

SADIE'S BEST CHRISTMAS

Chapter 1: Kennel Life

Sadie couldn't tell you if it was sunny or rainy outside. She couldn't tell whether it was summer or winter. There were no windows in the cinder-block room where her cage was.

The sun, wind, rain, heat and cold were ancient memories to Sadie—something that gave her dreams texture and color, but that she couldn't remember outside of dreams. Sadie had just turned three years old, and she didn't know what it meant to go for a walk outside.

Sadie's cage, like all the other cages in the dingy, grey space was, by any standards, small. Occasionally, she would walk around in a circle—all the room her "house" allowed. Even though she was a little dog, when she stood up, her ears brushed the cool metal floor of the unit above hers. There were twelve other dogs in Sadie's room. Two of the cages were empty, their former occupants having disappeared one night. This happened from time to time. Sadie never knew where they went. She didn't really care—none of the dogs were really friends—but she was slightly curious. They may have just gone to one of the other rooms, from where she could occasionally hear barking when the door to

her room was opened. But she didn't know for sure, because she had been in this room for as long as she could remember.

In fact, Sadie had been born in another room identical to this one, right down to the rough, putty-colored walls, a smooth cement floor and a rusty drain in the center.

By the time she was a bit over a month old, she had been moved to this room with her sisters. She didn't know where her mother or two brothers went, because it was just Sadie and her sisters from then until she turned five months old. She remembers that day as if it were just yesterday. That was the day her sisters were moved away and into their own cages. Sadie remembers they were close by, and for the first few days they would talk to each other, crying and barking to keep in touch, and pressing up against the wire fronts trying to see each other. It was impossible to do, the way the cages were stacked: five across and three high along the wall opposite the door of the square room.

With every passing day, they talked less and less, until by the end of the week, they each lapsed into their own silent worlds, alone and lonely, with no hope of reunion.

Darkness helped keep things quiet. The only consistent source of light came from the hallway outside which shone through the wire-reinforced window in the door. Through the

window, every so often Sadie could see people walking past in the hall. If a person entered their room, they would flick a switch near the door and with a sharp snap an orange, flickering light would come on in the ceiling. The harsh light gave off a low, vibrating hum, so it was actually pleasant when the light was switched off again, and the dark and quiet returned.

Though dark, the room was never completely pitch black, as the hallway light was always on. It was always chilly. Not truly cold, but not warm, either. Since her sisters left, all she had to keep her warm was a threadbare towel. Once, it had been bright yellow with pink flowers, but now it was worn and faded to a uniform off-white, except where it was stained. It was rarely washed, so it was always a bit smelly. Sadie was used to the smell – it was her own smell, and it brought her comfort knowing it was her towel.

Sometimes Sadie would have her puppies to keep her warm. Before she had even turned two years old, she'd had three litters of puppies—warm, squirming, spotted, squeaking balls of soft fur. Sadie loved the puppies. After her first litter, she thought they'd be with her forever, but when they were six weeks old they were taken away from her, just as she and her brothers and sisters had been taken from their mother. By the time she'd had her second litter,

Sadie knew what to expect. Though she loved all of her puppies, and expertly cared for them, she didn't get too attached. She didn't name them, and she thought of them all as a group, rather than as individual personalities. There would always be one in each litter that would make itself so well known, so friendly and exuberant, that Sadie couldn't help but feel that particular puppy was special, and would make an impression on the world someday. When they were gone, these pups were the ones she could remember most clearly, from their scent to their markings.

Now, as a three year old, Sadie had given birth to a total of four litters. She didn't know where any of them were, but she could picture each group of happy squirming puppies when she was lying quietly in her cage daydreaming, which is what she did most of the time. Sadie would think of the litters, wondering what happened to them when they left, and hoping that, at least for a little while, they would stay together as a family, as she had been able to do when she was younger.

Sadie didn't know that a few of her daughters were in fact quite close by, one giving birth to her first litter of pups, though she was only eight months old.

Sadie's other puppies were all over the country by now. Some of them had been sold to pet stores, where they lived

with all sorts of other dogs, waiting for someone to come pick them as their new pet. Some had been sold to other breeders, to help them have more puppies that they would then sell to either stores or private individuals. Sadie's puppies were very much in demand. Her mother came from excellent bloodlines, and her father was a three-time Terrier Dog Champion. Almost all of Sadie's pups possessed her beauty and her sweet temperament, making them perfect as both working dogs and as family pets or companions. But Sadie didn't know any of that. She just knew her life, in her cage, with the familiar smells and sounds of her roommates—close by, but out of reach.

Chapter 2: Visitors

Sadie first heard the man's deep, clear voice while she was dozing, lost in her own thoughts. It was a new voice to her, and something about its tone and closeness to her room woke Sadie up. She sat up and cocked her head to hear it more clearly. Soon, the door opened and a very tall man came in. He was handsome, well-dressed, and he smelled, well, different. She didn't know what it was exactly, but the smell reminded her of something in her dreams. If she had ever smelled flowers before, she would have known that the man smelled of roses mixed with cinnamon—his particular

aftershave. Sadie also noticed that he was completely without fur on his head, which was shiny and smooth-looking.

He entered with two women. One was the woman that Sadie knew as her caregiver. This woman fed her each day, and added water to a little tin cup hooked on the side of the cage. Sadie called her the "Pink Lady" because of the bright fuzzy sweater she wore every day. She was the one who would clean their cages. She would move them all to cardboard boxes, wearing heavy leather gloves that felt rough when Sadie was picked up. When all the dogs in the room were in the boxes, the cages were hosed down with hot, soapy, sharp-smelling water. Then the cages were left to dry for a while. This process was both exciting and frightening. It was exciting to get picked up, and sometimes even stroked or spoken to. The smell of the disinfectant was so sharp it had its own excitement. Some of the dogs became anxious, either shying away from the unfamiliar human contact, or crying incessantly until they were returned to their cages. The most frightening was when one of the other dogs misbehaved. This made the woman upset, and she would become suddenly angry at the smallest mistake, sometimes losing her temper and yelling, or even getting rough in her handling. More than once, Sadie had

borne the brunt of this temper, being picked up by the scruff of the neck and thrown back into her cage. Jack Russell Terriers may be small, tough dogs, but it hurts nonetheless to be picked up like a week-old pup.

The other woman was the one Sadie thought of as the "Puppy Stealer." She was a tall, lean woman with tight grey curls, almost like a poodle's coat. When a litter was deemed old enough, the Stealer would come in and pick up each pup in turn, taking it away from its siblings, and its mother. As she did this, she spoke sweetly to each one. She would sound sweet, at any rate. Sadie could understand many of the words, and she often heard things like "pretty enough," "fancy pants 'n worth it," or sometimes "runt," or "not worth ten pennies." The worst words she heard were "yer a dull one." When Sadie heard a pup being called "dull," she always felt a trickle of fear. She had a feeling this meant a very short life for that pup.

"These pups aren't worth the food to feed 'em," the Stealer would mutter, placing the dull ones into a woven wooden basket with a hinged top that latched tightly with a strap and buckle. All the other pups would go into an open box with a towel. Sadie remembered being put in an open box just like that with her siblings the day they were moved to their own cages. Any pup in the basket would start crying,

because they were suddenly alone, and in the dark. But their cries were muffled by the basket lid. Once, when Sadie was watching, the woman stepped out the door, handed the open box to the Pink Lady, then turned and walked the other way with the basket. From that day on, the sight of that basket and the sound of those words made Sadie shiver with fear and sadness.

Today, however, the Stealer was here with the sweet-smelling man and the Pink Lady, and her tone was not at all gentle. This time her tone was harsh; her words were polite, yet quite unfriendly. She appeared to be giving the man a tour, and spoke about all the dogs in the room as if they were very close friends. But her smile was almost a grimace, and her whole body was tense. The Pink Lady stayed one step behind, looking down at her shoes, the floor, the mop in the corner. Sometimes she would pick lint off her sweater, or brush dirt Sadie couldn't see off her sleeve. But she never once looked at the dogs in their cages, or the man, and she particularly looked away from the Stealer. The man said very little. Sadie had the distinct impression that he was unhappy, though his voice was calm and even-toned when he did speak. He asked the Stealer simple questions, and then let the tall woman rattle on at great length in her answers. Once, he came quite close and looked

intently into each cage, studying its occupant carefully. When he looked into Sadie's cage, he looked around, then right into her eyes, and she could hear a very clear message, though he had not spoken. "It's going to be all right. All this will end soon. Hang on." The message startled Sadie, but it was so sweet, and earnest, and *real* that she felt completely peaceful, and somehow happier having seen this man. She knew right then she would never forget his smell. It would be in her dreams, like the smell of her puppies.

Chapter 3: Ending and Beginning

Weeks went by, and each day felt somehow more exciting, more hopeful than any Sadie could remember. It had been that way ever since the man's visit. She didn't know why, but she awaited each day with a new sense of life and purpose. Something was going to happen, just what or when remained a mystery. Sometimes Sadie would get nervous, thinking somehow maybe she would lose her home. Sometimes she got very excited imagining the sweet-smelling man might come and take care of them from now on.

When she heard his voice again, it was louder, firmer, and he was definitely doing most of the talking. There was another man with him. He was much taller than either the

sweet-smelling man or the Puppy Stealer. And he was about two cages wide, with a stern face that had no smile, though his rosy cheeks and the wrinkles around his deep blue eyes led Sadie to believe there was a smile hiding in there somewhere. This large man was dressed in dark blue, and he had all sorts of things on his clothes—shiny buttons, and black leather straps, and there was a gold badge on the sleeve above his tremendous arm muscles.

The large man was silent. He stood behind the sweet-smelling man, while the latter read from a piece of white paper, occasionally asking if the Stealer understood what he was saying. She refused to answer, merely giving an occasional sharp nod. Her mouth was a tight, thin line and her face was almost as white as the paper.

When he was done reading, he spoke to the large man, whom he called "Bill." Bill then took the Stealer's arm in his huge hand, and led her away. The pink-sweatered caregiver followed, and the bald man followed behind them all. They weren't merely leaving. Sadie had the distinct impression the tall woman and the caregiver would not return. For a moment she worried about who would take care of them, until she remembered her daydream about the bald man taking care of them. "What a joy that would be!" she thought.

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, in fact a whole week went by.

Someone Sadie had never seen before came in each day. In the morning, they were all fed and given clean water. Fresh water every day! Sadie felt suddenly very thirsty, and drank to her heart's content. Somehow, water never tasted quite so wonderful. All the cages were cleaned, and instead of watching from a tattered box, each and every one of the dogs were let loose on the floor! The first day, this felt quite alarming; many of the dogs stayed quite still. The youngest were a bit more adventurous, sniffing all around the floor, the laundry, the other cages and the new person's feet. She spoke so sweetly to them, and patted them often, but was mostly all business. After each cage was dried a new, clean towel was put inside. This was remarkable, and Sadie was confused at first. She missed the familiar smell of her old towel, but each new one was so soft, and smelled so fresh, she couldn't help but curl right up in it.

As if all of this weren't strange and wonderful enough, the same things happened again each night! Clean water, clean cages and towels, and time out on the floor. Within a day or so, each dog had begun to explore the whole room. They would even trot right across from end to end. Sadie felt weak, but loved the feel of her own motion. She had felt something good was going to happen, but this was amazing.

The following week more people came, including her favorite, the sweet-smelling bald man. Bill, in his starched blue uniform was back, too, plus a few others she had never seen. Everyone seemed quite business-like and rushed, but they all took time to pet each one of the dogs, and always spoke so nicely, even when one of dogs got really nervous and tinkled all over their white cotton coats!

One by one, white coated people removed the dogs from their cages, inspected them, wrote down their markings, examined each dog's teeth, ears, and coats, too. They were given a sweet paste to eat, and a shot-ouch!-but they got special treats afterward, which made it all right. Then each and every one got a bath. None of them had ever had a bath before, and yet they behaved quite well-for the most part. A few got a little anxious and tried to jump out of the basin, but the water was warm and the hands that held them were firm, and yet so gentle it was easy to relax a little bit and enjoy the pleasant scent of the bubbles and the feel of being softly scrubbed all over. After they were taken out of the bath, each dog was rubbed dry with a clean towel, and set in a high-sided basket-this one without a top to it-set in the corner with a clean mat and a red light hanging above that gave off a steady warmth. In

minutes they were dry. Once dry, a new person took a brush and small pair of scissors and made sure that each and every one of them had all the knots and tangles removed. Once Sadie was brushed, she was returned to her cage. So much seemed to be happening! Exhausted by all the new activity, she was soon fast asleep.

Chapter 4: Chance Meeting

After two weeks, the new routine of clean cages, grooming and "playtime" had become normal. On the following Monday, the bald man came into the room once more. He went straight to the cage above Sadie's. His voice was warm and quiet as he spoke. He gently lifted a young dog out of her cage, and left the room. All the dogs were standing at their doors watching. No one had ever been removed in this way before. There was no harshness, no sense of the doom usually felt when someone was taken from the room, and the young dog was not ill. Quite the contrary, she was one of the first to begin running around the room during playtime, jumping on the others and yipping and barking. During the next few days, this sequence happened over and over, each time the bald man coming in quietly and going directly to one dog, then quietly carrying that dog out, stroking its ears and talking softly the whole time. Every time he came, it made

Sadie long to have him speak to her. Before many days passed, all the dogs in both rooms were removed by gentle handlers—all but a young dog not even six months old, and Sadie.

Then, before she knew what was happening, the bald man returned, and this time he was indeed speaking to her—to Sadie! She could not believe it!

Soon he was carrying both her and the young dog, talking and petting, while Sadie listened intently to him, soaking up the sweet smell he always had. She couldn't hear any other sound than that of the man's voice.

Could this be happening?! The man, still holding Sadie and the young dog, walked out of the room, out of the hall, out of the building and into the sunshine. He paused, knowing the light was so brilliant it would take a few moments before their eyes adjusted and they could see properly.

Blinking in the brightness, Sadie began to see—and oh my what she saw! A world she had never seen before. She could not believe how big and colorful everything was! She began to tremble. The man said, "It's all right, little beauty. It's just the world, and you'll soon learn it is a wonderful place. Don't fear, little one."

Sadie settled a little, and began to realize she was trembling partly with cold. It was never exactly warm in

her cage, but out here she could feel the chilly air and the wind ruffled her fur. Brrr!

He moved on, walking gently toward his car. The man placed the two dogs on a soft leather seat the color of cocoa. It was much warmer in here. He got into the seat beside them, and started the car. The engine made a low growling noise. Then they were off. As Sadie looked up, she saw out of windows treetops going by, and she saw, for the first time and the last, the building she had lived in all her life, growing smaller and smaller into the distance as the man drove.

The car accelerated out the driveway and down the road. More trees went by, and houses, and signs, going by so quickly that she could barely make them out. Sadie was now officially free, though even she did not quite understand what it all meant yet. The bald man spoke to her almost constantly. Sadie was half-listening, half-watching the windows as more trees, light poles, and sometimes quite suddenly big trucks all flashed by. She shook almost uncontrollably. This was a lot going on after years spent in one room!

The car stopped moving; the growling and vibrating ceased. The man got out, saying he would return in just a few minutes. Sadie watched through the window, her paws up on

the armrest, as the man disappeared through a doorway into a large, brick building with a plate glass window in the front. The sign over the window said, "Peter's Pet Emporium."

Inside the window, Sadie saw a group of kittens playing and frisking around. She began barking at the kittens, then stopped, and wondered why seeing them made her want to bark. Suddenly, one kitten jumped right on top of another and they began racing around the window, which made Sadie completely forget her thoughts of why she was barking, and just start barking at them again. As Sadie was watching the kittens, the man was inside the store that sold food, dishes, collars, beds and other amazing things, all made just for dogs!

While there, he met up with an old friend. He explained to her about the breeding kennel being closed down, and the dogs being fostered out to potential homes. His friend hadn't heard the news, and was very curious. She asked if all the dogs had found foster homes yet. The man said most had, a few went to the shelter until they found new homes, and he had the last two with him in the car. He was hoping the younger one would make a perfect companion for his mother, and wasn't quite sure what to do with the older dog; the shelter was nearly full now, and no one else had

stepped up to foster her yet. The woman was very happy to hear about the dogs finding homes, and was excited to come and see the two he had with him. They walked to the car together.

Sadie saw them coming through the window. Something about the way the woman was smiling made Sadie want to smile back, and she hoped the woman would notice. She forgot all about the silly kittens in the shop window.

The man's companion asked which one he was thinking of for his mother. He said, "The smaller, tri-colored girl. She's a bit younger and has more energy. The other one is so quiet, I think she'd be happier in a quieter home. With all of the grandchildren around, plus her own dogs, the older one may be overwhelmed at my mother's, but the pup should catch on."

"My friend Mindy is retired, and lives on her own," the woman replied. "I wonder if she'd like to have the older dog. She lives nearby, so I could check on the dog often for you. I could even take her with me now and bring her over to Mindy's to see what she thinks of the idea. If it doesn't work out, I can bring her back to you. What do you say, Jeff?"

"I'd trust any dog on the planet with you, Fiona. You've had so many hounds at your farm over the years, and your

reputation is impeccable—and you know it!” Fiona smiled. “Feel free to take her and show her to your friend if you like,” said Jeff. “I just bought some food and things. Let me get them for you.”

The car door opened. Sadie felt the chilly air outside as Fiona lifted her from the car seat, while Jeff held back the younger dog. He handed a small bag to Fiona. They exchanged a few more words, then Sadie and Fiona watched as her sweet-smelling, bald friend, Jeff, she now knew, climbed back into his car. As he drove away, the woman waved and shouted “Happy Thanksgiving, Jeff. And thanks!” Sadie didn’t understand—wasn’t she going to stay with him? Where was this woman taking her? Was this the last time she would see him?

Chapter 5: The Farm

“Well, young lady,” said Fiona, who rubbed Sadie’s ears as they walked across the parking lot, “I suppose I should introduce myself. My name is Fiona, and from what Jeff tells me, you are called Sadie. I like that name, don’t you?” Sadie cocked her head and looked at the woman. She had never heard her own name before. Sadie? She liked it, and wagged her tail a tiny bit. Fiona laughed. “I guess it really is your name, then. Let’s get you home.”

As they got into the car, Fiona didn't put Sadie on the seat, but instead held her on her lap. Sadie could almost see out the front window. Soon, cars and trucks and trees were flashing past again. Sadie quickly tired of watching, and lay down in Fiona's lap. In a few minutes the car stopped, and Fiona carried Sadie out into the chilly air one more time, then through a little white picket gate and into a large grassy area with an enormous beech tree in the middle. The grass was crunchy from the recent frosty weather. Fiona put Sadie down in the cool grass. Sadie sat and trembled. What was she supposed to do now? Was Fiona going to leave her here? It was freezing, and the wind was blowing, and the yard seemed so big and open. For a moment, Sadie longed for her little cage. She was so upset she whimpered, then went to the bathroom. "Good girl!" cried Fiona. "I was afraid you might not want to go outside since you've never been allowed to before. Okay, now we can go in and get warm. Come on!"

Fiona started to walk away, and Sadie waited and watched. That's what she knew how to do. Wait for people to come, wait for them to go. Fiona turned back, and bent down, arms outstretched. "Come on, Sadie. That's a girl. Don't be nervous, just come to me." Sadie took a few hesitant steps toward her. "That's right! Come on, now." Sadie walked up

to Fiona, who immediately smiled and cheered and started to pet Sadie all over, telling her how good she was. Sadie was surprised! "Well, I never!" she thought.

Fiona stood, and continued walking toward the house. She called to Sadie, who again hesitantly followed. Fiona praised her again, and then walked into the house. Sadie hopped up the little step and walked straight in behind her. Oh my! What a wonderful room they were in. It was warm, and had gleaming yellow wooden floors with soft carpets all over them. And Oh! all the delightful smells! There was one Sadie couldn't place. She realized she smelled it a little before—in the car, and on the woman's coat, and then again in the yard. It was stronger here in the house. Some sort of animal. It seemed interesting, but safe; she wasn't worried, merely curious. She sniffed around a bit and found the scent was strongest on a pair of tall, shiny black boots that were standing by the door. Definitely curious, and something worth thinking about. Sadie spent the night in Fiona's house. She didn't sleep much in this unfamiliar place with so many new sights and sounds. Fiona left Sadie in a room with some towels, a soft mat, one dish with water and one with food. The water was fresh and clean, and Sadie drank her fill. The food was quite tasty, but Sadie didn't eat much. She was too

disturbed by all the new happenings to eat. It was quiet and dark, in a peaceful way, but Sadie couldn't sleep. She curled up on the mat, and watched.

Chapter 6: Not Quite Home

Hours later, the room brightened and Sadie knew it is another day, though she has never been woken by the sunrise before. With no windows in her cement room at the old kennel, days started when the people arrived and turned the lights on. She yawned and stretched, and realized she could get up and walk freely around the little room. She had a sip of water, and a few bites of food, and discovered she needed to empty her bladder. But where? There was always a bit of newspaper she used to go on in her cage. She remembered Fiona speaking nicely to her when she went outside the day before. But where was Fiona now? Sadie couldn't get outside by herself! She began to whine gently. She really couldn't hold it in much more, and was worried about doing the wrong thing. Everything was so different here! She became nervous, and accidentally let a little loose on the floor. Footsteps distracted her for a moment, and there stood Fiona, smiling and speaking to her. "I hear you're up! What an early girl you are. I imagine you need to go outside—oh yes, I can see you do." Fiona was looking

at the small puddle on the floor near the mat. Sadie wondered if she might get in trouble, but there wasn't any newspaper!

Fiona moved a small screen from across the doorway, and Sadie could see beyond to the door that led into the yard. Fiona walked to the door and opened it wide. A sudden blast of chilly air entered the room, and both Fiona and Sadie shivered for a moment.

Fiona beckoned Sadie to the open door. Sadie came, then hesitated at the top of the small step. Fiona stepped out into the yard a few feet. Sadie followed. She could slightly smell her own smell in the yard from emptying the night before, and suddenly she could no longer wait. She trotted right to that same spot, and with a sigh, relieved herself. "Good Girl!" cried Fiona. "You are the most clever girl, aren't you?"

Fiona invited Sadie back in. This time, Sadie trotted right back, hopping up the little step and back into the house without help. Fiona closed the door to the yard, then opened another door inside the house and Sadie saw there was a large room beyond. And past that, she could see another room, too. What a big place this was! She followed Fiona into the next room, which had a warm stove made of stone. The room was full of delicious aromas. The wooden

floor was worn smooth and burnished to gold, and there was a colorful braided rug covering most of it. She smelled the strange animal smell on this rug, and again—very strongly now—on another pair of boots that sat by the woodstove. Fiona was talking to her most of the time, and yet Sadie only half heard. There was so much to see and to smell, yet she was still a bit nervous, and remained cautious. Fiona refilled the little dishes of water and food and placed them on the floor. Then she prepared more food, and sat at a long, dark wooden table to eat. Sadie had never seen a human eat before, and she was fascinated, partly by the odd behavior, and partly by the aromas coming from the food. When Fiona finished her breakfast, she stood up and moved her plates to the sink. While Fiona washed up, Sadie went to the dishes on the floor and had her fill of both food and water.

After she was done cleaning up, Fiona left the kitchen, returning a few minutes later wearing different clothes. She bent down and put a little collar around Sadie's neck. "I've had this old collar for years, and for now you can use it until you get to your new home." Sadie was surprised! She hadn't really thought about home, or indeed a new home. She supposed, now she thought about it, that she must not be going back to her cage ever again. She had

thought perhaps she might go with her friend, Jeff, the sweet-smelling man, but he gave her to Fiona. Now Fiona was saying that she still was not at her new "home." Sadie wondered when her adventure would end. She liked it here, with Fiona and all the good food and smells, and the nice way Fiona spoke to her. But now she wondered if there would ever be an end to the new people she would meet, or places she would go.

Chapter 7: Rollo's Message

Fiona walked to the door, and interrupted Sadie's thoughts by calling her to come along. Out into the yard they went again. Sadie had a pretty good idea what the yard was for now, and she immediately set to work relieving herself again, and then sniffed around a bit. She lifted her head to follow the strange animal scent, and to her great surprise there was a huge, furry brown head looking over the fence right back at her! She startled and ran back toward the house, then turned again—it was still there! The head started moving, and making loud sniffing noises. This was indeed the source of the wonderful smell, and it was a huge animal! Sadie began barking, hoping it would go away. Instead, it just shook its big head at her and snorted, blowing its nose. Sadie kept barking, but stayed a

respectful distance back near the door. She wished Fiona would shoo it away. No sooner had she thought this, when Fiona came over and started speaking nicely to the giant creature. She didn't shoo the big thing away. Quite the contrary, she smiled at Sadie, and said "I see you've met Oscar, my horse."

Horse? This is a horse. Sadie had to reach back into her deepest memory to be able to place the creature. Although she had never seen or heard of a horse, somehow she instinctively knew they existed. Now that Fiona was here, she began to feel a little braver. As her curiosity got the better of her, she moved tentatively toward the big brown head. Suddenly a tremendous neighing noise filled the air, and Sadie ran back to the house, barking like mad!

"Oh Oscar, all right. I'll come feed you now. No need to be afraid Sadie, it's only noise. But just in case, I brought a little leash I found to keep you close and safe while we venture out to the barn."

She snapped a thin red lead made of braided plastic to Sadie's collar, and gently guided the small dog through the picket gate and out onto the gravel where the car was parked. They walk past the car, and Sadie saw another building. This one was red with white trim. The sides were wide vertical wooden boards and it was quite a bit taller

than the neat, white clapboard house. Inside the aroma of horse was unmistakable. The light was dim compared to the bright sunshine outside, and once Sadie's eyes adjusted she took a good look around. She didn't want to be caught by surprise by another big brown head! In a corner of the barn was a low wall with a half-door set in it, where soon Sadie saw another head. But this was not Oscar's long, dark mahogany colored head. This head was pale brown in color, and it was quite a bit smaller. This little horse seemed a much more manageable size to Sadie, so she stepped a bit closer to have a better look. The pony, whose furry coat had patches of creamy white and soft caramel covering his body, looked at Sadie with kind, intelligent eyes, then turned his attention to Fiona. She was busy getting an armful of sweet smelling grass, carrying it first to Rollo the brown and white pony, then to a big box of a room just like the first, but empty. Fiona stepped inside the empty box, carefully shut the door behind her, then opened a door on the back of the box. With a big Whoosh! Oscar the horse came flying into the stall, and stopped short, diving his head into the pile of freshly delivered hay.

"Easy does it, Oscar!" said Fiona. "I know you're hungry, but we have our new guest to consider."

In a few minutes, both Oscar and Rollo were contentedly

munching their hay, and also something called grain that Sadie tasted when Fiona dropped a bit. It was quite delicious! After a bit more fussing around, Fiona picked up Sadie's lead, and the two of them left the barn, closing the door behind them. When Sadie glanced back, she could see that both Rollo and Oscar had second doors in their stalls that led directly to the grassy, tree-lined paddock outside. Soon Rollo appeared at the fence and watched from the paddock as the two walked away. Sadie paused and turned back, and the chubby pinto pony looked at the little dog for a long moment. Rollo was telling Sadie something. She heard it like a soft voice deep inside her. It was peaceful, and happy. It had a warm safe feeling, though she wasn't sure what it meant. All she heard clearly was the word "home."

The rest of the day seemed to pass quickly, as Sadie followed Fiona around the house. From room to room they moved, Fiona sometimes talking to Sadie, sometimes humming to herself, while she dusted and swept and tidied up. Fiona went up a long flight of stairs that seemed to go to the sky. Sadie had only seen the one step between the house and yard, and she sat nervously at the bottom. She did not want to be separated from Fiona, who called to Sadie each time she passed by the top of the stairs. Timidly, Sadie put

one, then two paws on the bottom stair. She hopped up onto that step. Phew! Not too hard, and as she looked back she saw she was not very high up. Gaining courage, she climbed four more stairs, front paws first, then a hop up with the back paws. "This is pretty easy!" she thought. Then she made a mistake and looked back at how far she had come. The distance to the bottom seemed huge, and in her fright, Sadie dashed up the remaining steps without thinking.

"There you are!" said Fiona. "That wasn't so bad, was it?" She sounded so confident that Sadie wagged her little tail in pride and trotted off down the hall behind Fiona to the bedroom.

A soft-looking bed took up the center of the room, covered in a patchwork quilt with all the colors of the rainbow. On one side sat a low pine dresser with a row of small wooden boxes and a mirror on the top. Across from the dresser was a window with creamy lace curtains and a cushioned bench built right in. Between the dresser and window was a narrow door to a closet, where Fiona was rummaging around, talking to herself. She pulled out an oversized old pillow with a faded blue denim cover. "It's a bit dusty, but it's better than nothing," she said, mostly to herself. "Look, Sadie, this old pillow will make a nice little bed for you, at least until we get you situated at Mindy's. It will be

nicer than those old rags you're on now."

Fiona turned and headed back down the stairs. When she reached the bottom, she saw Sadie, still at the top, nervously peering down over the edge of the first step. Fiona went back up, took Sadie in her arms and started to carry her down, stopping in the middle of the staircase. She put the little dog down on the fifth step from the bottom. "Okay, girl. Be brave. You can make it from there." Sadie watched Fiona go down the rest of the way and, not wanting to be left behind, she scampered down after her, skidding to a halt on the small rug at the foot of the steps. Fiona smiled and gave Sadie a pat.

The two new friends spent the rest of the day busy around the house and farm. Once the housework was finished, they went outside and began tending to the horses, feeding them again and cleaning their stalls. When the horses were settled and cared for, Fiona and Sadie returned to the house. They both had a bite to eat. As the sun was setting, Sadie, exhausted from all of her new adventures, curled up on the blue bed Fiona had brought downstairs and placed by the woodstove, and fell fast asleep. What a day!

Chapter 8: Visiting

Fiona came downstairs the next morning already dressed and

smiling brightly. She hurried around the kitchen getting Sadie's breakfast, then her own. Even their trip to the barn was brief, as she gave Oscar and Rollo their hay and grain, then patted each of them on the neck before going back outside. "Come along, Sadie, we have someone to meet today!"

Sadie turned to follow, but caught Rollo's eye for a moment. Again, she could hear that calm reassuring voice telling Sadie how happy he was she had come to live with them. Sadie liked hearing these things, but she also knew she was going to meet Fiona's friend and become her dog today. Yet, gazing into Rollo's deep soft eyes, she trusted him completely. Fiona broke the spell when she picked Sadie up and put her in the car.

As Fiona got in, she spoke to Sadie. "I really think you'll like Mindy very much. She'll give you a good home, and she'll take good care of you." Sadie sighed, a small whisper of sound that Fiona didn't hear. And although Sadie couldn't hear it, Fiona gave a small sigh, too.

The car ride was short. Fiona stopped, and turned to smile at Sadie. "Let me go speak with her first—then I'll come get you so you two can meet, okay?" Sadie wiggled her tail a tiny bit, but she was nervous. A lot had happened recently, and she was a little wary of meeting yet another

stranger and going to another new house. But if Fiona said it was okay, then Sadie would try.

She stood with her front paws on the inside of the car door so she could see out the window. There was a neat row of little cottages. They were all similar, but each was a different color. They had tidy yards in front, and some had flower beds by the door. She saw Fiona waiting at the door of a blue cottage. Fiona knocked, waited some more, then she began to peer in the front windows.

A woman from the yellow house next door came out to her front step and called to Fiona, who crossed the small yard toward the other house. They spoke for a few minutes, and then Fiona smiled, shook the woman's hand, and turned back to the car. But instead of taking Sadie out, she got back in. "She's not home, Sadie. In fact, the neighbor says she won't be back until next week, after the holiday weekend! Oh dear! Well, you will just have to wait, and be Mindy's early Christmas present. Guess we're stuck with each other for a while longer!" Even though she said they were stuck, Fiona was smiling, and didn't sound a bit sad. Sadie wiggled her tail; she didn't mind staying with Fiona one bit.

The weekend brought colder weather. The smells of fall abated as the temperature dropped and the air grew brisk.

Snow began to come down one afternoon. Fiona took Sadie to the yard to see the snowflakes. At first, Sadie sat on the step trembling in the cold, but the snowflakes fascinated her as they swirled around and floated to the ground. They almost looked like she could catch them. She stood up and watched carefully, trying to pick out one flake. When it got close enough she snapped! "Got it!" she thought, and felt the cool tang of the snow on her tongue. There were more coming, landing on her nose, her eyebrows, her back. She snapped at a few more: "Got 'em again!" Fiona began to laugh, which made Sadie stop and look, but then she smiled back at Fiona, and wiggled her little tail as fast as she could.

They stayed in the yard a few more minutes while Sadie quickly dispatched several more flakes, then she shook her coat as she realized she was wet and chilly. Fiona shivered too, so they returned to the warm kitchen where Sadie curled up on her little bed, and Fiona made tea, then curled up in her own chair right beside Sadie. They spent a quiet evening that way, and went to bed early.

Over the following week, Sadie and Fiona spent every minute together. Some days, they would go for long walks in the woods by the farm, Fiona riding Oscar while Sadie trotted along behind keeping an eye on them. Other days, Fiona

spent most of her time in a small room off the kitchen called her office. There she typed, and spoke to people on the phone and wrote letters, only stopping briefly for lunch, and finishing up as the sun set and they went out to tend to the horses. One day, before returning home from a car ride out shopping, Fiona stopped again at the blue cottage. Still no one came to the door. Fiona tried knocking on the door of neighbor in the yellow house, but there was no answer there, either. Fiona returned to the car, wrote a brief note, and placed it on the front door of the yellow house, then she and Sadie headed home.

Chapter 9: Preparations

The next morning, Fiona was up early and seemed very excited. She dressed and ate quickly, fed and tended Sadie, then they both bustled out the door. They fed the horses, giving everyone an extra pat and a carrot. "We'll be back soon!" she brightly told the horses. Instead of getting into Fiona's car, they got into a big, dark blue pick-up truck that was parked behind the barn. Sadie had a bit of trouble jumping in, so Fiona gave her a boost. Off they went down the road. The truck was much noisier than the car, and it smelled even more strongly of horses, which Sadie liked. The truck also sat her higher up, so she could

see easily out the windows as they drove.

They arrived at another small farm where Sadie saw two giant grey horses standing in front of a bright red wagon that was almost as big as the truck. She noticed that the horses were attached to the wagon, but they didn't seem to mind. One of them shook its huge crested neck a little, and through the window Sadie could hear bells ring. There were bells on the horses' harness!

Fiona spoke. "Sadie, I don't want to leave you in the truck in this cold. Let's put your leash on you while we walk around, okay?" And with that, she snapped the little red plastic lead onto Sadie's collar.

Fiona lifted her down out of the truck and off they went.

It looked as though they were walking through a forest.

There were dark green pine trees everywhere, planted in neat rows. Fiona was inspecting the trees. She would stop and look at one from one side, then another, then she would move down to another row and repeat the process. After what seemed like the fiftieth tree inspection, they went into a little building that stood near the horses and wagon. She spoke to a gentleman in thick brown coveralls for a few minutes, but Sadie didn't pay any attention. She was watching the two greys.

The big horses started to shift a little and fidget gently

where they stood, as people began climbing onto the wagon. Two people, then four, then three more... nine people got into the wagon. A young lady who had been helping the people get on climbed into a little seat way up front right behind the horses' tails. She looked so tiny compared to the horses! The girl picked up long straps that attached to the pair's heads, and gave a soft clucking noise. "Up Ben, up Bob," she said quietly. The horses began to move off at a steady walk. As soon as they moved, the bells on their harness began to jingle softly. As they walked beyond the little building, the driver clucked again, and said "Trot up, please." As if they were one being, the two horse picked up the trot in unison, and Sadie could feel the ground vibrate rhythmically as they trotted down the lane through the trees, the sleigh bells jingling merrily, the sound growing fainter as they disappeared into the green forest of perfect trees.

When Sadie looked back at Fiona, the man in coveralls had come out of the little house and began walking with them back into the forest. They all stopped in front a tree that Fiona had looked at carefully before. He bent low under its green branches, and cut the tree down. Then he carried the tree out of the woods and placed it in the back of Fiona's truck. She spoke to him a bit longer, said "Bye, Tom.

Thanks, and Happy Holidays!" Then she boosted Sadie back up into the passenger seat. She waved goodbye to the man in coveralls, and rolled up the window against the chilly air. Once they returned to the house, Fiona brought the tree inside, and stood it in a corner of the kitchen. It soon filled the whole house with its sweet, fresh aroma. Fiona turned music on. The sound of a beautiful chorus sang softly. Then she took out several boxes from a closet, and began to pull all sorts of wonderful shiny objects out. When she was finished, all the pretty things from the boxes were on the tree. The whole tree glittered in the light, and each ornament was so colorful, it made both Fiona and Sadie feel good just to look at it.

Chapter 10: Presents under the Tree

"It's only a few days until Christmas, Sadie," Fiona said brightly the next morning. "We still have a few things to do!"

They spent part of the morning running errands. Most of the time, Sadie came along wherever Fiona went, but sometimes she waited in the car. She would pass the time looking out the windows eagerly drinking in all the sights.

When the back of the car was filled with packages, they headed for home. Fiona spent the whole afternoon sorting

through her purchases. Each one was placed on the long table, carefully considered, inspected, and finally wrapped in pretty paper and topped with colorful ribbons. Fiona placed most of them in the center of the wooden table, though a few she put underneath the tree. She seemed unusually pensive all afternoon. Even when they went to the barn for the evening's chores she was distracted, and gave Rollo's food to Oscar by mistake. Rollo nudged her, then again a bit harder until Fiona stopped and noticed the mistake. "I'm sorry, buddy. I guess my mind is someplace else. I have a decision to make, and I just hope I'm making the best choice."

Rollo nuzzled Fiona's neck reassuringly. Oscar whinnied with impatience. He didn't care whose food he got, he just wanted it now! Oscar could be quite loud compared to Rollo's calm presence, but Sadie had gotten used to him. His outbursts didn't frighten her anymore.

As Fiona and Sadie left the barn, Rollo gave a low nicker. When Sadie turned back to look, she was certain she saw the old pony wink at her. "What is that about?" she wondered, then trotted off in the snow behind Fiona.

Night fell early that evening, as clouds rolled in bringing more snow. Fiona stood in the kitchen baking cookies, and Sadie watched from her little bed, her nose wiggling to

capture all the wonderful smells from the oven. Fiona seemed more content than she had earlier and kept smiling at Sadie. The little dog wondered what had changed her mood. Perhaps it was the phone conversation she'd had after dinner. At first, Fiona had seemed nervous, but by the end of the call, she was more relaxed, and chatting happily. The two friends curled up by the woodstove later on, Fiona draping her hand over the arm of the chair and stroking Sadie's soft ears until it was time to go to bed.

"Wake up, Sadie! It's Christmas!" Fiona cried the next morning. She was still in her red flannel robe and fleece slippers, but was already bustling about the kitchen making tea. She let Sadie out on her own, and breakfast was ready when she came back in. While Sadie ate, she kept an eye on Fiona, who was humming Christmas carols and almost dancing around the kitchen.

"It's time to open presents, girl. Come on!" Fiona sat cross-legged on the floor next to the tree. Sadie trotted over and sat next to her. She looked up quizzically at her human friend, ears atilt.

Fiona chose a package from the small pile of neat and colorful presents under the tree, and removed the pretty paper. Inside was a new soft leather collar the color of butter, with a little brass plate that had Sadie's name on

it. Fiona laid the collar in front of Sadie and reached back to choose another package that had a gold bow on the top. This one revealed two small ceramic bowls colored bright blue with white flowers. They also had Sadie's name on them. The next package was a box so big Sadie couldn't quite see over it. Fiona lifted the top off the box and withdrew a wicker basket about six inches high and cut low on one side, with a cheerful red plaid cushion inside it. "This is your new bed, Sadie." Fiona then removed Sadie's old collar and put on the new one. "In fact, all these new things are for you. I don't know if you'll mind not going to live with Mindy, but it seems she is not coming back from her trip for a long while. I spoke with Jeff last night, and everything is all set. You're mine now, Sadie, forever. Merry Christmas, girl."

Sadie could not believe what she was hearing—it was a dream come true! She stood up and, wagging her tail as fast as it could go, licked Fiona's face til she fell over laughing, hugging Sadie to her. Rollo had been right all along. Sadie was home.

Though a short time before Sadie hadn't even known it existed, Christmas, she decided, was the very best day in all the year.