

BELIEVING IN HORSES

Valerie Ormond

Chapter One



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*Dedicated to Horse Savers,
military families,
and Dad*

A portion of the proceeds will be donated to
the rescue organizations mentioned in this
book.



NEW HOMES FOR HUMANS AND HORSES

Sadie believed that everything happens for a reason.

It kept her strong and helped her cope with what seemed to be never-ending changes in her life. At twelve years old, she had already moved six times and was now beginning her fifth school. Since she considered herself an adventurer, the moves were not tragic, but learning new routines and making new friends was getting a bit awkward as she grew older.

This move, to Bowie, Maryland, came with additional stress factors. Not only was she leaving her beloved San Diego, California, where the weather was perfect and every day was a “hang outside” day, but the whole reason for the move didn’t make sense.

Sadie’s father was in the Navy. She was always proud of that fact, particularly when her dad would pick her up from school, soccer practice, or riding les-

sons, dressed in his sharp, crisp, Navy uniform. He called her "Punkin," half the time, which he derived from "Pumpkin." To most kids her age this would probably be embarrassing, but to her it was just another part of their special bond. He had been in the Navy her entire life, and even though the Navy was the cause of the moves, she loved being part of the Navy family.

But now she and her family, which included her parents and her brother Austin, had moved across the country to Maryland, near Dad's new duty station in Washington, D.C., only to find that her dad would be deploying to Afghanistan for a whole year. She couldn't help but feel sorry for herself about the move, and that made her feel guilty because her dad would be going into harm's way. Somehow it just didn't seem fair. Why couldn't the family have stayed in California? Her mom had explained it to her in a way that probably made sense to adults, but all Sadie knew was that she left a place she loved for a place she already hated.

The move didn't come without some form of consolation. Her reward for being such a trooper was that she could get her own horse. Sadie had ridden since she was five and had fallen in love with horses well before that.

While she had tinkered with other hobbies through the years including karate, soccer, painting, playing the piano, swimming, and dancing, nothing else came close to her passion for horses. She didn't just enjoy riding horses, she loved everything about them. Grooming them, talking to them, watching them, walking them with a lead rope, feeding them – anything to do with horses, she loved. She even loved the smell of the barn, which seemed odd to some non-horse lovers

but well understood by those bitten by the horse bug. To Sadie, there was no better day than one spent hanging around a barn.

The next best thing about the move was her discovery of a wonderful barn, Loftmar Stables. The most fantastic part about it, aside from excellent horse care, was that she could walk there from her house. It was practically in her backyard. In all her years as a horse enthusiast she'd never had that freedom. She loved the idea of being independent from adults who could only drive her at certain times. Sadie could also hang around after her lessons, which she currently was taking using Loftmar's horses until she bought her own. She had only ever ridden barn or lesson horses, and adored every one of them.

What a luxury it was to not hear the familiar, "It's time to GO, Sadie," when whoever was toting her to and from the barn expressed total displeasure with her total pleasure of staying at the barn as long as possible. Sadie learned so much from watching other students, boarders, blacksmiths or "farriers," and barn workers. Horse care involved many facets, and she wanted to learn them all. Her past instructors called her a "sponge," because she absorbed knowledge about horses so quickly.

Sadie adopted the philosophy of several professional horsepersons, "the learning never ends." She digested everything she could from the internet, horse forums, feed and tack stores, and her lessons. She also knew the importance of hands-on education, which she got at the barn.

Mom and Dad told Sadie she had to find a suitable boarding stable before she got her horse. Knowing

that it was the biggest obstacle between Sadie and her dream horse, she moved it to the top of her “to do” list.

Even though Sadie was convinced that Loftmar Stables would be the perfect home for her new horse, Mom and Dad insisted she look at other stables. She tried to argue that she would never find another stable so close. She persistently stated that Loftmar took very good care of their horses, had lessons on site, and even had trails. Though her parents agreed that Loftmar appeared to have all the right things, they still wanted Sadie to explore other options to make sure that she wasn't just making a convenient decision.

Sadie's brother, Austin, proved a great help in the stable hunt. Austin had turned sixteen in January and earned his driver's license. During their move across the country, Austin drove most of the way for practice. After hearing their parents' insistence, Austin promised to chauffeur Sadie to stables so she could check them out. The arrangement was ideal; Austin got to practice driving in his new hometown, and Sadie had the freedom to explore new stables.

Austin wasn't like most of the big brothers Sadie's friends had. He was kind, patient, giving, and never had to do anything to be cool. Fiercely loyal, he loved his little sister and his family and wasn't ashamed to show it. As far as Sadie was concerned, she had the best big brother in the world. He was different.

At six feet tall, Austin inherited the best looks from both sides of his family heritage, Irish on Mom's side and Mexican on Dad's. He had his dad's beautiful dark skin and his mom's sparkling blue eyes. His shoulders spread as wide as a barn door, and he had a body builder chest. Austin enjoyed all types of sports and ex-

ercise, running, swimming, and lifting weights. Due to his athletic build, the new schools over the years had tried to recruit him for their sports programs, but Austin preferred to work out on his own.

Because of Austin's appearance, Sadie's parents felt comfortable with the two of them looking for a barn unsupervised. Anyone would have been crazy to mess with Sadie in Austin's presence. He was not only imposing and looked far more mature than his age, but he also had a "guard dog" aura to him that even the least perceptive human could see.

Although Sadie really liked Loftmar, she didn't mind the idea of the stable hunt. Seeing a few other stables in the area seemed interesting. So, with an open mind and a list of three local stables she had selected, they set off to explore. She would have liked to say her choices were scientifically based, but they weren't. The first one, Connor's Horse Home, she picked because she liked the name. The second, Jake and Tom's Stables, was far enough away that Mom and Dad would see she was putting in effort. She picked the third, Marlboro Horse Ranch, because it sounded Western and reminded her of California.

Sadie and Austin had all day Saturday to meander through the countryside and see the stables. Sadie was the navigator and steered Austin to Connor's Horse Home. They found it fairly easily using a GPS and directions from *The Equiery*, a Maryland horse magazine. They drove down a long dirt driveway to a set of barns and several fields full of horses. After they parked, Sadie hopped out looking for someone to talk to. A high school girl in low cut jeans and a tight shirt scowled at Sadie and asked: "What are you here for?"

Sadie felt instantly irritated. "We saw your stable listed in *The Equiery*," she said, "and we're looking for a place to board our new horse."

"Who is 'we'?" asked the rude girl.

Sadie wanted to ask the girl why she was being so nasty, but decided to take the high road and answered, "My brother, Austin, and I." Just then Austin joined them. For some reason he was wearing a cowboy hat today, probably because they were visiting horse farms, and even his little sister had to admit that he looked quite handsome. The rude girl transformed in an instant, like chameleons that change color. Sadie had seen them in science.

"Well, then, let's see what we can do, darlin'," Sadie almost vomited as she detected a sweet Southern accent that hadn't been there a minute ago. The girl primped her hair, and smoothed her dirty, skin-tight clothes. "Mah name is Rachel, and let me tell you a lil' bit about mah farm." She reached out to shake Austin's hand and said, "And you ahhr....?" .

Austin said politely, "I'm Austin, just like my sister said."

"Oh, why yes, of course, forgive me if Ahh was a bit distracted. It's just not every day that we get such, well, that we have such *interesting* visitors." She drew out the "interesting", probably thinking it made her sound like an adult. Sadie thought she sounded like something out of a vampire movie.

"Well, Austin, let's walk around, and Ahh can show you the stables, and the fields, and tell you about all the good reasons why you should board your wonderful horse here with us," continued Rachel. Although the girl irritated Sadie, she enjoyed seeing Austin get

this kind of attention. The best part was that he was bored by it. Austin would never fall for a girl like this, especially because of the way she was treating Sadie.

Just then, an older woman, who reminded Sadie of her Grandma Collins, came up to the barn with three dogs following slowly behind. She surveyed the situation, looked directly at Sadie, and asked, "Can I help you?"

Sadie chirped, "Yes, ma'am, as I told your daughter, or granddaughter, my name is Sadie, this is my brother, Austin, and we're looking for a new home for our horse. You see, we just moved here from California, and we don't really know anyone, and..."

"That's fine, dear, I get the picture. First, let me introduce myself. I'm Mrs. Connor, and this farm has been in my family for years. I don't ride much anymore, but I still love horses. Second, Rachel is not my daughter or granddaughter; she works here at the farm. I hope she didn't mislead you otherwise. Sometimes..."

"But I didn't...", Rachel whined.

"And third," continued Mrs. Connor over Rachel's objection, "although you both seem like fine young people, we don't have room for additional horses right now. We rarely have openings. When we do, I normally post a sign out by the driveway, someone calls, and I have a new boarder within days. I can take your number if you'd like, but quite honestly, I can't guarantee that I'll remember to call the next time there is an opening."

Sadie liked Mrs. Connor's honesty. She also had to admit she enjoyed seeing Rachel looking horrified that she had been found out to be a worker rather than an owner of this lovely property. Forgetting her new-

found accent, Rachel turned to Austin and said, "I'm glad Mrs. Connor came to help so I can get back to work now. I hate distractions. Bu-bye."

Austin gave a small wave and forced a crooked smile. Mrs. Connor shrugged her shoulders and chuckled. "And one more thing, kids, you may not be aware of this because I hear they do things differently in California, but people usually make appointments when they are going to visit boarding stables. If you are going anywhere else, you may want to call ahead. Good luck with your search, and welcome to Maryland." With that, she left, her three old dogs in tow, while Sadie thanked her for her time.

They got back into the car, and Sadie checked Connor's Horse Home off on her list and made some notes. Austin, in his usual way, did not say anything about the event. He just asked, "Where next?"

"Let's see," she said, "I think we should go to Jake and Tom's Stables next, since it's furthest away."

Sadie navigated their way to the vicinity of Jake and Tom's Stables. She had always been good with directions and maps, and prided herself on her ability to use them instead of routinely relying on a GPS. As they got closer to Jake and Tom's Stables, the neighborhood changed. It became different from the other places they'd visited in Maryland. The houses were dingy, there were broken fences and cars without wheels sitting in fields. There appeared to be a layer of soot everywhere.

The further they went, the dingier the scene became. Was it partly her imagination? Something just didn't feel right.