



CHAPTER 1

Wyatt Anderson came into the kitchen, holding a tub of squiggling worms he'd just dug up. Soon his best buddies, Joshua and Jackson Petree, would be arriving. They would be saddling up the horses, riding over to the pond, and fishing. Wyatt couldn't wait!

Jackson was Wyatt's age, ten, and Joshua was nine. They went to the same

school as Wyatt and played on his football team. The Petrees lived on the next ranch over, which was about seven miles away. Out in their part of Oklahoma, there was no such thing as a close neighbor!

Wyatt's mother hunched over the counter, scribbling a shopping list to get ready for her trip into town. His father had loaded the pickup truck with tools and had gone to mend a fence in the east pasture. The Andersons had a large cattle ranch with about eight hundred head of cattle. Usually, Wyatt loved helping out at the ranch, especially moving and sorting cattle. But mending fence was pretty boring, so he was glad his father had given him the day off — in honor of the first day of

summer vacation, and also because his cousin, Alison, had just arrived from New York City for a stay.

Mrs. Anderson looked up from her list. “Where is Alison?” she asked Wyatt.

“Out in the barn with Duncan,” Wyatt said.

“Duncan is not supposed to be entertaining Alison. You are!” his mother scolded.

Wyatt just rolled his eyes. He didn’t want to entertain Alison. She was annoying. His aunt and uncle had adopted her from Korea when she was two, and the cousins didn’t see each other that often so he didn’t really know her all that well. But he wasn’t impressed by what he did know. She was

giggly. She was a ballerina. She liked pink everything. They had nothing in common.

To remedy the situation, Wyatt's mother and his aunt, Alison's mom, came up with the idea of a cousin swap. Alison would spend two weeks at the beginning of summer on the ranch. Then the last two weeks of summer, Wyatt would go stay with Alison and her family in New York City. The grown-ups thought it would "expand their horizons." But to Wyatt it was just plain stupid. Alison would ruin his first moments of summer fun on the ranch. And spending two weeks in a high-rise apartment cooped up with Alison sounded like torture.

His mother frowned at him. Wyatt could tell she was not pleased with his attitude.

“I can’t help it if Alison is crazy about Duncan and wants to spend all her time in the barn with him!” Wyatt protested.

Duncan was the Anderson’s big white Great Pyrenees mountain dog. He spent most of his time in and around the barn closest to the house. The barn and the fenced-in areas to the side and behind it were home to the horses and Mrs. Anderson’s small herd of pygmy goats. Duncan had an important job. He acted as companion and guardian to the animals, especially the tiny goats, protecting them from coyotes, mountain lions, and bobcats.

Wyatt heard the sound of a car pulling up, and soon Joshua and Jackson appeared by the back screen door.

“Come on in, boys,” Mrs. Anderson said.

Both of the Petree boys, with their dark hair and dark eyes, took after their mother, whose ancestors were members of the Choctaw tribe. But other than that, the boys were very different. Jackson was tall and thin with longish hair that hung in his eyes, while Joshua was short and stocky with a buzz cut. Jackson was the responsible one and Joshua was impulsive. The two boys grinned at Wyatt, and then Joshua immediately ran for the cookie jar that Mrs. Anderson always kept stocked with freshly baked chocolate chip cookies. He grabbed two and stuffed one in his mouth.

“Joshua!” Jackson said, trying to remind his brother of his manners.

“Go ahead and help yourself, Joshua — and you, too, Jackson!” Mrs. Anderson laughed. She really didn’t mind. The Petree brothers were like family.

Wyatt held out the tub of worms while Jackson and Joshua munched on the home-made cookies. “Got some nice ones!” he said. “Let’s get the horses ready and head on over to the pond.”



“Take your cell phone with you,” Mrs. Anderson reminded Wyatt. “And be sure to saddle up a horse for Alison so she can go with you!”

Wyatt grabbed his phone off the counter and shoved it in his back pocket. “Alison doesn’t know how to ride a horse.” He scoffed. “She can’t come.”

“Give her Molasses. He’s old and steady. If a person can sit, they can ride Molasses,” Mrs. Anderson replied, smiling.

Wyatt tried another approach. “You should take her to town with you, Mom. She’d probably rather go shopping.”

“I’m going to the grocery store. Not anywhere exciting,” his mother said, shaking her head. “I told my sister we would

give Alison the full ranch experience. Now take the boys out to the barn and introduce them to Alison. Shoo!" Mrs. Anderson waved them off.

When the three boys got to the barn, they found Alison hugging on Duncan, his tail wagging, a big slobbery smile on his face. Then Wyatt noticed something that mortified him. Alison had tied two pink ribbons around Duncan's ears! Joshua and Jackson started cracking up at the sight.

"You've robbed him of all his dignity!" Wyatt cried.

Alison just giggled and stood up. And that's when he got a good look at the lettering on her shirt. Underneath a picture

of a pair of pointe shoes, it said *If ballet was easy, they would call it football.*

Wyatt cringed. “This is my cousin, Alison,” he said, without much enthusiasm. Maybe Joshua and Jackson would come up with some kind of wisecrack about her shirt. They would put her in her place!

But Joshua just smiled and said, “Funny shirt!” Like he was complimenting her or something. Jackson just stared at her in a dopey, love-struck way. Like he liked her. Like he *liked her* liked her. Good grief!

Wyatt had to admit his cousin was pretty, with her long, silky black hair and a wide smile with perfect teeth. But he felt like his buddies had betrayed him. Maybe

it wasn't fair, but part of him wanted them to give her the cold shoulder, too.

The trip to the pond should have taken fifteen minutes, but the time felt doubled because of old slowpoke Molasses. He got his name because of his deep-brown color, though now that he was getting older, the name was especially fitting. He used to work the ranch, but these days he was mostly retired.

Wyatt rode his very own horse, Licorice, who was tall, with a shiny black coat, and quick as lightning. He could cut cattle like nobody's business! Wyatt and Licorice had even won a collection of barrel-racing trophies, but now they had to plod along