



Late summer. Painted lady butterflies dance through a sunflower-dotted meadow beneath a cloudless Western Colorado sky. Beyond the grass and sagebrush flats, jagged bluffs and rocky spires define the horizon where a green haze marks distant conifers. Devoid of buildings, of fences, of confinement. Desolate, to some. Seemingly empty, and yet a haven for the winged above, the earth-bound below. A breeze carries the scent of sage, along with the tang of freedom.

The stallion paws the ground, snorts, ears forward, eyes alert. A liver chestnut, muscles honed by freedom, he possesses that quality humans call presence. A breeze ripples his long mane, highlighting the curve of a powerful neck. He allows himself a mouthful of grass without relaxing guard, remains alert for whatever does not look right, smell right, seem right. Hardened by breeding season challenges, by attempts of rival studs to steal his harem, he has the cunning to claim this herd as his own. His every move projects power, authority. He is magnificent, knows this.

The woman brushes wisps of grey hair from her face, adjusts binoculars and gasps. Wild horses! Real ones! They're a long ways off, but she counts eight of them—no, wait—at least nine.

On a whim, she'd turned off I-70 onto a paved two-lane toward Meeker. After fifteen miles or so, she pulled over to glass a golden eagle, enormous wings spread, riding high thermals. She caught sight of the horses accidentally.

One of them is bigger, maybe a stallion. Yes, must be. She imagines the thrill of approaching him. But no way such a spectacular animal would engage with a puny human like her. She is just Evelyn. Wrinkled face, batwing arms, an abundance of bulges. She is far from magnificent, knows this.

The stallion turns, looks in her direction, right at her! Well, no, of course not, she's too far away, too insignificant. But why not pretend he is projecting a mystical connection. She loves horses, always has, but the only one she's ever owned is a black and white pinto, eight inches tall, plastic.

An overwhelming urge compels her to move closer to this herd, even while her rational self objects. Then again, if she paid attention to the voice of reason that guided her entire life up until three weeks ago, she wouldn't have laughed when Sam Werner told her they 'had to let her go.' This is no laughing matter, since at sixty-one she is too old for job hunting, too young for Medicare. The normal Evelyn Bailey would have shed endless tears, picked the skin around her nail beds raw while stuffing herself with potato chips and butter brickle ice-cream straight from the carton. She would have slept little, worried lots. But not this time. On about the third repetition of Sam Werner's syrupy voice repeating "we're so very sorry," Evelyn smiled, then shocked herself by laughing out loud. The next



morning, she awoke at the usual time, turned over and dozed off again. No more rush hour traffic, no more watching the clock until quitting time. Later, while sipping a leisurely second cup of Earl Grey, she wavered between labeling her situation tragic or fantastic. On the one hand, she was tossed aside like a worn-out mule. Then again, this was an opportunity to do something different with the rest of her life. Maybe the kick in the butt she's needed for years.

All within three weeks, she collected a generous

severance package, sold her house and most furniture, donated mounds of clothing and household stuff along with what little remained of Ron's things after his fatal heart attack six years before. When the initial shock and grief of losing Ron subsided, a vague restlessness had crept in. She'd considered moving, changing jobs, traveling. But no, of course not. Evelyn continued on as always, clinging to routine, to expectations. Until now.

Without mentioning details like the sale of the house where they'd grown up, she called her son in Virginia and her daughter in Idaho, told both she was retiring and taking a long vacation. Partly true, sufficient for now. The pleasure in her voice was real.

Co-workers held a goodbye luncheon, neighbors followed with a dinner in her honor. Friends dropped by, wished her well, even though everyone was plainly bursting with questions, concerns. Or maybe it was envy. Long-time friend Ruth was the only one who came right out and asked where she was headed, what the heck was wrong with her. Evelyn admitted that letting go of the house, heading off with no particular plan sounded crazy. But it also sounded exciting and necessary in a way she couldn't articulate. Yesterday, she

stuffed the old station wagon to the roof with a supply of stretchy jeans and tops long enough to cover her butt, wedged in undies and toiletries, her laptop and armloads of books. Last came food, and, of course, her beloved set of pots and pans. Well before dawn, she left Denver, heading west for parts unknown to meet the rest of her life with a full tank of gas, accompanied by Paul Simon at full volume.

Now, partly because she wants—no, needs, to get closer to these horses, and partly because her bladder is filling and squatting right here even by this sparsely traveled road could be a spectacle, she looks around, sees a dirt trail. It heads toward the horses and looks possibly drivable. After a while of slow going and bumpy ruts, she stops close enough to the horses that the binoculars reveal colors and markings. The road is far enough away that she can bare her butt and pee even though there's neither bush nor tree in sight.

Her count was right earlier, nine horses, including the stallion. Most heads are lowered to graze. Several animals are small—must be this year's babies. The correct term is foals, she remembers. The mothers are mares. Using the binoculars, she studies them, one by one. Maybe these are ranch horses, not mustangs. But no, something about them is different, she feels it. These are the real deal. The stallion looks in her direction again, briefly, decides she poses no threat. She stands still, trying to blend in with the surroundings even though it's obvious that she and her car are as out of place here as this herd would be in downtown Denver.

The horses amble forward, slow, snatching mouthfuls of tall grasses, tails swishing against late summer flies. One foal, a chestnut with sturdy legs and a short little tail held straight up, races around the group, finishing with a rear and a buck. Off to one side, a pinto foal, black and white in equal measure, eases under a mare's belly, latches on to an udder, and sucks with determination, its entire body engaged in extracting rich milk, short tail wagging like a happy puppy.

This little foal is a real-life version of Evelyn's beloved plastic pinto statue. She felt a connection with the stallion first, but there's something stronger with this mare and foal. Motherhood shares elements among all species. The mare nudges her foal gently, stands patient while the youngster nurses. Evelyn herself gave birth twice: first to a son, then three years later, a daughter. She nursed them both, remembers that special time vividly, drifting off to sleep with first Stephen and later Julie snuggled to her chest, the rocking chair soothing. That chair is old now, with a few nicks but still solid, and one of the few items she put in storage before leaving town. Nature is smart, even cunning to make babies cute, lovable. The mare, also a pinto but mostly white with small black splotches, turns its head, nudges her foal again. Evelyn wishes she could communicate with the mare, ask how it felt being a pregnant horse, giving birth, how wild horses experience the world. Their lives aren't easy, of course. She shakes her head, sighs, considers the wad of cash and the enormous check she'd gotten in exchange for the house. There is plenty of money, for now, most invested but accessible. She's lost in thought, still looking through the binoculars. It's been awhile since she stopped at the side of the highway. The scent of sage seems normal by now, comforting. She wishes she could get close enough to the horses to inhale their scent, their wildness. She scans the horizon, imagining how spectacular sunsets must be displayed against the jagged hills to the west. A rock near her foot reflects all

the colors of the distant hills, so she picks it up, rubs her fingers over the rough surface, slips it in her pocket. This place feels peaceful, and she's not ready to leave. Sleeping in the car is something the old Evelyn would never consider, but it's a new day, a new Evelyn.

All of sudden, the mare's head raises. She starts trotting, the foal beside her. The entire herd is moving, suddenly racing, galloping. A bay mare leads while the stallion brings up the rear, dashing back and forth, his neck extended to nip stragglers, keeping the band together and going fast, faster. The taste of sweet grasses, the

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feel of summer's heat against their backs, the need for swishing flies, all forgotten now in collective panic. A plume of dust rises behind, chasing them. Escape is the goal, is all that matters.

Evelyn is shocked, can't imagine what is so urgent. And then she hears a distant thumping, sees a helicopter approaching, flying so low she's afraid it might crash. But no, other horses race in front of the thing, an enormous bunch. Too many animals to count, their legs pounding the ground, tails extended like flags. The noise grows louder as the chopper nears until she clamps her hands over her ears. There was something on the news awhile back about roundups, about the BLM saving wild horses from starvation. All these horses appear to be in great shape, though, have to be to run as fast as this helicopter is pushing them, bearing down on them. If any were starving, they'd be too weak for this. The sound of the chopper, deafening even from where she stands, must be horrendous for the horses. No telling if she can also hear the thundering hooves or only imagines it, but the large dust cloud rising behind the animals signals their passing, their terror.

What she now considers her little band, the nine of them veer off to the side, not yet caught up in the main group. "Go! Run! Run!" she shouts at

top of her lungs. "Damn helicopter! BLM idiots!" She hasn't thought much about a helicopter chasing horses before, but now that the noise and chaos is unfolding in front of her, she's horrified.

Her little band runs as though their tails are aflame, fast, faster. They seem to be escaping, although there's little doubt the helicopter sees them. But it's also obvious that if the chopper swerves over to capture these nine stragglers, the main herd might disperse. "Yes! Run, run!" she shouts until hoarse, jumping up and down. Just as it appears her nine will get away, will remain free, one of them stumbles, head over heels, goes down. A white one. Evelyn raises binoculars, holding her breath. It's the mare, the pinto mare. "Oh God, no!" The mare tries to rise, but one front leg sticks out at an impossible angle. It is easy to tell through the binoculars that this leg is broken. Irreparably shattered. "No," Evelyn whispers, shaking her head. "Oh no."

The pinto foal runs, falls behind the others, stops. Its short tail twitches side to side as it looks around, turns to race back toward the mother. At the same time, the stallion slows, races to the foal, nips it, ordering it to return to the others, but the foal turns away, continuing to the mare. The stallion hesitates for only an instant before returning to his herd, ignoring the injured mare as if aware it is hopeless. As he and the others race out of sight and away from the helicopter, Evelyn keeps watch on the two pintos, sobbing now as the mare struggles to rise, finally stops, lies back as though done for. Her foal nudges her once, then wanders a short distance, waiting for her. It's much worse now that the mare is still, giving up. Her white coat is lathered, her breathing rapid. "No! Oh my God, no! Oh no!" The binoculars are no longer needed, only bring the horror closer. It is too much, imagining the mare's pain, her fright, her giving in. The mare's future is certain, grim.

And then the helicopter circles back, still moving fast, swerving side to side, no doubt searching for the escaped band but finding only the two pintos, the mare down, the foal the only one circling around the mare. But there is no escaping the roaring noise. "What now, you idiots!" Evelyn screams, not caring that they can't hear her. "You did this! How could you!" The chopper continues past the pintos, soon circling back with a trio of buckskins galloping in front of it, their mouths open, nostrils flared, eyes white with fear. The pinto mare struggles again to rise as the chopper nears, she looks to her foal, no doubt whinnies.

The foal begins to run, joins the buckskins. "No! Damn it, no!" Evelyn, still sobbing, screams as the pinto foal is forced away, leaving the mare scrambling, frantic. The pinto is stranded there, alone, the end coming either slowly from starvation, from lack of water, or more quickly but violently from the approach of a cougar.

There's little that can be done for the mare, and even the foal may not survive what's ahead.

But maybe Evelyn cannot only help the foal, but save it. She's never owned a horse, much less a young wild one, has no idea if this one is old enough to survive without nursing. She swipes tears from her face with the back of her hand, looks at the now quiet mare. "I'll do what I can for both of you," she says out loud, and then she turns, jumps in her car and drives forward in the direction the helicopter is herding the horses.

Not far ahead, there is a large V-shape structure leading to a round enclosure made of tall metal sections, which already holds the bigger group of horses. These last few gallop forward with the chopper bearing down, escape impossible. A row of pickups are parked well away from the enclosure, and a huge semi-trailer is

snugged up to a far side. Evelyn takes all this in, her focus on the black and white pinto, and it breaks her heart to see its little mouth open as it races forward, in danger of being trampled by the larger horses.

By the time she gets to this enclosure, these last horses will be inside, captured. She is so intent on trying to keep the youngster within sight as it weaves back and forth, dodging the bigger horses, that she doesn't notice a tall man in a faded red baseball cap until he's feet from her car, his arms waving wildly. She hits the brakes, skids to a halt and looks at the guy. Now he's making a circular motion with one hand. "Roll down the window, roll it down!" he shouts.

What she needs is a strategy, a way to control things.

"The window, Lady, the window," the guy shouts.

She looks at him, nods. She's used the 'little old lady' routine before, found it amazingly effective even if a bit demeaning. People, especially men, expect gray-haired women to be daft, in need of help and guidance. So be it. She nods once more, slowly rolling the window down a few inches.

"You can't be here," the guy says.

She gives him a look, one that says she's not with the program. "Oh, okay. I guess I'm ... well, I must be lost."

"Turn around and go back the way you came."

"Oh. Can you tell me where I am?"

"Ma'am, this is an HMA operation." The guy says, not even attempting to keep the look of disgust off his smug face. Irritating, but Evelyn figures she has the upper hand so far.

"An operation, you say? Oh dear! I don't see any doctors. Why, there's not even a hospital. So, they're doing an HMA right here?" She doesn't know what HMA stands for, but she can tell the guy's frustration is mounting. As planned. She keeps her expression dopey.

"Ma'am, you can't be here."

"Oh dear! But where is here? I don't know where I am. I'm, well, I'm lost, you see."

The guy looks like he's about to explode by now, and it's all Evelyn

can do to keep a straight face. Men can be duped so easily. No effort at all.

"Turn this car around and go back the way you came. Now!"

"Oh, I would, yes, I sure would. But I don't really know where I came from. And, oh my goodness, the gas thingie is on that red line." Evelyn pauses, hand positioned so the guy can't see the gas gauge, which in fact indicates over half full.

The guy shakes his head and gives such a big sigh that Evelyn is tempted to clap for him.

"Follow me, drive slow."

"Oh, how nice of you. I could sure use a ladies' room, too," she adds in her best little old lady voice.

He bites his lip, turns and stomps off toward the enclosure where horses are milling, raising clouds of brown dust.

Evelyn parks near the pickups as directed, and by the time she approaches the enclosure, another man greets her. This one is shorter but obviously in charge. "So, you're lost, Ma'am?" His tone sounds both kinder and yet more authoritative than the first guy.

"Well, goodness, I must have taken a wrong turn somewhere."

"Where're you headed?"

Evelyn shrugs, smiles sweetly. "Nowhere in particular," she begins, stopping to peer into the enclosure. The little pinto isn't visible.

"Well, you can't be here."

"And yet, here I am."

The guy sighs. "You from around here?"

"No, I don't think so."

"There's a small town just up the road, Meeker. Go on back to the paved road, turn north."

"Yes, swell, but first, I have a problem," Evelyn says, allowing her expression and her voice to shift from crazy old lady mode to business-like.

This guy notices, kind of smiles. "A problem?"

She nods, moving closer to the corral. Still no sign of the foal. "I was watching this roundup, the way the helicopter almost landed right on top of these poor horses."

"Stand back, Ma'am. These are wild horses, and they can be dangerous."

She stays right where she is, folds her arms tight across her chest. "They can also be injured by cruel methods," she says, the sweetness and the daft expression totally gone now. "And I recorded one entire incident, which will prove how cruel these roundups are." The video existed, but only in her head. She'd never forget seeing the white mare stumble, go down.

The guy looks her up and down. "You don't look like a reporter. What is it that you're after, Ma'am?"

"First off, stop calling me Ma'am. It's irritating. I'm Evelyn. And since when does grey hair disqualify a woman from being a reporter or anything else? What I'm after is to save a little black and white pinto whose mother you people left out there in agony with a shattered leg."

"Ok, Evelyn. Here's the deal. I'm Jeff Winters, the BLM District Manager. No one told me one of the horses went down out there. Cruelty isn't our intent. If there is a horse with a broken leg, it needs to be euthanized."

"What do you mean, if? I watched the mare fall, watched her struggle. Now I'm here to save her foal." She paused, searching

the horses. "There! That's the one, the little black and white. And I have cash."

"Adoptions require specific paperwork. It's not generally instantaneous."

"Showing my video can be instantaneous."

"We're used to unfavorable publicity, Evelyn. We don't like it, but it happens."

"So, you don't give a damn?"

"Now look, first off, you're not allowed to be here. You put on an act to make my guy think you're a helpless little old lady, and now you turn mean."

"How dare you lecture me about meanness! Speaking of which, the way all these horses are milling around, the little pinto could be injured, even killed."

"Hate to agree, but you may be right. Looks like it's about five or six months old. It can live without the mother, though, has no doubt started grazing some."

Evelyn nods. "Like I said, I have cash."

"We sometimes allow immediate adoptions, but we hadn't planned on that this time." He pauses, sighs. "You're set up to assume care of this little critter?"

"You bet," Evelyn says, even though that is an outright lie. She doesn't even have a place to stay herself, much less a place for a foal.

"Then you probably know you'd be better

off with two young ones, maybe a yearling along with this foal to keep each other company."

"Of course," she says, swallowing hard but trying to look casual, in control. "Is it ... uh, I haven't gotten close enough to tell if it's female or ..."

Jeff stares at the pinto for a moment. "It's female, a filly."

"Ok, please move it and one of the yearling fillies to a separate pen so they're safer."

He calls to another guy, and within minutes the filly and a skinny buckskin filly are isolated in their own small pen with hay on the ground and a water trough.

"And I recorded one entire incident, which will prove how cruel these roundups are." The video existed, but only in her head. She'd never forget seeing the white mare stumble, go down.

"Now show me where this mare is."

He and Evelyn take one of the BLM pickups out to the white mare, and Evelyn looks away, gasps when the shot rings out.

"She appears to be only about six or seven," Jeff says. "Hate it when this happens."

She nods, sobbing. He holds out a handkerchief.

When they get back to the others, he turns to her. "Do you really know how to care for horses?"

She shrugs. "I can learn."

He smiles. "Yes, I'm sure you can. You have a barn or a corral?"

"Not yet."

"My wife and I live outside of Meeker, and I know a place that has an empty corral. Folks run a B&B on the outskirts of town. They rent cabins, too."

"Sounds good."

"Your car looks packed. You moving somewhere?"

"Left Denver this morning. Got tired of traffic, rush hour. Plus, I was 'let go' from my job."

"That's too bad."

"No, it's good, actually. They did me a favor."

He frowns. "Seriously? Letting you go was a favor?"

Evelyn nods. "Forced me to realize how long I've just existed day to day rather than making changes, taking chances."

"So, what're you planning to do?"

"You mean for a job?"

He shrugs. "Yeah, for starters."

"I love to cook."

"The B&B is looking for a cook."

Evelyn laughs. "Perfect."

"I'll introduce you."

"Thanks. But why are you being nice all of a sudden?"

"I dunno. You strike me as someone interesting, different somehow."

"Interesting? Seriously?"

"Yup. And that daft old lady routine was kinda funny, but I figured it wasn't the real you. Even so, Sam, the guy who tried to stop you, he was right. We can't allow people to interfere with HMA business. It can be dangerous, for starters."

"HMA means what?"

"It's a BLM designation. Stands for Horse Management Area. Colorado has four HMAs, places set aside for wild horses, mustangs. I'm in charge of the Piceance-East Douglas HMA, which encompasses 190,000 acres.

"That's huge. So, do you like mustangs?"

"Yup. For sure. I've adopted six of them so far, and my wife wants more. They're amazing. Tough, smart, reliable. Once they trust you, most make phenomenal saddle horses."

"I thought the BLM considered mustangs worthless nuisances."

"Some might, but I'm not one of them. And as for gathers and helicopters, I wish there was a better way, a less frightening way for the animals. Sometimes we use a baiting method by luring them in with hay cubes. Doesn't work for larger gathers, though."

"You're a nice guy, Jeff."

"You sound surprised."

Evelyn laughs. "I guess I am surprised."

"Let's go fill out some adoption forms, make this official."

Turns out that not only was there no charge for the two fillies, but Jeff arranged a one-thousand-dollar payment to Evelyn for adopting, as part of a new Federally approved incentive to find more homes for mustangs.

By early evening, Evelyn is hired to cook daily breakfasts for guests at the White River B&B on the outskirts of Meeker and is settling into a log cabin near the back of the property. The place is cozy, meaning tiny. Although vastly different from the home she'd left behind, the place feels welcoming. She arranges boxes of cereal and canned goods on shelves and begins transferring perishables from her cooler to the refrigerator when she suddenly stops, a bag of arugula in her right hand. "Look at me," she says out loud. "I did this, I really did."

She plops the arugula in the fridge and sinks onto a chair, elbows on the pine table, chin resting on folded hands as if in prayer. To say it's been quite a day is, well, like saying the Rocky Mountains are mole hills. Twenty-four hours earlier she was in Denver, packing her car, wondering if selling her house was a mistake, if she was crazy to leave. Now here she is, several hundred miles away in a small town she's never even seen before, the owner of two young mustangs. She rises from the chair, moves a few feet to the window, and there they are—the black and white foal, the slightly bigger buckskin, milling around in their own corral, a stone's throw from her cabin. She's been out there several times already, standing inside the enclosure with her horses, watching them. Her horses! The thought both thrills and terrifies her.

Just as dusk colors the sky pastel, she goes out to the corral once more, lets herself inside and stands there, holding out a carrot. Both fillies approach, and the pinto sniffs the carrot but doesn't take it. Neither allowed Evelyn to touch them earlier, so now she doesn't try, just lets them get used to her presence, the smell of her, while she inhales the scent of alfalfa and the muskiness of her two horses. Her very own. This is the most spontaneous, off-the-wall thing she's ever done in her entire life. No telling how this will turn out, but it's an adventure, a challenge.

"I'm so sorry about your mother," she tells the pinto, her voice soft. "We have a lot to learn about each other, you and I." She stands there awhile

longer, neither filly seeming to mind her presence, but neither approaching again either.

Miles away under a starlit sky, the stallion stands guard over the remaining members of his herd. Recovered now from the fearsome silver bird that failed to capture them earlier, the stallion paws the ground, snorts, ears forward, eyes alert. Once again, he has protected as much of his herd as possible, driven them into a secluded valley far from turmoil. He remains in possession of that quality humans call presence. He is magnificent, knows this.

As the sky darkens and stars shine above, Evelyn returns to her cabin and rummages to find the black and white statue which so resembles the pinto filly, the real one. Her filly lost its mother, lost

its freedom, but it has the young buckskin for company, and both of them have Evelyn. The fillies lost their freedom while Evelyn gained hers. She places the statue on a shelf where it will be in constant view, removes the rock from her pocket and puts it on the shelf too. Many challenges await, but she and the fillies will face the future together. She is still wrinkled, still grey, but perhaps her future will be magnificent.

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Long distance competitive trail rides have provided challenges and deep partnerships with horses. She writes mystery novels centered on equines, and believe all animals enrich our lives.

