

CHAPTER TWO – HORSE RANCH

Stuck between the metropolis of Hollywood and the dense aquatic jungle known as the Florida Everglades, stood a three hundred acre horse ranch that laid about as flat as a slab of freshly poured concrete. Its barn, where the horse stalls were located, was a gray, natural wood structure that could have easily held at least thirty horses – fifteen on the north side and fifteen on the south. A wooden rail fence surrounding the barn and the outer pastures kept the horses inside. Two of those horses were Paul's beloved companion, Half Pint, and her best friend, Brave Boy.

Upon arriving at the ranch, Paul set out to search for his best friend, Tim Hegler. Not seeing him anywhere nearby, he nonchalantly strolled past the long line of stalls that ran along both sides of the rustic-style barn before proceeding toward a set of gray metallic lockers located near the far end of the building. This was where everybody who owned a horse was expected to store his or her supplies.

I wonder what would be the best way to approach Tim about taking care of Half Pint while I'm gone? Paul thought as he unconsciously reached down and began to unfasten the small, brass colored lock that secured his locker. *Besides, should I even go to North Carolina? Heaven knows that if it weren't for the chance to fly there, I definitely wouldn't consider going.*

Glancing upward momentarily, Paul began to contemplate both questions. However, before he had a chance to resolve even the first one, a creaking sound from a nearby door opening echoed throughout the building, and a boy his age displaying fiery red hair and a face full of freckles stepped out from around the corner.

"Paul," the boy shouted, as an ear-to-ear smile rapidly spread across his face. "When did you get here?"

"Just a couple minutes ago," Paul replied, noticing Tim's standard horse-riding attire – tan sandals, bib overalls, but no T-shirt or socks. "Have you fed Brave Boy yet?"

"Naw. He's still in the pasture," Tim said. "I was waiting for you to show up before I got him."

"Sorry I took so long," Paul said, grabbing Half Pint's harness from the side of his locker. "But Mom wouldn't bring me out here until I ate breakfast."

"I'm not surprised," Tim said, taking a piece of straw from his back pocket and sticking it in the corner of his mouth. "That sounds just like something my mother would do. So. Did you get a chance to ask your mom if you could spend the night at my place?"

"Yeah, last night. Just before I went to bed. At first she acted like she didn't want to let me, but with the way my dad's been drinking recently, I was able to convince her that I really could use a break away from him."

"ALL RIGHT!" Tim yelled, giving Paul a high five.

After crossing the parking lot, the boys approached the front pasture's five-foot steel gate and began to

search for their horses. Tim's was a proud, reddish-brown sorrel, who stood fifteen hands high. Paul owned a twelve-hands-high quarter horse, who sported a distinctive, dark, diamond-shaped spot located in the center of her forehead. Her white and brown coat always appeared to be gleaming in the Florida sunlight.

Seeing their four-legged companions standing next to each other several yards away near the ranch's back property line, both Paul and Tim put their hands to their mouths and commenced to yell, "Half Pint. Brave Boy."

At once, two sets of ears perked straight up, and shortly afterwards, a dust cloud began to swiftly ascend into the heavens above.

"Tim," Paul said, leisurely placing his foot on the bottom rail of the sun-bleached wooden fence they were leaning against. "I'll bet Half Pint will make it to the gate before Brave Boy."

Tim chuckled.

"No way. He's already over a length ahead of her," he replied, as the two horses continued their race toward them. "Brave Boy's a lot faster than your old nag."

"Oh yeah? Would you like to place a wager on that?"

"Sure. But you know you're going to lose," Tim said, as he reached for one of the crumpled dollar bills he had carelessly stashed inside the front pocket of his overalls earlier that morning. "Whoever's horse comes in second has to buy the winner a Coke. OK?"

"You're on."

As the boys kept a steady eye on both horses, Brave Boy, not unexpectedly, increased his early lead as both he and Half Pint sailed across the pasture. With his tail held high, the proud gelding repeatedly pounded each of his black hoofs into the flat sandy soil below him as if he were a four-legged army tank. However, as the two horses began to approach the front gate, Half Pint, with her head held low, quickly eased next to Brave Boy's side. It looked just like something unseen had instantly converted her into a locomotive gone wild. Then with less than fifty yards to go, Half Pint suddenly exploded with a final burst of speed that shot her past her four-legged competition just as if he had been standing completely still.

"I won. I won," Paul jubilantly shouted, his arms and fists shaking high above his head.

"I can't believe it," Tim exclaimed as he abruptly hurled his blue and white "Intel Rules" cap to the ground. "During the majority of the race Brave Boy was a good two lengths ahead of her."

"Well. What do you expect?" Paul said, his face displaying a gratifying smile as he unhooked the front gate, before pulling it wide open. "I keep telling you that even though Half Pint is small, she's fast. You just won't believe me."

Tim snorted in reply and began to lead Brave Boy toward the barn.

Thirty minutes later after both horses had been fed, groomed, and were ready for the day's activities, Paul gently removed Half Pint's rope halter and replaced it with her tan leather bridle. He then did a

quick 180-degree scan to make sure nothing would be in the way when he backed her out of her stall. That's when he noticed that neither Tim nor Brave Boy were inside the stall next to theirs.

Oh. There they are, he thought, as the two of them came into view when he gazed toward the entranceway. *I wonder if this would be a good time to ask Tim about taking care of Half Pint?*

Shrugging his shoulders in reply to his own question, he proceeded to gather Half Pint's numerous combs, brushes and other grooming supplies that he had just finished using, so he could stash them inside his locker.

"So where do you want to head to this afternoon?" Paul asked his friend, a couple of minutes later as he led Half Pint up to Brave Boy's side.

"How about the lake?" Tim replied.

"Driftwood Lake?" Paul said, as he unconsciously gazed across the southern horizon. "Hm-m-m. That's not too far away. Only about three miles. And after our swim, we might stop by Pete's Sandwich Shop for lunch since it's only a stone's throw away from the Sawgrass Horse Ranch."

"That's true. And I don't know about you, but I definitely want to get a few hours of rodeo practice in this afternoon. Before you know it, the Fourth of July will be on top of us."

"You're right about that. And this time, I want the two of us to be walking away with all the blue ribbons."

Tim immediately grinned as a vision of one of his bedroom walls completely enshrouded with countless First Place ribbons instantly flashed before his eyes. "That sounds like a good plan to me."

"All right," Paul said, displaying a toothy grin. "Let's get started then."

Completely forgetting all about North Carolina and what he had planned to ask his friend, Paul climbed onto Half Pint's back and gently tapped his heels against her sides.