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Wild Horse

Early September, 1878

Coming down the steps from Dr. McAdams's office to the boardwalk, I could see the unmistakable glare of revenge in Thunder's eyes. He had decided that he would be the one in charge.

A few people were out and about, and though the streets weren't crowded for a Saturday morning, neither were they empty.

"Mighty Thunder," I commanded as I cinched up the saddle even more tightly than before, "we are going home and you will obey me. I am the knight, you are merely my means of transportation. Follow me!" I gave the reins a good tug.

Thunder grunted and stamped his hind feet on the dusty street. He wasn't coming.

My intent was to lead him to a place more private in nature so that I could mount him without an audience watching us. The last thing I wanted was to be the feature entertainment for the folks milling about on that Saturday morning.

"Come on, Thunder. Let's go home." I yanked the reins. Thunder would have none of it. He wouldn't budge. He

shook his head, snorted, and laid back his ears again.

“All right, have it your way.” I was kind of fed up by this point. “Don’t forget, though, that I’m the boss of this outfit.” I decided to go ahead and mount right there. As I was climbing into the saddle, Thunder tried to bite me.

It wasn’t long after I mounted Thunder that I knew he didn’t plan on me having any say about our ride home. He obstinately started fighting me, and when I tightened up the reins a little—I was still trying to show him who was in charge—he rebelled in a burst of gusto.

He bucked twice, jarring my head each time he hit the ground; and then he leaped up onto the boardwalk and galloped about three-fourths the length of the boardwalk before halting and tilting sideways in attempt to throw me off. I pulled back hard on the reins again, and he responded by jumping over the chain between two hitching posts and back onto the road.

By this time, a small crowd had gathered as people were coming out of the stores along both sides of Nebraska Avenue. I was getting advice from everybody. Some of the advice—“get him to stop”—wasn’t really helpful. Probably the most useful advice I heard was, “Hang on, Johnny. Hang on!” That made about the most sense.

Thunder continued bucking and lurching forward for what seemed an eternity but probably was only a few seconds. My arms were aching, my rear end was sore, and my head was beginning to throb with dizziness.

Suddenly, everything stopped. The world was standing still. I heard a man saying, softly but firmly, “Easy boy. Easy. Easy boy. Shhhhh. That’s right. Easy boy. Easy. Shhhhh.” And then he said, “Son, you can open your eyes.”

I opened my eyes—I didn’t realize I had closed them,

and I had no idea how long they had been that way—and saw a moustached young man—older than my brother George but not as old as Pa—in a white cowboy hat standing before me, cradling the horse’s head in his arms.



Thunder had quickly calmed down, and I could feel his tension evaporate even while I sat there in the saddle.

“Who ... who are you?” I blurted.

“Hop down, boy,” ordered the man, ignoring my

question. I immediately complied.

“Your horse here needs a friend,” the man explained. “You two are a team. Yes, you are in charge of the team, but you still have to take care of the ego—the pride, if you will—of the other half of the team. A sugar cube or two, or an apple, can go a long ways toward making this happen. Here, give him this.”

The man handed me a green apple and said, “Now, take good care of him.”

I gave the apple to Thunder, at the same time stroking his head with my other hand. If a horse can purr, Thunder was purring. This went on for a minute or two.

“Mister, thank you for your help,” I said, turning to talk with him. “What’s your—”

He was gone! I looked all around but didn’t see him.

“Hey, did anyone see ...” I began asking, but the crowd had pretty much disbursed, and no one was paying attention to what I was saying.

Thunder and I had a nice, almost cordial trip on the way home. When Thunder and I pulled into the farm yard, Elias was there in the barn, back from the d’Allemands. He saw all the sweat and foam on Thunder—the horse was soaked from the fast, hard trip into town—and he rebuked me for riding Thunder as hard as I did. And then I rebuked him for taking the other two horses that morning and leaving Thunder. And then he rebuked me for not being able to handle a horse like Thunder. And then I rebuked him for no other reason that I could think of, other than I wanted to have the last word.

I wasn’t sure if Pa or the siblings would hear about it. I was hoping they wouldn’t.

The next day was Sunday. We went to church—and I

should have anticipated this—there were a couple of folks who had witnessed the whole thing. They approached me just after we arrived and asked with well-intended concern whether I made it home safely.

I was perhaps a bit defensive, and I responded that of course I had made it home safely. I made the mistake of adding the retort, “and why wouldn’t I?” Well, they described what they saw, accurately portraying the event right there in front of Pa and my siblings and God and everybody. I received some good-natured teasing about my ability—or inability—to handle Thunder.

On the way home, Pa asked, “So ... who was this man who was able to get Thunder to calm down?”

“Pa, I don’t know. I’ve never seen him before. He sure has a good way with horses.”

“It’s unusual for a complete stranger to control a horse like Thunder.”

After that episode, I made it a point to ride Thunder every day I could. With all that attention—and with an occasional apple or sugar cube thrown in when he was well behaved—we were soon famous friends. It wasn’t long before I became his preferred rider. As for the “complete stranger,” well, I would encounter him soon enough, but I wouldn’t realize it until later.