

WILD HORSES OF SKYDOG
BLUE ZEUS
& *FAMILIES*

CLARE STAPLES
FOUNDER OF SKYDOG RANCH & SANCTUARY

WITH PHOTOGRAPHY BY
JAMIE BALDANZA
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by CLARE STAPLES
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PREFACE

One of the questions I am asked more than any other is just how a girl from England came to start a sanctuary for America's wild horses. I am happy to tell the story of how and when this all began.

Certainly my love affair with horses started as soon as I was born. My grandparents were Welsh and lived in a little village called Glynneath in South Wales. As a family, from as early as I can remember, we would make the car ride from Surrey, England, where we lived, to my grandma and grandpa's little house in the shadow of the coal mines. We would all sing as we crossed over the Welsh border, a song that began, "We'll keep a welcome in the hillsides, we'll keep a welcome in the vales," and my excitement started to build because I knew that scattered all across the Brecon Beacons mountain range were wild horses. I would fight my sisters for the window seat in the car and gaze out, hoping to see one.

I have no idea why seeing a pony anywhere—on the side of a wild hillside, in a field in Surrey, in the back of a trailer on the road to school—brought out in me an excitement similar to what I felt on Christmas morning. When I was old enough, I would walk alone through the nearby woods, which bordered my house, to a field where horses were kept, and I would lure them to the fence with an apple and then extend my long spider legs over their backs. No bridles, bits, or saddles. Nothing at all between me and those horses—just the thrill of being one with them, their manes tangled in my hands as I held tight.

As I grew up and spread my wings, I left home in the United Kingdom for America. I was mostly in search of the cowboys I had seen riding horses on television programs like *The Virginian*, *Bonanza*, and *Little House on the Prairie*. My favorite show had been *The Adventures of Champion*, which was about a group of wild Mustangs led by “Champion the Wonder Horse,” and a little boy and his dog who would go see them. I would listen to the theme song in my mind to help me fall asleep, to dream about the wild horses and the lands they roamed.

Throughout my twenties and thirties, horses rode back into my dreams and real life as often as I could find them and an excuse to be near them. While I was in New York, I dated an Argentinian polo player and had the opportunity to travel with him to Palm Beach, Florida, and spend my days warming up his horses and hanging out in the barn with the grooms so I could be close to the horses I loved. I went on riding holidays with a group of friends who loved horses too. I rode around Central Park on a horse called Fury, rented at the iconic

Claremont Riding Academy. I always somehow found a way to get back to horses.

It was when I moved to Los Angeles that the seeds of Skydog Ranch and Sanctuary were born. I came to purchase a golden Mustang named Buddy (I share his story, beginning on p. 10), and from the day he entered my life, I seemed to have a huge hand in the small of my back, pushing me away from the “glamorous” life I was living, toward something I can only describe as “my calling.” Little did I know that I had found my life’s purpose in my childhood passion. I look back now and realize that every memory and experience was preparation and training for what I would eventually undertake.

There is a paragraph at the start of Marguerite Henry’s book *Mustang: Wild Spirit of the West*, that resonates deeply for me:

If God has a kind of plan for all of us, I like to think he coupled me with horses right from the start. It is not just my own Mustang that is part of me. All horses call to me. We sort of belong together. This could not just be an accident.

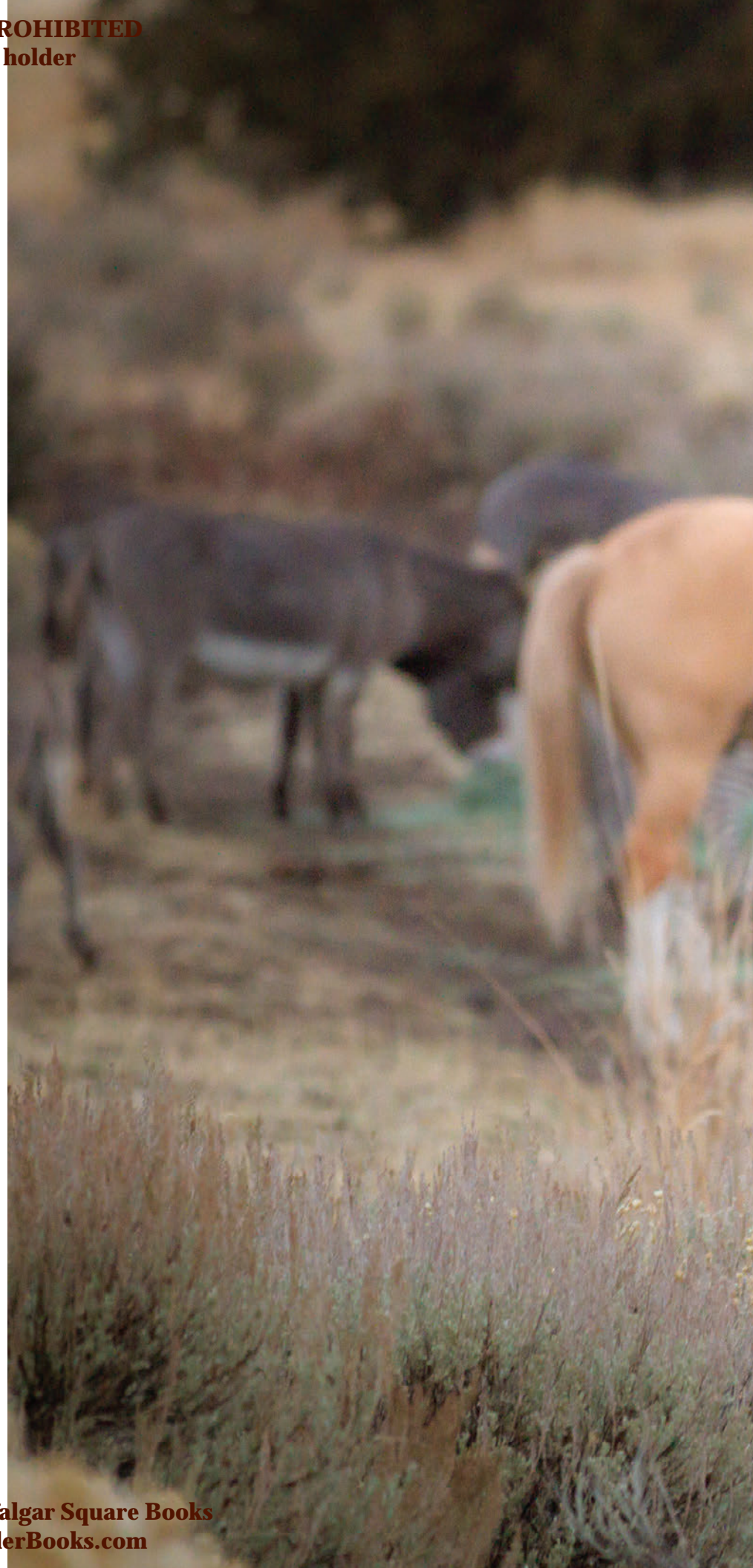
That is equally true for me.

Once I fell in love with Buddy, it seemed my innate interest in the wild horses of the American West only grew and grew. I felt like these horses had saved me, more times in my life than I could remember. It became apparent to me that every time I had gotten too close to the edge of danger and of losing myself, the horses had galloped in and given me my sanity back, grounding me in my first true love, and bringing me home.

But the evolution of my relationship with wild horses was not just a happy one. I went from that early love, to fascination, to outrage...and eventually, to horror, as I quietly educated myself in the facts of what was happening to Mustang populations, both in the wild and in captivity.

I quickly became determined to help the horses who had helped me right back. I saved some, learned more, saved some, learned more and more—until I felt strong enough and sure enough to dive right in, head first, with a solid intention to save *them all*.

I began with a goal to rescue seventy-five captive Mustangs, and then maybe retire to the wilds of Oregon, where I felt most at home and where I dreamed of them roaming free in a sanctuary, as close to their natural habitat as possible. I could sit on a windswept hill under the pines and watch babies grow up in their family bands. I'd be surrounded by the horses who had always given me joy.



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With Buddy's herd

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My reality now has surpassed that original dream, and what a blessing that is.

When I began Skydog Sanctuary, I came into it with no strong opinion on the issue of managing wild horses on public lands. According the United States Department of Interior, there are “400 national parks, 560 national wildlife refuges, and nearly 250 million acres of other public lands” that they manage. The agency within the US Department of Interior responsible for administering federal lands is the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). It has “oversight over 247.3 million acres and governs one eighth of the country’s landmass” for the purposes of “multiple use.” And it routinely “gathers” wild horses and burros from these public lands under the premise that otherwise, herd health is compromised and rangelands overgrazed due to overpopulation.

The BLM has a large network of holding facilities (what they call “off-range corrals”) where the horses they have removed from the wild are kept, pending sale or adoption. As I began my mission to adopt Mustangs who had been pulled from the range in order to

give them a life of freedom at the sanctuary, I started dealing with the BLM on a regular basis, as I spent a lot of time at the BLM corrals. Unfortunately, what I often saw in the wranglers who worked there was disrespect, cruelty, mistreatment, and disdain for the wild horses in their “care.” It horrified me. This wasn’t about the debate over whether or not these horses needed to be taken off public lands in the first place, losing their freedom and families forever, it was about what I perceived to be animal abuse once the horses were in the government’s custody.

Time and time again I went to the corrals, hoping for cooperation as I strove to find ways to help the horses—in particular the seniors, those with special health needs, and the wildest ones who wouldn’t likely adapt or transition well into domestic life. But it quickly became apparent that the staff at those corrals were not interested in any gesture of kindness. They were rude, disparaging, and condescending. They seemed to resent my compassion for the horses and the very idea of the sanctuary.

↓ *With Marvin*



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With Scout

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From the second Mustangs are born, they are targeted by people who can make money off them. From the helicopter pilots who are paid to chase wild herds from the air, to the ranchers charging to stockpile the horses on their land, to the off-range facility contracts, to the kill buyers, to those who “adopt” horses just to get BLM adoption incentive money, to holding facility staff willing to take backhanders from people looking for the best horses, and even some advocates and wild horse photographers who make money for themselves while calling what they do “advocacy”—through it all, in many cases, the horses’ suffering is ignored.

And so I made it my goal to not only save as many wild horses as possible, but to help raise awareness and educate people about the very real problems within and systemic abuse allowed by the agency tasked with managing them. To change things for the better for wild horses, we need to change the way we approach what it is we value about their existence. I think Skydog Ranch and Sanctuary has made great strides in doing just that. Not only is our aim to educate the public and promote forever-home adoption of wild horses, we also recognize the social nature of these wonderful animals, and so have made it our mission to reunite families of Mustangs that have been rounded up and torn apart. One of my primary goals is to keep bonded horses and families together at the sanctuary. At Skydog, we believe that wildness matters, that family matters,



and that there is a better way to manage Mustangs, when free on public lands and when taken into captivity.

I have a memory from when I was eight or nine. After school, my mother would drop me at a riding stable called South Weylands. I would usually just do chores like mucking, preparing feed, cleaning saddles, and grooming (I would only get about ten strokes of the brush in before I would stop and just breathe in the glorious smell of “horse,” as deep as I could into my soul).

One crazy day I went along the whole line of stalls and unlocked all of them, pulling back the rusty bolts one after the other, and opening the doors so the horses could come out. Well, of course the stable manager called my mother to come and get me! My lasting image is of all those school horses, galloping across the green grassy fields, running and bucking with delight. My mother turned around as I was looking out the back window of the car with a true sense of joy in my heart and asked me why I’d done it. And I replied, “They really want to be free.”

That memory only came back to me recently when my sister reminded me of the story. It further explained to me that, somehow, I was *meant* to do this—start a sanctuary to let as many horses as possible just be horses, and to “re-wild” as many as I possibly could. It is in honor of that little girl who already knew.

Horses are my greatest teachers. All my happiest times have been with them or on them or helping them, and I will find a way to keep saving as many Mustangs as I can, until I take my last breath, with a pocket full of cookies, hay in my gray hair, and the smell of a horse’s sweet breath in my nostrils.

It has been my honor to help rescue every single horse you will meet in the pages ahead...and still I owe them more.

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**BEAR, GOLDIE,
AND AERIAL**

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AS with Blue Zeus, this story started with a photograph. In this case, a blurry, fuzzy, faded photograph of three horses standing in a kill pen. Three horses: a golden palomino mare with a white mane, a jet-black mare with a white blaze, and a liver chestnut boy with a blaze and white socks. They were standing close together, as if clinging to each other for comfort in the strange world they had been dumped in. And the most unusual part was I was informed the chestnut was still a stallion, which is practically unheard of, as the BLM gelds all male horses before adopting them out.

And so, I decided to help them, little knowing that this group, some of the first Mustangs rescued by Skydog, would help us learn so much about horse families and their bonds.

We bailed the three, who I called Bear (stallion), Goldie (palomino) and Aerial (black), and they went to a quarantine in Texas to wait until we could bring them to the sanctuary. While in quarantine, we had Bear, who was eight years old at the time, gelded to make it possible for him to be released at Skydog.

The three Mustangs reached us right before winter, and we watched as the two mares got ever bigger, rounder, and wider, leaving us in no doubt that they were pregnant with what would be Bear's last babies.

The veterinarian was at the ranch one day, and I asked her to look at Aerial because she was so huge I was sure she must be about to have her baby. The vet explained that it would be unusual for a Mustang to have a baby in January as usually foals are born in the spring and not to worry. The very next day Aerial had her baby (Whisper) in six feet of snow and minus six degrees overnight. He was the fluffiest colt I had ever seen, and I learned baby horses will grow excess coat, depending on the outside temperature.

Goldie's baby, Mariah, was born about six weeks later—a beautiful sorrel with a crooked white blaze to be a friend to fluffy gray Whisper, her half-brother. The mares were amazing mothers, and even though they were wild as the wind, they were happy to let us enjoy their babies. I had never had a foal before and couldn't get enough of burying my cold hands in their thick fluffy coats, sharing space and breath with them. It was a magical time.

Bear was the most incredible father to the babies. He would “run drills” where he would wake his children from their naps



and have them run with him and his mares around trees, dodging buckets, from one side to the other of their pen at a full run. I understood this is what they would do in the wild if they sensed a predator nearby—the stallion would gather up his family and take them to safety. Bear was teaching the babies how to survive in the wild, and it was spectacular to watch.

Bear spent a lot of one-on-one time with his son, Whisper, too—sparring, wrestling, making him move his feet, teaching

Bear





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Nirvana – (noun) any place of complete bliss, delight, and peace
☺ synonyms: Eden, Shangri-la, Heaven, Paradise, promised land.
Nirvana is a place of perfect peace and happiness, like heaven.
Just some of the definitions of the word and I often think it must
look a lot like this. Sanctuary means a place of refuge or safety
and surely that's what this is for these horses and burros...and
for me and the people who work and live here too. With the green
grass and rolling hills, streams, and Sheep Rock towering above
us all – this is my heaven and place of peace and I hope it is
for you too ☺



← *Goldie, Aerial, and Mariah*
↓ *Goldie and Aerial*

his boy how to one day win mares and fight other stallions for them. It was a privilege to watch the strong bonds Bear had with his mares and developed with his two children. It was my first up-close lesson in understanding how deep a love these horses feel for family; it taught me well and informed many of the Skydog rescues to come.

Bear had a thick, clumped baseball bat of tail hair, which he couldn't lift or swish to ward off flies. He was wild, so we arranged for a trainer to come to the ranch and work with him so we could relieve him of the matted mess and he could grow healthy, fresh tail hair. Goldie also gentled down a little—enough for us to halter and handle her as necessary—but Aerial remained as wild and spirited as the day she arrived at the sanctuary. Looking at her terrified expression in the photos of her being processed at the kill pen where we found her, we understand why.

Bear, Goldie, Aerial, and their babies went on to join other kill pen and adopted mares out on the sanctuary (I will tell you about a few of them in the pages ahead), and Bear took all the mares and foals on as his own. Early on,



↳ *Aerial, Bear, and Whisper*
↳ *Baby Mariah*

we had no idea how many mares in the slaughter pipeline are bred so they weigh more and fetch a higher price. It is astonishing the cruelty that exists in the underbelly of the horse industry.

To this day, Bear remains the patriarch of this band, and particularly close to his two mares and children. Often you will see Goldie and Mariah sharing breakfast, and Aerial and Whisper the same. It always makes me happy to see them together.



“

Almost every tribe immediately yearned for horses, dreamed of them, sang of them, painted them on Canyon walls, named moons in their annual calendar after them, and welcomed them into the cultures so completely that before long they were sure the horse had always been there. The Apache said the Creator made the horse, using lightning for its breath, rainbows for its hooves, the evening star for its eyes, crescent moons for its ears, and a whirlwind for its power and speed. The Navajo said that every day the sun god rode across the sky on a turquoise Mustang with a joyous neigh.

—
David Philipps,

*Wild Horse Country: The History, Myth,
and Future of the Mustang*

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THE PINE NUTS

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The “Pine Nuts” are a herd of horses living wild near Gardnerville, Nevada, with an international following. Theirs truly is a model of good management of wild horses: advocates not only follow and photograph and name the horses, sharing their stories online, but also go out on the range and dart the mares with birth control to help control herd numbers. Sadly, human residents in the area sometimes complain about the wild horses coming onto their unfenced property, which leads to many being bait-trapped and removed. This is heartbreaking for the thousands of people worldwide who have grown to love this herd, watching new babies be born, stallions fighting over mares, and other aspects of wild horse life, all in real time.

A couple days before Thanksgiving in 2020, the BLM trapped an entire Pine Nut family, one that was especially loved and followed. It included Samson, the red roan son of the most famous herd stallion Blue, and at that time the leader of a group of mares that spanned four generations—from twenty-six-year-old Ol’ Momma, to her daughter Apple, her daughter Dumplin’, and her baby boy Sam. Also captured with this group was Jet, Samson’s brother, who lost his own mare and daughter who remained outside the trap when that gate clanged shut.

The band was slotted to be auctioned off online and separated forever, unless someone stepped up to keep them all together.

And we did.

The entire Pine Nut family was still together when I traveled to the Palomino Valley Wild Horse and Burro Center near Reno, Nevada, to pick up Blaze. Knowing their story, I walked over to see them. It was extraordinary to see this incredible and famous wild horse family there in that filthy pen, the stallions still swollen and in pain after their gelding. They were separated from their mares, but I was happy to see baby Sam had been left with his mother and not weaned. Some small mercy.

And so the mission began to bid on each of them. At the end of the online adoption period, as I clicked from horse profile to horse profile, seeing the notification that our bids had won had never looked better. The entire family was safe and coming to Skydog. What a win indeed.

And so we traveled back to Palomino Valley and picked up the entire family (along with a donkey named Dora I had promised to come back for). It was like a military operation: we took two large



trailers and a massive crew and drove home in a convoy with our precious cargo. As the sun set that evening, we unloaded them all and breathed a huge sigh of relief. The Pine Nuts were home.

And that was when their new lives began. Sam was still tiny, so for a few months, as we do with all new babies, we kept them in a smaller pen together, just putting on weight, Samson and Jet occasionally sparring, and the family dynamics ever-changing. The mares had remained so close through it all—Ol' Momma doting on her new great-grandson, helping her daughters in raising and protecting him. She would steer the whole family away when we came in with food; they kept their distance, thanks to Ol'

Momma's insistence. Sam was the only one to venture close out of curiosity and rebellion, only to run home to his mama and aunties if we stretched out a hand in his direction. He was a perfect little colt, and full of beans and such a scamp. His family doted on him and let him have pretty much free rein.

When at last we could turn the Pine Nuts out on a few hundred acres of their own, we noticed that more and more, Jet was alone or standing at a distance from the group, as Samson seemed to become more protective and possessive of his mares once they had more space. It made me sad to see him like that. I remembered

✓ *Samson in his brown winter coat*
✓ *Samson in his roan spring coat*



→ *Baby Sam soon after being born on the range*
↓ *Samson and family*



how he'd lost his mare and their baby in the roundup, and I felt a sad longing in Jet's heart for them.

During the next online adoption, I saw a photograph of a mare from the same herd, from Pine Nut Mountain, and in her photograph she was sticking her tongue out at the camera—and those who had torn her from her family and life in the wild, it seemed. She had zero bids, so I bid, and when the clock ran down, the mare was ours. Or rather, Jet's, as the plan was to add one more mare in need to his family and see if our “dating services” were appreciated and Jet would find love. His own love, just for him.

Thankfully, it worked. Jet and Mystery became inseparable, and little by little the other mares accepted her, too, and they became one big happy family. Young Sam also took a great deal of liking to Mystery, and the two are often off on their own together with Jet, just the three of them, with Samson keeping the rest of his group close.

There was a big debate about whether baby Sam was Samson's or Jet's son, so we tested his DNA. He turned out to be neither's! We hope he is the son of a stallion who is still wild and free, running up there on Pine Nut Mountain. Forever.

Jet





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The snow makes the whole ranch look incredibly beautiful, magical, and like a real-life fairy tale, with the horses blowing clouds of steam and the icicles in their manes making music. The horses love these colder temperatures much more than the heat of the summer. One of the things I think about these horses is how docile and gentle they are for large and strong animals. They have fight-or-flight instincts built into them but rarely choose fight with humans. They have such a kindness in them that to their detriment they willingly load onto trailers driving them to slaughter as they are so keen to please the human and do as they are asked. They take the punishment and cruelty because they don't have it in their nature to attack back or hurt people—or very, very rarely when provoked beyond all that's tolerable. Seeing these incredible beings, these gentle souls captured in such powerful bodies, is awe-inspiring and a huge testament to their quiet understanding of our shortcomings and emotional intelligence in their ability to forgive. They truly are the most forgiving souls I have ever met, and they inspire me to emulate that same quality and wisdom.

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I had come to the valley with the idea that roundups were necessary and as humane as possible. I had believed the agency when it said wild horses are overpopulated. I knew above all that the priority should be to protect the long-term health of the desert. But watching the families broken up was wrenching, and it made me wonder what kind of system we had created.

—
David Philipps

*Wild Horse Country: The History, Myth,
and Future of the Mustang*

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