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*The True Story of
a Lonely Horse
Who Found a Home—
and Became a Hero*



PROJECT SOLOMON

Jodi Stuber & Jennifer Marshall Bleakley



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A Tyndale nonfiction imprint

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Jennifer Marshall Bleakley

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Project Solomon: The True Story of a Lonely Horse Who Found a Home—and Became a Hero

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To the loves of my life: Ty, Jessica, Richard, and Hope

JODI STUBER

For Darrell, Andrew, and Ella

JENNIFER MARSHALL BLEAKLEY



Before You Begin

ALL THE EVENTS IN THIS BOOK are drawn from real life. In order to protect the privacy of the children and veterans who are part of the HopeWell community, certain characters' names and details have been changed, and a few are composites of different individuals' experiences. Some events and timelines have been compressed for brevity and to tell a more cohesive story.

As I write this, several of the animals mentioned in the book still reside at HopeWell, where they continue to play an active role in HopeWell's mission of creating an environment where children and adults—including veterans, current military service men and women, and their families—can experience love, hope, redemption, and the power of finding purpose, even in the midst of pain.

Jennifer Marshall Bleakley



Prologue

JODI'S FOREARMS ACHED as she pounded the posthole digger into the ground. Chunks of soil gave way as she repeatedly twisted the metal blades against the hardened earth. Satisfied with the depth, she heaved a wooden post into place. *Did that make six or seven?* She had lost count. Using her foot, she pushed the mound of dirt back in the hole.

Empty.

Refill.

Empty.

Refill.

If only the human spirit could be refilled as easily as a hole in the ground.

She tamped the soil around the post until it felt secure. Satisfied with her work, Jodi counted off another ten feet and

started the process again. Her hands began to cramp. But she wouldn't stop. She couldn't. The physical pain throbbing in her arms offered a welcome, albeit temporary, reprieve from the searing pain in her heart.

Jodi thrust the heavy digger against the ground. Small rocks and dried grass went flying. She pushed a strand of blonde hair out of her face, leaving a streak of dirt behind. Stopping for a moment, she pulled off her gloves, gathered her hair, and forced the wayward wisps back into a ponytail. She cast a glance at the line of posts dotting the untamed landscape.

Had it only been three years since they bought the land?

It felt like a lifetime.

Once a thriving farm, the unused land had been overrun with vegetation. Tall grass now swayed in the slight breeze. Vines hung like curtains over abandoned machinery. And large logs lay scattered across the acreage—the rotting wood providing refuge and nourishment to colonies of insects.

Returning to her work, she jammed the metal blade in the hole and hit a large rock. The jolt of pain that radiated up her arm brought everything to a halt.

What am I doing? It's Memorial Day weekend! I should be barbecuing with Ty and the kids.

The fence had seemed like a good idea in the middle of the night. Actually, it had felt less like an idea and more like a command. Maybe even a calling?

The noonday sun seemed even hotter than usual, as she began to question her memory of the night before—as well as her sanity.

Maybe I really am losing it. They say grief can do that to a person.

Moving past her moment of doubt, Jodi kept going. She kept digging and planting fence posts and refilling holes and tamping the earth.

Even though they didn't need a fence.

She had no horses. No cattle. Not even a garden.

But something was driving her forward. A yearning like she had never known kept her arms moving, even as her muscles protested. A promise—whispered to her hurting soul in the middle of the night—kept her mind focused on one thing, and one thing alone: *Build a fence.*

This yearning—this calling—felt bigger than her grief.

Bigger than a dream.

As the sun began its descent toward the treetops, Jodi finally leaned on the posthole digger and looked at what she had accomplished.

Wooden posts stood in formation—guardians of an overgrown field.

Jodi arched her back. Every muscle ached, but her muscles had nothing to do with the sudden quiver radiating through her heart.

“I can see it,” she whispered in elated disbelief. Tears made muddy streaks down her cheeks. “I can see it . . .”

1

FOUR YEARS LATER

JODI REACHED ACROSS THE PASSENGER SEAT of her van, fumbling for the scrap of paper with the directions she had written down. “There you are!” She held the paper against the steering wheel and tried to decipher her scribbles. She had been so distracted the day Ken called that she had hurriedly jotted down the basic information before rushing back to her four-page to-do list. Now she wished she had spent a few extra seconds writing legibly.

The afternoon sun in her eyes made it difficult to read the street signs. She drove past one, then slowed down at the next.

“I think this is the right road,” she mumbled, turning off the two-lane highway onto a dirt road.

She glanced again at the last line of directions: *Last house. Past open field. Dead end.*

A Road Ends sign a few feet ahead boosted her confidence as she continued down the narrow road, made even narrower by the closely placed trees and thick underbrush. There was barely enough room for her vehicle to pass.

She glanced out at a white farmhouse, almost hidden behind a curtain of evergreens. A gust of wind snatched and swirled some leaves in front of her like tiny colorful kites freed from their strings. The orange, red, and yellow leaves swooped and fluttered in the wind. Clouds were billowing to the north.

I'm glad I grabbed a coat before I left. Since she had lived in Michigan her entire life, she knew the unseasonably warm temperatures they were experiencing in mid-October would not last much longer. The wind and gathering clouds hinted at colder weather.

Jodi came upon a field overrun with at least a dozen giant rolls of hay. That must be the field. She stopped the van for a moment.

“And that’s *a lot* of hay,” she marveled out loud, gratitude warming her heart. “That will last quite a while.”

With eight horses, one donkey, and four goats needing to be fed twice a day, she was in constant need of hay and money to buy it. Then it hit her. *How are we going to get all this back to the ranch?*

“I’ll let Ty figure that one out,” she chuckled, grateful for a husband who enjoyed a good challenge and didn’t shy away from hard work.

Jodi eased off the brake as a driveway came into view at the bottom of a gentle slope. She followed the driveway to a tan ranch-style house surrounded by rolling hills and open fields.

As she pulled in behind a large pickup truck, she inhaled deeply, held it for a few seconds, and then slowly exhaled.

It was time to see what was in store for the hay donation. Jodi's heart beat faster. *What if it doesn't work out? What if I can't agree to their conditions? What if it turns out badly?*

What-ifs had plagued Jodi her whole life . . . a default setting she had fought hard to reset.

"And what if it works out just fine, Jodi Stuber?" she said aloud, refusing to allow her fear to get the upper hand. "Stop letting fear lead."

Her pep talk worked—at least for the moment—and her fear began to give way to a hopeful anticipation. It was the same hopeful anticipation she had experienced the week before during the Cowboy Ball—the annual fall fundraiser supporting HopeWell, their therapy ranch. She and Ty had founded the ranch three years ago, a year after Jodi had set up the fence posts. Those four years had flown by, and Jodi knew that not only the clients had benefited from the therapy, but she had too. Still, running the ranch required a lot of funds, and fundraising was Jodi's least favorite part of her job. Yet it was vital to care for the menagerie of animals—horses, donkeys, goats, chickens, ducks, rabbits, and dogs.

Each year, the Cowboy Ball was a lot of fun to put on, but Jodi and her small team of volunteers spent months planning, weeks gathering and packaging donations to auction off, and days decorating the venue to make it happen. This year's was no exception. By the time the actual event rolled around, she was mentally and physically exhausted.

That day, with just two hours left before the guests would arrive, Jodi had run home from the ranch to shower and change.

Then she had allowed herself ten quiet minutes before heading to the banquet hall. Two minutes into her short respite, her phone rang. Jodi didn't recognize the number and didn't have the energy to answer, so she let the call go to voice mail. "Eight more minutes," she breathed out, sinking into the closest chair.

So much was riding on this event. The fundraiser would make or break their budget for the year. "Please, God, let us meet our goal," she prayed. Her phone chimed a voice mail alert. *What if it's the caterer? Or someone is calling about an emergency? What if there is a water main break or a gas leak in the building? Oh, why didn't I answer!* Jodi lamented, quickly playing back the voice mail.

"Hi, Jodi, my name is Ken Brigham. We have a mutual friend who gave me your number. He's been telling my wife, Sue, and me about the good work you all are doing."

All is well at the venue. Jodi's breathing slowed as she listened to the rest of Ken's message.

"Just now on the radio we heard about the fundraiser you're hosting, and Sue and I decided to call to make a donation. And a pretty large one at that. If you'll give me a call back, we'd love to discuss it with you."

Jodi's head spun from the emotional whiplash she had just given herself. A large donation!

"Wow, God, you sure work fast." She laughed, hitting the call back on her phone.

Depending on the amount Ken wanted to give, they might meet their financial goal for the night—even before the event began! Maybe they would far exceed their goal this year. Jodi's cheeks flushed with the thought.

Of course, sometimes people wanted to donate farm

equipment or building supplies, which would certainly qualify as a large donation—at least in size. *Is that what he meant?* Jodi fought to keep her voice steady and gracious when Ken answered the phone.

“Well, that was a quick call back,” he said, laughing.

Jodi suddenly wished she had played it a little cooler and called him back the next day, but it was too late now. Might as well own her eagerness.

“You certainly know how to get someone to return your call,” she joked. “I’m actually on my way to our Cowboy Ball fundraiser now, but I wanted to get back to you before the evening got away from me. Ken, thank you so much for thinking of donating to HopeWell.”

“Oh, you betcha,” Ken replied. “We’ve been hearing how you and your horses are helping so many in our community, and we feel like—” there was a slight hesitation before he continued—“well, we feel like we have something that should really belong to you.”

Jodi was curious, but also slightly disappointed. She got the distinct feeling Ken was not talking about money. Her dream of being fully funded before the event officially began started to fade. But she quickly shook off the feeling, reminding herself that anyone willing to give anything to HopeWell deserved her gratitude, respect, and attention.

“Well, I am most intrigued,” she said, standing to stretch her back.

“We have a lot of hay that we would like for you to have. A dozen large rolls actually. And as an extra bonus—or I guess maybe it’s more like a condition,” he clarified with a short

chuckle, “the hay comes with a horse! A six-year-old gelding named Harley.”

Jodi sank back into her chair. *A horse?* she mouthed.

“Harley is such a good boy and has brought our family nothing but love and joy. And he’s a natural with kids. But we just aren’t able to give him what he needs anymore. We believe you can. And, well, we’d really like you to meet him and hear our story. And if you agree with us, we’d like him to go to HopeWell.”

Jodi walked to the kitchen sink and looked out the window toward the horses grazing in the field. She hadn’t planned on adding another horse to their herd. Eight really did seem like enough. In fact, when it came to the budget, eight often felt like too many. But something in Ken’s voice made her consider his offer. And the man certainly deserved to have someone hear his story. Jodi couldn’t offer people much, but she could listen to what they wanted to share. And, yes, HopeWell could certainly use the hay.

Jodi took a deep breath before responding.

“Ken, I would be honored to come out and meet Harley. And we would be so grateful for the generous offer of hay. Would next week be okay?”

After deciding on a day and time, Jodi scribbled his address and directions on some junk mail lying on the counter. When she hung up, she tore off the piece with the needed information and tucked it in her day planner. It was time to head to the fundraiser.

Jodi wasn’t too worried. She knew from past experiences that her adrenaline would surge the moment the first guest arrived. And it did. Dinner was delicious, her talk was well

received, and the live auction was as entertaining as it was profitable. They certainly didn't raise a huge surplus of funds, but they raised enough to meet HopeWell's day-to-day needs for the next year.

Now, as Jodi sat parked outside of Ken and Sue's house, she shook off all thoughts of last week and pulled the key from the ignition. It was time to focus on the task at hand. Yet, she couldn't help but wonder if they had raised enough money during the fundraiser to add another horse to the herd. The hay she had passed driving in would go a long way toward feeding the herd, but another horse would mean increased veterinarian and farrier bills, as well as extra time training a new horse to work with the kids and adults they served.

Jodi tucked her sunglasses and the scrap of paper safely into the side pocket of her purse and grabbed some pamphlets about HopeWell from the glove box. As she got out of the van, something to the right of the house caught her attention. A deer—a small doe—was standing perfectly still, her head raised, her gaze fixed on something off in the distance. Jodi was surprised to find a deer standing so close to a house in the middle of the day.

"What are you doing out here, little one?" she asked taking a few tentative steps toward the doe. "Are you okay?"

Suddenly, a twig snapped under Jodi's foot. She jumped, but the doe didn't move—not even a twitch. Jodi squinted against the late afternoon sun . . . then laughed out loud.

"You're not real, are you?" she said, chuckling and shaking her head. "Leave it to me to be concerned over a plastic deer!"

Jodi walked up three steps to the porch, but before she could knock, the door opened.

"Well, you must be Jodi."

“And you must be Ken and Sue,” she replied, nodding her head at the woman standing just behind Ken.

“Guilty as charged,” the couple said, welcoming her inside.

Ken and Sue appeared to be in their mid- to late-forties—not much older than she and Ty. Sue led the way to the dining room where she had set out tea and fresh baked cookies. The three of them engaged in easy conversation—discussing the impending cold front and lamenting the end of the mild temperatures. As they finished their tea, the conversation turned to horses.

Horses were one of Jodi’s favorite subjects and had been since the age of five when she begged her parents for a white pony. She promised to keep the pony in her bedroom and feed it hamburgers and cookies. Thirty-five years later, she had gotten her pony, and several horses too. Thankfully in that time, she had learned that horses fare much better in open, outdoor spaces and get more nourishment from hay and grain.

“So tell me a little about Harley,” Jodi said, sensing the couple’s eagerness to share their story with her.

Ken and Sue’s faces lit up. Their affection for Harley was obvious. Then she remembered what Ken had said to her on the phone. “You can give Harley something we can’t.” *What could that be?*

“Our boy is lonely,” Sue began, answering Jodi’s unspoken question. “For years we had three horses, our three musketeers. They were the best of friends. Even though health problems prevented Ken and me from doing much riding, the horses brought us a lot of happiness. We loved watching them in the field and taking care of them. But two years ago, we lost our oldest gelding; then last year we lost our mare. Harley was left all by himself, and the poor boy is terribly lonesome.”

Lonesome. Jodi's throat tightened when Sue said the word. A familiar emptiness settled around her like a well-worn shawl.

"I am so very sorry for your loss."

Sue nodded. "Thank you. It's been hard for us and Harley."

"A couple of months ago I came home from work to find Harley standing just as content as could be beside that plastic deer in the front yard," Ken said. "He had broken out of the pasture. I guess he figured a plastic friend was better than no friend at all."

Jodi didn't know whether to laugh or cry. The image of a large horse standing beside a small plastic deer was as funny as it was heartbreaking.

"After Harley broke out the fourth time, we knew he deserved better." Ken took his wife's hand. "But we just can't afford to take on more horses."

"I was talking to a friend about our situation, and she mentioned your farm," Sue explained. "She said you are helping families cope with some heavy issues by letting them work with your horses. We think Harley would be a good fit for your ranch. And I just love the name—HopeWell. It just feels right, you know?"

"I know exactly what you mean," Jodi said. The ranch had become a well of hope for her and so many others. "Is it okay for me to meet Harley?"

Ken's jovial expression returned as he stood.

The three of them walked behind the house where a beautiful chestnut quarter horse was standing in the middle of a field.

"Come on over here, Harley boy," Ken called out.

Harley's head popped up, and his ears flicked up in attention. He walked directly to Ken at the fence line and greeted

him. Ken leaned his head against Harley's muzzle. The scene felt so private that Jodi momentarily looked away. Then Harley started frisking Sue for treats. His fuzzy gray lips rooted around the woman's shoulders, then he stretched his head over the fence and began inspecting her pockets.

"Okay, okay," Sue laughed. "I surrender." She pulled a treat out of her back pocket and offered it to Harley, who eagerly accepted her offering.

Jodi stood several feet away from the fence to observe Harley interacting with his owners. Ty would be arriving soon with Ryan, their farrier and horse trainer, and Aimee, a HopeWell volunteer and veterinarian student. Jodi had asked the three of them to help assess the horse. Something deep inside of Jodi told her that Harley would be joining their herd, but she needed to consult the team.

Ken cleared his throat.

"I've always felt Harley was a special boy," he said, absently stroking his horse. "But a few months ago, I discovered just how special he is."

"What happened?"

"Our daughter brought the kids over for a visit. After lunch the kids went outside to play hide-and-seek. Colin, our five-year-old grandson, decided he was going to find a good hiding spot. He definitely did. After a while, his brother asked us to help find Colin. Sue suggested I check the barn and Harley's run-in shelter, but I couldn't imagine the boy would have gone out there. He's such a little thing, you know?"

Jodi could see Ken was reliving the moment.

"While the rest of the family spread out around the yard, I went to the barn. The door was shut tight, and it was pretty

dark in there. I called Colin's name, but he didn't answer. So I went to Harley's run-in shelter. Harley was inside resting, but as I got closer, I noticed something else—something that stopped me in my tracks. Colin was sitting without a care in the world under Harley!"

Jodi couldn't imagine finding a child sitting underneath a thousand-pound horse. Even though her own children were teenagers, she still drilled a fearful respect of horses into them.

"What did you do?" she asked, her words just above a whisper.

Ken chuckled. "I fought every instinct I had to shout out for the boy. I casually walked up to Harley and quietly asked Colin what he was doing.

"I'm hiding, Grandpa," he said. I told him that Harley is not a hiding spot; he is a big horse with heavy feet, and he might accidentally step on him."

"What did Colin do?" Jodi asked.

"He looked at Harley, then at me, and said, 'No, he won't, Grandpa. Harley is careful.'"

Jodi couldn't help but laugh.

"Well, good ol' Harley never moved. Not an inch. Not a muscle. He just stood as still as can be. Not the least bit bothered by the visitor beneath his belly." Ken rubbed Harley's chin.

"So how did you get Colin to move?"

"I did the only reasonable thing a man could do in that situation. I bribed my grandson with ice cream. Worked like a charm too."

"That would have worked for me too."

Jodi studied Harley's current stance and expression. One back hoof was cocked, his lips were relaxed, and his ears were

turned to the sides. He was the picture of a contented, peaceful horse. *A gentle giant.*

Ken and Sue described other instances of Harley with their grandchildren. “He has never reacted with anything other than patience and gentleness,” Ken said.

“Are you sure you don’t want to keep Harley for them?” Jodi asked.

“No, he’s just so lonely for a herd,” Sue explained. “And our grandkids aren’t able to visit us that often. We would love to keep Harley, but we want him to have a good life.”

Ken nodded in agreement.

Jodi heard car doors close in the distance. Her team must have arrived. Ken put his hand up.

“Sue and I can meet your team and bring them over here. Why don’t you get to know Harley for a bit?”

“I think that sounds like a wonderful idea.”

As the couple walked away, Jodi approached Harley. She stopped a foot from the fence. Harley flicked an ear in her direction as he pulled at a clump of grass. Jodi kept her hands at her sides and her posture relaxed. She wanted to make it clear to Harley that she was not a threat.

“Hello, Harley,” she said softly. “I’m Jodi.”

Harley raised his head, his dark eyes focused on Jodi.

“I sure am glad to meet you,” she whispered.

Harley took three steps forward, his lips moving as if chewing an invisible wad of gum. He and Jodi observed each other across the fence. Jodi longed to reach her hand out and run it down the length of the thin white stripe on his muzzle. But she wouldn’t rush him. She would let Harley make the first move.

“I hear you’ve been a bit lonely out here. Your deer friend isn’t such great company, huh?” Jodi kept her voice upbeat and soft. Harley’s ears flicked in response to her words. “It’s hard to be lonely isn’t it, Harley? It’s hard to miss someone who should be here.”

Jodi’s words trailed off. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. *Focus, Jodi*, she commanded herself. *Be present.*

A loud equine exhale startled her from her thoughts.

Harley’s face was inches from hers. The coarse hair from his chin tickled her cheek. A moment later, the large horse rested his chin on Jodi’s shoulder and exhaled again. She turned her face and breathed out in return—greeting him as another horse would. Jodi slowly reached up and gently rested her right hand on Harley’s neck. She could see her reflection in Harley’s left eye. “Sweet one, you are not going to be lonely anymore.”

The two stood together, inhaling and exhaling.

“Well, it appears our presence here might be a bit irrelevant,” Jodi heard Ty say. “I can’t leave you alone for a second without a handsome stud finding you!”

“He’s a gelding,” Jodi corrected, trying not to disturb Harley.

“You can admit it. You have a weakness for the tall, dark, and handsome type—as long as they have four legs and a tail, that is,” Ty said, with a laugh.

“Well, guys,” she said, turning her attention to the human herd, “it looks like it’s time to introduce you to the newest addition to HopeWell. I mean, of course, if you all agree,” she amended, sheepishly.

“Let’s check this boy out,” Ryan said, climbing though the fence rails.

Jodi and Aimee jokingly rolled their eyes as they entered

through the gate. Ken retrieved Harley's tack from the nearby barn. The horse stood perfectly still as Ryan saddled him and mounted. It was clear that Harley had no problem with a rider. Ryan asked Harley to back up, to go forward, and to walk. The horse responded to each request. As Ryan put Harley through his paces, Aimee observed his gait and temperament. Then Ryan dismounted and took off Harley's saddle so Aimee could examine the horse's skin, hooves, and teeth. When she was done, she gave Jodi a thumbs-up.

"He looks to be a healthy, compliant gelding," Aimee declared.

Ken and Sue beamed like proud parents. Yet behind their smiles Jodi could sense an ache. She imagined it would feel a lot like finding out your child had been accepted to a faraway college. It was the beginning of an exciting new chapter of life, but also the end of a chapter you have loved. Jodi's heart swelled with gratitude and appreciation, and she made a mental note to send them periodic updates about Harley.

Harley.

It was such a good name, and yet Jodi liked to give each of the HopeWell horses a new name as they embarked on a new life.

While Ryan and Aimee put the tack away, and Ty made arrangements with Ken and Sue for transporting the horse, Jodi stood quietly with Harley. He lowered his head and ripped several tall blades of grass from the ground, with one blade clinging to his bottom lip. His eyes flitted to hers.

"You have very wise eyes," she whispered.

The horse took two steps toward Jodi.

"And the way you instinctively knew what to do when little

Colin hid under your belly shows that you have a very wise mind too.”

The horse closed the distance between them.

“What do you think about the name Solomon? He was the wisest man who ever lived. He was also a king. Regal like you.”

The horse pressed his muzzle to Jodi’s face and breathed out.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

Jodi looked up. Everyone was staring at her and Harley with hopeful expressions. The stakes suddenly felt incredibly high. The what-ifs she had kept at bay for the past two hours started rapid-firing in her mind.