CHAPTER 1

DO YOU TRUST ME?

IT STARTED OUT as an ordinary trail ride.

In April 2003, I set out with Spotlight, a young Quarter Horse stallion I'd been training, to get some exercise. He'd been in a trailer most of the previous day, as we were on our way from our ranch in Spring Creek, Pennsylvania to Kansas City, Missouri, to take part in an Equus America event, run by the trainer John Lyons. Along the way, we stopped to visit a friend, who'd invited me to speak at a gathering she had organized.

Spotlight was about four at the time, but had only been in training a few months. He's an unusual case. He grew up at the Singing Pines Plantation in Glenwood, Georgia, and I'd first seen him not long after he was born. His parents were both dynamic horses, and much was expected of this young colt. On the day of his birth, Spotlight looked perfect. He had a golden coat, and a white mane and tail, and seemed strong and healthy.

But there was one problem. On his side was a large white spot—as if someone had turned a spotlight on him. That discoloration made him, in essence, worthless. The spot disqualified him from being registered as a Quarter Horse, and while he could be registered as a Paint Horse, he would be an unlikely Paint stallion, because of his Quarter Horse bloodlines.

So for his first three years, Spotlight was left on his own. He was well fed and cared for, but had no training. He wasn't trained to lead or to ride, or shown how to do many of the useful tasks horses can accomplish. He had an even-tempered personality and was well loved, but no one knew exactly what to do with him.

His owners, who were friends, offered to lend Spotlight to me for a Sermon on the Mount program, where I rode him for the first time. They eventually gave him to me, and so he ended up coming to live at our ranch. My other horse, Top Cat, was getting older, and so I decided to train Spotlight to take his place one day. We'd been working together for a few months when I thought he was ready to go out on the road.

After a long day of driving, we finally pulled into my friend's Missouri ranch, and got the horses and crew settled down for the night. The next morning, I took Spotlight out for a ride. My friends live at a ranch nestled on a mountainside, and so we enjoyed taking in the scenery. My thought was to ride for several miles, and then come back and get ready for the presentation.

About halfway through the ride, we left the road and walked across a pasture to a small pond. As we went along, the ground started getting muddy due to heavy rainfall the night before, and I realized if we went much farther, we'd start tearing up the lawn. So we took a shortcut, heading through some woods and making our way back to the road. Already my thoughts were turning to the details of the presentation I was to lead.

The retreat was a gathering of homeschoolers, and I wondered, with the heavy rains, if enough people were going to show up to make it worth the effort. I also knew we had to get back on the road not long after the presentation to get to Kansas City on time.

Just then, Spotlight came to a stop. He'd not done that before, and I thought he'd gotten distracted or lost track of what he was supposed to be doing. So I told him to move—we were on a tight schedule and didn't have time for him to fool around. But he would not move.

There were times, earlier in my horse-training experience, when I might have assumed that Spotlight was being obstinate, and pushed him to obey, just as a boss or parent might do. Many of us have that reaction, when someone seems to resist our authority. Still, I knew that Spotlight was a good horse, trustworthy and hardworking, always eager to please. I decided to take time to listen to him first. When I looked down, my heart nearly stopped.

There, across his forearm, was a strand of barbed wire. We had run into a fallen-down barbed-wire fence, which can prove disastrous for a horse. When a horse gets caught up in barbed wire, he doesn't think, he only reacts. The result is catastrophic, if not fatal, with the horse suffering lacerations down to the bone. Even if the horse recovers, he is often scarred for life. Barbed-wire wounds are also prone to infection, and the healing process is long and tedious.

I thought we were fortunate that Spotlight had halted in time to avoid being entangled in the fence. So I picked up the reins and turned to go right, but he would not move. That was not a good sign. Stepping off of Spotlight, I took a closer look. Both his rear legs were also caught in barbed wire. The wire, hidden by underbrush, had encircled his legs in a figure eight. In the middle of a quiet, ordinary trail ride, Spotlight had become trapped. One false move, and he—and I—could face a gruesome death.

If you know anything about horses, you know that when a horse is trapped, he panics. He goes ballistic and does not quit. He does not stop and think, he just reacts and tries to run as fast as he can. It's a survival instinct that keeps him alive in the wild.

But wrapped up in barbed wire, panicking was the absolute worst thing Spotlight could do. Any movement would draw the barbed wire even tighter around his legs, causing him to panic more. I could see it all unfolding in my mind's eye. If Spotlight bolted now, he wouldn't quit. He would wrap both of us in barbed wire and we could both die. The more he struggled, the tighter the wire would wrap around him, and with each desperate movement, his flesh would be torn from his body.

If I tried to free Spotlight, he could kill me as well. The chances were high that I'd get caught in the wire and Spotlight would kick and tear me to death as well.

For the first time in years, I was absolutely terrified. I had no wire-cutters to free Spotlight. I had no cell phone to call for help. There seemed no way out. I've seen horses panic and beat themselves to death against the side of a trailer, or kill themselves by getting tangled up in a fence. I once saw a horse panic and throw herself to the ground so hard that it killed her. The wise thing to do, as cruel as it sounds, would have been to turn and walk away and at least save myself.

But I didn't have the heart to leave Spotlight. To stay was stupid. To leave was terrible and heartless. I felt ashamed and angry. Here I was, a trainer with decades of experience, and I was helpless to save this horse who had put his trust in me. Seeing no solution, I cried out, "Oh God, help me."

Chances are you've uttered that prayer at least once in your life. Maybe it was in a doctor's office, where you or someone you loved first heard the word "cancer." Or perhaps it was a phone call in the middle of the day, saying your child was in the principal's office, or at the police station, or had been in a car wreck. It could have been the time when you were summoned to the boss's office and told that your services were no longer required, or when a foreclosure notice came from the bank. Maybe your spouse said she didn't love you anymore. And you knew that one false move, one wrong word spoken in anger, could ruin everything.

Most of the crises in our lives come like that, out of the blue. "The real troubles in your life," Mary Schmich, a columnist from the *Chicago Tribune* once wrote, "are apt to be things that never crossed your worried mind; the kind that blindside you at 4 p.m. on some idle Tuesday." We worry all the time, and still we never see life-shattering events coming.

We live in a world full of pitfalls and crises. And how we react to them will determine the course of our lives. Just like Spotlight, the smallest thing, one wrong step, can ruin us.

In the moment of my prayer for help with Spotlight, a thought popped into my mind. A week earlier, another trainer had shown me a technique for getting a horse to raise its feet. If I tried to reach back and grab Spotlight's rear leg, I'd throw him off balance, and that would pull the wire tighter and spook him. But if I could reach back and squeeze his hock—which is a joint higher up on the rear leg—Spotlight would lift his foot, and step out of danger.

After taking a deep breath and whispering another prayer, I reached back and squeezed Spotlight's hock. He lifted his rear foot, and slipped it out of the snare, causing the tension on the barbed wire to ease a bit.

One leg down, three more to go. Another breath and another prayer, and I reached back and squeezed the other hock. Rather than kick and fight, Spotlight lifted his leg right out of the snare, and set it down beside the wire.

We were halfway there. Still, the danger remained. If he bolted now, with both front legs still entangled, Spotlight's skin would be torn to the bone. But in our previous training, I'd taught Spotlight another trick. I would tie a rope around his front feet and teach him not to react or try to free his feet. Instead of resisting when I pulled on the rope, Spotlight learned to yield and follow.

So I put my hand around his left front foot and lifted it up—and rather then resist, Spotlight trusted me, and allowed me to gently pull him out of danger. The right foot soon followed, and he was free. I stepped over the barbed wire, which now lay loose on the ground, and led Spotlight safely back to the road.

❧

I'd like to take credit for saving Spotlight's life; to say that the reason he made it free of the barbed wire without a scratch was because I'm a miracle-working, horse-whispering genius. But that wouldn't be the truth. The real hero in this story is Spotlight, who overcame his fear, and put his faith and trust in me. His courage and faith in that moment of crisis made all the difference.

Trust remains the building block of every human relationship; between parents and children; between workers and their boss; between a husband and a wife; between people and God. Most of us know this. But it's one thing to know that trust is important, and it's another to take active steps, day by day, to build that trust.

I learned that lesson the hard way, from a horse named Nava Rose.

I first met Nava Rose when I was twenty and working for a local horse breeder. At that time, I thought I was hot stuff. After beginning 4-H when I was eight years old, I'd won three national titles and had a room packed with trophies. More than anything, I loved the praise that came with winning. My horses, when they did what I told them, made me look good and earned me the praise of veteran trainers. That was important to me.

My Dad died when I was five, and though my Mom later remarried, his absence loomed large over my life. I grew up thinking that I didn't matter much and was constantly looking for someone to fill the void in my life. So the older horse trainers and leaders became surrogate father figures. Pleasing them took away some of the pain and grief I felt from missing Dad. My very identity and self-worth were on the line every time I worked with a horse. And failure was not an option.

One summer, my boss entrusted me with Nava Rose, a three-year-old mare with the potential to be a national champion show horse. She'd already mastered the basics, and it was my job to push her to learn more complex tasks. I took her out to the back 40, and started work on a particularly difficult maneuver. I placed a tire on the ground and asked her to place her front feet in the center of it. Then I climbed in the saddle and asked her to turn in a circle, while keeping both front legs in the tire and rotating her back legs.

The longer we worked, the more it became clear that Nava Rose just wasn't getting it.

She'd start circling and then panic and lose her focus. First she started stepping forward out of the tire, ruining the maneuver. Once I cured her of that, she started backing up instead.

I'd not had a lot of experience with failure up to that point, and Nava Rose's struggle with the tire started my anger boiling. A smarter or more experienced trainer would have taken a break or tried a different approach. But I was a young horse-training prodigy, and no stubborn three-year-old mare would spoil my reputation.

So I pushed her harder. All I was asking her to do was keep her front legs in the tire. How hard could that be? So I yelled, kicked, and jerked on her. After all, that's what I'd seen other trainers do. They saw training as a test of will and would do whatever it took to conquer a horse and force it to obey.

But despite my yelling and insistence that Nava Rose do things my way, she didn't get it. Finally, I lost it. She started circling and then got her feet caught up in the tire and backed up. I was so frustrated and angry that I stepped off of her and grabbed her by her head and threw her on the ground.

I was a little shocked because she weighed 1,000 pounds, and horses don't throw down easily. Nava Rose lay on the ground, bewildered and shaking. I sat down on the tire and wept. I have just ruined everything I have invested in her, I thought.

Thankfully, Nava Rose was stunned but not injured. She got up right away, and after a few minutes I went over to her and apologized. I hugged her and told her I was sorry; I had no idea if she understood any of that. Then I told God that I was an idiot—that I was impatient and angry and had acted like a fool.

That day was a breakthrough for me. Nava Rose didn't have a problem. I had a problem. I'd asked her to do too much, too fast, and punished her when she couldn't keep up. That's a problem many of us face—when someone won't do what we say, we try to force them to comply. Nava Rose made me look bad, and I couldn't handle it.

At our ranch we think of horses in two categories: "want to" and "have to." The "have to" horses are perfectly good workers. They are safe to ride and do what they are told, most of the time. But the "want to" horses are the ones who excel.

What we try to do in training—for both horses and the young guests who come and stay with us—is to capture their "want to." Every trainer is looking for a "want to" horse, just like every parent wants a child who is eager to listen and learn.

Nava Rose helped me learn how to capture the "want to." I had to re-earn her trust and rebuild her confidence. She was afraid to fail because she knew that if she failed, I would punish her. So I stopped trying to lead by fear and intimidation, and looked for ways to build her confidence.

We reached this goal by making the task bite-sized. First, I stood beside her as we walked through the process. I had her place her front feet in the tire and then take one step over. Once she mastered that, I praised her, and gave her a break. Then she did two steps in the tire and stopped. Again I praised her for getting a little bit closer to the goal. Before long, she had enough confidence to circle the tire without stumbling or stepping out. And she trusted me enough to know that if she failed, I would not punish her. Only then did I climb in the saddle and lead her through the process.

The most important lesson I learned was how to listen to what Nava Rose needed. I had to understand her needs first, not just command her to obey me. Once I understood, she had a greater ability and desire to obey.

John Wooden, the famed basketball coach from UCLA, used to tell his teams, "Run but don't hurry." That's another lesson Nava Rose taught me. I wasted days trying to get her