

A Wild Ride

The Adventures of Misty & Moxie Wyoming

By

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A Wild Ride: The Adventures of Misty & Moxie Wyoming

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Dedicated to

Misty of the Darwin Ranch

and

Moxie Wyoming Sigel
who loved and cared for
Misty during her final years

In Memory of
Brad Hendricks
1941-2014

When it was time for the real Misty to retire from the Darwin Ranch, Brad, the inspiration for the character of Grandpops in the novel, came up with the brilliant idea that this feisty little horse should move to his daughter and son-in-law's ranch in southeastern Wyoming. That is where a rich friendship developed between Brad's beloved granddaughter, Moxie Wyoming Sigel, and Misty, Queen of the Darwin Herd.



Chapter One

“It’s my birthday!”

Moxie Wyoming Woodson popped up in bed, her brown hair sticking out every which way.

“And I hope, I hope, I hope that Mom and Dad will give me my very own horse.”

Moxie blinked at the early morning light streaming through the window. It landed on her favorite poster of a wild Mustang herd galloping through a canyon.

She listened to the rooster crowing, rubbed her eyes, and jumped out of bed. Today was also the start of summer vacation, and she didn’t want to miss a second of it.

In a flash, Moxie brushed her teeth, used her fingers to comb her shoulder-length hair into loose pigtails, and threw on some jeans and a tee-shirt. She heard a barking noise and rushed downstairs.

“There you are, Bunkie-Bunkie!”

Moxie plopped down at the bottom of the staircase and nuzzled the family dog, a lovable golden retriever mix from the local pound.

“Oh, my Bunker!” He licked her nose, and Moxie giggled. “Are you wishing me happy birthday?” She scratched behind his ears and hugged him. “You are *sooooo* cute!”

She looked up at a large painting hanging in the front hall. It was a portrait of her great-grandmother from long, long ago, dressed head to toe in pink cowgirl clothes, sitting on a beautiful black horse.

“I wonder if I’ll ever grow up to be a champion like you, Granny Rose.” Moxie sighed. “Then I could be extra-special, too, like you.” She hopped up and hurried into the kitchen with Bunker.

Moxie added milk to a bowl of cereal her mother had set on the table, and gulped it down. She rehearsed a short speech for her father, reciting it to Bunker. The dog tilted his head while she practiced, as if he were listening, but she knew he was really more interested in what she was eating. Placing the bowl on the floor for Bunker to lick, Moxie dashed out the door.

She saw her dad by the barn loading gear into the bed of his truck. She tiptoed over and noticed how his shaggy dark hair stuck out every which way. She loved that he looked like her when she got up in the morning, but he got to look that way all day long. *I guess it’s ‘cause he’s a grown-up*, she thought, *and he doesn’t have a mom making him comb his hair.*

He was also wearing his favorite faded denim shirt and tan work pants, held up by wide red suspenders that Moxie had given him for Christmas. She quietly reached up from behind and playfully snapped the suspenders, surprising him. “Daddy, what’s up?”

“Hey, Moxie Wyoming! Happy birthday!” Laughing, Mike Woodson swooped up his daughter for a good morning hug and kissed her on the cheek. His unshaven face tickled her.

“Daaad-dy!” She wiggled loose. “Where are you going?”

“I just got a call from Officer Clem Brown over at the highway patrol,” he said. “He thinks wild horses may have broken through some

of our fencing near the road to town.” Her dad checked the hitch connecting the back of the truck to a trailer. “I’m worried our own horses will get loose, so I want to get over there and repair the fence.”

“Me, too,” Moxie said, looking hopeful. “You can help me saddle up, and I can ride with you.”

“Now, darlin’, I don’t have the right horse for you...at the moment,” he said, glancing at the trailer.

“But, Daddy, that’s just what I want to talk to you about. Even though we’re not celebrating my birthday until tonight, I’m already ten *this morning...*” Moxie tilted her head down and launched into her speech. “And if I had my very own horse—which I hope I will *soooooon*—I could ride with you and help with your chores. Like fixin’ the fence.”

Her father walked to the back of the four-horse trailer. “Moxie Wyoming, we’ll just have to see—”

“We’d have more daddy-daughter time,” she interrupted, and beamed her widest smile at him. Chuckling, he closed the doors of the trailer.

“Hold it, Daddy. Where’s your horse?” Moxie asked. “Aren’t you riding over to fix the fence?”

“Like I said, kiddo, the broken fence is close to the road, so I don’t need a horse to get there.” Her father climbed into the truck and started the engine. “Anyway, when I’m finished with the fence, I’m driving on to Laramie.”

“But what’s in Laramie? And why do you need the trailer?” Even as Moxie asked, it dawned on her that he’d only take the trailer if he needed to pick up a horse, maybe a *birthday* horse? “Daddy—”

“Later, squirt.” Waving to her, he put his foot on the gas and the truck rolled down the road.

Moxie climbed aboard one of the ranch's all-terrain vehicles and propped her dusty, brown cowboy boots on the handlebars. If her father was picking up a horse for her, wouldn't he take her along, especially on her birthday?

"I guess it's not happening..." She rubbed the small scar on her elbow. "I'll probably be an old lady before I get a horse. And that will look just weird."

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Later that afternoon, Moxie sat on the step by the kitchen door next to a purring gray barn cat as her father pulled up. Her chores were done. She had also gathered eggs in the chicken coop, eaten lunch, and been waiting for what seemed like forever. Now he was back. Finally.

"Hey, Dad, what's in the trailer?" Moxie called out. She grinned, hopeful again. "My birthday present?"

"How'd you know, kiddo?" Mike Woodson smiled at his daughter as he climbed out of the truck.

"Sure, Dad. Right." She figured he was kidding.

He unlatched the back door of the horse trailer and stepped into the dark. Moxie could hear her dad moving around inside, speaking quietly to someone. With growing excitement, she walked over, carrying the cat in her arms.

"Come on, girl," he urged gently, as he came out. "Come see your new home."

Expecting to see a fine-looking young horse stride down the trailer's ramp, Moxie stopped in her tracks and dropped the cat when she finally got a look. This could *not* be her birthday present. It had to be a terrible mistake.





## Chapter Two

Moxie watched her father lead off the trailer what she thought was the saddest excuse for a horse ever. The animal's black coat was so gray-flecked, that he—or was it a she?—looked more gray than black, making it look old. But the horse's most noticeable feature was the steepest swayback Moxie had ever seen. It swooped down and made the animal's belly hang as low as low could be.

“What's up with that horse, Dad? You could skateboard down one side and up the other,” she sputtered.

“Moxie Wyoming, you cool it,” he said and smiled. “This little mare is yours!” The barn cat meowed and ran off. *That cat feels the way I do*, Moxie thought.

“Daddy, is this a joke?” She took in his expression which said *no*. “Can I even ride this horse?”

“Yes, you can,” he answered.

“Aren't there any others in Laramie? This one looks really old and kind of ugly—”

“Hold it there, young lady. She can't ride fast anymore, but she'll get you where you want to go around the ranch.” He gave his daughter a stern look. “I did go to Laramie to pick her up, but Misty—that's her name, by the way—is from much further away, all the way across the state. She's retiring from the Darwin Ranch near Jackson.”

“But Dad—”

“Now, listen, Moxie. Misty’s a legend at that ranch and a real favorite of the Darwin guests,” he continued. “Even though she’s more than thirty years old, she’s been queen of the herd out there forever.”

Moxie’s face drooped in disappointment. “Why’d she—”

“Every morning at the Darwin, the wrangler rounds up the horses for the guests. And Moxie, Misty was *always* out front, leading the herd back to the corral at a full gallop.”

He scratched Misty’s neck. “And even though the guests didn’t ride her much anymore, she was still the boss of the Darwin corral.”

“So why’d she have to come here?” Moxie pushed out her bottom lip.

“Your grandfather’s a good friend of the owner of the Darwin, and they decided it was time for Misty to retire.”

Her dad must have noticed her quivering lip, and he said in a gentle voice, “Grandpops and the owner thought our ranch would be a nice place for her to live out her golden years.”

“But I can’t ride her in the barrel races at the rodeo like Pickle’s cousin.” Moxie sniffled. “Or Granny Rose.”

“That’s true. Misty is pretty much retired,” he said. “Hey, birthday girl, stop your whining. One day you’ll have a horse for barrel racing. In the meantime, Grandpops and I thought you’d be the perfect candidate to take care of this little mare.”

Moxie didn’t feel convinced, and sniffled again.

Her dad pushed his hat back from his forehead. “Now, Moxie, everybody knows how you love animals. Every time I turn around, you’ve brought home some injured critter or abandoned little one you find around the place. I should call you Doctor Moxie, the way you like to take care of animals.”

He nodded toward the gray cat as it darted past them into the barn. “Why, there goes Pie. You took him in during that snowstorm last winter. Remember?”

He offered Misty’s lead rope to his daughter. “Come on, squirt. Don’t you want to meet her?”

Moxie noticed that the old horse looked bored and sleepy, as if she didn't want to be there, either.

Moxie shuffled over, frowning and kicking up dust with her cowboy boots. Reluctantly taking the lead rope, she stood sighing heavily before her dad as he made the introductions. She did happen to notice Misty's one white sock on her left hind leg.

Her dad noticed the leg, too. "Looks like Misty's lost her shoe on that hoof. We'll have to get the blacksmith over to take care of that."

"Yeah, whatever," Moxie said, glancing at the horse's face. She was surprised to see Misty's brown eyes wide open and looking straight at her.

Then Moxie watched something peculiar. While the horse's left eye stayed open, her right eye closed and then snapped open again.

*Is she winking at me?* Moxie wondered and looked at her dad. But he was busy examining Misty's hoof that was missing a shoe.

Moxie looked back and the little horse did the winking-thing *again* and smiled at her, showing all her teeth. *This is definitely weird*, Moxie thought.

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That night, Moxie huddled under her blanket in bed. She watched her long, lean mother cross the room in a few graceful strides to turn off the lamp. Moxie could hardly wait for the growth spurt that would put her on the road to her mom's almost six-foot height.

"That was a delicious cake you made for my birthday. Thanks, Mom." Moxie reached up to play with the thick strawberry-blond braid that hung down over her mother's left shoulder. "But please make sure Bunker stays away from my cake, 'cause chocolate will make him sick..."

Jane Woodson tucked the light cotton blanket around her daughter. "Now, Moxie Wyoming, I know this birthday didn't work out quite the way you'd hoped," she said. "But give it time. You'll feel better about things in a few days. You'll see." She kissed Moxie on the forehead and left the room.

Moxie pulled an envelope out from under her pillow. She flicked on a flashlight and reread the letter from her grandfather.

Dear Moxie Wyoming,

She may not be much to look at, and I'd have to admit she's even kind of homely. But I promise you that Misty is one special mare. You can't even begin to imagine how this old girl will change your life, even though she's a senior citizen, like me. Just give her a chance and let her into your heart.

Your dad and I figured you were the perfect gal to look after her because you love helping animals. Why, I remember when Bunker arrived at your house, scared to death. And now look at him. What is it you like to call Bunker? A regular love bug? And it's all because of how you took care of him.

By the way, Misty's going to need you as a friend, 'cause I'm sure she'll miss her buddies at the Darwin Ranch. There's Bandit, Misty's son...he looks just like her but light brown, and he's kind of taking over now that his mom isn't around anymore to lead the herd. There's huge Hector, Misty's protector. There's the spoiled peanut butter-colored pony named Heber...

Moxie Wyoming drifted off to sleep, thinking about all the different horses at the Darwin Ranch. In her dream, she did not see Misty, who would have probably slowed her down and gotten in the way. Instead, Moxie sat on top of a beautiful, frisky, golden-colored horse with a white mane and tail, proudly leading the herd across a meadow.

Chapter Three

Moxie Wyoming loved going to the rodeo in Laramie with Pickle Turner. The two had been like brother and sister since first grade, when Pickle's father, Willie, came to work for Moxie's dad at the family's Moose Creek Ranch.

Their first meeting had been memorable. Moxie had filled a glass jar with crickets, hoping to surprise the skinny kid with wild, curly, blond hair. Pickle thought Moxie just wanted him to look at the bugs, but Moxie surprised him by dumping them all over his head.

Instead of yelling the way most kids would, Pickle had jumped up, laughing that the crickets tickled. Moxie couldn't believe Pickle's reaction. To top things off, Pickle had bravely picked up some of the insects and thrown them back into Moxie's hair. That sealed the deal, and they became best friends forever.

Now, Moxie sat in the rodeo bleachers with Pickle and his mom, Carol Turner, cheering on Pickle's older cousin, Sue. They watched Sue Turner race her horse around barrels set up in a clover-leaf pattern. Sue rode a special cutting horse that she had trained to separate cows from a herd of cattle.

More than calf roping, team roping, or bull riding, this rodeo event, barrel racing, was Moxie's favorite. She could imagine herself chasing around those barrels in record time, winning first prize just the way her Granny Rose had done so long ago.

If I just had the right horse, instead of that old Misty, she thought, I could practice to be a real champion. She squeezed her eyes shut. Maybe my wish will come true.

The cheering of the crowd turned her attention back to the rodeo as Sue Turner finished her ride in record time. Moxie Wyoming jumped to her feet. “You know what? I’ve been wishing on my lucky star, my horseshoe, and my rabbit’s foot for a great horse. I’m going to practice riding around barrels every day. And before you know it, I’ll ride in the rodeo and be a champ just like Sue.”

“You’re not old enough, Moxie. You have to be a teenager,” Pickle piped up.

Moxie gave him a stare that would stop a grizzly in its tracks. But Pickle got that look from Moxie at least five times a day, so he was used to it.

Mrs. Turner squeezed Moxie’s shoulders. “I believe you’ve just turned ten—”

“My dad says that’s double-digits,” Moxie interrupted. “So I guess I’m almost a teenager!”

“Slow down there, pardner!” Mrs. Turner said. “You and Pickle—please don’t be in such a hurry to grow up.”

Why do people keep telling me that? Moxie Wyoming smiled just the same.

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After the rodeo, the kids wandered among the different pens and corrals comparing the horses and bulls. They looked through one fence to admire an enormous black bull with deep, dark eyes.

“Don’t stare at him, Pickle,” Moxie giggled. “He’ll give you the stink eye and put a hex on you.”

Pickle quickly looked away. “Okay...”

“Hey, Clem Brown!” a voice called out from a nearby pen. “Why aren’t you on duty, drivin’ ‘round in your fancy new highway patrol cruiser?”

Moxie looked up in time to see a man in a highway patrol uniform shaking hands with two cowboys. *So that's Officer Clem Brown*, she thought, the one who'd called her dad and told him about their broken fence. She nudged Pickle.

"How are you Jenkins boys doing?" The officer smiled at the two cowboys and then spoke quietly. "Hey, what's been happening since that roundup went bad near Rock Springs last month?" Both cowboys looked surprised and uneasy.

The highway trooper went on. "Jeb, I heard you were almost arrested by some sheriff's deputies over that way." Moxie and Pickle's eyes grew big as they listened in.

"Whew! That was a close call," the cowboy in the dusty-brown hat said, looking around to make sure no one overheard. Uncomfortably shifting his eyes away from the uniformed officer, Jeb mumbled, "But hey, big buddy—"

"Don't look so worried, guys," Officer Brown interrupted in a low voice. "I just had a talk with your friend over there, Tony Olsen. He told me we could, uh, *help* each other if you're planning more...well..." The highway patrolman also looked around, but he seemed to be searching for the right words.

Pulling on Pickle, Moxie ducked down, although they could still see the three men through the fence. The trooper went on. "I might be interested in, you know, lending a hand, if you get something going."

Jeb and the other cowboy studied the lawman for a long moment. "Well, well, you do surprise me, Officer," Jeb said in a quiet voice. "So, you know Tony Olsen?" He paused a moment. "We just might be gettin' ready for a new roundup, this time in the Snowies."

Moxie Wyoming jabbed her friend hard in the ribs, and Pickle almost yelped. Moxie quickly put her finger to her lips, showing Pickle he had to stay quiet.

Jeb looked at the cowboy in the charcoal-gray hat next to him, who nodded back. "My brother Frank and I have been thinkin'," he said. "There's one person we haven't found yet—"

"—who could help us," Frank spoke up, but also in a low voice. "If we decide to do a roundup, that is."





Peeking through the fence, Moxie thought Jeb and Frank Jenkins sort of looked tough. Their hats were pulled low over their faces, that were covered with scruffy whiskers.

“Do you guys have enough help for the roundup?” Officer Brown asked.

Jeb laughed. “I’m sure there’d be plenty of ranchers ‘round here who’d line up to join us, but we ain’t there yet.”

“Keep this to yourself, Clem,” Frank said. “We’re buildin’ a corral, not far from Centennial. It’s secret, okay? Nobody knows about it.” His voice got even quieter, but Moxie could certainly still hear. “It’s the perfect pickup spot for our buyer. He’s payin’ big bucks, by the way.”

“Hey, I’m over that way all the time,” Officer Brown said. “Even though I’m new around here, I know the area you’re talking about. How can I help?”

“We’ll let you know right before if the roundup happens, ‘cause if it does, some trucks will be drivin’ to and from the corral,” Jeb said. “That way you can be a sort of lookout.”

Moxie and Pickle couldn’t believe what they were hearing. Anxious, they glanced around carefully, not wanting to be discovered.

“And we’ll pay you good money for keepin’ the nosy neighbors away,” Frank added, covering his mouth with the edge of his hand as he spoke.

“Great,” the officer said. “I could use the extra cash.”

“Remember, don’t talk about this with *anyone!*” Frank reminded him.

“We don’t want to get arrested for makin’ some money.” Jeb smiled crookedly. “Just because some people think we’re breakin’ the law.”

“And you definitely want to keep your fancy highway patrol job, so it’s better if you don’t get caught helpin’ us.” Frank jokingly fake-slugged the officer’s arm. “Get my drift, buddy?”

Wide-eyed over what they had just heard, Moxie and Pickle peeked through the fence right above the back of the black bull. Officer Brown and the two cowboys walked away slapping each other’s backs and laughing.

Pickle rubbed his hands over the goose bumps on his arms. “That sounded scary.”

“They sure didn’t want anybody else to hear them,” Moxie said.

“I’m glad they didn’t see us.” Pickle shuddered. “Are they planning a crime?”

“Yeah, they could be,” Moxie said, noticing Pickle’s shivers and the bumps on his arms. “You heard what they said about breaking the law and not getting arrested. So whatever they’re planning, it must be no good.”

The two stood up, and Pickle shook his legs out nervously. “They were talking about a roundup. What do you think they want to round up?” he asked.

“And a secret corral,” Moxie added. “They said they’re building a secret corral near Centennial.”

“That’s close to *us*...” Pickle’s nervous voice cracked.

“I wonder where exactly, and what for?” Moxie looked around. “Maybe for cows or horses?”

“You mean they’re going to steal someone’s cows and horses?” Pickle asked.

Moxie Wyoming scrunched her face in thought. “Hmmm. Remember, they said other ranchers would probably join their gang. So they wouldn’t steal ranch cows and horses.”

Then Moxie’s eyes lit up. “Hey, maybe we can find out what’s going on and why this corral’s supposed to be a secret. We can be like cowboy detectives!”

Pickle didn’t look very happy about that idea.

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