

ATTEMPTED MURDER IN THE SOUTH PASTURE

PART TWO OF PHOENIX'S LIFE BEFORE DOWNUNDER
HORSEMANSHIP PICKS UP A YEAR AFTER HE WAS BORN

By Kim Hinson (NWC KHinson322449)

My cell phone rang just as I put my hand on the doorknob, heading outside. The caller ID flashed Brett, and I looked at my husband's name in surprise. Supposedly, Brett was just two steps away in the garage, where he'd been all afternoon, rearranging our blue storage tubs.

I answered the phone, glancing out the window as I spoke, and there he was, my husband, curled up like a horseshoe in my flower garden next to the butterfly bush, clutching his knee.

While running to the house to tell me that our new 900-pound Fell Pony stallion, Mercury, had broken out of his pasture, Brett stumbled on a rock, completely dislocating his knee.

In a rush of worry, I knelt beside Brett, careful not to jar him. I touched his shoulder softly and asked if I should call 911. My eyes stung with tears seeing him in such pain. I could see the denim on his jeans stretched impossibly tight over his grossly swollen knee. My hero lying in a flower garden. Next to the butterfly bush. Under normal circumstances, my tough, born-and-raised Texan would never even get close to something called butterfly bush.

Brett gripped his knee, clenched his teeth, and encouraged me to go check the horses. Powerful, domineering Mercury was now in with our other horses, and Brett knew there could be trouble. "I'll be fine," he said, and clasped his knee a little tighter, hunkering down to wait for the pain and swelling to ease off.

I ran down the driveway and through the barn to the south pasture. The scene was like a bizarre play where all the characters are caught frozen in place immediately after a hideous crime. Our horses—Josie,

Jackson, Traveler, Rebecca and Laura—all stood like statues, heads raised, nostrils flared, staring at the magnificent white stallion who had burst into their midst.

Mercury stood in the distance on a little knoll—magnificent, fearless ... and dangerous. His white, silky mane flowed to his knees, his forelock covered his face, and his tail blew long and sweeping in the Texas twilight. The Fabio of the horse world. "Where's his unicorn horn?" was a question we heard from every visitor. Sensible women in sensible shoes wanted to leap on his back and ride him to the castle keep. Mares of every color, shape and size wanted to have his baby. Even our boss mare, Josie, picky about her men, couldn't take her eyes off him. Mercury was born wild on the Fells of Cumbria, England. We could ride him, but his beauty sometimes left us in danger of forgetting the wildness, power and aggression that still ran hot in his blood. He wasn't afraid of anything, and he'd protect his herd from *everything*.

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With a jolt, I noticed the heavy iron gate to Mercury's pasture swinging wide open, the lock bolt thrust aside



Megan holding Phoenix.

and the extra-thick precautionary rope we'd tied so carefully flapped in the chilly January wind.

So our savvy new stallion could open gates and untie ropes. Great.

Taking a deep breath, I counted the horses crowded under the bodark tree, making sure they looked unharmed. Josie, Jackson, Traveler, Rebecca and Laura huddled tight, watching me. My heart raced as I noticed one face missing.

Where was little Phoenix?

Phoenix, our yearling miniature horse, stood a mere 18 inches tall, and weighed in at maybe 40 pounds—small even for a miniature horse. He was our Tiny Stallion—our little Orange Baby, we called him.

I scanned the pasture in the growing darkness, my eyes wide and determined. Struggling to calm my nerves, I spotted a shadowy lump in the distance. It was Phoenix, laid flat-out and still as death, halfway between Mercury and me.

Mercury snorted—a loud, challenging, stallion snort. He looked right at me, shaking his head fiercely, his long mane swirling like a tempest.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Phoenix lift his head. He flopped back down, and then with a mighty struggle, heaved himself to his feet only to topple over yet again. Eighteen inches tall, for crying out loud. Our brave little orange baby.

Phoenix, though tiny, was a stallion too. At one year old, he still hadn't started acting studdy, as horse people call it—in other words, like a horse that is all aggressive and full of himself—so we hadn't gelded him yet. But Mercury knew a stallion when he smelled one, no matter the size, and Mercury meant to be king of this little herd.

Mercury snorted again. This time he looked right at Phoenix. He stepped forward, his giant, feathered hooves making their way straight toward the tiny orange heap that was Phoenix.

"Hey!" I yelled. And then, louder, "NO!"

I forced my voice to be strong, loud. My "bad horse, bad dog" voice. Stomping forward, I planted myself between Mercury and Phoenix.

Hearing my voice, Phoenix struggled to get up, but stumbled and fell after just one or two steps. It looked like there was something wrong with his head. It looked bigger than usual, and heavy.

My trembling fingers pushed the speed dial number for the veterinarian hospital, where Dr. Farnon, our favorite equine veterinarian, worked. It was after hours, but someone always answered. I prayed it would be Dr. Farnon, but as rotten luck would have it, the vet on duty—I'll call her Dr. Dismal—was my least favorite vet ever. She was the doomsday, always-look-on-the-dark-side vet.

Heavy-set, slow moving and even slower talking, Dr. Dismal told me that I should call her back after I'd gotten Phoenix into a stall. Begging her to come right away, I told her I really needed her help, and hung up, my mind racing for a plan. Any plan. With my horse-loving daughter Megan away at college, and Brett huddled up

and miserable in my flower garden, I quickly called my two horse-savvy friends, Dale first, and then Kathleen. No answer from either one of them. Darkness settled around me, and a cold January wind froze my fingers as I left hurried messages, asking them to come if they could, to help me get Mercury and the rest of the horses out of the pasture and away from badly injured Phoenix.

Holding my ground between Phoenix and Mercury, shivering but focused, I did what I always do when I'm in terrible trouble. I called Brett. Dislocated knee or not, I needed his help.

All the horses stayed perfectly still, their white-rimmed eyes riveted on Mercury, Phoenix and me as if we were some kind of private horror movie.

Minutes later I heard a muffled footstep from the dimness of the barn. And there was Brett, in his soft plaid flannel shirt, faded denim jeans and tough, gray duck-cloth jacket. Limping but still strong, he was the

gunshot cowboy in those old westerns who just wouldn't stay down no matter how many times he'd been shot. He grabbed a handful of halters, hobbled around to each horse, and one by one, led them to safety. Then he put Mercury back in his old pasture, far from the other horses and chained the gate shut.

Just as Brett finished, Kathleen and Dale pulled into the barnyard, parking under the hackberry tree. And, trailing up the rear, Dr. Dismal's truck lumbered to a stop.

Kathleen and Dale hurried over to join me in the pasture, while Dr. Dismal dithered in the driver's seat of her truck, toying with her phone. I asked Dale to show Dr. Dismal to the stall, and Kathleen and I walked quickly toward Phoenix.

It was pitch dark now, so I switched on our powerful flashlight. We saw Phoenix lift his head, and then let it flop to the ground with a soft thud. He tried again to get to his feet, but fell back, still and silent.

Even for a mini horse, Phoenix was a small foal.





Phoenix with his dam, Felicia.

Kathleen and I crooned encouragements to Phoenix as we half-led, half-carried him over to the stall, gently lowering him to his side as his legs paddled spastically and his eyeballs rolled back in his head. Kneeling beside Phoenix's trembling body, I hugged him gently, caressing and stroking him all over, trying unsuccessfully to find his injury.

I looked up to see Dr. Dismal standing a few feet away. A large woman, she aimed her chins toward Phoenix, but she made no move to take his temperature, listen to

his heart or even do a quick examination. Keeping her distance, she said it looked like he'd gotten kicked in the head, and then added that most young horses die when they get kicked in the head.

And that was as helpful as she got.

I'm the kind of animal owner who spends hundreds of dollars to find out what is wrong with a pet chicken, but I'm also chronically nonconfrontational, so I almost didn't recognize my own voice when it said, "Well, he's not dead yet." I looked straight into her dismal eyes and said, "I want a second opinion from Dr. Farnon." My voice shook with stress and anger, and I added, "I want you to call him now."

Through Dr. Dismal, Dr. Farnon suggested that we bring Phoenix to Performance Equine Hospital in Whitesboro, the best equine hospital around, and about 60 miles from our farm.

Fingering her chins, Dr. Dismal said that it would probably cost thousands of dollars and she doubted that Phoenix would make it, but if I wanted her to, she could give him an injection of something to make him more comfortable on the drive. Then again, we'd have to follow her back to her office, since she didn't have the medicine with her.

I clenched my jaw and stared at Dr. Dismal like a toad had spoken, but decided to remain calm and get Phoenix the shot he needed to be comfortable for the long drive.

Kathleen took out the back row of my van seats, making enough space for Phoenix to lie flat out on the floor. She backed the van up to the stall and we tenderly laid Phoenix inside. Kathleen carefully crawled over him, sat with her legs stretched out on either side of Phoenix and gently lifted his head to her lap. Flicking on the dome light above her head, I hurried to the driver's seat, and carefully followed Dr. Dismal's taillights south on County Road 5.

I heard the scuffle of paddling hooves on carpet as Kathleen tried to soothe Phoenix through a seizure, murmuring "It's OK, Phoenix, it's OK."

Ten long minutes later, I swung up to the back door of the vet clinic in a spray of gravel. Dr. Dismal came out holding a syringe, so I lifted the tailgate, and Kathleen held Phoenix's head while Dr. Dismal gave him the injection. Without a word, I gently closed the door, slid back into the driver's seat and stepped on the gas. Dr. Dismal turned away in a cloud of my dust.

Kathleen leaned over Phoenix, her dark hair brushing his swollen face. I heard her singing, “Hush little baby, don’t you cry,” and in the rearview mirror I glimpsed her stroking his thrashing legs.

“Instantly, a flock of veterinary angels fluttered around Phoenix, murmuring soft directions to each other, and crooning endearments to calm him.”

Easing from 55 to 60, I struggled to keep my mind focused on following directions to an equine hospital that I’d never seen, way out in the boonies and darkness. I heard the tussle of another seizure, and quickened the speed to 70.

As I approached the outskirts of Sherman, Texas, I kept my eyes peeled for the exit, driving fast but careful, like an ambulance driver, but without the ambulance.

“Uh-oh. A cop car,” said Kathleen, who knew a thing or two about cops and getting pulled over.

My stomach lurched as I eased over to the shoulder. I’d talked my way out of a few speeding tickets in the past, but I didn’t feel up to my usual bright smile and apologetic excuses. My throat tightened with unshed tears and worry as I rolled my window down, handed the officer my license and waited for his questions.

“Do you know how fast you were driving?” he asked.

Stifling a half-sob, I gestured to the back of the van where Kathleen cradled Phoenix in the greenish glow of the dome light. I explained that our horse was dying, and that I had to get him to Performance Equine Hospital as soon as possible. In a flash of inspiration, I asked him for an escort, which he refused, but after glancing back at Phoenix and Kathleen, both looking feeble and sickly in the greenish glow, he gave me better directions to the clinic, encouraged me to drive slower, and then let me get on the road again—without a ticket.

Thirty highway miles later, on a road black as pitch, my straining eyes spotted the Performance Equine Hospital sign and the gravel driveway leading to the rear of the clinic. I backed up to a tall sliding door and jumped out to open the back of the van. Instantly, a

flock of veterinary angels fluttered around Phoenix, murmuring soft directions to each other, “Grab that corner of the blanket and I’ll support his legs...” and crooning endearments to calm him. Moving quickly, every eye locked on Phoenix, they gently lifted him onto a pony-sized stretcher, and brought him inside.

The all-woman team worked quickly. They took Phoenix’s temperature, listened to his heart and examined his gums and eyelids. Gentle hands prodded and probed him from head to tail. “It’s a good thing he’s not skinny,” I heard one of them murmur softly. “He’s going to need everything he has to pull through.”

Dr. Kerry, the head veterinarian, stood up and turned to me. “It looks like your stallion grabbed Phoenix by his neck and shook him,” she said, pointing out a very swollen section on both sides of his mane and halfway down Phoenix’s neck. “It’s very much like the Shaken Baby Syndrome that real babies get from being shaken by adults.”



Kim with her horse Jackson.

Author’s Note

Kim Hinson grew up in an old-timey, Wild West Saloon-looking gas station with attached bunkhouse-style living quarters. Kim writes stories that uncover the comic, nostalgic, and quirky in such unlikely matters as boss mares, in-hand stallion breeding and indestructible horse carts. You can read more about Kim, her stories and animals, and see pictures at www.kimhinson.com.

Look for part three of Phoenix’s story in the winter issue of the *No Worries Journal*.



Kim's husband, Brett, giving Phoenix a good scratch.

Phoenix's head was swollen to twice its normal size and he was still having convulsions. Dr. Kerry told me the chances of Phoenix recovering were about 50-50, and that he needed complete quiet and intensive care to let his brain settle down.

"But we're going to think positive," she said. "I have high hopes for this little guy."

She knelt beside Phoenix, rested her hand on his side, and told the rest of the team her plan: Do everything possible to save Phoenix.

Two of the veterinary assistants carried a twin-sized mattress into a big, padded stall, and Dr. Kerry told me that they would all take turns sleeping next to Phoenix so he'd never be alone. The assistants gently

laid Phoenix on the mattress, and Dr. Kerry leaned over and gave him a kiss on his swollen cheek. My face wet with tears, I gently touched Phoenix's muzzle, praying that God would give us one more chance with our little orange baby.

I phoned Dr. Kerry every day, and drove up to see Phoenix every other day. "Everyone loves Phoenix," the clinic's secretary said the first time I came to visit him. "He's in the stall that looks empty." She grinned, giving me directions to find him, because our tiny Phoenix was in a full-sized horse stall now, and impossible to see unless I looked over the door.

Finally, after a week of intensive care, Dr. Kerry said, "Well, he's eating, he's pooping and he's running

away when we come into his stall with a rectal thermometer!" She told me he was getting smarter every day, that she thought he was going to be fine and that he could go home.

I drove up later that day and a vet tech lifted Phoenix into our horse trailer. Driving slowly back to our farm, I was breathing easy, listening to That Girl is a Cowboy on 92.1 KXEZ Classic Country, and feeling the warm Texas sunset on my face. By the time I pulled into the farmyard, the hackberry tree and our barn were deep shadows, but Phoenix's old birthing stall glowed warm and welcoming. We'd spread new shavings, filled the water trough and piled fluffy coastal hay in the middle of what we were calling the recovery room. Phoenix's best friend, a yearling filly named Rebecca, watched as

Brett and I lifted Phoenix from the trailer and set him down in the stall.

Phoenix took a few shaky steps to the pile of hay and Rebecca brusquely swung her head towards him in a typical "get away from my hay" movement. Startled by Rebecca's sudden lunge, Phoenix instantly toppled over in a small orange heap. Hot tears sprung to my eyes, and I watched through a blur of tears as Phoenix grunted, struggled to his feet and then stoically wobbled his way to the far side of the hay pile.

I heaved a sigh. Brett shifted his crutches to one hand, put his arm around my shoulders, and said, "Give him time, Babe." Leaning hard on his crutches, he said again, "Just give him time."

You dream of
being a better
horseman.

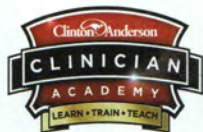
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dream come true.*



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