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# The Horse Lover

H. Alan Day

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# THE HORSE LOVER

*A Cowboy's Quest to Save  
the Wild Mustangs*

H. ALAN DAY

*With Lynn Wiese Sneyd*

*Foreword by Sandra Day O'Connor*

*University of Nebraska Press | Lincoln and London*

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Set in Dante by Laura Wellington.  
Designed by Nathan Putens.

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*This book is dedicated to fellow horse lovers everywhere.*

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That Congress finds and declares that wild free-roaming horses and burros are living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West; that they contribute to the diversity of life forms within the Nation and enrich the lives of the American people; and that these horses and burros are fast disappearing from the American scene. It is the policy of Congress that wild free-roaming horses and burros shall be protected from capture, branding, harassment, or death; and to accomplish this they are to be considered in the area where presently found, as an integral part of the natural system of the public lands.

*—The Wild and Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971*

There is something about the outside of a horse  
that is good for the inside of a man.

*— Winston Churchill*

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## *Foreword*

When my brother, Alan, told me that he had agreed to keep fifteen hundred wild mustangs on his South Dakota ranch, I thought he had temporarily lost his common sense. It sounded like a very challenging task and a great deal harder than raising cattle, which he knew how to do very well. Indeed, Alan had been a cattle rancher all his adult life. But Alan was very enthusiastic about the mustang project and about seeing whether he and the mustangs could adjust to each other. Alan likes a challenge and the project was certainly that.

For more than four hundred years, wild mustangs have existed in the region that is now the western United States. They fared well before the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934 reduced their habitat. But even in the last century there were many pockets of public land in the West where they could live free, breed, and multiply. But the pressures of the multiple-use policy of the Bureau of Land Management and the restricted uses of national forest and national park lands meant that many of the wild mustangs would be captured, sold, or destroyed. The wild horse and burro law dictated that the Bureau of Land Management was to capture many of them and care for them until they could be adopted. Sadly, many of them were not suitable for adoption. This opened the way for the project Alan undertook.

It is impossible to see a herd of wild horses running free without

## FOREWORD

feeling a surge of excitement and enthusiasm for their vigor, power, and beauty. To watch them run with their manes and tails flying in the wind is to experience a sense of the ultimate freedom of motion.

This book tells the story of the Mustang Meadows project in a way that enables the reader to see and feel that excitement and to glimpse what was and what might have been with these splendid animals.

*Sandra Day O'Connor*

## *Acknowledgments*

Few books come to fruition without teamwork, and we were fortunate to gather and work with an exceptionally talented team. A special thank you to Sandra Day O'Connor for encouragement that began long before the first draft even emerged and continued throughout the writing process. Stuart Krichevsky's guiding wisdom early on kept us focused on a story about horses, horses, horses. Matt Bokovoy of the University of Nebraska Press grabbed this project and, along with Martyn Beeny and the rest of the folks at that fine organization, poured unending energy, vision, and support into it. We also were blessed to have the eyes and editing talents of Liza Wiemer, Meg Files, Nancy Wiese, Marina Day, Debra Brenegan, and Margo Barnes. A warm thank you to Ann and Kevin McQuade for sharing their writing sanctuary. And finally, to our families, who endured the writing process from the sidelines and never stopped cheering us onward, our love and appreciation always.

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# PART ONE

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## CHAPTER ONE

# *A Sexy Find*

*They were out there somewhere. I scanned the horizon through the pickup's bug-spattered windshield. To the right, sunlight reflected off a small stream trickling in and out of view down the mountainside and meandering near this stretch of back road. Maybe they had been here. I pulled off the gravel, dragging a plume of dust, set the parking brake, and grabbed my binoculars from the front passenger seat. Hot wind whistled past me and bumped against the brown hills. I scouted for tracks in the soft, wet soil next to the stream. Not finding a one, I dredged up more patience and focused the binoculars on a distant ridge. This was the fifth time I had gone through this exercise since leaving Reno at sunrise. Sooner or later, I'd find them.*

*I panned the ridge. Left to right, right to left across clumps of scrub cedar and outcroppings of rock. I was about to turn back when the slightest of movements caught my attention. There, at the top of the ridge, was what I had driven miles to see. I held my breath to keep the binoculars steady against the rush of adrenaline.*

*A herd of horses began to gather, first two, then three, four, eight, ten, possibly fifteen. The slant of the sun shadowed their colors. One of the horses stood apart from the others, presumably the lead stallion. I had a sense he was looking directly at me, sizing me up, deciding if I was friend or foe.*

*"Come on, big boy, come on down," I said. "There's plenty of water. Take a good long drink."*

*The stallion turned his head as if listening. He looked at the herd for a moment, then took off at a gallop down the hill toward me, his family in tow. As the land leveled, he slowed and the other horses followed suit. They bowed their heads and began to graze on the scant clusters of grass. The stallion remained off to one side, ears alert and pointed, tail and mane blowing in the brisk breeze. Even though they were still half a mile away, I could count them now. Ten mares, four babies, and the stallion. All mustangs, all wild. Most were chestnut brown or black with black manes and tails. Two had solid golden coloring. The babies were light dusty brown, still too young to have grown into their colors. The smallest suckled on its mama, a thin sorrel mare with a large head. The stallion was jet black.*

*I watched, sometimes tucking the binoculars under my chin to give my arms a rest, though never moving more than a few slow inches at a time. I never had observed wild horses in their natural environment, yet I knew they were shy and skittish. They continued grazing their way down the last gentle slope of land toward the gurgling water. When they reached it, I felt like I had been awarded a gold medal for crossing the finish line of a strenuous race. I stood a quarter mile downstream from them. I wanted to hoot and holler in celebration but barely dared to breathe. Each horse took a long drink and splashed in the stream.*

*I remained still for who knows how long, twenty, thirty minutes, sweating under the Nevada summer sun. Finally I reached into the truck for a bottle of water. The movement triggered the stallion to give some sort of secret signal to the herd. Heads raised and whinnies floated in the air. The stallion took off running. Without hesitation, the horses turned in unison and gracefully followed him over a small hill. When I next spotted them, they were trotting over the ridge where they first had appeared. I focused the binoculars and saw the stallion stop on the crest of the ridge as if surveying whatever mysteries lay on the other side. His tail waved at me. In a blink, he disappeared from sight.*

*I stood in the cedar- and grass-scented wind, stood beneath the bowl of blue sky, no human or other vehicle in sight. A few hawks circled*

## *A Sexy Find*

*overhead. I wondered what the stallion had thought of my presence. I only knew what I thought of his.*

*I climbed in my truck and turned the key. The dream of two thousand wild mustangs running through long, thick prairie grass played across my mind. I turned toward Reno. The last thing in the truck's wake of dust was a whoop that soared as high as the hawks.*

Without the South Dakota ranch, the wild horses and I would never have gotten to know each other. That much is certain. The ranch found me in the early summer of 1988, before a single wild horse stepped into my peripheral vision. At the time, I owned and managed two ranches and needed a third one about as much as I needed a permanent migraine. That's what I told Joe Nutter every time he pestered me to go see the old Arnold Ranch.

"But Alan," Joe would say, "I know how important good land is to you and, by gosh, this is thirty-five thousand acres of mouth-watering prairie." He was the consummate real estate agent. "It's beautiful. Absolutely incredible. And has the potential to be so productive. You of all people could turn this place around."

Every call. Beautiful. Incredible. Productive.

Joe wore me down like heels on a pair of cowboy boots. Finally, I said, "Goddamnit, Joe. I'll go with you just to get you off my back."

A few days later, I met him in the hamlet of Nenzel, Nebraska, population eighteen, and climbed in his pickup a bundle of grumbles. I hadn't taken my first sip of Joe's offered coffee when he turned off Highway 20 and headed north up a narrow dirt road.

"It's five miles to the state line and another five to headquarters," said Joe. He swung the wheel to skirt a pothole on the verge of becoming a crater. I quickly gave up drinking the coffee and concentrated on preventing my head from banging against the window. Joe pointed out a gnarled post, long divorced from a fence. "Welcome to South Dakota," he announced. Three potholes later,

we clacked over a cattle guard. “Here we are, on the ranch.” He looked at me for a reaction.

I couldn’t reply, much less move. I had been slammed with an acute case of *déjà vu*. Somehow I knew this godforsaken road, knew it swerved right before we swerved right, knew what lay around each bend before we made the turn. This was more than a fleeting feeling. It intensified with every bump. I looked out over rolling, grass-covered hills that felt like old friends ready to embrace me, pour me a drink, and sit me down to reminisce about the good old days and the adventures we shared. I saw familiar fence lines, smelled the sweetness of familiar meadows. Without looking at the car’s mileage, I knew we were nearing headquarters.

“Did you say there’s a creek on one side of the main house?” I asked.

“No, I didn’t say that,” said Joe, “but there is.” He gave me a quizzical side glance. “Have you been here before?”

“Not that I recall.” I turned toward the window, unnerved. Not being prone to these types of experiences, I figured any explanation would sound as woo-woo as it felt.

We drove over a culvert and crested a hill. A cluster of buildings and corrals spread out before us. At the center stood a boxy three-story colonial home, white with dark green shutters and shaded by thick elms. A faded red barn anchored one end of the compound. When the ranch was at its zenith, this immense structure would have been its nerve center. The road forked in front of the house and Joe turned left, drove another hundred yards, pulled into an open graveled area, and parked near a pickup and two tractors. I stepped into air alive with the scent of freshly cut grass and livestock.

“The corrals are over there,” said Joe, pointing past the tractors. “I believe there’s a big roping arena and four or five smaller corrals. We’ll check them out, but first let’s see if the Pitkins are home.”

We walked across an expanse of trim lawn. A tire swing hung

from one of the elms and I gave it a friendly push. Joe knocked on the door. I swished the blades of grass back and forth with my boot and tuned in to the midday conversations of redwing blackbirds and meadowlarks. A sense of belonging washed over me, dissolving weights on my shoulders. I wanted to run and touch everything like a small child returning home from a long vacation. I couldn't think beyond the moment; this was the only place in the world I needed to be.

"They must be gone," he said. "Too bad. I was hoping you could meet John and Debbie. Wonderful people. John knows every inch of this place. He's been managing it since Don Raymond fell in the bottle."

"I'm sure we'll meet at some point," I said, running my hand over paint peeling from the clapboards. I backed up from the house, craned my neck, and examined what I could see of the chimney and roof. The tuck-pointing looked intact, though some of the shingles lay crooked.

Joe mimicked my view. "Big old house, huh? Nine bedrooms."

"How old is it?"

"I think it dates back to the 1930s. Arnold and his wife had nine kids. Needed them to work the hundred thousand acres he owned back then. No wonder he became a local legend. After he died, the kids ended up selling off parcels of the land. Apparently none of them were big enough to fill his big shoes. Don Raymond bought thirty-five thousand acres."

We walked to the back of the house. A guesthouse sat a stone's throw away and just beyond was a doublewide trailer where Joe said Raymond lived until he filed for bankruptcy. What a shame he became an alcoholic. Having to sell this place must have added to whatever misery festered inside him. I would be heartbroken to lose such a treasure. The ranch charmed me, flirted with me as seductively as a starlet flirts with her fans. But I didn't need to





1. The main house and guesthouse at ranch headquarters

fall in love with it, because in some strange, inexplicable way, I already loved this ranch and had loved it forever.

We crossed the road near the trailer. A spring-fed creek pooled into a pond ringed with cattails and marsh grass. The water reflected the blue-and-white patchwork sky. A beaver had built a lodge on the far side and beyond its dwelling, a sea of prairie grass stretched out to a distant rise of hills. Its undulating surface mesmerized me and spoke of the land's great potential.

"Let's check out the rest of the place," said Joe. I forced myself to turn and follow. We crunched down the road back to the main house then veered off toward a bunkhouse and a shop. Both looked weathered around the eaves, windows, and doorframes. The glass in one of the bunkhouse windows had cracked. On the other side of the buildings were the corrals. The roping arena had to be a good five hundred feet long. A corner gate opened into a series of smaller corrals. In the farthest, a black horse and a bay grazed on hay. They raised their heads and looked at us curiously but were too intent on eating to walk over to say hello. Some of

the corral posts looked worn and the rub boards that protected livestock were almost nonexistent. The neglect didn't deter me. Quite the opposite. I couldn't stop thinking about ways to refurbish the headquarters.

We slid open the gate of the arena and walked a few yards to the entrance of the barn. What a majestic building. One of the first things I would do is restore its proud red. A flash of reality intercepted my vision. How was I going to buy this ranch and what in God's name would I do with it besides fix it up?

"How you doing?" Joe asked. He looked at me oddly.

"Fine, just fine," I said, stepping into the dim light of the barn and readjusting my poker face. Joe led the way down the row of twenty horse stalls, then climbed a ladder into an empty, dormant hay loft.

"Pitkin said they baled about three thousand acres of hay in the meadow last summer," Joe said. In times past, this space would have been filled with loose hay, food for the workhorses.

Back outside, the sunlight glared bright. Joe suggested we drive over to the meadow on the south side of the ranch. The road went over Spring Creek and passed the pond. Joe slowed to allow a flock of wild turkeys to march across the gravel in front of us. A little farther on, the road turned left near a metal Quonset building.

"Don Raymond told me once that twenty vehicles could fit in there." I mumbled that he probably was right. The building, however, seemed insignificant compared to the scene in front of me. Joe stopped the truck at the edge of the sea of grass that extended beyond the pond. I got out and walked in a few yards. The grass was so thick I barely could see my shoes. For any grazing animal or rancher, this was the gold coast.

"The meadow extends around the back of those hills," Joe said, "and to the east. Then there's about another twelve hundred acres to the north." He dangled the carrot. "Do you want to go

look over there? Or drive over to the Little White River? It snakes around for a good five miles through the ranch and is real pretty.”

“That’s okay,” I said. “I’ve seen enough for today.” I didn’t add that it wasn’t necessary because on some level I knew those meadows and places and indeed, they were perfect, beautiful and fit for ownership. Maybe Joe was a good poker player and could read my face because he didn’t look perturbed. We got back in the truck and bounced back toward Highway 20. We passed the flock of wild turkeys, maybe twelve or fourteen, bobbling along the road in single file, heading out on some secret journey. At the gnarled post, Joe popped the question. “So what do you think?”

“Well, I gotta be honest. My rule of thumb is not to tangle with property on the brink of foreclosing. But this is one gorgeous ranch. Not sure what I would use it for.” But did it matter?

“You’re a good cattle rancher,” Joe said.

“I’m not so sure I want to invest in any more cattle. Right now I’m running a total of four thousand cows. That might be putting too much risk in one place.”

“You’ll think of something,” said Joe.

We pulled into Nenzel and I promised to call him within two days.

I climbed in my pickup and swallowed some cold coffee, hoping it would restore my senses. I had my arms wrapped around the old Arnold Ranch in a big bear hug and I couldn’t let go. But this overwhelming desire to own the ranch was totally illogical. It bucked the core principles that guided me in business. I knew that unprofitable, troubled ranches should be avoided like melting ice on a pond. My dad had ingrained that lesson in me before I even broke my first horse, and his dad had ingrained it in him.

Furthermore, it was a family mantra never to invest in unneeded property. I currently co-owned and managed two ranches: the Lazy B, a 198,000-acre chunk of high desert straddling southern Arizona and New Mexico, and the Rex Ranch, a 45,000-acre parcel of prairie

nestled in the Sand Hills of Nebraska. My Cessna was getting worn out arcing between the Southwest and the Midwest. For certain, my life did not need this ranch. Plus, I only took calculated risks. Too many times I had seen cattle prices bounce like a rubber ball on asphalt, watched miserly rain clouds disperse drops that barely dented the sand, and felt the slap of governmental regulations that gummed up well-oiled ranching practices. Excessive risk is like a saddlebag stuffed with fool's gold; it weighs the horse down and doesn't pay off. So why gamble? Because I sensed that within the boundaries of the old Arnold Ranch lay something special. A journey? A destiny? A fate? My soul needed to know.

That night I made a series of phone calls. First, I gushed to my wife, Sue, who was back in Arizona. During my absences, she was my eyes and ears at Lazy B.

"I think that pen is already in your hand ready to sign an offer," she said. "I'm already looking forward to seeing the place when the time is right."

It was a green light, but I needed a different kind of green. I phoned each of my business partners. Beautiful, incredible, productive, I repeated over and over. My enthusiasm must have swayed them, because all five agreed to go deeper into debt. Forty-eight hours later, I made a conservative offer on the old Arnold Ranch. That beautiful, beat-up, bankrupt ranch. It was like rolling a little white marble counterclockwise in the groove of the spinning roulette wheel. I'm pretty certain my dad and granddad did flips in their graves that day and not from joy. The offer did not include the forty head of cattle running on the property, but it did include every machine and building, as well as the big house, home to the Pitkin family.

How was I going to staff the old Arnold Ranch? The question nudged me from a deep sleep one night. Less than a week had passed since Joe Nutter submitted my offer to the bank and already

my mind was grappling with management issues. I would need to hire a foreman. I had a fabulous one on Lazy B and a cantankerous one on the Rex Ranch. Joe had spoken highly of John Pitkin. If he equaled his reputation, the job search might end before it began. Regardless, I owed this Pitkin fellow a visit since his future was in my hands and he was probably suffering a bit of anxiety wondering what was in store for him and his family. A call to the Pitkins would be the first order of business in the morning. I punched the pillow, rolled over, and tried to still my thoughts.

Two days later Debbie Pitkin and I sat on the south porch of the big house, glasses of ice tea sweating in our hands. She was telling me what grades her four kids were in when a screen door slammed at the back of the house.

“Here comes John,” said Debbie.

Heavy footsteps echoed inside and a tall man wearing cowboy boots walked through the doorway. “John Pitkin,” he said, extending a hand. He was a handsome man, dark haired, square jawed, with a smile that made him look about eighteen.

Debbie went to refill our glasses, leaving John and me to chat about seasonal rain levels and temperatures and how the hay was growing in the meadows. He asked what it was like in Arizona this time of year. I described the dry, hot climate and the scant grass that poked up through the desert pastures.

“Not sure I could handle days over a hundred,” he said. “Guess I’m acclimated to this country.”

“How long have you lived on the ranch?” I said.

“We moved here about six years ago. I was working for Don Raymond at the time, down near North Platte. Debbie and I both grew up in the Platte River Valley. Don owned a small feedlot and I started working for him when I was a teenager. Over time, I had a chance to wear all sorts of hats—mechanic, farmer, cowboy, vet, truck driver.”

“Which did you like best?”

“Oh, I always preferred working with the cattle and horses. That’s why I wanted to tag along when Raymond bought this ranch. He planned to run a thousand head on it, and I thought it would be a good way to learn more about ranching. First time I came up here, I fell in love with the place. Don has four daughters and I’m the closest thing he has to a son, so I didn’t have to twist his arm to let me join him. We had a couple of good years at the start, but then the drinking got the best of him. The last few years haven’t been too much fun. He sold several bunches of cattle at the bar when he was too drunk to make a good deal. I’ve spent more time keeping creditors at bay than I have ranching.” John and Debbie exchanged a commiserating look.

“I can teach you good ranching practices,” I said. John leaned forward like he was ready for class to begin right now. “I’ve always been a hands-on rancher and that’s what I intend to keep doing. I’m not coming in here as a mere investor. Though I do need someone to teach me in return.” John looked a bit surprised. “Having done most of my ranching in Arizona, I’m not expert on what grasses are native to this ranch or how to handle livestock during a blizzard. I spent only one winter on the Rex Ranch and it was mild.” John nodded in understanding.

We continued talking for well over an hour. John had an aura that commanded attention and openly shared his frustrations and accomplishments. It didn’t seem to bother him that I didn’t have a specific game plan for the ranch. As long as he could work the land and the livestock, he would be happy.

The ice tea had long disappeared when I decided it was time to take my leave. “It’s been a real treat to sit here and talk to both of you. I have a pretty strong feeling that my offer will be accepted and I’ll become the owner of this place. At least I hope so. I’d like you to stay on as foreman if you’re interested, John. We can work out the details, but I promise you two things. I won’t fall in the bottle and your family can continue living in this house.”

I could almost hear John and Debbie's joint sigh of relief.

"That's the best plan I've heard in some time," said John, and we shook on a future together.

With the property in escrow and the Pitkin family in place, I faced the facts that now stood staring me down. Talk about a holy shit moment. I had persuaded the bank to lend me money to buy the ranch, which meant I had two monthly mortgages but only one ranch, the Rex Ranch, generating income; Lazy B belonged to my family and its profits were off-limits. I found myself waking up in the middle of the night lost in an arithmetic jungle, counting the number of calves I needed to sell in order to cover those mortgages. I felt uneasy about running cattle on a third ranch lest the market nosedive and no profits cross the finish line for anyone. Finally, weary from sleep deprivation, I shifted my anxious mind into creative mode and tried to think of a different way to generate income on the new ranch. That's when the roulette wheel came to a stop and the little white marble dropped to its destiny.