

For *the* Love *of* Horses



AMBER H. MASSEY



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To anyone who has ever endured for the love of a horse.





Special Thanks

There are many people whose love and encouragement have been the strength behind this book, and to them I say thank you...

- to Jeff for finally saying yes to my dream of owning a horse and for loving, supporting, and funding our animal family.
- to my family. Looks like the horse craze never went away. Thanks for loving me through it.
- to Erin for transforming a notebook full of really bad grammar into something worth reading.
- to my friends who have allowed me to share their stories and horses with the world.
- to all the veterinarians and their technicians who have cared for Marquise and me.
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Then and Now

It seems like only yesterday that Marquise and I were learning the ins and outs of endurance riding and looking forward to a very bright future on the trail. Riding for hours at a time was a passion, and it didn't matter whether I was competing, training, or just enjoying a brisk fall afternoon.

After only a few short years of trail riding over so many wonderful miles, Marquise's career came to an abrupt end, and in light of his early retirement, my identity as an equestrian felt phony. Hay, dirt, leather, and riding consumed me for so long that I began to grasp at anything for fulfillment. Thankfully, I picked up a pen and paper and wrote.

Little stories, life lessons—devotions if you will—began to form, and God's desire became clear.

Some equestrians like me seek to connect with greatness and strive to fill this need by obtaining oneness with a horse, but this satisfaction lasts only until the tack is hung. Much greater and longer lasting joy is found in an intimate relationship with Christ. Even though I longed to be in the saddle, the time I spent carefully listening to God was worth the sacrifice and opened my eyes to some valuable truths.

The first truth is that my purpose is to imitate Christ and selflessly follow Him. God's plan was for me to write a book that would speak to horse lovers, but He knew my desire to ride stood in the way of my wholehearted focus. By allowing riding to be temporarily removed from my life, I was able to concentrate on God's desire rather than my own.

The second is this. For now Christ has called me to write. Rather than using my time to ride, He's asked me to invest in others and reach out to those who share my unbridled love for horses. For those of you who are

out there riding, do so with vigor and enjoy the blessing of knowing that until He calls you to do something else, you're good right where you are.

When Marquise galloped down the trail to early retirement, my purpose changed. I went from being an aspiring endurance rider to a writer, yet God was gracious and added a new equestrian identity. Marquise is now trail sound, and I'm amazed how God puts people in my path to love on. Who I am now is different than what I would have expected, but in this new season of life, I'm able to have some really wonderful conversations out in the quiet of the woods.



"The chosen fishermen weren't chosen because they were the best, but they were chosen because they were willing to cast their nets."

Pastor Paul Jimenez



Diamond in the Rough

A horse. It was all I ever *really* wanted. Every birthday, Christmas, and Easter, I dreamed of waking up and finding that special pony happily munching grass in our suburban front yard.

Through the years I was content with Barbie horses, horse sleeping bags, horse calendars, and horse-themed birthday parties. I carefully saved and rolled the coins from my allowance so that when I had saved enough, I could buy another Breyer and add it to the collection already filling my room. For a very long time, I dreamed of owning my first *real* horse and knew that when the time was right, everything would be perfect.

Twenty-eight years old and armed with a well-planned budget, I presented my childhood dream to my husband, Jeff. He'd heard my argument before and never agreed, but this time his answer was different. It was yes, but as the self-proclaimed family-pet-namer, he had one stipulation—he wanted to name the next member of our animal family.

Naming a horse isn't a right. It's a privilege, and the chosen name should reflect the horse's character and honor. I knew there was going to be further discussion about this, but that conversation could wait until after four hooves were firmly planted in my pasture.

When Jeff told me he'd picked out the name Huckleberry, my mind flashed to pictures of Doc Holliday in *Tombstone*. My skin crawled at the thought, but arguing was useless. What I really wanted was a horse, and as long as a yes still lingered on Jeff's lips, I wasn't going to push the naming issue.

My childhood snuck up on me, and I rolled every loose coin I could find around the house. Maria and Theresa, my dear friends, enthusiastically joined the search for my dream horse. Thanks to those two, my

in-box was never without pictures of a new possibility one of them had found.

When searching for the perfect partner to share life's miles with, getting caught up in the moment and buying a horse that may not be your best match is easy. So I deliberately created two lists to review before making a purchase. One list was titled "Have-to-Have," and the other was titled "Hope-to-Have."

On my have-to-have list was an eight- to ten-year-old Arabian gelding who'd been there, done that. I wanted him to have enough spirit so we could have fun for years to come but enough experience to be a patient and willing teacher. Although good looks would be nice, they weren't a requirement. With a frown I bumped that trait onto the hope-to-have list.

My eyes blurred as I stared at the computer screen in front of me, so for a moment I took a break, leaned back, closed my eyes, and dreamed. I pictured myself astride my new equine friend with all the hope-to-haves a girl could want. His coat glistened, and his great hooves pounded the earth as we raced the sunset across fields of blazing red poppies. As nothing more than a silhouette, we rode until the South Carolina sun dipped beneath the horizon and night enveloped us in its quiet splendor.

Ugh. Shaking sense into my head, I remembered an old saying and a promise I made to myself. "Pretty is as pretty does." Good looks weren't going to get me down the trail and back in one piece. Have-to-haves had to come first.

Weeks into the search, I spent countless hours e-mailing sellers, looking at pictures, and traveling to several southern states. Early in my search, it became evident that I heavily leaned toward tall, muscular bays, but the three I'd gone to see didn't work out so well. The first cribbed, the second reared, and the third had a glimmer in his eye that told me he was not one to be trusted. Settling wasn't an option, but the more I looked and came up empty-handed, the more anxious I became to find *my horse*. He had to be out there somewhere, and with just a little more effort, perhaps I could find him. Frustration began to get the better of me.

One night I was up late tediously exploring the Internet again and clicked on a picture of a handsome chestnut with a flaxen mane. He was quite a looker, flashy on all accounts, and something about his attitude in the photo caught my eye. Always curious when I'd find my Huckleberry, Jeff poked his head in the room to offer encouragement. It only took him

a minute to notice the pedigree of the little red horse. An equine scholar he is not, so he certainly didn't realize the weight of his statement when he said, "That's your horse. Make the call and go get him." All he knew was that the little red horse's grandsire was *Huckleberry* Bey.

Theresa and I rolled into the city limits of Bristol, Tennessee, within the week. A winding road meandered through the woods for a mile or so before it opened up and released us into the arms of a country estate with gently rolling hills and miles of pristine white fencing. Driving toward the farm, we couldn't help but blink hard after staring in amazement.

Ponds with banks of lush grass were dotted with ivory-colored swans. Great Pyrenees protectively patrolled the yard while watching their herds for any sign of unrest. As we neared the barn, I leaned forward in my seat, hoping to steal an early peek of *my horse*.

Directly ahead of us was a large pasture boasting horses of every size, shape, and color. They playfully tossed their heads and ran the fence in celebration of the new visitors. I caught sight of a few chestnuts basking in the sun, but based on their small size, they were much too young to be my horse. Continuing to scan my surroundings, I noticed a small pasture on my left with the homeliest bunch of horses I'd ever seen.

In contrast to the animated equines in the other paddock, these horses lazily wandered around picking at the grass or dozing beneath the canopy of shade trees. One chestnut in particular drew my attention. He stood alone, away from the group, and was obviously less than interested in the unfamiliar rig making its way up the driveway. Eyes half-closed and ears flopped in different directions indicated that he really didn't care what was going on. His rather large waistline and lack of conditioning were awkwardly accentuated as he stood with one leg cocking up his back end. My eyes took in the equine specimen before me, and I realized that cantering down a trail would be more than improbable with him. It would be impossible.

A chestnut's coat mirrors the sun and brilliantly reflects its red and gold rays. Sadly this little guy's coat was so caked in mud and rain rot that it reflected nothing more than the need for a bath and some serious TLC. Where the striking flaxen mane was supposed to hang, nothing more than a mass of tangled knots poked out erratically in every direction. Gone were his white socks. In their place were grass stains and burs. This horse was certainly the poster pony for some heavy-duty grooming products.

With a single gasp, I sucked all the air out of the truck, and Theresa shot a worried look my way. “I sure hope that’s not him.” The comment slipped from my lips as a whisper, but in my heart it was a desperate prayer.

Linda looked in the direction I was looking, and she quickly realized the cause of my concern. “There’s *no* way Mr. Homely over there is Huckleberry Bey’s grandson. I’m sure he’s up in the barn already.”

Sometimes prayers aren’t answered the way we think they should be. After meeting the trainer at the barn, my heart sank as he led us down the path toward the homely horse pasture.


With a bucket of grain in hand, the trainer told us Mr. Homely’s story. As the product of fine breeding, the little red horse was supposed to make it big in the show circuit. In his younger years, he had been shown in Halter, English Pleasure, and Native Costume Events, but due to the owner’s financial difficulties, what began as a promising career had come to an abrupt halt. Now months later, Mr. Homely’s value had dropped to whatever he could be sold for.

I trudged down the gravel path and barely lifted my eyes to give the tattered chestnut a second glance. The rocks at my feet had become increasingly interesting the more I lamented the time wasted seeing another dud. However, the scene drastically changed when the bucket of grain rattled.

Mr. Homely’s eyes lit up. With a piercing call and thundering hooves, he raced past all the other horses coming our way. The gelding’s tail proudly flew behind him as he approached at a full gallop that lasted only seconds and ended with a dramatic sliding stop. This time my gasp was a happy one as he pranced in tight circles and tossed his head with impatience.

There’s my Huckleberry.

“We call him Marquise.” The trainer grinned as he noticed me taking a second look at the now Not-So-Mr.-Homely, who somehow seemed to know he was going home with me that day. Marquise was certainly a mess, but I soon came to the realization that his name fit him perfectly. He was my diamond in the rough.



I’m sure Christ felt the same when He saw me. When I was lost and living a life of sin, I was covered with all sorts of ugliness and dirt. Content

to lazily go through life the easy way, I didn't want to move outside of my comfort zone or put forth any extra effort.

When Jesus hung on the cross, He carried the weight of all my sins. It was so ugly that God had to turn His back. Looking at my shame was unbearable for such perfection. Just like I took Marquise home and gave him a bath, Jesus cleaned me up too. On the cross the price was paid for my sins and the sins of the world. By accepting this act of love, we can be washed as white as snow.

It's difficult to comprehend that no matter how sinful we are, Jesus is still willing and able to forgive us. Because we're human, when people sin against us, it can be hard to forget—even if we are able to forgive. Christ not only forgives us, but He also removes our sins. To Him it's as if our sins never happened.

For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his
love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

Psalm 103:11-12

Have you entered into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ that allows you to experience the freedom of unlimited love, forgiveness, and hope of eternal life? If you do not have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, please consider making this step in your life.



Dear God, I understand that I am a sinner, and I know that without You in my life, I will remain hopelessly lost and unable to be spiritually clean. Thank You for Your Son, Jesus, who died on the cross to bear my sin and shame so that I may be forgiven. Send Your Holy Spirit to live in me so that I can begin a new life with You.

...Or You Can Sell Him

I've never seen a horse buck like that—and still haven't. I was in the saddle during the acrobatics and couldn't even claim to have been riding at the time. To Marquise I was nothing more than a fly he was trying to shake.

This was either the beginning of the end for Marquise and me, or *I* was going to learn to buck up.



When Theresa and I went to look at Marquise for the first time, she took the initial test ride. I watched and, of course, offered moral support. Cautiously watching for signs of protest, she stepped into the stirrup and swung her leg over. The saddle creaked in rhythm as they walked a few relaxed laps around the groomed arena before Theresa began to play with the bit, encouraging Marquise to stretch his neck and round his back.

And that he did.

Theresa obviously didn't like how *much* he rounded and quickly snatched his head back up.

"Oh, c'mon, Theresa. He's fine. Just let him drop his head," the trainer said, standing by the arena fence with his boot propped against the lowest board. He nodded toward the horse and rider and said to me, "He likes to do that. You know, reach down to stretch his back." Mr. Davidsen's opinion of how Marquise should be ridden was clear, and like most trainers do, he was going to make sure I knew it. But as the buyer, I trusted my friend.

Blonde curls bouncing, Theresa hopped off and held the reins out to me. "He's a nice ride, but the last time I felt that much roundness in a back was two seconds before Harley used me to play lawn darts. Keep his head up, and you'll be fine."

“That boy doesn’t have a buck in him. I’ve seen him ridden for years, and he’s good as gold.” Mr. Davidsen huffed, slightly offended by Theresa’s suggestion that his boy was anything less than perfect.

Gotcha! I’m guessing “bucks like a mad fiend” doesn’t sell a horse very well, does it, Mr. Davidsen.



Marquise went home with me that day, and six months later I was still learning to trust my new partner. Trail rides with Maria and Theresa seldom encompassed more than long walks in the woods. I hadn’t been ready to start trotting or cantering, but that was getting old for them, me, and especially Marquise.

With the fall fast approaching, my perfect season to begin training for a spring entrance into endurance riding arrived. No one’s ever completed a race within the time limit by walking, so I had to slip on my big-girl britches.

As long as we were on the trail, my redhead was a dream, but put him in the arena, and everything changed. Once a show horse, Marquise hated mundane exercises like circling, lateral work, and collection.

I also found out Marquise didn’t like canters to the left—or to the right. For that matter I’m not sure the direction had anything to do with it. He bucked every time I asked him to pick up a canter and, occasionally, in the middle of it. If the sky was blue or the grass was green, I was really in trouble. That boy of mine sure could kick up his heels.

Ride after ride, I worked on my skills, which included the watch for the lift, the emergency dismount, and the fall-softly-and-roll maneuver. I’m pleased to say we both improved. I learned to ride better and pull Marquise out of a temper tantrum, and he learned how to avoid me and get away with it if he could.

Our partnership bloomed and so did my confidence. Marquise and I began to trust each other, and with each challenge he dealt me, my survival instincts grew stronger.



“Watch it! Watch it! Watch it!” Maria screamed as a flash of gold mane ducked under my hands, and the slack in the reins disappeared. Too late. My seat lifted higher and higher, left the saddle, and floated through the air.

Marquise had pulled one of his tricks and caught me off guard.

I hit the ground heavily without an ounce of grace and rolled over to spit sand from my teeth.

“Are you okay?” Maria jogged over to check on me. She’d left Sable to wander over to Marquise, who had parked himself on the far side of the arena with his reins dragging the ground.

“I’m fine but so over this,” I said, regaining my feet. I marched over to Marquise, snatched his reins from the ground, and stomped through the sand toward the gate.

“Are you going to get back on?”

I shouldn’t have, but I gave my friend one of *those* looks.

“Okay, fine. I was done too.”

I tied Marquise to the hitching post and pointed a finger in his direction. “You’d better think about what you’ve done. You...you...Ugh!” I was disgusted with my horse, but he was much more interested in his hay bag than making amends. *This is just ridiculous.* I fumed while slamming his saddle onto its rack. *Why am I tolerating this behavior when there are plenty of good horses out there that like and want to be ridden?*

My emotional train wreck worsened when I walked through the door of the house and my chipper husband met me with a smile. “Dinner’s almost ready. How was your ride?”

And there went the look again.

“Geez. Sorry. It didn’t go well?”

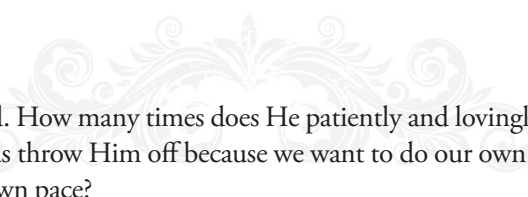
“No, it didn’t.” I slammed the door behind me. “I hit the dirt *again*. I’m so stinkin’ sick of this. Everything is going great, and then—BAM—he goes crazy. Like seriously *Pet Cemetery* nuts. I can’t figure him out, and the spring endurance season’s only a couple of months away. All the girls are getting their horses ready, and I’m still figuring out how to stay on mine.”

“You could sell him.”

“What?” The look. “What did you say?”

“No one says you have to keep doing this. Just sell him and buy a more mellow horse. Maybe an older one with more experience would be easier for you.”

Oh, no way! I wasn’t going to be beaten, and I sure wasn’t going to get an old horse that was more mellow and easier to ride. This battle had only just begun.

A decorative floral ornament with symmetrical scrollwork and leaf-like patterns, centered above the text.

Poor God. How many times does He patiently and lovingly guide us just to have us throw Him off because we want to do our own thing and choose our own pace?

The day he chose to show his attitude, Marquise tossed me and ran to the farthest side of the arena. Can you picture how many times we must do this to God? We toss Him aside and run off. Still He patiently waits and never gives a second thought to quitting on us.

God doesn't get rid of us because of the trouble we give Him. Instead He chooses to love us more—just as I loved Marquise more and never turned my back on him. Through the trials I've had with Marquise, I've gained a new ability to ride a buck, but more importantly I've learned to appreciate the One who has never given up on me.

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:37-39