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## U Animal Rescue



*Wild Cat*



DANDI DALEY MACKALL

Wild Cat



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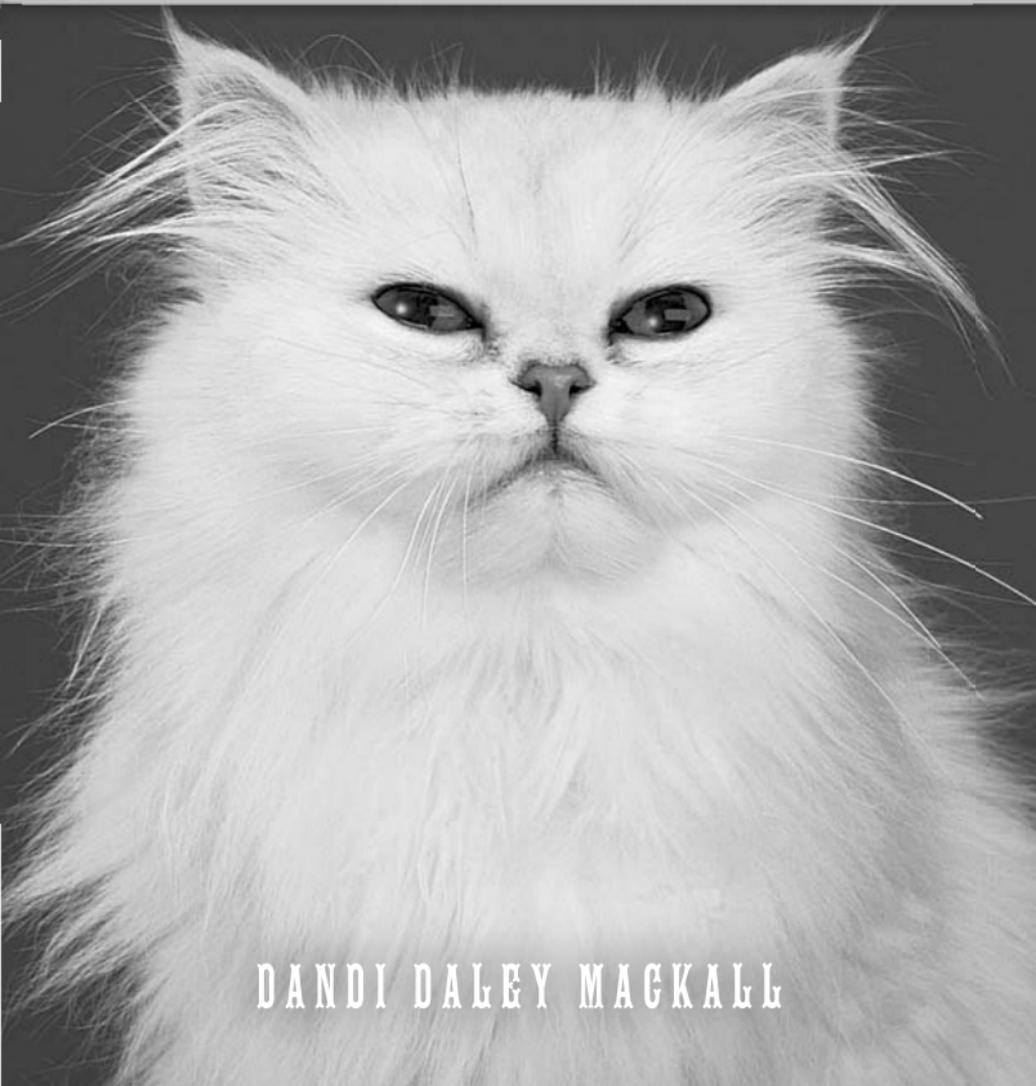
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*Wild Cat*

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## ONE

### *I WISH ANIMALS COULD TALK.*

This is what I'm thinking, watching Hank and Dakota unload eight horses they rescued from Happy Horsey Trail Rides.

*Happy Horsey?* There's nothing happy about these horses. They're skinny, scarred, scraggly, and scared. If they could talk, their stories would probably tear my heart into little pieces.

"Hank! Can I help?" I shout at him. He's trying to get a spotted mare to back down the trailer ramp. She stomps one back leg like she's squishing a snake, then lunges toward the

trailer. Her flank is so scabbed over it looks like rough leather.

Hank gets the horse to back halfway down the ramp. I'm about to ask him again if I can help when he yells at me. "Kat! Stay back!"

I don't usually get to help with the horses. I'm in charge of cats. But I've been hoping Hank would make an exception this time. I really want to help these poor horses.

The mare bolts up the ramp again. Hank smooth-talks her. "Come on, gal," he coaxes. My brother—well, he'll officially be my brother as soon as my adoption is final—is 16. If that stubborn horse were a junior high or high school girl instead of a horse, she'd come thundering down the ramp fast as you please to follow Hank. Every girl I know in Nice, Illinois, has a crush on Hank.

Midway on the Pinto's bony rump is a deep brand: HH. Happy Horsey. A jagged scar streaks under the brand like a ghostly underline. I try not to think about how it got there. I wish I could do something to help.

"Quit daydreaming, will you?" Hank shouts. "You're going to get hurt." He and the spotted mare match step for step down the

ramp, trotting backward when they touch ground. Then they jog off to the pasture, leaving me in a puff of dust.

I move into the barn. It's a great barn, with stalls in back and a round pen out front that takes up half of the sawdust floor. Everything smells fresh, like the forest. If I were a horse, I'd love it here. In this very barn I touched my first horse, kissed my first cat, and got my first dog bite.

My cat, Kitten, climbs my leg, claws up my back, and settles onto my shoulders, where she curls her scraggly self around my neck. I'm sweaty, so Kitten's shaggy white fur sticks to me. I don't mind. Kitten and I go way back. I found her half-dead in a ditch. She was my first rescue.

Kitten rubs her face against my ear. She purrs, and it sounds like a swarm of locusts. Then, just like that, she digs her claws into my shoulder and springs off.

"Kitten!" I scold. But she's long gone.

Dakota teases me about *Kitten* not being the most creative name in cat history. But since my nickname is Kat, I think "Kitten" is the perfect name for my first rescued cat at Starlight Animal Rescue.

“Look out!” Dakota shouts.

I turn, and I’m nose-to-nose with a scrawny chestnut pony. A wide, raised scar runs the length of his head, splitting it in two. His eyelids sag, and he’s bone thin all over.

“Move, Kat! I’m not kidding!” Dakota tugs on the pony’s lead rope. But she’s leading another horse too, a skinny gray mare who wants to return to the trailer.

I take a couple of steps back from the pony. “Sorry. I just wanted to help.”

“Right now you can help by staying out of the way,” Dakota says. “You could get hurt.” Dakota’s 16, like Hank. She could probably pass for Cherokee—she’s that exotic looking. I love Dakota like a sister, but she worries about me too much. She freaks out if I break a fingernail. Once people learn I’ve got cancer, they treat me like I’m made of glass.

I watch Dakota struggle to keep both horses behind her as she leads them through the barn. “The pony’s limping,” I call to her.

“What?” She starts to turn around. The gray mare tugs sideways, pulling Dakota with her. The poor pony’s nearly jerked off his feet.

*Hooves. Not feet.*

Okay. So I'm not exactly a horsewoman. But neither was Dakota when Ms. Bean, the social worker, dropped her off at Starlight Animal Rescue. That was only a couple of months ago. Now Hank says he couldn't get on without her.

I wonder what that would feel like, to know people couldn't get on without you.

The whole Coolidge family is like one big hall of fame. A doctor, a firefighter, an expert dog trainer, two horse whisperers . . . and me.

"You guys are going to need help with all those horses, you know." I have to shout so Dakota can hear me. She's still making her way to the stalls with both horses.

I tag along. "That pony's favoring his right foreleg, Dakota," I try again.

"I know. We think it's a bowed tendon. The vet examined all the horses before we picked them up. Doc Jim said we'll need to give this one some bute—Butazolodine—until his leg heals." Dakota has control of the horses again. She frowns at me. "Not so close, Kat."

I'm trying to study the pony's forelegs. "His leg doesn't look bowed to me. Are you sure—?"

"Not now. Okay?" Dakota begs.

“You know,” I say, hustling to keep up with her, “this is the first time we’ve taken on so many horses at once.”

“You and your first times,” Dakota says, shaking her head.

It’s true that I love firsts. First snow of the year. First leaf to turn in autumn. (It hasn’t happened yet.) First robin in spring. The first time Hank called me “little sis.” The first time Kitten purred for me.

Yesterday I heard three cats purr at the same time. I wrote Catman, Hank’s cat-loving cousin, about it. Catman knows more about cats than anybody in the whole world. He’s even making a movie about cats, a documentary. He and Winnie the Horse Gentler run a pet helpline on the Web. I still haven’t met them, even though they’re just a couple of states away, in Ohio. But it’s hard for people with animals to leave home.

“Kat! Did you hear me?” Dakota yells. She’s standing in front of an empty stall, a horse on each side, pulling her in opposite directions. “Will you open the stall door? Please?”

“Oops. Sorry.” I slip in front of her and unlatch the door.

“Thanks.” Dakota leads the gray mare into the stall. The pony tries to follow. “Stay!” Dakota commands.

“Let me take the pony,” I beg.

She hesitates. “I don’t know. You could get stepped on.”

“By the pony? Poor thing’s so skinny, I wouldn’t even feel it if he did step on me,” I joke. “Besides, I won’t get stepped on. Please, Dakota. I really want to help you guys.” I reach over to stroke the pony. His neck twitches like a fly’s landed on it. He sidesteps.

That’s enough for Dakota. “Maybe later. You better ask Popeye and Annie first.” Popeye is my dad, Chester Coolidge, and Annie is my mom. Dakota and I are both fosters, but she doesn’t call them Mom and Dad like I do.

Dakota unsnaps the lead from the gray horse’s halter. The snap startles the pony. He jerks and backs away fast. The rope slips out of Dakota’s hand.

Without thinking, I lunge for the pony’s lead rope, grabbing it in both fists.

The pony bolts. My hands stay glued to the rope. I jerk forward. My feet fly out from under me. The pony takes off up the stallway.

“Kat!” Dakota screams.

I hit the ground hard. My stomach’s a sled as I’m dragged over sawdust.

I hear Dakota’s cries behind me. “Kat! Let go of the rope!”

I see my hands on the rope. But they don’t belong to me. They won’t let go. The pony’s tail slaps my arm. I bounce over something. Dirt sprays my face. I barely feel it. I’m numb. I can’t see. I close my eyes and wonder if I’ll ever see again.

I’ve heard your whole life flashes before you at a time like this. But my life isn’t even a flash. More like a spark. A fizzle. I haven’t done anything with my life.

Fear shoots through my bloodstream. I feel it like the cold ink they inject in me before X-rays.

*X-rays. IVs. Tests. Cancer.* That’s how I’m supposed to die.

Not like this.