

IF AT FIRST...

by
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Chapter 1

Brad Hastings opened his eyes slowly. Even that small movement sent a stabbing pain from his forehead to the back of his neck. Through blurred vision, he discovered this was a hospital room and there was someone seated near a window a few feet away. The form rose and approached the bed, leaning over to look into his eyes.

"Hey, Bud. You awake? Talk to me." It was Doug's voice.

"Dad? What happened? Why am I here?" His father gradually came into focus when he backed away with a look of surprise on his face.

"Dad?" Doug chuckled. "You ain't called me nothing but 'Doug' since you was ten years old!"

This topic was never openly discussed between the two. With his father slipping in and out of their lives throughout his rodeo years, Brad automatically became the man of the house in taking care of their small horse ranch with his mother. Up to age twenty, when Brad himself became a professional bronc rider, his role in the family consisted mainly of keeping Doug out of jail and trying to keep him moderately sober when he came home for a few days between shows.

Brad struggled to recall why he was in a hospital. It must have been a car wreck. He and Doug were supposed to go fishing near Paul Gorman's cabin. That much he remembered. Then what?

Doug stepped forward again and placed his hand on Brad's arm. At five-eight there was little family resemblance between the two men except for the Hastings' red hair and blue eyes. Doug's square jaw, thick neck and wide back in no way resembled Brad, who was tall and broad shouldered, with slim hips, more like Grandpa Hastings.

"Did we wreck the truck, Doug? Is Skeeter okay? What about Smoky?"

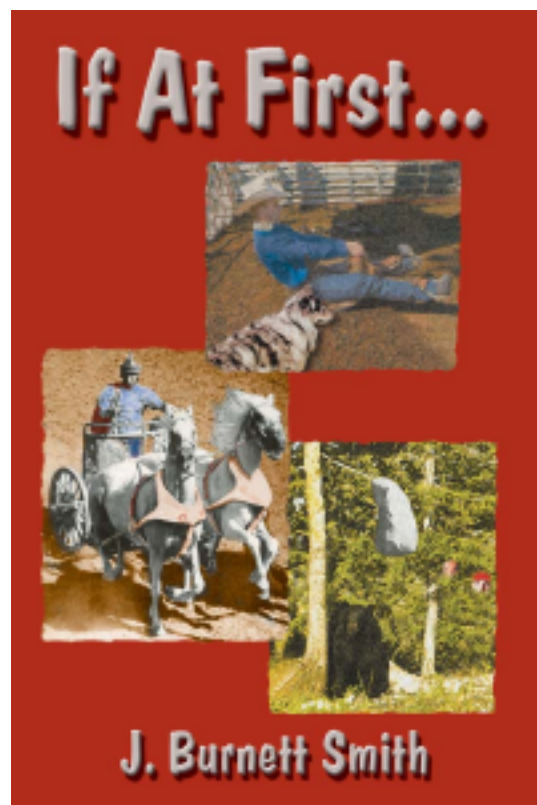
Doug seemed to choose his words carefully. "No, Bud. No car wreck. My roping horse and your Aussie dog are okay. You had an accident in the saddle bronc riding..."

"Oh, come on, Doug. You know I don't ride broncs any more. What's the real lowdown?"

Doug went back to the window and retrieved a chair. He pulled it next to the bed and sat down. He seemed reluctant to answer.

"Well," Brad asked impatiently, "what really happened?"

Doug seemed relieved when a blonde student nurse peeked through the doorway and smiled in response to seeing the patient awake.



"I'll get the doctor." She disappeared as quickly as she had emerged, but not before Brad saw the room number on the door. Number 23. Small hospital? Not 123 or 223. Just plain 23.

"Quit stalling, Doug. Give me some answers."

Brad would have recognized Doug's pained expression as a reluctance to answer had he not been in so much discomfort himself.

Another reprieve for his father intervened in the person of a small, bespectacled doctor who rushed into the room as though a brain transplant patient awaited him in the operating room.

"So!" the doctor exclaimed in a high pitched nervous voice. "How's my patient this morning? Ready to get back to your broncos, I suppose."

The man's sarcasm came as no surprise, so Brad remained silent. This attitude was familiar from past years when Brad was rodeoing full time and he or one of his friends found themselves under the care of a "civilian" medical man. For some reason quiet a few doctors seemed to resent caring for patients who, in their collective opinions, went out of their way to put themselves in danger. There also was the added fact that in the past, amateur riders generally were not covered by medical insurance. To hospital personnel this apparently made the recurring episodes even more unacceptable. What this doctor probably did not realize was that even the amateur rodeo hands were now offered the opportunity to buy medical insurance, and members of the Professional Rodeo Cowboys' Association were actually required to do so.

One thing Brad could not fathom was why the man referred to "your broncos." Since his retirement from the

rodeo business at the ripe old age of twenty-seven, when he became a small town deputy sheriff in New Mexico, Brad had no aspirations to return to competition except for an occasional team roping event with his father.

The doctor impatiently took Brad's blood pressure, listened to his heart, peered into his eyes and ears as though searching for signs of anything tangible, such as a brain, inside his skull. Before skittering out of the room, he prescribed a pain reliever in response to Brad's obvious discomfort at the not-too-gentle probing.

Brad wanted to elicit some answers from Doug before the nurse arrived with the sedative but again the grilling was delayed. This time it was their friend Tooley who came bursting into the room and rushed to Brad's bedside. A small red faced Irishman with graying hair and pale blue eyes, he was dressed in his usual off-work wardrobe of coveralls, baseball cap and hiking boots. Tooley always leaned forward at an eighty-five degree angle when he was in a hurry, like he was climbing uphill. In his haste, he slammed into the bed with a thud.

Brad flinched.

Even in times of stress, the way Tooley's mouth curled up at the corners, he generally seemed about to laugh out loud. This time his face showed only concern.

"Brad. Sorry I couldn't get here sooner. Had to work the night performance. Talk to me, Son. What happened?"

Tooley was a former rodeo clown/bull fighter who now performed with three Australian Shepherds in an act displaying the dogs' ability to manipulate twenty or thirty sheep around a rodeo arena. To all who knew him, Tooley, whose real name was Sean O'Toole, distinguished himself primarily by his unintentional habit of completely butchering any expressions and/or proverbs he attempted to quote.

Brad looked from Tooley to Doug and back to Tooley.

"Why don't one of you fill me in? Where's Smoky? What the hell's going on?" His head began to throb again. Smoky, his Australian Shepherd, was from the same litter as Tooley's performing dogs and the two of them were almost never separated except in an emergency situation.

Brad caught the puzzled look exchanged by the two men.

Doug was the first to speak. "Remember signing up for bronc riding at Bear Claw, Colorado, don't you, Bud? You claimed you might as well give it a try if you was gonna travel with me for awhile..."

"Broncs? I don't understand! What happened between our trout fishing and this hospital bed? You're not ribbing me are you, Doug?"

"Sure not, Bud. It's a true fact. You and me was gonna team rope and since we're here anyway, you decided to try the saddle broncs just for the hell of it. This show's too small to be sanctioned by the Pro Rodeo Association and all the stock is local..."

"That right, Tooley?"

"Right as rain, Son." Strange that Tooley always referred to Brad as "Son," even though their only relationship was based solely on many years of friendship and Brad's closeness to Tooley's daughter, Angie. This was in contrast to Doug always calling his son "Bud."

"You knew this stock weren't too tough," he continued, "so I guess you wanted to test their air. Don't know why you'd have some gunsels belting you down, though, the way these range-land broncs are likely to go over backwards in the chute. You were lucky to get out of there in a nick of time, especially with some yahoo helping you that don't know what he's doing."

Brad was so preoccupied with this puzzling turn of events, he was barely aware of the nurse's presence until he felt the prick of a needle in his upper arm and almost immediately experienced a warmth permeating his body from his arm to his other extremities. Relief from the pain in his head was welcome, but he still fought complete unconsciousness. There were too many unanswered questions.

As he drifted to the edge of total blackness, Brad was aware of the conversation going on between Doug and Tooley.

"Doug, you got any idea who the hell that joker was that was beltin' him down today?"

"Not a clue. All I heard was his name. Stokes, I think someone said. He's in a room down the hall. Brother's there with him."

"So what happened?"

"Seems that bronc reared over backwards in the chute and instead of pulling Brad out of there, this dummy just hung on and they both ended up under the horse! Lucky they weren't killed."

"How bad was the gunsels hurt? Did you ever hear?"

"Not bad enough, I'm sorry to say. If his brother didn't watch him every minute, I'd go over there and knock the shit out of him myself. Somebody like that oughtn't be allowed around the arena."

"Well, you can't always judge a book under the covers. If this was a pro rodeo, he wouldn't have been allowed. Even then, why would Brad let him...?"

Those were the last words Brad heard before he was completely swallowed by a wave of darkness.