

## Chapter One

Cotton Candy Sally looked behind her and gave Dutch a stern warning. But that didn't stop the yearling from pulling even harder on her tail. So Sally drew her ears back, threw her head up, and lifted her hind legs in a half-hearted kick. She easily could have made contact, but Sally knew that Dutch was a youngster, and still learning how to properly act in a herd. Besides, he was her friend. She let out a high-pitched squeal and kicked higher, grazing his chest. Dutch took her warning seriously this time, tossed his head, and trotted away in defeat.

She walked over to the fence separating the paddock from the road and nibbled on the sweet new dandelions of early summer. After a few minutes, she looked up and nickered to Hunting Pony. He was across the road in another paddock, but close enough for them to see each other. "*I'm here!*" he answered, then lowered his head back down to the tender blades of grass. He was Sally's favorite. Quiet, unassuming, sweet little Hunting Pony.

Up above, a red hawk soared across a cloudless blue sky, and a light breeze carried the faint smell of lavender through the paddocks. Life was good today for the horses in Council Bluffs, Iowa. But all that was about to change.

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It happened one Saturday morning in September. Like every other dawn, the night lifted its veil and the farm slowly emerged from darkness. The barn doors rattled open and dogs barked in the distance. The workers went into the stalls and, as they poured a sweet-smelling mixture of oats and pellets into each bucket, the horses nickered softly with pleasure. But Sally was uneasy. She ate her breakfast and kept one ear cocked. The men were moving too quickly, and they were tense.

Every morning after breakfast, Lico, Jan, and Francis – the men who worked at the barn – put halters on the horses and took them out of their stalls, carefully looking them over. Then they led the horses, one by one, down the dirt path and out to the pastures. Sally had five pasture mates and she knew them very well. After all, she shared the same field with them for eight years, ever

since she was a foal. Before that, she was turned out only with her mother, in the big broodmare paddock next door. Sally was born here at the farm, and except for when she went to a horse show, she knew no place else. Her home was and always had been at Gone Away Farm, here in the peaceful Iowa country.

But on this September morning, nobody came to get the 15.3 hand quarter horse. Some of the horses -- like Dutch and another young horse named Comet -- were impatient and started to kick the walls. They wanted to go out and any change in their routine made them edgy.

It was 9:00 when Lico finally took Sally out and put her on cross ties. But instead of bringing her out to the field, he put shipping boots on her legs. Dutch and Hunting Pony were already on cross ties, their boots on and fastened. Sally stood in the aisle attached to the ropes and watched as the men took all the other horses out of their stalls and put boots on them, too.

Just then, Lauren -- the barn owner -- walked out of the tack room and down the aisle.

*“Jose, what’s your problem?”* she yelled. “If you moved any slower you’d be standing still!”

Now she turned to Jan. “All those saddles are supposed to go, too. Where are they, and why aren’t they ready?” Her voice was shrill and unsteady. She said loudly, “I thought I made it very clear to everyone what needed to be done, and when!”

Then, right in the middle of the aisle, she started to cry. She just stopped in her tracks, dropped her head in her hands, and started sobbing. Lauren never yelled around the barn, and Sally had never, ever seen her cry.

This bothered the mare so much that she shuffled on the cross ties and tried to break free. If she could just get off the ropes and into the pasture, she thought everything would be okay. Dutch kicked the tack trunk in the aisle and tried desperately to lift his front end off the ground, but the ropes kept bringing him back down. That got Solomon, the big bay horse from Canada, so upset that he started whinnying and pawing the ground with his front foot.

“*HEY!*” yelled Lauren, sniffing. She was mad, and hollered, “*HEY! Cut it out, now!*” Then she started to cry again.

She walked over to Sally and said, “I’m sorry, girl,” she said. “I’m so sorry...”

She wrapped her arms around Sally’s neck and burrowed her face deep into the soft hairs of Sally’s coat. Sally rested her head on Lauren’s shoulder. They stayed like that for a long time, and Lauren’s tears made Sally’s shoulder wet and salty.

“We’ve come so far together,” Lauren said as she ran her hands over Sally’s neck. “You and me. So many blue ribbons. So many perfect hunter shows. You jump your fences in stride, every time... everybody knows Gone Away Farm because they all know *you*...”

And everything she said was true. People in Council Bluffs liked to say that Sally had beautiful eyes -- not only in how she sized up a fence, but also because they were just... so pretty. Big, deep, dark eyes that seemed to say “*I understand, I’m confident, I’ll take care of you.*”

Lauren whispered to Sally, “You’ve always been my favorite. But there’s nothing I can do...”

“A divorce is bad enough,” she sobbed. “But to have to give up the farm. My life. My horses. It’s just unbearable.”

Lauren’s brother Jake walked up to them, put his arm around Lauren’s shoulder, and gently pulled her away.

“Come on, Lauren,” he said softly. “They’re waiting. We need to put them on the trailer.”

Sally stood like a soldier, staring at the two of them. With a feeling of uncertainty and foreboding, she watched them walk away.

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When the horses traveled to shows, Lauren loaded them onto a trailer, but today strangers did the job. Their names were Dan and Roy, and they were all business.

They loaded horse after horse onto a big rig. Some, like Solomon and Hunting Pony, walked right up the ramp, turned effortlessly once inside and backed into the straight stall behind them. Other horses without much experience, like Dutch, were afraid. When Dan tried to lead him on, Dutch threw his hind end to the right and then the left – anything rather than walk up that vertical incline. Finally, running with him so that Dutch was up the ramp before the horse even knew it, Dan turned him, backed him up, and tied him in his stall.

Now it was Sally's turn. Dan snapped the lead line to her halter and she walked obediently after him. But she didn't like the ramp – it was steeper than it had looked from far away. So when it came time to load, she swung her hind end to the left, threw her head up high, and tried to get loose. She just wanted to go out to the paddock, but Dan wasn't having any part of that. He led her in a circle, pulled hard on the lead line, and tried again. This time, Sally swung her body to the right.

Then she sensed someone approaching from behind.

“Stupid horse, I don't have time for this!” Roy growled, and before she knew it, he whipped her hard, right across her flank.

It hurt, so she kicked out and he whipped her again. Then she lifted her front feet off the ground, and twisted in mid-air, almost lifting Dan off the ground.

*“Hey man, stop, STOP!” Dan yelled. “You're just making it worse,” She'll kill us both!”*

Before she even knew what was happening, Dan quickly turned her in a circle, and ran her right up the ramp, like he did with Dutch. He turned her around, backed her up, and tied her into her

stall, right next to Hunting Pony. The horses touched noses. Sally was glad to see him and she nickered to her best friend.

Dan and Roy hung up hay nets between the stalls and the horses started to eat. But Sally wasn't interested. She focused on the doors as they shut with a loud clang, on the sounds of the bolts locking them in, on the start of the engine, and on the slow motion of the trailer as they drove out the driveway and away from the farm forever.

