

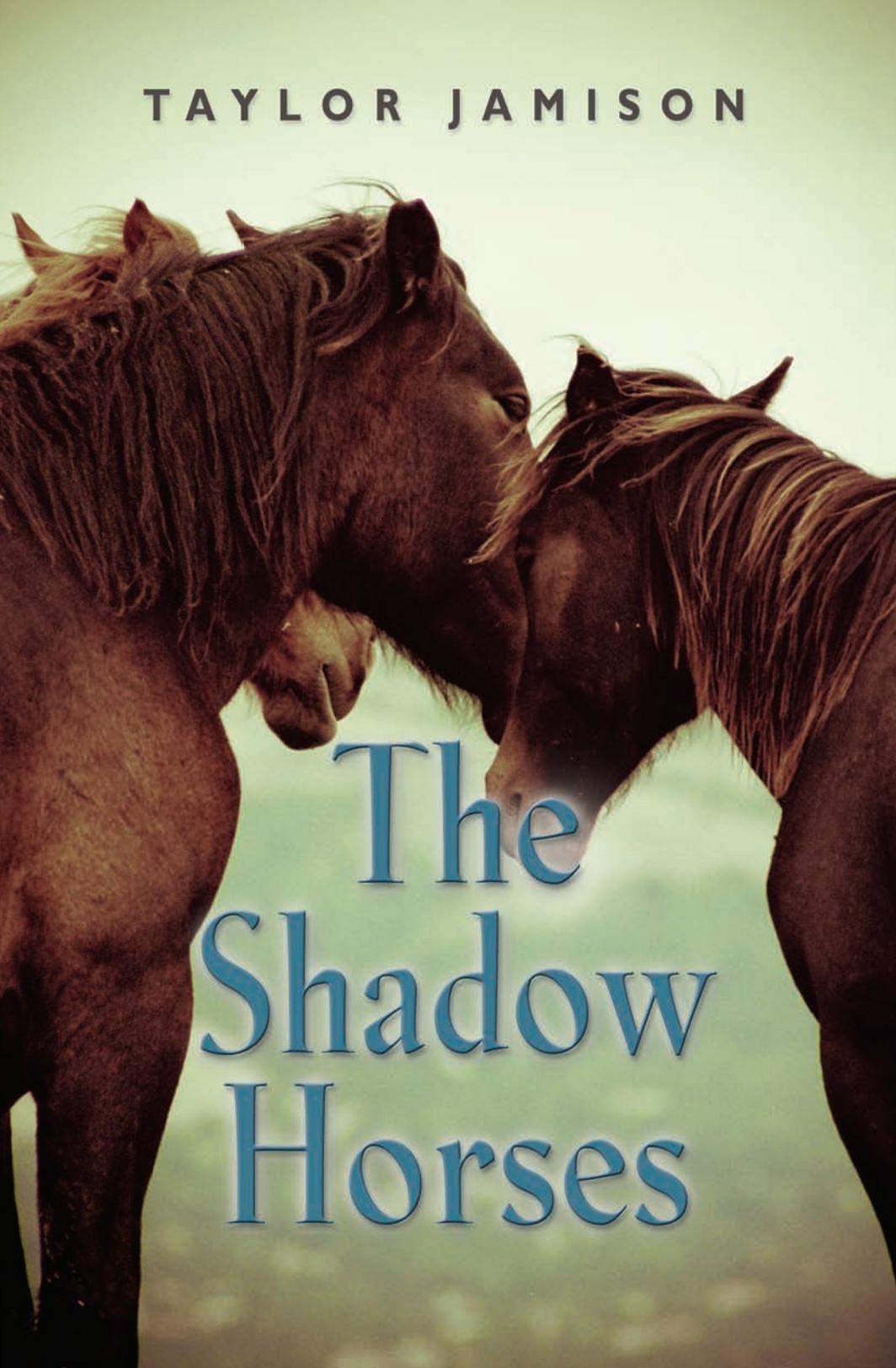
A castle in the Nebraska Sandhills is the last place Chicago zoologist Julianne Stormbeck ever imagined she belonged. She faces an impossible choice when she uses her expertise to help her new husband's estranged brother—a man Drew openly despises—investigate who is responsible for poisoning a herd of wild mustangs. Should she help rescue the wild horses before they all perish or try to save her troubled marriage?

The Shadow Horses

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TAYLOR JAMISON

A close-up photograph of two brown horses nuzzling each other. The horse on the left is in profile, facing right, with its head lowered towards the other horse. The horse on the right is also in profile, facing left, with its head touching the first horse's neck. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light green and yellow, suggesting a natural outdoor setting. The overall mood is peaceful and affectionate.

The
Shadow
Horses

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The biggest mistakes, the ones that stay around forever, always happen in ordinary places—the kitchen, the bedroom, the back seat of a car. That’s why Julianne Stormbeck got scared when she laid eyes on downtown Baxter, Nebraska for the first time. The only thing that exceeded the number of bars was the number of churches.

As she lowered herself from the passenger side of the jacked up pickup, the heel of her pump gave way. She rubbed her sore ankle. “What was I thinking?” she asked, not in reference to her shoe selection, but to her recent life choices.

Tate Adams, the woman who’d brought Julianne along to Tip’s Lounge in Baxter, hopped down from the driver’s side and waved her hand at the crumbling building that leaned beside Murray’s gas station. The sign above the entrance read “Baxter Equipment” in sun-faded letters. “That’s your neighbor’s place.”

Julianne limped around the truck with new resolve. In her thirty-seven years, being cautious had never gotten her anywhere interesting, she figured. That’s what had brought her to Nebraska in the first place, that and her new husband, Drew. “Are you talking about the Vaughns?” Julianne asked.

“Yes, Cliff and Millie. Cliff’s father, Hal, started the business some thirty years ago when Cliff was just a boy. Hal’s gone now.”

“Sorry I didn’t get to meet Hal. And I haven’t even met Cliff and Millie.” Even though it had been two months since Julianne moved to Nebraska, the only friend she’d made was the surly raccoon that raided her trashcan on a daily basis.

Julianne wanted to believe that she and Tate would become good friends, but she couldn’t, not really. She suspected Tate had only come by the ranch that afternoon because she was after something.

Tate patted Julianne’s arm. “Don’t take it personally about the Vaughns. They’re probably not feeling too sociable, what with Cliff’s business going bankrupt and all.”

“I should ask Drew to invite them over for dinner,” Julianne said.

“Do women from Chicago always have to consult their husbands when they want to eat?” Tate asked.

“I just get the sense something’s not right between him and the neighbors.”

“You got that right,” Tate said. “Drew and Cliff haven’t been friends for a long time, not since Drew’s mother passed away, back when we were in high school.” As they headed for Tip’s, Tate’s boots clacked against the sidewalk. “But there I go again, talking when I ought to keep my mouth shut.”

When Julianne laid eyes on the stuffed grizzly bear propped beside the coat rack just inside Tip’s Lounge, her heart nearly froze mid-beat. “What is this place?”

Across from the bear, an antique phone booth came into view. It bore a striking resemblance to a confessional. Even though Julianne hadn’t confessed her sins since sixth grade Confirmation, she was tempted to step inside and own up to her transgression. What greater crime could a zoologist commit than patronizing a grime-infested bar filled with dead animal trophies? *Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. I frequented Tip’s Lounge of my own free will. No other woman or beast can be blamed for my lapse in judgment.*

Julianne made a sign of the cross and kept walking, trying her best not to look at the petrified rattlesnake coiled beside the cash register. “This place is awful.”

“Isn’t it, though?” Tate said, flashing a smile. “Can’t complain to Tip about it anymore though. He’s dead as driftwood, buried in the Baxter cemetery. Guess he should have been propped alongside that grizzly, a perpetual scowl on his face. What’s good enough for the hunted should be good for the hunter.”

A queasy feeling rose in the pit of Julianne’s stomach, probably, she guessed, from the combination of deep-fat fryer fumes and musty fur. “I’m not sure I can eat here.”

“Somebody’s spoiled,” Tate said with a lilt in her voice.

“You said I’d be impressed with Baxter.”

“Well, maybe you should be more concerned about the pictures hanging above the bar. Now you can be doubly offended.” Tate looked up and Julianne’s eyes followed. The naked pictures of three ample-breasted cowgirls were mounted on the soffit above the brass bar. Their virtues were hidden behind a well-positioned cowboy hat. “Distasteful display,” Tate said, grinning.

“That hardly begins to describe—”

“Never mind,” Tate said. “Look over there.” She pointed at two men perched at the bar, a pair of perfect opposites. One was white-haired and scrawny, the other dark and well built. “Have you met Skinny Pete McIntyre and his new help?” Tate pulled Julianne toward them. “Hey, Pete,” Tate shouted out.

Skinny Pete removed his Husker ball cap and tipped his head. “Afternoon, ladies.” His face and neck were deeply lined. A thick cloud of white hair fell down the middle of his back in a single white braid.

“This is my brand-new friend, Julianne,” Tate said.

Pete shook her hand. “My pleasure.”

“Pete manages the Vaughn’s ranch,” Tate explained.

Pete gestured to his right. “This is Weston Montañes, moved all the way from Texas.”

Weston removed his cowboy hat and rose from his barstool. “Ladies.” Thick shiny black hair brushed the collar of his plaid flannel shirt. Where he’d rolled up his sleeves, tan muscular forearms bulged. He held his head slightly cocked, his hands ready by his side. At any moment Julianne expected him to draw a gun or start a fistfight.

“Weston lives in the bunkhouse with me and Rowdy.” Pete pointed to the far end of the bar where a white dog with black markings stood with ears perked forward.

“How do you get him to stay there?” Julianne asked.

“Pete’s got a way with animals,” Weston said, a note of admiration in his voice.

“Live animals?” Julianne asked. Just above the bottles of Jack, Johnny, and Jim, a moose head hovered.

“Julianne doesn’t appreciate the local color,” Tate said.

“Animal rights activist?” Pete asked.

“Zoologist,” Julianne said, somehow feeling like she owed them an apology.

“Oh ho, you must be Drew’s new wife,” Pete said. “I was wondering when we’d finally meet.”

“You know Drew?”

“Ever since he was a kid.”

“Seems like everybody knows everybody around here,” Julianne said.

“You can’t scratch a rash without the neighbors offering ten different kinds of advice,” Pete said.

“Usually all bad,” Tate added.

“If you’ve got something to hide, best move on,” Pete said as he nudged Weston. “Isn’t that right?”

Weston kept his gaze fixed on his beer mug. “Haven’t been here long enough to say.”

“Sounds a lot like the suburbs,” Julianne said. All three of her bar companions gave her a surprised look. She shrugged. “You’ll have to trust me on that.”

“Oh, I believe you. San Antonio was no different,” Weston said.

Tate turned to Weston. “What brings you to Baxter, Mr. Montañes?” she asked. “Most folks can’t get away fast enough. Surely you’ve seen the skid marks leading out of town.”

Weston took a drink before answering. “Got restless, I guess.”

Tate slid onto the barstool beside him. “Something wrong with Texas?”

Julianne took a seat next to Tate and leaned forward.

Weston shrugged. “Just needed some space, that’s all.”

“Texas seems plenty big,” Tate said. She signaled the bartender, who barely looked old enough to drink himself. “Whiskey on the rocks with three cherries,” she said, holding up three fingers. Her eyes remained fixed on the bartender as he dumped a shot over ice and slid it toward Julianne. Then he winked at Tate and poured her a double.

Pete turned to Tate. "You get a chance to speak to Drew about that half-wild stallion?"

Tate lowered her voice. "Drew left town before I got a chance to ask him about that horse."

Pete's shoulders fell. "That's a shame."

"Not all is lost," Tate said. She patted Julianne on the back. "Julianne's here. Maybe she can help."

"It wouldn't be polite to involve her," Pete said.

Somewhere deep down a sensible voice warned Julianne this would be a smart time to get off her barstool and leave, but to be perfectly honest, her social life had dried to a mere trickle. She was hardly in a position to be picky about the direction the conversation was headed. She took a timid sip of whiskey and sputtered. "If it's about ranching, you should probably talk to Drew. I'm from the city."

"She has to get Drew's permission," Tate said.

Even though Tate and Julianne had only met once before, Julianne realized Tate had already figured out just what to say to annoy her. Julianne didn't want to admit that she was dependent on any man, especially since her ex-husband, Phillip, had let her down so completely. Knowing that the only one waiting at home for her was a hungry raccoon didn't help matters either. So instead of leaving, she folded her hands in her lap and settled her spine. "Fine, what can I, uh, *help* you with, Mr. McIntyre?"

"Well, since you ask, my boss, Cliff, has a first-rate stallion he needs to sell." Pete pulled a crinkled photograph from his back pocket and slid it across the bar to Julianne.

The picture of a midnight-black horse with white socks and a white blaze took Julianne's breath away. "He's very striking," she said, "but to be completely honest, Drew hasn't said one word about horses or cattle since I got here. He's obsessed with his company."

Pete displayed three more photos. "Maybe so, but this is one fine horse."

“Pete knows horses,” Tate said. “His mother, Flies with the Ponies, used to do trick riding for the Front Street Western Show in Ogallala. When I was a kid, I used to beg my dad to take me there, just so I could see her ride.”

Pete lifted his mug, toasting his mother’s memory. “Cliff found Jesse roaming around Shadow Valley with the wild mustangs, but that horse is no mustang. He doesn’t have the coarse features. He looks like a well-bred paint quarter horse. Some fool must have dumped him there.”

“Better the valley than the sale barn,” Weston said.

“You got that right,” Tate said. She turned to Julianne. “Horses sold at auction usually wind up on a stock trailer headed to Canada, destined for the rendering plant.” She aimed a finger at the center of her forehead. “Nothing like death by nail gun.”

Julianne swallowed hard. “Is there something wrong with him?”

“Well,” Pete chuckled, “yes and no. You see, Jesse McCue is afraid of cattle.”

“Can’t judge him like that,” Weston said as he pushed his beer mug aside. “It’s like comparing royalty to peasants.” He intertwined his fingers and placed them on the bar. “No reason that stallion should be chasing livestock when he could be standing in the winner’s circle, earning someone a pile of money.”

“God put horses on this earth to cut cattle,” Pete said. “Besides, Millie Vaughn tried taking Jesse to a dressage show. That didn’t work out so well.”

“Millie spent more time in the dirt than in the saddle,” Weston said, a smile creeping across his face. “That Jesse’s got a real spark.”

“So Cliff’s selling him because he’s so high-strung?” Julianne asked.

Pete lowered his voice. “No, not exactly.” He paused and leaned in closer so only his three companions could hear. “Baxter Equipment is going bankrupt, thanks to the tractor retail store that opened in Ogallala a few months back.”

Julianne had driven to Ogallala at least twice a week to buy groceries and fill her car with gas. She had yet to find a drive-thru that made a decent latte. She could handle gravel roads and well water that smelled like rotten eggs, but no espresso was more than she could deal with. “What does Cliff’s store have to do with the horse?” she asked Pete.

“Cliff can’t compete with the new store’s prices, and declining profits means he can’t afford to maintain his ranch, let alone provide for the wild mustangs. If he doesn’t sell his business for top dollar, he’ll have to give up the ranch.”

“How many horses are you talking about?” Julianne asked.

“I couldn’t say for sure, a couple hundred, maybe,” Pete said. “Brome yields have been pitiful, thanks to the drought, and prices are sky high. Come winter many of the mustangs will starve,” Pete said.

“If Cliff ends up losing the ranch, some rich outsider is going to buy it up, use it for commercial purposes,” Weston said. He waved his hand in front of his nose. “I’m sure you can figure out why horses and golf courses don’t mix.”

Julianne took another sip of her whiskey, which had begun to taste better and better. “How much is Cliff asking for Jesse?”

“Two hundred and fifty dollars.”

“That doesn’t sound like much,” Julianne said. She looked at Tate, who nodded in agreement.

“He’s worth thousands,” Weston said.

“Is he well cared for?”

Pete crossed his arms across his chest and sat gun barrel straight.

“She didn’t mean anything by it,” Tate said. “Come on, Jules, buy the horse.”

“No one calls me Jules except family,” Julianne said.

Tate barreled ahead. “It’s not like you’re all that busy right now, Jules, what with your being out of a job. Think about it. You could save Jesse from a needless execution. Better yet, you could make your new husband happy.”

“Drew seems happy enough, and he’s awfully busy.”

“Horsemanship is in Drew’s blood,” Tate continued without taking a breath. “He probably doesn’t even realize how much he misses ranching, but if horses were right there on the property—who knows?”

“It might give Drew and the girls a common interest,” Julianne said, sitting a little taller. Her two teenage daughters, Kayli and Olivia, still hadn’t warmed to Drew, and they both loved horses. “We could go on trail rides together.”

Although the desire to bring her new family closer had occupied Julianne’s thoughts every day since her arrival, it wasn’t the image

she now pictured. She saw herself—not Drew or her daughters—galloping across open prairie.

“There you go,” Tate said and slapped her leg for emphasis. “Do it for your whole family. It will give you something to focus on, so you don’t feel like you’re at loose ends.”

“I’m hardly at ‘loose ends,’” Julianne said. She tipped her glass. The amber liquid filled her with courage. “In fact, I just had an interview this morning, so I might have a job soon enough. Besides, I’m not sure I’m qualified to own a horse.” Even though she liked the idea of flying on horseback, the largest animal she’d ever handled was the horseshoe crab she dissected while teaching advanced biology lab. “Shouldn’t I look the horse over, inspect his molars, make sure he isn’t lame?”

“I can take a look at him if you’d like,” Tate said.

Julianne bit off a cherry. Maybe if she bought a horse Drew would have a compelling reason to stick around the ranch instead of rushing off to conduct business in Chicago or Denver. That’s how she’d met him in the first place. Now she just wanted him to stay home.

She placed the cherry stem beside the sweating tumbler. “What do you say, Mr. McIntyre? Do you mind if Tate takes a look?”

“I’ll do you one better. You can take Jesse home on trial. If that stallion isn’t everything I’ve claimed and more, you can send him right back.” Pete slapped Weston on the back. “And Weston here can give you lessons, first one complimentary.”

“I can outride any cowboy in Keith County,” Weston said, his shoulders edging upward.

“If he does say so himself,” Pete added, wiping his mouth on his sleeve.

“You’ll make an excellent horsewoman, Julianne,” Weston said with a pleasant drawl. “You have the right build. You’re graceful but strong.”

Julianne placed the cool tumbler against her cheek. Weston’s confidence in her was inspiring. Maybe she did have it in her. Besides, she’d been unable to find a Pilates class within driving distance of the ranch. She could really use the exercise. Before she lost her courage, she offered her hand to Pete. “I believe you just sold a horse.”

“*Salud, dinero y amor!*” Weston said.

“Health, wealth, and love. I’ll drink to that,” Tate said and raised her glass.

As Julianne and her new friends raised their glasses in a toast, a hefty man elbowed his way up to the bar. Shirt buttons strained to bursting, he looked like he could arm wrestle a bull and win. The brim of his black cowboy hat dipped farther forward than was polite. When he shoved it back, dark downturned eyes darted from face to face.

A wave of distrust coursed through Julianne. The man looked vaguely familiar, like a long-lost relative who’d shown up at the funeral to steal the inheritance.

“What are we celebrating?” the man asked, not quite looking anyone in the eye.

Weston hopped off his barstool. “This is a private party.” He puffed his chest and took a step forward.

The man didn’t give ground. “You boys making an honest deal?” he asked. “I don’t want to find out later you took advantage of these two pretty ladies.” He flashed a well-rehearsed smile.

The insinuation deflated Julianne’s mood, and regret flooded in. She’d made a rash decision, she suddenly realized, one she might live to regret. The urge to bolt came over her again. She looked over her shoulder at the exit.

In college, she could run the hundred-meter dash in twelve seconds flat. Even now she was certain that with a head start, she could outrun them all.

The keys to the pickup were resting on the bar beside Tate’s empty glass. Julianne opened and closed her fist. Her French-manicured nails dug crescents in her palms. As she eyed the keys, the events of the day flickered through her mind. If she only could pinpoint where she’d taken a misstep, maybe she could take it all back.

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