

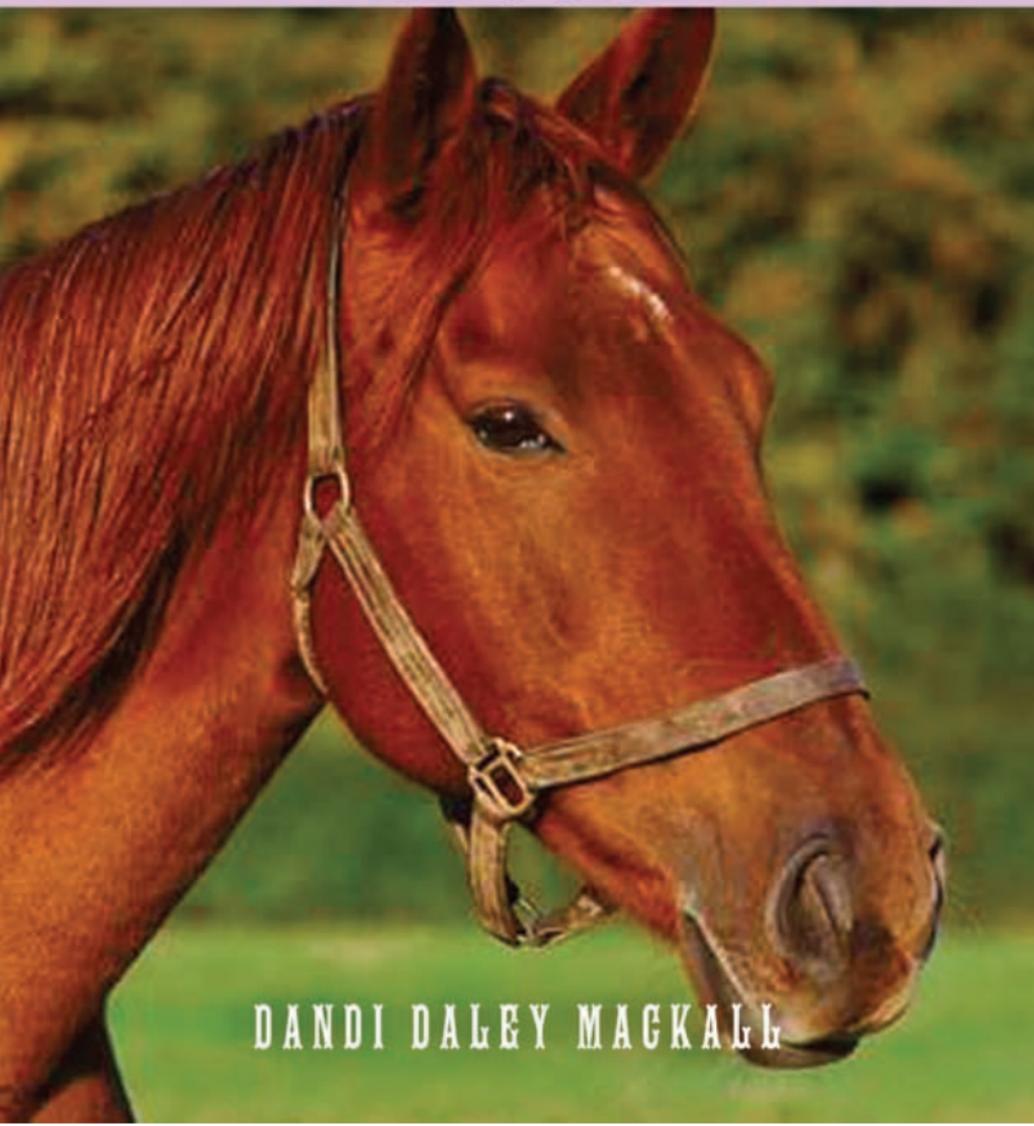
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Animal Rescue



Dark Horse



DANDI DALEY MACKALL

Dark Horse



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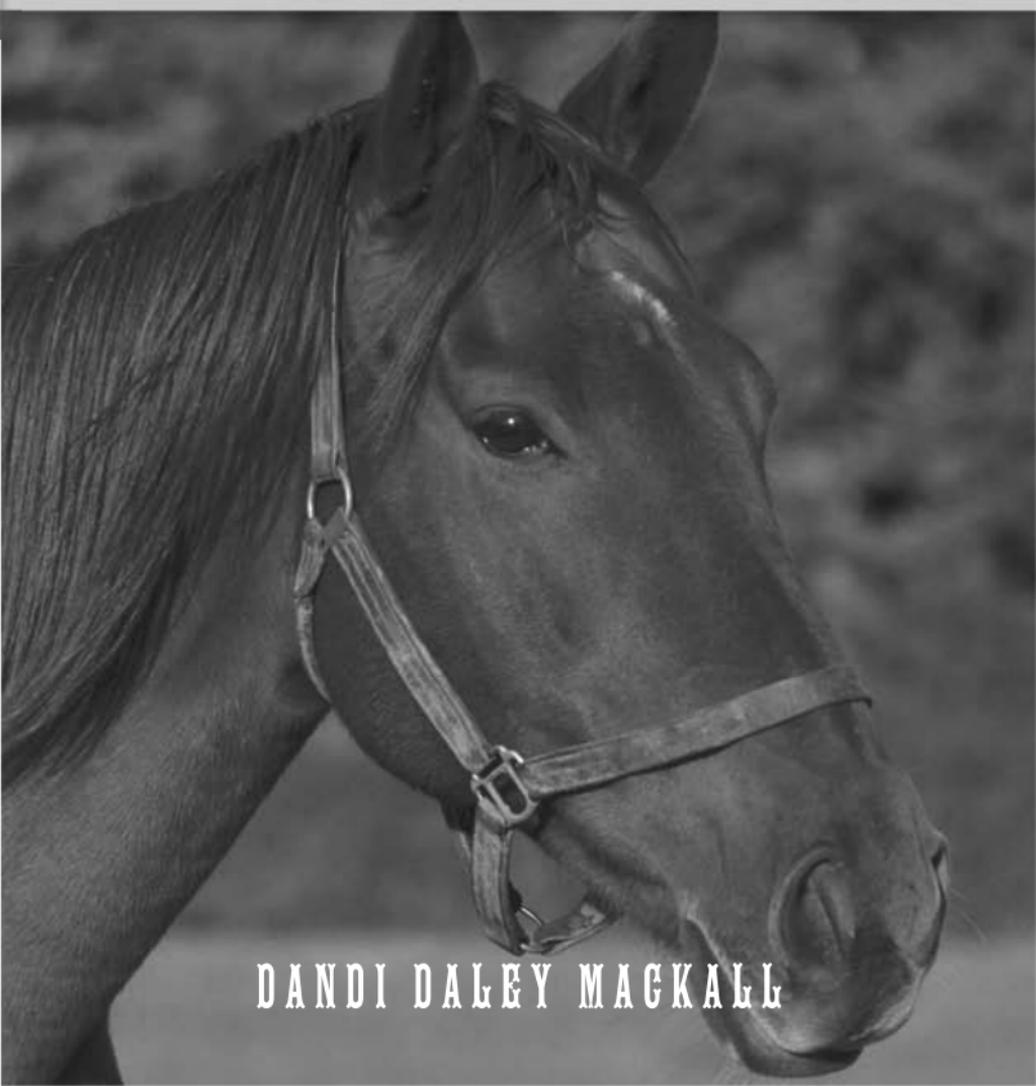
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ONE

Hank Coolidge

Nice, Illinois

"**COME ON NOW, GIRL.** I could never love that red-head more than you." I stroke Starlight's sweaty neck and lean into the turn as we canter too close to the pond. I can smell pond scum and fish. "Okay. I admit Cleo's a looker. She's got spunk and spirit. But nobody's as sweet as you, Starlight. Besides, I've always been partial to Paints."

I've been riding blind for several minutes. Keeping my eyes shut isn't easy on horseback. I don't do it often. But when I need to feel connected with my blind horse, this helps. I can

sink into Starlight and trust her the way she trusts me. We've both been over every inch of this pasture hundreds of times, so there aren't any surprises left in it to trip us up.

It's been over a week since I rode Starlight, and I can't remember when I've gone this long without our ride. But the redhead—a sorrel mare named Cleopatra—has taken up every minute of my after-school time. Yesterday was the first time the mare let me get close enough to brush her. Cleo's a gorgeous Danish Warmblood, over 16 hands high, with a well-set neck, perfect shoulders, a muscular back, and strong legs . . . and so touchy it's almost impossible to imagine riding her.

We rescued Cleo from a circus a few weeks ago, at the end of October, no questions asked. But I have a million questions I'd like to ask that circus trainer, starting with what they did to the horse to make her so terrified of humans.

Starlight tosses her head, and I know instantly by the tightening I feel in her back that something's wrong. I open my eyes and ease her to a trot while I search the ground around us. No snakes. Nothing unusual I can make out.

Starlight snorts and prances in place.

Then I smell it. *Smoke.*

Please let it be leaves burning. But I know it's not. My dad's a fireman. I *know* fires.

I look back across the pasture, across two fields, and there it is, a feather of smoke rising like a thundercloud. I can't see our house. But the sky is red, like a sunset all in one spot.

Starlight lunges to a gallop before I have the sense to cue her. She's heading straight for home. I hunch low on her neck, urging her to fly. My mind's spinning. Who's in the house? Is Kat there? Is she asleep? Would she smell the smoke? Hear the alarm? Is Wes inside? Dakota?

"Come on, girl," I whisper to Starlight. We're through one pasture and galloping across the second. Grass, leaves, trees, all blur by. The acrid stench is stronger now. My eyes burn.

Out of the gray fog of smoke comes a horse racing toward us. I can't see it well enough to make out its color or features. Someone's riding it. The long strides, the outstretched neck tell me the horse is Blackfire. And that means Dakota's riding him. They're flying straight at Starlight and me.

Neither of us slows as we get closer and closer to each other. Just as I'm about to pull up Starlight so we don't crash into Blackfire, Dakota pivots her horse 180 degrees. Blackfire rears, then drops and springs into a gallop beside us.

"Is everybody out of the house?" I yell over the pounding of hooves and the rush of wind. We're galloping side by side, neck and neck.

"Yes!" She shouts something else, but I can't hear it.

But she said yes. So they're out. They're safe. We can handle anything else.

". . . horses, Hank!" Dakota shouts. And again, I can't understand what she's saying.

"What?" I yell, still galloping full speed.

"Not the house!" she screams. "The barn!"

I look toward the barn, and I can see for myself now. Smoke is billowing from the barn, not the house. Flames shoot up like fingers of fire.

"The horses?" I cry. "Dakota, are the horses out?" *Three*. Three were in the barn. Maggie and Bay Boy, the two rescues we're having trouble placing. And Cleo. I should have turned them out to pasture. But I was so

anxious to ride Starlight. I left them in the barn until after my ride.

“Maggie and Bay Boy are out. Popeye and I got them,” Dakota shouts.

“Cleo?” I demand. My throat closes on the word. I can’t breathe. “What about Cleo?”

Dakota shakes her head. “Hank . . .” She’s crying. Galloping. And crying.

“What about Cleo?” I scream.

Dakota moves in so close that Blackfire bumps my leg. “Cleo’s still in the barn!”