

CHRISTY CASHMAN

THE TRUTH ABOUT HORSES: A Synopsis

Fourteen-year-old REESE TUCKER and her parents live a humble but happy life in Birdwood, South Dakota, raising and training horses at the BIG GREEN BARN. Every year, the Tuckers dream of running a horse in the Black Elk, a race that, if won, could turn their fortunes around. They've finally found a horse that can win: their beloved TRUSTED TREASURE. Mom can always spot the rare horse that has the X-factor. The family's hopes have never been higher.

But two connected tragedies set Reese's world spinning. Trusted Treasure has a debilitating fall at the Black Elk finish line just as he seemed about to win, and a family drive intended to help them forget their troubles for a while—a drive during which they have a near-mystical encounter with a herd of wild horses led by a mysterious black stallion—ends in a highway accident that instantly kills Mom.

Dad soon gives up the lease on the Big Green Barn and sells off every single horse Reese loves—including Trusted Treasure. Reese promises Trusted Treasure that she'll bring him back home again, no matter how long it takes. She knows what can eventually happen to a racehorse who can no longer race. Seeing how upset Reese is, Dad makes the empty promise that they'll get the barn back someday, a promise Reese takes to heart.

Two years later, Reese and her dad are still struggling to heal. Their relationship has grown strained and distant. It doesn't help that Dad seems to be hiding behind an annoying new beard and has slept with nearly every woman in town, including Reese's second grade teacher. Even when he's home, he's not really there.

Reese has been coping with her pain and loneliness by biking over to the Big Green Barn every day after school. Even empty, the barn is the place Reese feels happiest, although she tells Dad she's going to track or choir practice. He still can't so much as look at a horse, in spite his promise about the Big Green Barn, a promise Reese holds on to until the day she sees a banner on the For Sale or Lease sign at the end of the barn's driveway that reads Deal Pending.

Reese is devastated until she learns that WES, the person now leasing the place, is bringing horses back to the Big Green Barn. Reese snoops around the property, watching Wes from afar, until she finally gets the nerve to introduce herself and ask Wes for a job. Wes hands her a note telling her he chooses not to speak. She soon learns to communicate with Wes without words and finds it easy to tell him all about her troubles, something she won't do with the school therapist she's forced to see. But she doesn't tell him her biggest secret of all: a herd of wild horses, led by a black stallion—who look just like the horses the family saw the day of their tragic drive—visits her regularly. No one else can see them, but that doesn't mean they're not as real as can be.

But she soon gets up the courage to tell Dad. After all, he didn't blink an eye when his friend Flip told him about seeing his father's ghost in the doorway of his doublewide. And sharing this amazing story might bring her and Dad closer again. Huge mistake. Later that night, she peeks at his laptop and discovers that he's been searching for terms like PTSD and schizophrenia. So now it's not just the kids at school who think of her as the crazy horse-crazy girl. Dad does, too.

At the Big Green Barn, Reese and Wes have become a good team. Even though times are tough for horse farmers, they succeed. Reese uses her social media savvy and her mother's old business notebooks to help. Wes gives lessons and they take in boarders. He becomes a local sensation not just because of his gifts as a teacher and a trainer but also because of his ability to do both without using any words at all.

Reese has never given up on finding Trusted Treasure. One day while in class, she gets a notification on the Horse Tracker app: Treasure is going to be auctioned. Reese travels to the auction and, with surprise help from Wes, brings Treasure back to the Big Green Barn, where he is rehabilitated. Reese discovers that Trusted Treasure's injury has healed completely, and she is overcome with joy at the thought of riding Trusted Treasure again.

On the home front, Dad is seriously dating a new girlfriend, LeeAnne. Within weeks, LeeAnne and her two boys move in with Dad and Reese. One day, when Reese is about to buy a saddle for Trusted Treasure, she discovers that her savings are missing from her room. There's only one explanation: the boys have stolen her money. To get revenge, she mixes smegma—the gloppy white substance that must be cleaned from beneath a male horse's sheath—into cream cheese frosting for cupcakes LeeAnne has baked. The boys eat the “smegma cupcakes,” and news of Reese's recipe for revenge spreads throughout the community. Lessons cancel. Boarders leave.

Crises mount as fallout from Reese's actions continues, affecting business at the Big Green Barn to the point where Wes is forced to train the horse owned by the unsavory character Blake, a boarder who accuses Wes of drugging the horse that he himself has drugged. Instead of defending himself, Wes decides to break the lease, sell what he can, and drive off, leaving Reese heartbroken. But she's also determined. She will redeem herself by finding out the truth about Blake's horse. Just as she is about to confront Blake, she overhears information that clears Wes's name.

But at home, Reese continues to act out, giving Dad no choice but to drive her to a psychiatric emergency room. On their way to the facility where Reese will be admitted long-term, they must drive along the same stretch of highway where Mom died. Reese spots the mystical horses coming toward them, surrounding their pickup truck. At Reese's panicked insistence, Dad pulls over to the side of the road. As Dad tries to convince Reese that the rumbling of the herd's hoofbeats is nothing more than thunder from an approaching storm, his phone rings. It's his friend Flip, who's been boarding Trusted Treasure since Big Green closed its doors, telling Dad he better get over to the ranch right away: Trusted Treasure has escaped along with much of Flip's herd.

As ever-larger hail falls around them, Reese, Dad, Flip, and the ranch hands search for the missing horses. When Reese calls Trusted Treasure's name, he gallops toward her and stops, as if asking her to ride, which she does. During the roundup in which she and Treasure bring in the other horses, Reese discovers Trusted Treasure is every bit the racehorse he used to be, if not better.

When Dad discovers that Flip saw the same herd of horses that Reese saw, he concedes that some things are beyond a logical explanation, and he decides to bring Reese home. Flip and Dad also discuss how Trusted Treasure is not the only one who looks ready to race the Black Elk. Reese does, too.

Meanwhile, Wes had made a highway journey of his own. After leaving the barn, filled with feelings of failure and regret and contemplating taking his own life by driving his truck straight into Smuggler's Rock, Wes also encountered the mystical horses on that same stretch of road. He couldn't see the horses, but he could sense them. And he understood what they were telling him: Go back; there's still a life for you in Birdwood.

When Wes returns, he helps Reese and Trusted Treasure train for the Black Elk, which Reese, miraculously, wins. Wes becomes a partner with Dad and Flip at Flip's barn. Reese and a beard-free Dad are close again, and she is content with all the simple joys of her life on the ranch.

One day, as Reese and Wes watch one of the new foals play in the field, Wes decides to talk. He tells her why he'd stopped speaking: he blames his brother's overdose death on his own harsh words.

In the end, Wes wants Reese to see something in the field outside of the barn. They look out into the mists together, hearing the hoofbeats and the breath of an entire herd. Reese already knows what Wes says out loud: “They are here.” And they always will be.