

TAKE *the* HORSE *and* RUN

The Incredible True Story of a Horse Fleeing for His Life—
and the Girl Who Would Stop at Nothing to Save Him

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Cover design by Ron C. Kaufmann

Interior design by Cathy Miller

Edited by Bonne Steffen

Published in association with the literary agency of WordServe Literary Group, wordserve.com.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.


ISBN 979-8-4005-1024-3

Printed in the United States of America

32	31	30	29	28	27	26
7	6	5	4	3	2	1



**For those who fall yet rise again
despite the aches and pains of the plunge.
Heels down, eyes up.
There is hope.**



DISCLAIMER

The stories in this book are about real people and real events, but some names of places and people's identities have been omitted or changed for privacy purposes. Dialogue has been recreated to the author's best recollection, and some events have been compressed for brevity.

A percentage of the proceeds from the sale of this book will be donated to Fox-Bell Humane Society and their ongoing animal rescue efforts on the Olympic Peninsula.

Foreword



One beautiful fall day, I drove my daughter to our friend's horse therapy ranch to help with a birthday party. I was just supposed to drop her off, but my friend took one look at my face and invited me to stay.

“Hang out for a bit. Take all the time you need.”

I walked toward the pasture that housed my friend's six horses and folded my arms over the top rail of the fence. The facade I had been hiding behind for so long finally began to crack. Fear, anxiety, and helplessness overwhelmed me.

“God, where are you?” I muttered, the words sounding more like an accusation than a question. “I can't do this anymore. I need you—we need you.”

I had been pleading with God to fix a heartbreaking situation; to intervene in the life of someone I loved; to rescue one I could not. But nothing was getting better. In fact, it seemed like things were getting worse.

I sighed deeply and closed my eyes.

I was so tired.

Utterly terrified.

I felt so alone.

Then suddenly I wasn't.

I felt the rush of warm air on my neck a moment before a gentle weight pressed against my right shoulder.

"Hi, Slick," I mumbled, opening one eye. "The party is over there." I half-heartedly pointed across the ranch.

Slick, the head of the herd, didn't move. His feet remained planted in front of me.

"You can stay here if you need a break," I offered. He was the one who kept the others in line—the protector who stood guard and tried to keep everyone safe.

"It's hard work trying to keep everyone safe," I said to the horse—I admitted to myself.

Slick exhaled.

I exhaled.

And that was all it took.

My emotional dam burst, and all my fear, doubt, sorrow, and anger came rushing out. My body shook against the force of so many feelings. Silent sobs came in waves. Yet, Slick stayed right where he was. I threw my arms around his neck and held on for dear life.

When the emotional torrent quieted and my body stilled, I whispered, "Thank you"—to Slick and to God.

Slick's head bobbed, as if saying *You're welcome*, and then he turned to join his herd.

I have seen many examples of the profound impact therapy horses can have on people. But that day with Slick, I

didn't just *witness* God's provision and love through a horse, I *experienced* it.

I experienced firsthand the powerful, sacred bond a human can form with a horse—a horse who becomes a living, breathing picture of God's love and presence with us. Whose strength reflects God's perfect strength; whose acceptance mirrors God's invitation to come as we are; and whose steady presence reminds us that we aren't alone and never will be. That day, Slick became more than a horse, more than a companion. He became a friend who stood with me in the darkness and fear and directed my gaze toward the Light.

That is the type of friend Haylee Graham met in her horse, Cartier—and the reason she went to such great lengths to rescue the one God had sent to rescue her.

The bond I experienced with Slick is the same bond I saw reflected on every page of *Take the Horse and Run*—a beautiful story of God's provision, the powerful gift of forgiveness, and the transforming work of redemption.

If you have ever experienced a powerful connection with an animal, you will instantly get this book. And if you haven't, I imagine that by the time you finish reading the story, you, too, may find yourself willing to do whatever is required to take the horse and run.

*Jen Bleakley, author of Joey and
the bestselling Pawverbs devotional series*

Prologue



I had always been drawn to the night sky. When I was younger, I'd wrap myself in a blanket and sit outside for hours, staring at the vast, endless darkness. The stars were my silent companions, glimmering high above the chaos I longed to escape—beyond the violence that pulsed through the walls of my fractured home, beyond the heartbreak, grief, and struggles that felt insurmountable. I whispered my questions to them, wondering what it was like up there, far from the turmoil below. As a child, the night sky was my companion; now, as an adult, it had become my accomplice as I crept across the ranch grounds to steal my own horse.

I threaded my way among the shadows of the ranch, clad in all black, except for my bright pink hair that shimmered against the moonlight. Slinking along a manicured hedge, I traced my fingers across its dense leaves, following it straight to the open doors of the barn. Just shy of the entrance, I pressed my back against the outside wall, my heart hammering so hard I was sure it would give me away. This wasn't

like me. None of this was like me. But this was what I had become.

I could hear the horses inside shifting restlessly in their stalls, the soft crunch of hay punctuating the silence. I took a few deep breaths, trying to calm the adrenaline. Steeling myself, I dared to peek inside. Darkness swallowed the long aisle, but I scanned the shadows anyway, looking for anything out of place. I pushed off the wall and walked quickly through the dark hallway of the barn. I glanced down at my shoes and almost cursed aloud at the concrete floor beneath them. Nerves gutted my stomach. It would be harder to sneak out on concrete.

I made it to the last stall on the left where Cartier was being kept, hesitated, and looked around a final time. Carefully, I lifted a halter off the hook and eased open the stall door.

“Hey, Cart,” I whispered into the void. “It’s me.”

Cartier jolted upright at my voice, the whites of his eyes flashing like tiny crescent moons. He had been dozing in the corner, but now his entire body braced in fear.

“It’s just me,” I soothed, taking a cautious step forward into his shavings. “You’re going to be okay.”

He exhaled, his body relaxing slightly, but his muscles remained taut, ready for him to flee. I reached out, trailing my fingers down his neck, feeling the slight tremble beneath the skin.

“I’ll never let anything bad happen to you,” I promised, slipping the halter over his face and clipping the lead rope to

the bottom. His eyes, flecked with gold, glinted even in the dim light and locked onto mine—wide, searching, uncertain. My throat tightened.

“But that means we have to go, buddy,” I whispered, fighting the tremor in my voice. “Right now.”

1

We drove along a long gravel driveway bordered by white picket fences and open, rolling pastures. The more cautious horses braced themselves in place, lifting their chins and snorting into the air like dragons.

Sawyer, my three-year-old sister, pressed her tiny index finger against her window. “*Hors-ie*,” she squeaked.

“Lots of horsies,” Mom affirmed from the driver’s seat. She looked around, admiring the scenery a little too long for someone at the wheel. Next to her was our horse trainer, Chad, who hadn’t looked up once from beneath his ball cap. He was locked onto his cell phone, typing.

The car started to slowly drift until it was bouncing and skipping over molehills. Chad dropped his phone and lunged for the wheel. “Good grief, Susan! Watch the road!”

Chad was like family and always entertained me. I adored our theatrical trainer, especially when he scolded Mom. No one else had the audacity to talk to her that way, not when they knew how quickly her Southern temper could spark and flare.

Suddenly, a group of yearlings dashed past the side of the car in long, ground-covering strides, snapping me out of my reverie. I leaned into my little sister and pointed at the horses again. “Look, Sawyer, look!” The yearlings surged ahead of us, kicking up gobs of mud in spirited defiance. Then they circled back, reveling in their triumph over the SUV monster with stomps and snorts. They lifted off the ground in small rears, tucking their knobby knees and tossing their heads in joyful abandon. A few of the young horses even glided across the terrain, their necks arched and tails held high, as though challenging the car to another race.

“They’re so cute,” Mom said as she craned her head for a better look. “I bet Mark would let me have one if I said please.”

“Ugh. Rich people,” Chad mumbled.

Before I was born, Mom, an aspiring actress from Louisiana, met my dad, Gary, a charismatic up-and-comer in Hollywood, on the set of the hit Fox TV show *Alien Nation*. Dad played a human detective; Mom, an alien who had crash-landed on Earth. Despite the bald cap and otherworldly makeup, she caught his eye, and they married almost as soon as they met.

Then along came me and life seemed dreamlike—red

carpets, magazine spreads, paparazzi in the bushes. *Alien Nation's* international success gave them a fleeting taste of Hollywood stardom. Until, suddenly, the show was canceled after the first season.

Dad's acting career stalled. Mom, who'd competed at some of the biggest horse shows in Southern California, gave riding lessons in our backyard, using a round-bellied black pony I'd named Batman. Much later, I learned how well he lived up to his name; our unlikely little hero helped pay the mortgage.

I don't remember my parents fighting. Perhaps I was just too young. But when I was five, I do remember Dad taking my tiny fingers in his hand, and with tears in his eyes, telling me he was moving to a different home. Not long after, Mom said she wanted me to meet a man named Mark.

Mom and Dad got divorced, but I didn't really know what that meant. To me, divorce just meant double the attention, double the Christmas presents, double the Easter egg hunts as I bounced between their homes. For Dad, divorce was heartbreak. For Mom, it was freedom.

She and I quickly moved in with Mark, trading our drafty one-story house for a sprawling mansion filled with an ever-growing menagerie of dogs, cats, and parrots that swooped freely overhead. I strapped on my pink and purple Rollerblades and glided across polished marble floors, speeding beneath grand archways, dodging yet another one of Mom's rescue dogs, and twirling beneath ceilings tall enough for the grandest Christmas trees. It was like we lived in Noah's

ark with a constant blur of brightly feathered birds streaking through the air.

Mom and Mark got married, and soon I had two half-siblings. Suddenly, I wasn't alone anymore. Neither were they. Their nanny followed them through the endless hallways, always a few steps behind, gently coaxing them in Spanish as they chased after cats, tumbled over dogs, and giggled at the parrots' squawks.

My baby brother, Hunter, was just beginning to talk, lost in a world of toy trucks and tiny tractors. My toddler sister, Sawyer, spent her days outside, picking up ladybugs and roly-polies, proudly showing us her collections.

I spent all my time with horses, and my world was competitive show jumping. By the time I was ten, I was competing at the highest levels of Southern California show jumping for my division, riding against the daughters of celebrities like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Steven Spielberg. When I wasn't in the saddle, I galloped through the living room, leaping over broomstick-and-mop courses for hours on end. I watched all the horse movies and read all the equine-centered books, and birthdays and Christmas mornings always included gift-wrapped Breyer model horses along with molasses treats to pass out at the barn. My room's walls bloomed with custom horse murals, and wisps of hay clung to my hair like a badge of honor. As our family grew and chaos swirled, horses remained Mom's and my shared passion—and today, she was shopping for a new one.

We spent an entire day driving from barn to barn,

evaluating half-ton contenders for her heart. While Mom and I saw each animal as a masterpiece, Chad was harder to impress. “That one’s too short,” he’d grumble. When Mom called a bay horse “sweet,” Chad shot her a sharp glare. “We don’t need sweet, Sue. We need a . . . *superstar!*”

Our SUV pulled into a circular driveway that looped around a tiered fountain, coming to a stop in front of an A-frame barn with a mahogany finish that sparkled in the sun.

I scrambled out of the car, gawking at the grandiose barn with perfectly trimmed rosebushes at its corners.

Mom grabbed Sawyer, and Chad stepped out with a confident stride.

Chad had arranged the visit in advance, and the moment we arrived, an older Middle Eastern man met us with crushing enthusiasm. After a flurry of handshakes, he launched into a description of the first horse he wanted to show us.

“This one flies,” he said, drawing out the words like he was describing a mythical beast.

My face lit up with excitement while Chad’s expression telegraphed he’d heard this one before.

“His name is Cartier, and he is one of my finest.”

“Car-tee-ay,” I breathed, tasting the name on my tongue. It sounded familiar. *Wasn’t that what Mark called the flashy silver watch on his wrist?*

“Cartier, huh?” Chad said dryly. “Is that why he’s so expensive?”

The owner laughed and eagerly explained Cartier’s select breeding from some of the best show jumping lines in

Germany. His words faded into the background as a groom emerged from the barn, leading a majestic dark horse into the embrace of the descending sunlight. Suddenly, no one was listening anymore.

His coat was like a melted mixture of my favorite milk and dark chocolates, but when the sun hit just right, it gleamed amber. Cartier's long legs were dipped in midnight, and his black mane and tail flowed in the warm California breeze like wispy shadows. He was tall and lean, and when he breathed, his sharp muscles seemed to dance beneath his skin.

This horse was designed for defying all gravity. *This* was a superstar.

When Cartier was led to us, he first greeted Sawyer, nuzzling her cheek and exhaling hot breath in her face. He watched my sister with a deep, soulful eye as if he were gauging her sweet reactions. "He has the kind eye," Mom said. She never based her decision on a horse's athleticism, conformation, age, or even breed. It all came down to their eye—the perceptive carrier of understanding between horse and human—and the soul that sparkled through it. Both of Cartier's eyes seemed to glow with something special.

I stepped in front of the massive animal and stroked his velvet nose. He dropped his head and gazed down at me with curiosity and warmth. I watched his ears swivel back and forth as the adults chatted. He seemed to want to understand their words, and as his muzzle brushed across my cheeks, he seemed to want to know me. I glanced up at

his forehead where he had a white marking distinctly shaped like a capital *F*.

“Look!” I beamed with a gap-toothed smile. “He has an *F* on his head. What do you think it means?”

Mom gently brushed his forelock aside. “I don’t know. Maybe it stands for *fast*. Or *flying*.”

“He is fast, and he does fly!” the owner said. His eyes darted between Mom and Chad, hoping he had just landed a sale.

Cartier nibbled my hair and blinked slowly. “Maybe it means friend,” I said.

“Friend.” Mom smiled. “I like that. I like *him*.”

Chad raised his eyebrows at Mom. “*Please* let me ride him first.”

“Fine. You ride him, and I’ll write the check.”

The word *check* had the owner moving at lightning speed. He quickly instructed the groom to take Cartier away to be saddled. Chad followed them to the barn and snapped on a helmet while the ranch owner led us to a huge oval-shaped arena. Inside were dozens of colorful triple-bar obstacles and widespread Liverpools—jumps with water trays or pools beneath them.

Settling in a nearby gazebo, we spent the next hour marveling as Chad and Cartier effortlessly soared over jumps taller than me. Cartier had scope, something that most equestrians ached to find in a prospective show jumper. He used his full shoulders to launch himself, clearing the poles with feet to spare; and every time he landed on the other

side, Chad would collapse over the horse's neck and catch himself with a grab of dark mane. This was a rare thrill for a rider like Chad.

"You'll have fun with this one, Sue!" he yelled over his shoulder.

Mom turned to me, her eyes searching. "What do you think, baby?"

I exhaled a single word: "Superstar."

"Superstar," she whispered, leaning her forehead against mine.

When she pulled back, a radiant smile lit up her face—bigger and brighter than I'd seen in ages. I sat up straighter, unable to stop myself from mirroring her grin.

A flicker of forgotten hope stirred in my chest. Maybe this horse could bring more of those smiles. *Maybe Mom will feel truly happy again.*



Our family's lavish lifestyle was a stage, and we each played our part in a performance that hid Mom and Mark's fractured marriage. Sure, they could write the checks—funding a horse whose price tag rivaled that of a luxury car, a down payment on a house, or an investment that wouldn't catch colic or step on a nail. But beneath the glitter of our world where extravagance seemed ordinary, another reality was quietly falling apart.

One night at dinner, as we passed a bowl of spaghetti

around the table, Mom and Mark threw heated barbs at each other. When she grabbed the bowl from Mark, Mom snapped something sharp, and he fired back with an insult just under his breath. I froze mid-chew, stunned. *Did he really just say that? Did she?*

I glanced at Sawyer. She slurped her noodles, completely oblivious. My baby brother, Hunter, was too young to notice, and the nanny kept her head down, quietly correcting table manners in Spanish. She didn't meet my eyes. So I fell into a pained quiet, one that would slowly become a familiar presence to me. Even though I was surrounded by my family, I was completely alone.

I forked the pasta on my plate, but my appetite was long gone. I quietly excused myself from the table with half my food untouched. No one seemed to notice.

Mark started coming home less and less, and when he was there, the accusations of infidelity and shouting matches rattled the walls. The fights followed us everywhere—to horse shows, vacations, even the barn. Once, at a prestigious showground in Palm Springs, we packed the SUV with my siblings, their nanny, saddles, and show clothes, excited for a weekend together as a family. Chad had driven separately, saying something about “not joining the family circus,” and booked a room at a nearby hotel instead of staying with us.

The rental house where we stayed was stunning, and it even had a pool. For a moment, it felt like everything might be okay. We spent the first day splashing in the pool and getting sunburned. My siblings went to bed, but I stayed

up, half-watching TV. Suddenly, shouting erupted outside. I crept to the sliding glass doors and saw Mark storming off, keys in hand, with Mom chasing him.

Mark never returned that weekend.

As the days went on, Chad made a point to spend more time with me. He picked me up for horse lessons, blasting pop music in the car and dancing behind the wheel. At first, I laughed and joined in, belting out Britney and NSYNC lyrics. But as the fights at home escalated, my smiles became more forced, my laughter faded, and eventually I stopped dancing altogether. It didn't take long for Chad to stop dancing too.