

The background of the cover is a painting. It depicts a young woman with long brown hair, wearing a light blue button-down shirt and jeans, leaning forward and reaching out with her right hand towards a dark-colored horse. The horse is standing in a grassy field. In the background, there are rolling hills or mountains under a blue sky with some clouds. A large, gnarled tree trunk is visible on the right side of the image. The overall style is that of a classic children's book illustration.

Wild Horse Summer

by Hope Ryden

Illustrated by Paul Casale

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in Wyoming where she learns to ride a horse and where Kelly, who is blind,
helps her overcome an old fear.

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For Latahna, Gail, and Loretta
(three muses on horseback)
whose high spirits and love of mustangs
animate this tale.
—H. R.

— Chapter One —

THE SUMMER I SPENT WITH MY COUSIN in Wyoming, I celebrated my thirteenth birthday. I traveled there by myself on a train. It was a long ride from Chicago, where I live, but I had a thing about flying. You might call it a phobia. I'm scared of heights and just the thought of being 30,000 feet above the earth gave me the shakes. My mom said my fear was irrational and I should try to get over it. But how do you overcome an irrational fear?

Anyway, if I had had to fly, I would never have agreed to spend the summer with Kelly. To be perfectly honest, I wasn't that keen on going to Wyoming in the first place. I hated leaving Chicago and the kids I run around with. I've lived in a big city all my life and I couldn't imagine what I would find to do on a ranch.

But my mom insisted. She said I would love the

place. That's where she grew up and she had it in her mind that I would miss something important in life if I didn't learn to love the great outdoors. So when her sister called and invited me to come for the summer, my mom was ecstatic.

"You're going to experience a different way of life, and I know you'll find every day full of adventures and surprises," she said.

I didn't tell her that I was having plenty of adventures and surprises in Chicago, because I knew that that was one of the reasons she wanted me to go. I'm an only child and my mom and dad just don't want me to grow up. When they catch me or my friends wearing makeup or hear us talk about boys, they act as though that's not natural for kids our age. My dad, especially, gets upset by any sign that his daughter is no longer a little child.

"Twelve-year-old girls are so beautiful, they don't need makeup," he says. "Would you paint a rose?"

At first he wouldn't hear about my traveling alone on the train, but my mom convinced him that it would be safe—what with a train attendant being alerted to my being on board. So in the end, *both* my parents lobbied me to accept the invitation. I don't know how many times my mom said, "Just think, you'll learn to ride a horse."

Well, I do love animals a lot, so that argument

might have been persuasive, if I weren't afraid of heights. The thought of getting on a horse's back, however, made me feel like blacking out. I didn't say anything about this to my mom, though. She wanted in the worst way for me to learn how to ride. When she was a young girl living on a ranch, she had her own horse and she got to be such a good rider that she won a lot of barrel races and that kind of thing. It's funny how parents want their kids to turn out like themselves.

The fact is, though, I'm a cat person. I have a red cat, named Pete, that I adopted from a shelter. That's another reason I didn't want to go to Wyoming. Pete is used to sleeping on my bed, and I play with him a lot. My mom and dad won't let him into their bedroom and they never pet or play with him. How could Pete get along without me?

Then there was the long train ride—twenty-three hours from Chicago to some whistle-stop town where my uncle would meet me and drive me sixty miles to the ranch. I'm telling you, these people live at the end of the world! My mom wouldn't listen to that argument, though.

"The train ride will be the only difficult part, but you'll love the scenery," she said. "You'll pass through beautiful mountains and just fall in love with the country out there."

Heights again!

Still, I was kind of pleased that my parents had enough confidence in me to let me travel by myself. It surprised me, because when it comes to buying clothes or wearing makeup or staying out after nine-thirty, they treat me like a three-year-old. There's just no understanding grownups.

There was another reason I didn't want to spend a whole summer with my cousin Kelly. I'd never met her, so I wasn't sure we would hit it off. Imagine being stuck a thousand miles from home with someone you don't like!

Well, I'm not being completely honest here. I did know something about Kelly's personality from her letters. We had written to each other for a couple of years, and Kelly's letters were always funny. We'd also exchanged pictures and I liked the way she looked. She had a turned-up nose and red hair, which she wore in a thick braid down her back. And she had a wide and friendly smile.

Still, I had reservations about her. When I tell you why, I hope you won't think badly of me. You see, all Kelly's letters to me were typed. There's nothing wrong with that, of course, except for the reason. The reason is that she wasn't able to write in longhand. Kelly is blind, and when she was only seven years old, her mom got her a typewriter and taught her how to use it.

Now please understand me, I have nothing against people who are blind. I just wasn't thrilled with the idea of spending my entire summer with a handicapped person. A week would be long enough. What's more, I knew that my mother and aunt had cooked up this invitation for Kelly's sake. They wanted her to have a companion, and I was picked for the job. I don't believe my wishes on the matter were even considered. Well, I know this sounds horrible to say, but I didn't want to get stuck in a situation where I found myself leading someone around and watching out for her safety every minute. It would be like babysitting, nonstop.

That's not the sort of thing a person speaks about, though. So my mom and I never discussed it. Now, looking back, I suspect she knew all along what was bothering me, but she had the same problem I did. She didn't know how to bring up such a sensitive subject. In all our talks, neither she nor I ever mentioned the word blind. Instead she stressed positive things, such as the fun I would have being with my two cousins—Kelly and her older brother, Bill.

"Just think, you won't be an only child, for a change. Living with your cousins will be like having a sister and a brother. You've always said you wanted siblings."

In the end she wore me down, and I agreed to go. My decision made her so happy that she took me right

out shopping for new clothes—stretch jeans and riding boots and a poncho and a cowgirl hat—that kind of thing. And my dad bought me a camera.

“You take a lot of pictures of the good times you’re having,” he said. “We’ll want to see them, and you’ll be glad to have them in years to come.”

If my parents had any second thoughts about my going off on my own, they didn’t let on—at least not until I was about to board the train. Then my mom hugged me and started getting teary-eyed. And my dad couldn’t get out what he was trying to say until he had cleared his throat a couple of times.

“You can call us collect whenever you feel like it, you know. And if you aren’t having any fun, you just come right home.”

My mom managed to pull herself together.

“Oh, she’ll have fun, I know that.” She made herself smile. “Just be careful on the train. Don’t talk to anybody older than you are unless they happen to be parents traveling with their children.”

“What about grannies and granddads traveling with their grandchildren? Is it all right if I talk to them?”

I couldn’t resist making that wisecrack in response to my mother’s warning. She never credits me with having any common sense. But as soon as the words were out of my mouth, I was sorry. Why, when I was



about to leave her for the whole summer, did I make fun of her at the last minute?

My dad put his arm around her. "She knows how to conduct herself, Carol. Nothing's going to happen to her on the train."

"I know that," she said. "It's just that we love you, Alison. We don't want you to run into any trouble."

Just then the conductor called "All aboard!" I gave my mom and my dad each a quick hug and climbed onto the train. I didn't look for my slumbercoach assignment, because I didn't like the idea of being in solitary confinement during the daylight part of the trip. Instead, I took the first window seat I came to. As I settled into it, I spotted my dad walking fast alongside the slowly moving train. I could read his lips as he shouted, "Be sure to call us the minute you arrive."

I nodded, and he blew me a kiss.

Then, as the train picked up speed, I swallowed hard. For better or for worse, I was now committed to the plan my mom and aunt had hatched. Whatever lay ahead, I would just have to make the best of it.

— Chapter Two —

KELLY LOOKED EXACTLY LIKE HER PICTURE. I caught my first glimpse of her from the train, as it pulled into the station. When I stepped off the train and walked toward her, she turned in my direction with a big smile on her face, just as if she could actually see me.

“Alison?” she called out, as I drew near.

“Hi, Kelly!” I responded.

We gave each other a hug, and then my Aunt Lynne and Uncle John each hugged me.

“How was your trip?” Uncle John asked as he picked up my suitcase.

“Okay, I guess,” I answered.

Aunt Lynne laughed. “You don’t sound very enthusiastic,” she said. Her voice was a lot like my mom’s. “What happened? Did you sit next to a bore? Here, let me take your hat and tote bag.”

She picked them off the platform and we headed for the parking lot. Kelly walked as quickly as any of us—just as if she could see where she was going. It was pretty amazing!

“You girls sit together in the back seat,” Uncle John said. He held the door open and gestured for me to get in first. Then Kelly slid in beside me, and we were off.

“We’re taking the long route to the ranch,” he continued. “That way, we can go through a corner of Yellowstone Park. We thought you might like to see it. If you’re lucky, you might even spot a bear or a moose.”

I turned to Kelly. “Have you actually seen a bear here?”

Immediately, I felt terrible, because Kelly can’t see. How could I have said such a thing to her? Kelly must have sensed my embarrassment, because she tried to cover for my mistake.

“We come here a lot in the summer and we usually see something—a coyote or bison or something.”

She had purposely used the word “see.” Her response was so gracious that it reminded me of some advice our home economics teacher once gave us. If one of your dinner guests spills something, she said, the polite thing for you to do is spill something, too. Of course, the girls in my class couldn’t wait to act out that scene in the school cafeteria. We laughed and spilled food and behaved so badly that a teacher had to

come over and stop us. In my present situation, however, I suddenly saw the point of good manners. I was feeling so embarrassed that I couldn't think of another word to say. But Kelly continued to try to make me feel comfortable.

"I liked your last letter," she said. "It sounds like you have a lot of fun in Chicago. It must be wonderful to live in a big city. I hope you won't find things too quiet out here."

Uncle John let out a loud guffaw.

"I wouldn't exactly characterize ranch life as quiet," he said. "I can't recall a single day this spring that we haven't had to meet one emergency or another."

Aunt Lynne spoke up. "Kelly's talking about another kind of excitement than we experience here, John. She's talking about glamour and entertainment and culture—that kind of excitement. She's worried that Alison will be bored."

There was an awkward pause, and I knew that everyone was waiting for me to say something—to deny that I could possibly become bored on a ranch! But the words didn't come to me. So we rode in silence until Uncle John thought of a way to fill it.

"We've got a fine horse for you to ride, young lady. Do you like riding?"

"I've never done it," I answered. Now I really felt stupid.

“Well, we’ll fix that in a hurry. We’ll have you up on a horse first thing we get to the ranch.”

My heart sank. How could I tell them about my fear of heights?

Just then Kelly’s hand gripped mine. She gave it a little squeeze to reassure me.

“Do you like horses?” she asked. “I know you like cats, but maybe you don’t like horses. If that’s the case, we have plenty of cats for you in the barn. You can bring some into the house if you want to. What about dogs? Do you like dogs? We have eight. They all work for us. They help us drive our cattle when we move our herds to high pasture.”

“Oh, I like all animals,” I said. “I just don’t know much about horses or dogs. Cats are my favorite, I guess, because I know them. You can’t keep a horse in an apartment, after all.”

Kelly laughed at that.

“What’s your cat’s name?” she asked.

That got me going. Once I started talking about Pete, I felt more relaxed. I also felt grateful to Kelly for sensing my awkwardness and finding a subject that I knew something about.

The country we were passing through was beautiful. The road cut through a forest of tall evergreen trees. At every bend, the view changed and new mountains appeared in front of us. Some of the peaks were

still snow-capped, even though it was June. I remarked about this.

“The snow will last all summer,” Kelly said. “When we get higher you’ll be able to feel its coolness.”

The fact that we were steadily climbing made me nervous. I certainly didn’t want to have a panic attack in front of these people. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine that we were on flat ground. Kelly, of course, couldn’t see that my eyes were shut, so I didn’t have to worry about seeming chicken.

Suddenly she announced, “We’re almost at the highest point now. Do you find it beautiful here?”

I opened my eyes and saw that we were driving on a narrow ledge cut out of the side of the mountain. On our left, the mountain dropped away into a deep gorge. I quickly grabbed the door handle and squeezed my eyes shut.

“Oh, yes, it’s enough to take your breath away,” I said.

“Would you like to stop and look over?” Uncle John asked.

“Oh, no, thank you.”

“Wouldn’t be any trouble. I can pull off at the rest stop just ahead.”

“Oh no. That’s all right. I really don’t want to stop.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”