

Deadly Ride

By Karin Livingston

The russet-red horse exploded off of all fours, skyrocketed three feet into the air, landed, and leaped forward with its head between its knees.

White-railed fence, white announcer's stand, white bleachers, white horse trailers, dead tumbleweeds, and faceless exhibitors rushed past the rider's sight in a blur.

The horse crashed down again on its front feet, and thrust its hind end up in a violent burst of strength. The rider, a lean, sun-streaked blond in a white western shirt, straw cowboy hat, freshly-pressed blue jeans and silver-trimmed belt, gripped the saddle horn with both hands. His lips were clamped together in a grim line, his face pale, his eyes open wide. A veil of dust rose from the horse's hooves. Gunmetal gray clouds hung over the show grounds, ready to dump their load of rain.

"Hang on!" somebody screamed, and all eyes turned from the class in the ring to the parking area. The horse leaped into the air again, groaning like an Olympic weightlifter. It grunted as its feet hit the ground. Then it gathered itself for another buck and launched into the air. Its rider pushed his body from the saddle, flew sideways about

10 feet, dropped down, missing the wood bleachers by inches, and landed on his hands and feet.

Spectators applauded. “Loosen the back cinch!” yelled one of the other riders. The horse ran a few steps and stopped, its sides heaving, chest flecked with nervous sweat. Foam dotted its mouth.

A woman, the mother of somebody else’s child, her own face drained of color, caught the horse’s reins. Everybody looked – and saw the back cinch on the double-rigged saddle. It was tight. Too tight.

“Who cinched that up?” asked the woman holding the horse’s reins.

“I don’t know,” said Seth Olvera, the oldest member of the Poudre River Riders 4H Club. “He’s not my horse. He’s only three. I’m just riding him for the owners.” Fingers trembling, Seth unbuckled the rear cinch. His mount lowered its head and sighed.

“Nice riding, Seth. You could have been killed,” said the woman holding the reins.

“More like nice flying-dismount, Seth,” said another boy, a redhead, who came up and high-fived Jason’s sweating palm. “It saved your butt.”

“Thanks, man,” said Jason.

The sky opened, dumping its load of rain.

“I can’t believe they’re making us do this!” Emma Duncan jammed her finger at The Hayburner article in her hands. Her eyes bugged out at her mother. “Helmets! We’ll all look like idiots! I can just see it now, lovely, oh-so-plastic, bobble heads

zipping around the arena in a Reining pattern. What a joke!” She threw the newspaper article down on the kitchen floor, flopped into a chair, and crossed her arms. “Don’t tell me you were in on this, Mom. Don’t tell me.”

Emma’s Mother, Nina Duncan, felt the sudden urge to giggle. Her daughter’s outbursts often had this effect, that is, if they were of the totally irrational, not-targeted-at-her variety. “I think it’s a good idea, if you ask me,” she said. “I’m the last person to want to see one of my 4H’ers maimed or killed by a head injury.”

“Yeah, but Mom, it’s not the Horse Council’s place to tell us what we can and can’t wear,” she said. “Pretty soon they’ll be telling us we have to go to dorky 4H uniforms at the horse shows, and believe me, if they ever do that, I’m out, period, end of discussion.”

“First of all, Emma, the helmet rule is only a proposal. Nobody’s voted on anything,” said her mother, who was also the leader of their 4H club, the Poudre River Riders. “And second of all, there has been some talk of uniforms ...”

“That’s it!” Emma stood up, ready to leave the room.

“... but it’s nothing serious, right now. The helmet thing, though. Mark my words, you’ll all be wearing helmets a year from now.”

“They should have asked us first,” said Emma, flinging her arms out and gesturing toward the ceiling. “How come they never warn anybody about these Horse Council meetings? How come you didn’t warn me? I’m going to protest.”

Her mother put down the knife that she’d been using to slice tomatoes and turned toward Emma, mouth open. “What do you mean, nobody ever told you? I ask you to go to these meetings with me all the time. You haven’t been for months, and you are, after

all, the club president. Fine, you want to protest, there's a Horse Council meeting day after tomorrow. We're going." She dried her hands on a towel and leaned against the counter, watching her daughter.

Emma inhaled; about to launch into another tirade, but something in the grim lines of her mother's expression stopped her. "Fine," she said in a prim voice. "I'm going. And now, I'm going upstairs to call Aubrey. I'm sure she'll have a few things to say about this."