me. 'Ooh, Annie, where've you *been*? You're in *such* trouble. You were supposed to milk Pink because Ma wanted to make butter. She's been thundering about all morning making *terrible* threats.'

My heart sinks into my stomach. I'd clean forgot. Or maybe I'd just decided to do it later and gone to the woods to find Pa instead. Either way, Pink's un-milked and Ma's unhappy. Again.

'What's she been sayin'?'

'Well,' Lydia enthuses, 'she said she's going to lock you in the cellar with the rats for the *whole winter*.'

I frown. 'We don't have a cellar.'

'I *know*. Ma's going to make you dig it first.'

Pa taps Lydia's hat so the brim drops over her eyes. 'Don't tease your sister. Is the wagon out? I need to load it up for my trip to the mill.'

'Not yet. Mary Jane's doing it once she's finished in the kitchen,' Lydia says, pushing her hat back up onto her curly brown hair.

'I'd better get on then. I want to be back before night falls.'

I figure I'll turn Ma's thunderstorm to a squall if I milk Pink before she sees me. 'Lydia,' I hiss. 'Where is she?'

'Indoors.' She gives me a wicked grin. 'Shall I call her for you?'

'No! And if she asks, tell her you ain't seen me.'

Lydia shakes her head. 'I cannot lie,' she says primly, and goes back to her darning.

Wondering what I've done to deserve a sister who's such a pill, I creep up to the cabin door (which, luckily, is closed), pick up the pail and head across the yard towards Pink's pasture. But before I make it to the gate, I hear the cabin door open and a voice snap, 'Phoebe Anne Mosey!'

3

Before I go on, I should probably explain that I live in Darke County, Ohio, and my full name is Phoebe Anne Mosey. My four older sisters – that's Mary Jane, Lydia, Liz and Sarah Ellen – and younger brother John, always call me Annie. My other sister, Hulda, is just a baby so she don't call me anything yet. Ma and Pa call me Phoebe or, when they're angry, Phoebe Anne Mosey.

'Phoebe Anne Mosey!'

Darn it. I turn, shoulders slumped, and see Ma on the porch, hands on hips and mad as a hornet. Lydia looks delighted.

'Hold it right there, young lady,' Ma says. 'Where've you been?' But she doesn't even let me reply. 'Never mind. I can guess. You've been beating the Devil round the stump in the woods again, haven't you?'

I nod, confounded as to why Ma always asks me questions she already knows the answer to.

'You were supposed to milk the cow,' she goes on, bristling from top to toe.

Ignoring Lydia's silent laughter, I lift the pail and say, 'I was just about to—'

'Look at the state of you!' Ma marches towards me. 'You've got leaves in your hair, your dress is all grubby. Lord above, I thought I only had one boy.'

'Sorry, Ma . . .'

'And what on earth have you done with your boots?'

I look down at my bare, mud-caked feet. *Dang it!* 'I, er, left 'em on a tree stump.'

'A tree stump?' Ma draws herself up to her full height and points to the pail, then the distant woods, and then at the ground. 'Milk the cow. Fetch your boots. *Wash your feet.* Then come back here, by which time I'll have decided what to do with you.'

'Yes, Ma,' I mumble.

She's already striding back towards the cabin, wide skirt swishing and back straight as a spade handle, when Pa appears from the barn, whistling through his teeth. Ma swerves towards him. They stand close, and after a moment her stiffness just . . . melts away. Pa whispers something into her ear. She laughs and they stroll away up the lane, heads bent towards each other, Pa with his hand resting on the back of Ma's narrow waist.

I trudge into the pasture, wondering what punishment I've let myself in for *this* time. Pink, our beloved brown-and-white Hereford, ambles over when she sees me. 'Morning,' I

say as she licks my hand (Pa says she likes the salt). 'I'm in hot water again.' I set the pail in place, grab two teats and start squeezing.

Pink stands patiently while I work, flicking her ears and tail and looking round at me every now and again to see how I'm doing. I stop when the pail's half full, give Pink a thank-you pat and head back to the cabin.

Mary Jane's at the kitchen table brushing beaten egg onto a pie. She's tall with sky-blue eyes and looks just like Ma, 'cept with softer edges and no grey hair. I set the pail down and cover it with a muslin cloth. 'You've got flour on your cheek,' I say.

'Better than having mud on my feet.' Mary Jane picks up a broom and brandishes it at me. 'Outside, Annie – *right* now.'

I retreat to the porch. 'Where's Liz and Sarah?'

'Picking apples. I'm going to bake them for supper tonight.' She pauses. 'The apples, not your sisters.' Mary Jane leans against the door frame, folds her arms and turns her face to the sun. 'Would you like to know a secret about Ma?'

'Is it about her mysterious childhood?' Lydia says from the porch. 'Was she born out of wedlock, left on the riverbank and brought up by gamblers on a Mississippi steamboat?'

Mary Jane ignores her. 'The best way to make her happy is to do what she asks of you. And if you want to make her *really* happy – and maybe avoid the spanking that's coming to you – do something nice that she isn't expecting.'

'What sort of thing?'

Mary Jane bends down and kisses the top of my head. 'That, dear Annie, you'll have to work out on your own.'

I think for a moment. Boots first, so I run back to the woods. After picking them up I head to the stream for a wash. As the water cools my feet, I spy some berry-covered holly bushes. They'll brighten up the cabin and maybe Ma's mood as well, so I cut off some branches with my pocketknife, put on my boots and, being careful not to prick myself on the leaves, head home.

I'm halfway down the track when I see Mary Jane outside the barn harnessing Maple, our chestnut pony with three white feet, to the wagon. Pa, shirt sleeves buttoned at his elbows, is loading the last of the grain sacks. John's on the porch, staring at the ground and looking like the saddest little four-year-old in the world. I guess he's been told he can't go with Pa to the Mill and watch the grain being turned into flour.

Pa kneels in front of him, says a few words then clambers onto the wagon. I wave, but he doesn't see me. Disappointed, I watch as he jerks the reins and clatters down the road; by the time I get to the cabin, he's gone.

Ma's out and about somewhere, so Mary Jane and I hang the holly from the rafters so it'll be a surprise when she gets back. I do my chores for the rest of the afternoon: collecting eggs from the henhouse, filling pails from the water pump, and helping Lydia bathe baby Hulda in a tin bath.

'Why don't you and John take Huldie for a walk while Lydia and I finish getting supper ready?' Mary Jane says as she slides the pie into the oven. 'And chivvy your sisters along – they've been gone for hours and I only sent them out for apples.'

Lydia passes a gurgling Hulda to me. 'Don't drop her,' she says sweetly, 'or leave her on a tree stump.'

I ignore her and head outside. John traipses behind me, still looking sorrowful. We cross the yard and head down the lane that leads to the apple trees. It's getting cold and there's a pile of grey clouds on the horizon.

'Cheer up, John,' I say. 'Pa'll be back soon.'

'I wanted to see the windmill. Watch the sails go round.'

'Well, Pa was in an awful hurry and he works faster on his own,' I say. 'How 'bout we have a race? First one to the orchard can be president for the day.'

John looks at me with solemn eyes. 'But that'll bump Hulda. Let's just walk and be sad.'

'Oh, all right. We'll do that instead.'

I wave when I see Liz and Sarah Ellen strolling up the lane towards us, each carrying an apple-filled basket. 'Mary Jane's sent us to find you,' I say. 'She wants to know why you've taken so long.'

'It's because we've been choosy,' Liz says.

'We only select the best apples for the Moseys' table,' Sarah Ellen adds.

'If a job's worth doing . . .'

'. . . it's worth doing well.'

Liz and Sarah Ellen are always together. Ma reckons they're just like twins.

Wind's really gotten up by the time we get back. It pulls at our hair and swirls up dust devils in the yard. I'm relieved to close the door and breathe in the golden smell of hot pastry.

Ma and Pa built this cabin. Downstairs is one big room. It's got fur rugs on the floor, and walls decorated with a clock that Pa winds every evening, a few pictures of mountains and prairies, and an oval mirror Lydia likes to admire herself in.

There's a big black stove that's always warm, a sideboard with a sink, plates piled on shelves and pots dangling from hooks. There's an open hearth too, with logs piled on either side. Narrow stairs lead up to two bedrooms, one for Ma, Pa and Huldie, and one for Mary Jane cos she's the eldest.

'Getting cold out there,' Liz says as she plonks her basket on the table. 'Oh, that holly livens the place up!'

'That was Annie's idea,' Mary Jane says from the rocking chair.

'She's hoping it'll save her from Ma,' Lydia adds. 'I'm betting it won't work.'

I ignore her and straighten one of my holly sprigs. 'Where is Ma, anyway?'

'She's taken some bread and cottage cheese to Mrs Marshall,' Mary Jane says. 'She'll be back soon. And in the meantime there's still plenty to do around here.'

The cabin's soon a whirl of activity. Hulda's laid down in her crib for a nap. Apples are washed, cored and filled with sugar. The pie is taken from the oven and left to cool on the sideboard. Mattresses are flumphed up, the fire and lanterns are lit, water boiled, vegetables chopped, and plates and cutlery laid for supper.

We've just about finished when the door opens and a red-cheeked Ma bustles in, followed by a gust of wind. 'Storm's coming in. Is everyone here?' She looks relieved when she sees we're all safe and sound.

'Sit down and I'll heat you up some milk,' Mary Jane says, taking Ma's hat.

'Pa's not home,' John says.

'No, dear,' Ma replies with a tired smile. 'He'll be a while yet. We're to have supper without him.'

'But we'll save some for him, won't we?' John's face is deadly serious.

'If we don't, I daresay Pa'll eat *you* up instead,' Lydia says, and she picks him up in a rush and tumbles him onto the bunk bed that we children share at the far end of the cabin.

Ma takes the mug from Mary Jane and settles down in her favourite chair. 'Well,' she says, looking up at my holly, 'that's brightened the place up.'

'Annie picked it from the forest,' Mary Jane says over Lydia and John's laughter. 'It was her idea.'

'Was it now?' Ma says.

'I thought it'd be a nice surprise.' I watch Ma's reaction, but I can't tell if I'm forgiven or not.

'Did you milk Pink?'

'Yes, you're drinking it. And I got the water and helped with Huldie and lots of other chores.'

'As you should. Everyone works in this family.'

'I know that,' I say, feeling my face go hot. 'I'm not lazy.'

'That's true,' Ma says. 'But you put your energies into the wrong things. Laying traps and tracking animals – that's your father's domain. John's too, when he's old enough. But they're not the sort of things a girl should be concerning herself with.'

I open my mouth to protest – I can't help it – but Mary Jane's shaking her head at me. This is a fight for another day, she's saying, and because my oldest sister is one of the wisest people I know, I push my frustration away and say, 'Yes, Ma.'

Perhaps I can get Pa to talk to her . . . make her understand.

Ma beckons me close and gathers me onto her lap. 'All I want is for you to grow up to be a respectable young woman,' she says. I lay my head against her chest as she rocks us back and forth on the chair.

This sure feels nicer than being shouted at in the yard.