

# Rodeo

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## Chapter 1

Armstrong Texas is not on the main rodeo circuit, despite what its town fathers may like to think. The annual rodeo does collect a large audience from as far away as Lubbock, but the competitors are mostly young men and boys from the nearby towns and ranches, along with a few, a very few, bored-to-death ringers, like me.

The smell of the town is mostly dust. Too far north for watermelon, too far south and west for wheat, Armstrong is poised above an almost-dry aquifer. When there is no longer enough water even for cattle and the grasses they feed on, the town itself will blow away.

Or so the sullen unshaven youth with an earring in one nostril informed me. I'd picked up Mork hitchhiking at the last rest stop. A student Texas at A&M. Mork was on his way home from for a few days R&R. "And to see the rodeo."

Mork liked rodeo, said all the guys in Kappa Phi were crazy about rodeo, too. I asked what event he liked best. He said saddle broncs. I allowed as how that was my event. He said he knew who I was, or, rather, who I claimed to be. He said he'd expected the real Larry Miller would be taller, maybe thicker in the chest, with huge thick-fingered hands like jaws of steel.

My hands are normal size but with short stubby fingers that kept me, thankfully, from being the piano player my mother wanted me to be. Piano players, so I hear, spend most of their time indoors. As long as I can remember,

I've wanted to be a wrangler like my uncles, earning my living working with horses. And despite my hands size and shape, they've been pretty successful at that task.

"They do the job," I said to Mork, though I wasn't sure my hands were still capable of being all they used to be. I'd had a couple of bad falls recently, and might fall again that weekend. Oh, Lord, let my horse be a mean one and my ride last the full eight seconds. This is the cowboys' prayer.

Armstrong, the way the kid explained it, consisted of exactly four families who had married and intermarried so many times that everyone was related to everyone else. "Only everybody thinks they're better'n everybody else, so the Armstrongs look down on the Thompsons, the Thompsons look down on the MacDonalds, and everyone looks down on the Daniels."

"What are you?"

"I'm a Thompson. We're the best."

At one time, everyone in Armstrong had been dirt poor; then, the great Nebraska aquifer had been discovered and all of a sudden everyone was getting rich on irrigated land.

"But the water's gone, now." Mork's slumped shoulders and woeful expression proclaimed him part of a generation cheated. "No one took time to put back what they were taking out."

The once-rich aquifer explained the shopping mall and the two new housing tracts that greeted us on the edge of town and the frenzied spirit of self-promotion further in. But just like me and my career, Armstrong would be dying soon.

The town itself was more or less what I expected—Woolworths's, Sears

catalog store, Armstrong's Seed and Feed, a half dozen elderly men on benches whittling outside the bus depot which doubled as a coffee shop.

According to Mork, every second person I ran into ought to have had a cleft lip or some kind of deformity, but the men and women I encountered on the way from the parking lot to the Fair Grounds all looked pretty normal to me. They also looked pretty prosperous, wearing what the magazines call "leisure clothing" in place of the cleaned-up work clothes which are the norm back home on Saturdays. Even the contestants looked more yuppified than cowboy, though it was good to see they at least carried gear that had seen service elsewhere.

I didn't have much of a reception committee, possibly, I learned, because I was supposed to have checked in at the Fair Grounds the night before. The short blond woman with pinched-in cheeks and a perpetual scowl who sat behind the counter gave a double take when she finally found my name in the file on the table in front of her.

"You were supposed to have been here yesterday," she said.

"Flat tire."

"Mr. Armstrong will want to talk with you," she pronounced ominously as she handed me a numbered armband, a program, and two sealed envelopes. One of the envelopes held a check, the other an invitation to the grand-opening reception the night before. Oh well.

I saw from the program I was down for a 10:30 qualifying ride. I was lucky it hadn't been eight-thirty or nine. Who knew what Mr. Armstrong might have had to say then?

"Who'll I be riding?" I asked no one in particular.

"Riviera Red." The man who'd spoken up quietly from the rear of the booth was a dwarf, his features barely on a level with the head of the sitting woman.

"If you'd been here for the draw, you'd have known that," she said.

The dwarf put a large freckled hand on her elbow as if to calm an unruly horse, but I'd already stopped paying attention to the two of them. "Riviera Red." I'd heard the name before, maybe a couple of years ago, but nothing recently. He'd made his riders look good, the one or two that had lasted the distance. I hoped he'd do the same by me. I hadn't been looking good for a long while.

With fifteen or twenty minutes to wander about the grounds, I thought I'd see if I could rustle up some kind of breakfast. The motel had provided free doughnuts along with the coffee, and I wished now I'd taken two doughnuts instead of one.

Trying to decide between French fries, where the line was long, or flannel cakes, where the line was longer, I almost walked into Memphis Bill. Bill was doing his best to look nonchalant while drooling over a gangly young woman with an unruly mop of orange hair. I'd heard Bill'd been gored by a steer in Amarillo about a month and a half before. If so, then he, too, was probably in Armstrong to see if he still had what it took on the main circuit.

I wasn't sure if Bill and I were still friends—we'd had our outs, mostly over women a bit older than the one he was flirting with. Still, he gave me a wink over the young woman's freckled shoulder and I knew we'd be exchanging a few words by and by if not an actual handshake.

The flannel cake didn't last more'n one or two bites; just as well; better to ride on a near empty stomach. I put my saddle down near the entrance to what

would later be some kind of exhibition and seated myself on it as if about to ride into the arena. Riviera Red. Did he hook left or right? Or maybe both ways at once while backing up against the fence? My goofy foot drew back sharply, dragging the spur along the flank where Red's imaginary shoulder would be, then shot forward quickly into the air, while I hooked back with my right.

"Writing love letters in the sand." shouted an old man interrupting my thoughts. His rooster-like cackle ended abruptly as his wife dragged him off toward the main arena. "The young man doesn't appreciate your sense of humor, Henry."

"You practicing?" a twenty-five year old's high-pitched voice asked before I could refocus my thoughts on my upcoming ride.

The man wore a yuppy outfit, the kind a Neiman Marcus sales clerk would think today's cowboy is wearing, kerchief at the neck, dust collar and all. Must of being hotter'n hell.

I thought of telling him to go to hell, but that wasn't exactly the kind of warm fuzzy the Armstrong people expected me to bestow in return for the check and the invite. Instead, I gave him a totally insincere smile and asked if he were a competitor too.

He fairly glowed all over, like a girl whom the captain of the football team just asked to the senior prom. "Bareback," he said, "All the folks back in Fox's Bend are routing for me. You're Larry, Larry Miller."

Did he want my advice or my autograph? Either way, I wasn't going to get a chance to practice before my ten-thirty ride. I stood up, dusted off the saddle and swung it over my shoulder. The greenhorn trailed after me as if he'd gone

from prom date to steady.

"I'm a bareback rider," he said to my shoulder.

I grunted.

"My first time. Well, third or fourth. First time in a regular rodeo though. I do pretty good. You think saddle or bare-backed's easier?"

"Different strokes for different folks," I told him and gave him that celebrity smile again.

"I guess you're right," he said. Asshole.

The stands were crowded; not much to do in Armstrong on a Saturday. The tall young fellow in gray-green work pants, gray shirt, and a gray Stetson who'd just finished a desultory ride on a worn out bronc got a hell of a roar from the crowd. "Armstrong's own Tom Thompson," the announcer said, which may have explained their interest. Tom-Tom's score of 65 met with general disapproval; too low for the crowd, too high as far as I was concerned.

10:25 am. Magically, Memphis Bill appeared just as I was about to tell the too-eager would-be rodeo star from Fox's Bend that I preferred to cinch up myself. I don't. I like to make the initial adjustments, checking the length of the stirrups, making sure the bind straps are tight enough to keep my thighs pulled in when I make that initial pass with my spurs, but the man on the ground has a better angle when it comes to the final pull.

Memphis Bill moved about calmly, double-checking what I'd already done. I don't think we exchanged more than a "thanks." Throughout, Riviera Red remained calm and passive, too passive, beneath me. Not a good sign. Fifty percent of a man's score is the horse. Too dull a mount and no one will care how great the rider is; you can stay on top for 80 seconds or 800 years for all

the judges care.

Still, I couldn't or wouldn't relax. Off the main rodeo circuit, the Brahmans may move a little slower, the broncs don't buck quite as high or as hard. But there's always a chance one or more of the animals will have a special day, a morning or an afternoon when it chooses to go plumb crazy.

(And if and when that happens, the homegrown rodeo clowns won't get there in time. Oh, they'll make the effort, inexperienced horses with inexperienced riders, trying desperately to guide a frantic animal back in line. Just the bad luck for the rider on the ground to be stepped on by one of the rescuers along with the horse that originally bucked him.)

Quickly, I cleared my mind of the negative image. Instead, I saw myself on the reviewing stand accepting the reward as World Champion Cowboy, felt the championship buckle at my waist, flashed back to the ride that had made it all possible, Riviera Red and I moving as one.

The leather thong came alive in my left hand as I measured it out along Riviera's mane; the leather knew I wanted to hold it and gripped me tightly in return. "Tighter," I called to Bill, and he gave a final yank on the rear cinch just as the chute opened and Riviera Red leapt into the arena.

My spurs shot forward along Riviera's neck and then up, over his head as we burst out of the chute, Riviera bucking every which way as he sought to prove he wasn't that sick, or that tired, or that old. I was feeling good, eyes focused on that slight patch of white hair, dead center on the margin of Red's forehead, knowing whatever Red did, I was part of him, I would ride him till the end. Then he stumbled; I could almost feel the pain as a previously injured foreleg gave way beneath him.

They say my ride looked to be a perfect one: Legs up high on entry. Cowboy floating free in the saddle, the leather in his left hand almost his only point of contact, his raised right hand waving to the crowd.

Then it was all over. Riviera was down on his right foreleg and I had the choice, slung over his left buttock, of letting go, or getting crushed in his collapse. I swung out and hit the boards.