

HEAVENLY
Horse
STORIES



REBECCA E. ONDOV



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS
EUGENE, OREGON

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“The Trail to El Shaddai” was written as a devotion and presented on Rebecca Ondov’s website: www.rebeccaondov.com.

Cover design by Left Coast Design

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Published in association with the Books & Such Management, 52 Mission Circle, Suite 122, PMB 170, Santa Rosa, CA 95409-5370, www.booksandsuch.com.

Formerly published as *Heavenly Horse Sense*

HEAVENLY HORSE STORIES

Copyright © 2012 by Blazing Ink, Inc.

Published by Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97402

www.harvesthousepublishers.com

ISBN 978-0-7369-6636-8 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-0-7369-6637-5 (eBook)

Library of Congress has cataloged the earlier edition as follows:

Ondov, Rebecca E.

Heavenly horse sense / Rebecca E. Ondov.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-7369-4419-9 (pbk.)

1. Horsemen and horsewomen—Prayers and devotions. I. Title.

BV4596.A54O525 2012

242'.68—dc23

2011022652

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Printed in the United States of America

16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 / VP-CD / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To Chuck and Julie,
my brother and sister.*

*Thank you for supporting your horse-crazy sister
and her dreams all these years.*

I love you both with all my heart.

Acknowledgments

To God. Thank You for giving me incredible adventures while holding me safely in the palm of Your hand.

To Cindy and Kim, Jeanne and Doug, Joan and Gene, Mom and Dad. May God bless you abundantly for all the hours you've encouraged and prayed for me and this book. Thank you.

To Czar, my faithful and most trusted horse. You were a priceless gift from God and are permanently etched into my heart.

To Cindy Peterson, Dena Hooker, Shirley Rorvik, Jane Latus Emmert, Betsy Capon, Tricia Goyer, and Kathy Lamping. I wouldn't be here without your unconditional love and support. There's a special place in my heart for all of you.

To all my cowboy friends. Thanks for taking this greenhorn under your wings.

To Barbara Nicolosi-Harrington. Your passion for teaching story has fueled hundreds of us to write for Christ. You're my writing hero. May the blessings of God abide with you.

To Dennis Foley. You're a fabulous writing teacher whose words inspire me. Thank you for investing thousands of hours in the "Authors of the Flathead."

To Harvest House Publishers. It's an honor to be part of your family.

To Barbara Gordon, a kindred spirit. You are a fabulous editor, and I'm looking forward to riding horses with you (and canoeing too).

To Tom Fox, my daytime boss. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to work for you.

To Janet Kobobel Grant, my literary agent. Your leadership is incredible. Thank you.

To all the horses, mules, and dogs who have shared my life. You have been my faithful companions and best friends.

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A NOTE TO YOU

*As they were walking along and talking together,
suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared
and separated the two of them, and
Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind.*

2 KINGS 2:11

My heart pounds when I think about supernatural horses of fire majestically racing with a chariot of fire. Someday I'd like to meet those heavenly horses. And yet I feel that over the years I've had the opportunity to work with hundreds of heavenly horses and mules. These stories are my personal experiences, most of which took place during the 15 years I worked in the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex in Montana. During this time God blessed me with very special friends, several exceptional horses to ride, and four fabulous dogs. I'm excited about sharing with you what they taught me about having a personal relationship with God and living for Christ.

I pray you'll adapt the wisdom I've learned to your life—to help empower you to experience a life richly blessed by God. Saddle up with me and ride through these pages for some exciting adventures!

Rebecca

HOMESICK NO MORE

From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.

ACTS 17:26

The door latched behind me, and the wooden porch steps squeaked as I walked and sipped my steaming cup of coffee. Gravel crunched under my boots as I strolled toward the pasture. A chickadee whistled its morning song, which drifted to me on the cool breeze. I turned up the collar on my prickly wool jacket as I gazed in awe at the beauty around me. Dawn's early light glowed from the snowy mountain peaks. The powder-blue sky was delicately laced with ribbons of wispy clouds splashed pink from the sunrise. Frost glittered from tufts of spring grass.

I buttoned the tan herringbone jacket and leaned my arms over the wooden corral gate, listening to the horses and mules munch hay. A wave of peace washed over me. It was the first time in my life that I felt like I was home. *How strange*, I thought. I'd moved to Montana only a few weeks ago. Every place I'd lived before this I'd felt unsettled and restless. There had been a longing in my being that was never satisfied. But since I'd arrived here, that craving had disappeared. I felt as if God had made this spot in the mountains for me. *Did God artistically create a place on earth for me?*

Melinda, the cinnamon-and-sugar-colored appaloosa mare with a rat tail, stopped chewing and looked up. With a few strands of hay

hanging out one side of her mouth, she sauntered over to the gate and pushed her face toward me, begging for a rub. With my fingernails, I scratched behind her chin. She closed her eyes and leaned into my fingers. My mind drifted through the tidbits I knew about God. Before I was conceived, He'd planned the time frame of my birth and the purpose for my life. *Of course He loves me so much that He planned a place for me to live*, I decided.

Melinda pushed her head into my fingers and sighed. So did I. In the past, the longing in my heart had been homesickness for the place God had created for me. And now I stood in the right spot on earth, my heart fulfilled. *I'm going to stay here, in western Montana, wrapped in God's arms of love.*

*Lord, thank You for revealing the depths of Your love for me.
Amen.*

TAG, MINNESOTA, BELGIAN

Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them. And whatever Adam called each living creature, that was its name.

GENESIS 2:19 NKJV

The warm, spring sun glistened off the snow on the Rocky Mountain peaks, melting the snowpack and sending it trickling down the slopes. The drops of water woke up the hillsides after a long winter. Delicate yellow glacier lilies sprung up between nubbins of green grass. The frozen creeks were gently thawing, forming rivulets that skipped over mossy stones and sprayed a fine mist over the lacy ferns that lined the banks. Purple shooting stars nodded their heads in the breeze. The smaller creeks tumbled into the river named Rock Creek, which meandered through the narrow valley and close to the small ranch where I worked.

Squirrels chattered from the tops of the lodgepole pines. The heat of the sun warmed my back as I stood on the tailgate of the gold Ford pickup eyeing a tall stack of riding saddles that leaned against the cab. The truck was backed next to the side door of a tack trailer. I lifted a saddle off the stack and lugged it through the door. Slingshotting it onto a saddle rack, I sighed. Sweat trickled down my back. I tucked my thumbs into the pockets in my blue jeans and leaned in the doorway. It had been a long day arranging the tack in the trailer.

I felt scruffy from doing the heavy lifting. I was dirty, tired, and ready for a shower.

Gravel crunched under Larry's cowboy boots as he walked over. He unzipped his brown vest and tossed it into the cab. "When you're done, grab the pen and the notebook off the front seat and meet me at the corrals. We're going to name the stock."

I nodded as he turned to go. Reaching for another saddle I wondered, *Name the stock? I can't tell them apart.* A couple days ago I'd accepted a job working for Larry. He was an outfitter who took guests on horse pack trips into the Bob Marshall Wilderness of Montana. He'd recently purchased a semitruckload of stock: 1 horse and 19 mules. The day he unloaded them, they all barreled down the ramp snorting and blowing, bucking and kicking—and they hadn't stopped since. I'd never seen a real live mule before. They all looked the same to me: long ears, four legs, and a tail, although I did note some were black and others were red.

I finished hauling the saddles into the tack trailer, grabbed the pen and notepad, and then headed over to the corral.

Larry leaned on the top rail. "I'm going to have you write down the names along with descriptions. Let's start with the horse."

I rested the notepad on a weathered wooden rail and wrote "horse." She was easy. She looked like a horse: a cinnamon-and-sugar-colored appaloosa mare with a stub of a tail that was nearly bald.

Larry looked her over. "Let's call her Melinda."

I wrote it down.

Larry rubbed his brown beard and pointed. "What do you think we should call that black one?"

I looked in the direction he pointed and saw a half-dozen black mules. "Which black mule?"

He waved his finger. "The gangly black mule. He's narrow-chested and has a creamy tan patch over his left eye—like a pirate's eye patch."

I giggled when I spotted him.

“Or maybe it’s like a price tag. Let’s call him ‘Tag.’”

I scribbled “Tag, gangly black with price tag.”

Larry leaned his head to the side, glancing through the herd. “What should we name that black one?” He glanced at me.

I stretched up, looking.

He waved his arm to the side. “Medium height and build with a white nose and white under its belly.”

White? I frowned. I hadn’t noticed the white on him. He looked like he’d dipped his nose halfway to his eyes in a bucket of milk.

Larry chewed on his lip. “Let’s call him Minnesota.”

Scrawling “Minnesota,” I chuckled. My thoughts drifted to the story of creation in the Bible, when God created the animals and brought them to Adam. *What was it like having the Creator of the universe sit by your side as He paraded His creation before you, giving you the honor of naming them?* Did God sit in delight while He watched Adam gawk at the hopping kangaroos? Did Adam laugh at the long neck of the giraffe? Did God have the elephant blow his trumpety-trunk? A strange thought drifted through my mind. *God didn’t stop creating when He finished the Garden of Eden.* My thoughts turned inward. *I wonder what God was thinking when He created me in my mother’s womb? Did He delight when He formed me? Did He say, “I’m going to put a passion for horses in her so I’ll give her long legs. And how about blue-green eyes that will change color according to what she wears”? Did He chuckle when He thought, “Her mother’s Norwegian. I’ll give her a small, ski-jump nose.”* I smiled and brushed a tear from the corner of my eye. I’d never thought about God having fun creating me.

Even though I was sweaty and dirty, I stood a little taller and brushed a straggly strand of hair behind my ear. Eyeing the herd, I now saw them differently. One of the red mules was pudgy and short, another had a black mane and tail. I pointed to a chunky

reddish one with a blond mane and tail. “That one looks like it’s out of a Belgian draft horse. Can we name him ‘Belgian?’”

Larry nodded.

*Lord, I'm glad I don't have to look special to be special in
Your eyes. Amen.*

NUGGET

*He paws fiercely, rejoicing in his strength,
and charges into the fray.*

JOB 39:21

My cowboy hat prickled against my forehead. I slipped it off and wiped the sweat from my brow with my red bandana. I glanced up at the sun. *It's already midday, and I've got to get these horses to the trailhead and then drive back here tonight. I hope I can get them all in this load.* Dusty's hooves drummed against the wooden ramp as I led him into the back of the stock truck where six horses already stood tied. I'd loaded them crosswise, tying the first one's head to the right side and the second's to the left. When they rode sideways, nose to tail, they didn't fight while I was driving down the road.

I tied the brown gelding in place and pushed against his side. "Scoot over, Dusty. We still have to fit in Nugget." Dusty leaned against the horse next to him. The truck rocked as each horse shifted a few inches toward the front. I looked at the two-foot space between Dusty and the back wall of the truck and then gently slapped Dusty's side. "Nugget's not that skinny," I commented. The truck rocked some more but there still was only two feet of space. I groaned. *I don't want to make another trip for one horse—that would take hours and cut into my sleep tonight.* Seven was the most horses I'd ever been able to load in the truck. It wasn't because there wasn't enough room.

One more *would fit if* I could get the horses to squeeze together. But they refused to cooperate.

I walked down the three-foot-wide ramp while sizing up Nugget, who was tied to the hitching rail. The boss had just bought him, so I didn't know much about his personality. He seemed to be a gentle giant. He was a deep, golden-brown with a reddish-brown mane and tail. Although he was tall, he didn't look it because he was built like a barn, with muscles that bulged in his chest and through his haunches. *There's no way that monster is going to fit in the truck.* I chewed on my cheek as I glanced in the back of the truck. *It wouldn't hurt to try,* I decided. *It's better than making another trip.*

Untying Nugget's lead rope I rubbed the cowlick on his forehead. "It doesn't look like there's room, but I need you to load in that truck, okay?" He looked at me with his kind, dark-brown eyes and batted his reddish-brown eyelashes.

The wooden ramp squealed in protest under the horse's weight as I led him up. By the time we got to the top, Dusty had moved toward the ramp. There wasn't even a crack for Nugget to wiggle into now. I tapped Dusty's side. "Move over!" I commanded. He braced all four feet and refused to budge.

I reached into the truck to tap Dusty again just as Nugget butted my rear with his nose, as if to move me out of the way. Turning toward him, I asked, "What do you..."

With his head, Nugget gently pushed me to the side of the ramp and stepped into the truck. With what looked like very little effort, he shifted around to stand in the proper place, bulldozing into Dusty, who stiffened like a board but was pushed sideways. The whites of Dusty's eyes showed, but he didn't put up a fight as he shifted his feet toward the front of the truck to keep his balance. Dusty bumped the next horse, who shifted and bumped the next one, and on down the line it went. Hooves grated across the wooden floor as all seven horses skidded to the front. After Nugget compacted them, he relaxed in the newly created wide spot and

waited for me to tie him into place. I would have sworn he had a smile on his face!

I stood in awe, rubbing his neck. “You were terrific! I’ve never seen anything like that. And it looked like you had fun.” I’d never thought of horses being buff or proud of their strength, but it was almost as if that gentle giant was created to flex his muscles and push his weight around. In all the years I knew him, he never acted vicious or mean, but if I ever needed to load an extra horse in the truck, I always saved Nugget for last.

Lord, thanks for making superheroes in horses too. Amen.

IDENTITY CRISIS

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.

EPHESIANS 1:11-12

A warm, spring breeze rolled down the mountains. The rays of the morning sunlight danced through the pines. Melinda stood tied to the hitching rail. In the pasture behind her were 19 mules crowding the barbed-wire fence, longingly gazing at Melinda as if she were a dazzling movie star. I glanced at Melinda. She wasn't much to look at. Her tall, rawboned frame jutted with her angular shoulders and hips. A few straggly hairs stuck out of her salt-and-pepper-colored mane, and her tailbone was nearly bald. I patted her neck. "But your personality makes up for your looks."

I heaved the heavy Western saddle onto Melinda's back. I was looking forward to some saddle time. I could think clearer from the saddle than anyplace else. I reached under Melinda's belly for the cinch. My job of gentling the mules was coming to an end in less than a week, and my boss already had a full crew lined out for his outfitting season. I'd been pounding the pavement in Missoula looking for a job. I had several possibilities, but as far as figuring out what to do next, my life was a blur.

I pulled the cinch tight. Two mules squealed. I glanced up as one of the black mules in the back pushed its way through the crowd to the fence. Another mule nipped it in the rear. The war was on. They

kicked and squealed, all vying for the spot on the fence line closest to Melinda. Worried they would get cut on the barbed wire, I hollered, “Hey, get away from the fence!” But they were so absorbed in their squabble that they either didn’t hear me or chose to ignore me. I reached down, picked up a clod of dirt, and lobbed it at them, hitting the front mule in the chest. Stunned, they all scattered.

I shook my head. “Snuffy said you guys loved horses better than each other, but this is ridiculous!” I swung my leg over the saddle and reined Melinda down the driveway. Her fan club escorted us.

Snuffy, an old-time cowboy friend, had yarned many hours about mules. I relished his coaching because my time around mules was limited. He would lean back in his chair at the dinner table and brag on the critters. He’d shared that one of the reasons outfitters preferred mules over horses for backcountry work was that mules didn’t need to be put inside a fence to hold them. He said that if you tied up the horses, you could turn the mules loose and they wouldn’t leave the country. They stayed with the horses because they didn’t care for the other mules.

I turned left out of the driveway and watched the crowd follow in the pasture. Melinda’s hooves crunched on the gravel road. *Why do they dislike each other?* Mules are a hybrid animal. Over 90 percent of them are sterile, not able to breed. Mules are the product of a donkey dad and a horse mom. They usually were the best qualities of the horse and donkey rolled into one. They ate less, drank less, and the old saying “Stubborn as a mule” was true—but only because you couldn’t get a mule to do anything they thought would hurt themselves. This made vet bills almost nonexistent for them.

My saddle creaked as I leaned back and glanced at their long ears and straight backs. *A hybrid... a freak of nature.* I snickered. *Did they know they were freaks?* The sun warmed my back, and I melted into the saddle. My thoughts roamed over the mule issue. *Born of a horse mom. That’s it! When they were born, they imprinted on their moms! Each one thought it was a horse.* I chuckled. The mules’ ears swiveled like

periscopes as I jabbered, “So when you look at the other mules you see freaks. And you think you’re nothing like them—after all, you’re horses.” How would they know they weren’t horses? They didn’t have any mirrors. I laughed as I thought of holding up a mirror in front of a mule.

The mules lined the fence as Melinda and I walked beyond the field and down the road. I wrapped my legs around her and nudged her into a trot. Her hooves clopped down the hard-packed road as



• Heading into the wilderness •

we rounded a bend. My mind wandered. *So now that I've gotten the mules figured out, what am I going to do for work?* I'd applied at several restaurants. I'd been a waitress previously but didn't care for the grouchy, hungry customers. *But it would put beef and beans on my table.* The road passed between tan rock cliffs. *What else can I do?* After talking with a banker, I looked around at the women tellers, all wearing pantsuits and skirts. *I'm not much of a pantyhose-type gal.* Not that I wouldn't do it to get some cash flow, but it wasn't me.

Just yesterday I'd been offered a job as a pharmaceutical representative. The money was good, but the job required travel. I sighed. I'd moved to Montana because I wanted to live here. *I don't want to*

be gone all week—on the road, sleeping in motels, and eating in restaurants in other states.

The forlorn sound of a mule braying drifted down the road, followed by a chorus of brays. I shook my head. *It must be hard going through life not knowing who you are, having an identity crisis every day.* A strange question drifted through my mind: *Am I any different than the mules?* I had no clue who I was. Here I sat in the saddle of my dream job, which was ending. I was pounding on doors of businesses in town looking for a job, when I really wanted work that involved horses. It didn't make sense.

As long as I could remember I'd had a passion for horses. I was sure God tucked that love of horses inside my heart. *Why am I looking for a job in town?* As the next few miles of gravel road passed under Melinda's hooves, I looked into the mirror of my life and saw clearly, perhaps for the first time, that I was a horse gal through and through. This was the first opportunity I'd had to do what I wanted with my life. And this job was the first time that I felt like I "fit in." Before this I'd always felt like the square peg in a round hole. A freak. All my growing up years I'd dreamed of having horses. It was my goal in life. *So why am I not looking for a job with horses?* By the time Melinda and I turned into the driveway, I'd made up my mind to look for horse jobs.

Strangely, just the next day the cook my boss had hired for the summer season quit. So Larry offered me the job! I would be working in the mountains within the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex in some of the most pristine country in the world—from the saddle! It didn't take long for me to respond, "Yes!"

Lord, please remind me to keep looking into the mirror of my life so I reflect who You created me to be. Amen.