

Winning Bet

By
Karin Livingston

Saturday afternoon Emma Duncan licked her fingers gloomily and decided Bonnie, the 8-year-old mare from you-know-where would only waste a perfectly good entry fee.

The 15-year-old crumpled an empty French fry carton and stuffed it into the drink holder of her lawn chair.

Emma rose on long, slender legs and sauntered across the sun-baked show grounds to the office of the Cottonwood Saddle Club.

Marge, the show secretary, looked up from the counter inside the faded wood building used for a show office and pulled out her book of entries. "Again?"

"Yes, again," said Emma.

"But ..."

"No buts. We're done." The girl slouched against the counter as the woman drew a line through the words "Emma Duncan" on class entry pages.

"Everything?"

"No, we'll stay in the gymkhana," said Emma. "If nothing else, you can run, horse," the young rider said to herself.

"OK, you're all set," said Marge. The heavysset woman shook her head and frowned. "With all your scratches this week and last, I'm going to need a new pen."

"Sorry, Marge," said Emma. "She's just being a bi...a brat, you know? I'm going to change."

The girl trudged across the grounds and climbed inside the horse trailer dressing room.

Emma pushed a loose strand of dark blonde hair out of her eyes, and began changing into a pair of jeans.

The girl climbed out of the horse trailer and flopped into her lawn chair. The teen looked around. Exhibitors had been here since dawn. Lawn furniture, tack trunks and horses clustered around horse trailers. Emma slumped deeper into her chair and watched as Western Pleasure began.

The teenager sniffled.

“Why are you crying?” The question came from Aubrey Shepherd, Emma’s best friend. The wiry, dark-haired girl put down her pen and reached out to touch Emma’s arm.

“Hah!” Emma sneezed.

“No, just dying.” she exhaled. “The cement plant is probably finishing me off.”

“Really.” Aubrey looked at Emma over the top of her glasses and tried not to smile. “I didn’t know the killer cloud traveled quite this far.”

Emma thought about the poison cloud that had been in the news lately. For the moment it made a good excuse to complain.

“I doubt it,” said Emma. The teenager sighed. “It’s this stupid cold. I’ve had it all week.”

“Ignore it,” said Aubrey. “Remember, this is fun. You’ve got a great horse.”

“Yeah, right.” Emma kicked at the dirt. “If I had known it was going to be like this ...”

Emma remembered that day five years ago, when she first saw her horse Bonnie. The bay mare stood in a pen surrounded by drooping, rusty barbed wire. When she saw the humans, the horse nickered. Emma could still picture the liquid brown eyes -- which she now suspected contained no brain behind them -- and the velvety nostrils that quivered as the little horse greeted them. The girl also noticed a rough coat and the shadow of ribs along the horse’s sides.

“Hello girl,” Emma had said as she greeted the horse, a carrot in an outstretched hand. “You’re looking a little skinny.”

A metal water tank pitted and streaked with rust served as the horse's feed bin. Emma looked over the fence into the feeder. The mare picked through alfalfa hay once green, but now ruined by gray mold. Emma sniffed and crinkled her nose. Moldy hay reminded her of stinky sneakers. Watching the little horse eat the damaged hay tugged at Emma's heart.

"I've got to have her, Mom," said Emma, turning to Nina Duncan. "She's a winner."

"I don't know, Emma," said her mother. The woman's sharp eyes searched her daughter's face. "This mare is green broke and you know what they say: There's no worse combination than a green horse and a green rider."

"I'll work hard on her Mom, I promise." Emma wrung her hands in her mother's face, half-joking, half-serious. "Please?"

Emma's mother, Nina Duncan, knew how to get fast action when a horse's well-being was at stake.

Two hours later, the owner of the mare, who had not bothered to be on hand for the first visit, signed the brand inspector's certificate and handed over the Morgan's registration papers. Bonnie Blue was on her way to a new home.

The wind interrupted Emma's fond memory and yanked a yellow ribbon yanked from the sun umbrella. The gust flipped the satin rosette through the air and sent it to the ground. The bedraggled award landed between Emma's dusty boots. Emma eyed her size-10-and-still-growing feet with dismay.

"Mom's wrong," the girl thought. "I'll never grow into these, and I'll never win."

Emma leaned out of her chair and picked up the fallen award. The teen tried to breathe and snorkeled instead.

"Sounds great," said Aubrey.

"I'll live," said Emma. The youngster flicked a sand-colored strand of hair out of her face and reached up to re-hang the yellow ribbon on the sun umbrella. "That is, if something good would hap..."

The sound system screeched. Emma and Aubrey covered their ears.

“Fix the feedback!” somebody yelled. “Get a decent system!”

Dust behind her caught Emma’s attention. The girl turned to see her 10-year-old brother, Sam, pulling on his horse’s lead line. The horse pulled back.

“All I wanted was for Billy to bow,” said the redheaded boy. “The stupid noise spooked him.”

Sam’s mop of hair fell into his eyes. The boy tried to pull his horse to a stop. “Whoa, I said. Whoa, Billy.” The horse moved closer to the sharp edges of the white trailer. An angry blush worked its way up the youngster’s freckled cheeks.

Emma untangled her long legs and pushed herself out of the lawn chair.

The sorrel horse pulled back some more.

“Watch out, Sam!” Emma reached out to help her brother.

Billy saw Emma coming at him. The horse raised his head and rolled his eyes. The sound system screamed again. The gelding rose to his hind legs. Billy’s front hooves whipped through the air.

“Whoa, Billy,” said Sam. “Easy. Whoa!”

The boy clung to the lead rope.

The horse felt Sam’s weight on the end of the line. Billy dropped back down, and pulled back. The boy’s horse backed straight into Bonnie, Emma’s sleek bay Morgan mare.

“Whoa!” ordered Sam. “Stop it, I said.” The boy pulled harder on the lead rope and dug into the ground with his heels.

“Quit pulling!” said Aubrey. “You’re scaring him and he outweighs you!” Emma’s friend threw down the 4-H horse record book she had been working on and jumped up to help, but it was too late.

Sam’s gelding crashed into Bonnie. The horse’s hindquarters smacked the mare’s chest. Bonnie pulled back on her lead. The mare’s rope came free, and the horse spun away in a cloud

of dust. Bonnie's iron-shod feet tossed up bits of gravel.

The screeching feedback stopped.

Sam and Billy stood, breathing hard, but safe. The clatter of hooves on gravel caught the boy's attention. Bonnie trotted toward the street.

"You've got to stop Bonnie, Emma!" Sam pointed as cars zoomed by on the street.

"Bonnie, whoa!" Emma lunged toward her own horse.

The horse snorted, trotted a few steps away, and stopped.

Emma stopped too, trying not to spook her horse by moving toward her.

The ribbon that held Emma's sandy blond ponytail came undone. The girl's hair fell loose around her face. Strands of it floated into her eyes. Emma glared at Bonnie out from under the sun-streaked tangle.

"Whoa, I said." The teenager glared at the horse.

Bonnie lifted her head. The white crescent moon on the horse's forehead stood out as if it just painted. The mare stared down her nose at Emma and pawed.

"Now you ..."

The announcer interrupted Emma. "Loose horse, we have a loose horse in the parking lot," he said. "Sorry about the feedback, folks."

Emma chewed her lip. "We know we have a loose horse," the girl muttered. "So glad you noticed."

Bonnie trotted a few steps away. Emma moved to follow.

A low voice cut through the chaos.

"Emma, don't chase her."

Emma stopped.

Bonnie stopped. The horse swished her tail once.

A tall youth with sun-streaked hair appeared near the trees that flanked the river.

The voice belonged to Seth Olvera, who two days ago had walked up to her while she

was working at her family's stable. Walked up, that is, just as Emma backed the tractor into one of the arena fence posts, snapping it in two. The girl blushed at the memory.

Seth's deep tones continued. "Easy, mare. Easy," he said.

The young man shoved his hands into the front pocket of his jeans. His muscular arms flexed under a white T-shirt. He looked down and gently ran the toe of his boot through the gravel. Seth watched the horse out of the corner of his eye. "Just hold it right there. You're not going anywhere."

Emma watched Bonnie flick an ear at Seth and stand. The girl wondered where Seth had come from. One minute he wasn't there, the next he had appeared.

"Whoa, mare." Seth continued talking to the horse. Bonnie lowered her head. "That's it. Easy."

The mare snorted softly.

Nobody moved. It was almost as if Seth froze them into place with his unruffled presence and soft words.

The speakers cracked though the air. "Will somebody please control their horse?" said the announcer. "White trailer, bay, the loose horse is a small bay. Looks like it was standing by a sorrel horse and a big Paint tied to the trailer. I repeat: your horse is loose."

A man followed by a woman in a large-brimmed sun hat ran across the parking lot. Emma watched her parents out of the corner of her eye.

Nina Duncan's red hair and the large straw hat flapped behind her. Emma's father, Ray Duncan, breathed hard behind his bushy mustache. The man struggled to run in his cowboy boots and large body. The adults stopped when they saw the scene before them.

Bonnie snorted and tensed.

Emma's father spat on the ground. The man stared at Bonnie and the children surrounding her. "Well, this looks just great. Chalk one up for the Poudre River Riders 4-H Club," he said. "This is what you've been teaching them, Nina?"

Emma's mother scowled. The youngsters cringed. Ray Duncan continued. "Emma, did you have this horse properly tied?" The big man's eyes narrowed.

"Well, I..."

Moments ago, Aubrey had tried to save her from this. Emma could recall the entire scene in vivid detail. It started when Aubrey tossed away a bologna sandwich gone limp in the sweltering heat. A swarm of bees rose from the trash can. The insects hovered and buzzed for a few seconds, then settled back into the garbage.

"Yuck," Aubrey had said, wrinkling her nose.

Emma's friend turned from the trash and saw Bonnie. The horse stood half-asleep at the trailer, her eyes nearly closed. The mare's lead rope hung loose, threaded through the metal tie ring on the trailer, but not tied.

"You know, you might want to actually tie a knot there," Aubrey had said.

"It's boiling out here," Emma had replied. "Bonnie isn't going anywhere." Emma had squinted into the glaring sun. "No normal person, or animal, wants to go anywhere."

Bonnie apparently didn't understand normal.

Emma looked at her parents. The girl could not meet the quizzical stare of her mother or the accusing glare of her father.

Emma realized how stupid this must look, especially for a Level Three 4-H rider.

"Real stupid," said her father. It was as if he read her mind, and when her father said it, the observation hurt worse. The man's scowl darkened. He knew Emma was holding something back.

Ray Duncan's eyes hardened when he noticed Seth standing nearby. The older man folded his arms and sized up his new target.

"Hello, Seth."

Ray Duncan's greeting sounded like an accusation.

"Sir."

“You have a hand in this?”

Seth’s eyes flashed. He looked down, but not before Emma’s father caught the flash.

“No, sir,” said Seth. “Just got here.” The boy continued to study the ground.

Silence stretched between the tense cluster of people until Emma’s mother broke in.

“Not now, Ray ... Not now. It’s all right, Bonnie, whoa,” said Mrs. Duncan in a low voice. The woman smiled softly. The horse flicked an ear.

Emma’s father frowned, but remained quiet. The man prepared himself to catch Emma’s horse by flexing at his knees and holding his arms straight out on either side. Emma thought it looked like her father planned to block the horse with his body.

“Dad, don’t scare, her,” said Emma.

Emma’s mother answered. “She’s not going anywhere. Are you, Bonnie?”

The mare flicked her ears at Nina Duncan, who continued talking in a low voice.

“What are you loose for, you big silly?” crooned the woman. “Now you just stand there and let your girl catch you.”

In the same soft voice, Emma’s mother gave the girl instructions. “Emma, walk up to her quietly now, like you’re just strolling by, not trying to catch her.”

Emma steadily moved over toward the horse. The girl slid in next to the mare.

“See Bonnie,” crooned Nina Duncan, “you don’t want to be away from your friends, do you?”

The mare dropped her head and sighed.

Emma picked up the lead line. “Thanks, Mom.”

“Don’t mention it,” said the woman. “Looks like you got the worst of it.”

Simultaneously, Emma remembered her hair and the fact that once again, she had outdone herself in front of Seth.

“Thanks, Seth,” said Emma. Pulling strands of hair behind her ears, the girl looked over her shoulder, a half-hearted smile in place.

“He’s gone,” said Emma’s father. “I swear that boy acts sneaky. I wouldn’t be surprised if ...”

“Ray, I don’t think we need to talk about this now,” said Nina Duncan. The woman’s lips formed into a smile, but her eyes narrowed in warning.

“You know it’s ...”

“Later, OK?” Emma’s mother walked over to ruffle Bonnie’s forelock. “No more she-nanigans, little horse. You’ve used up all your luck for today.”

The mare butted Emma with her head and nuzzled the teenager’s pockets in search of a treat. Smiling, the girl pushed Bonnie away with an elbow.

“You big dummy.” The girl’s gentle tones took the sting out of the words. “You know better than that.” Emma stroked the mare’s neck

Ray Duncan broke up the reunion. “Emma,” said her father. The man’s voice dropped to a low threat. Emma gulped and looked at him. A muscle in the man’s jaw ticked. Ray Duncan sucked in air through his nose. He clamped his teeth together.

“Sorry?” Emma thought an instant apology might fend off a lecture.

“I’ve told you...”

The public address system interrupted them.

“Our judge just finished placing Pleasure. The loose horse is secured, thank you very much,” said the announcer. “People, please control your animals. Let’s keep it safe out there.”

A pause followed, along with the sound of somebody shuffling papers. “And now back to our events. We’ll move on to the Keyhole Race. Tricia Slater will be up first, with Louise Dane on deck, Emmaline Duncan in the hole. Aubrey Shepherd, be thinking about it.”

“Oh, great,” said Emma. “I would be up front! Since when did they start the speed events?”

The girl pressed her palms against her temples. Emma looked at Aubrey and her brother. The youngsters stared back, their mouths half open. They knew Emma’s temper was about to

blow.

"Why didn't somebody tell me? I'll never be ready." Emma kicked a large rock.

"Ow! Agh!" Emma jumped up and down. The girl held her horse with the left hand and her hurt foot with the right. Emma stared everybody down. "Don't say it. Just don't say it."

Aubrey dared to speak.

"They did just tell you about the speed events, and hey, it's not like we haven't been showing all morning...or recently busy," said Emma's friend. The girl picked up her 4-H record book and brushed it off. "Don't be such a whiner," said Aubrey. "Come on, I'll help you."

Sam held up a hand, palm warding off his sister, as if he were protecting himself. "Don't look at me," said the youngster. "I'm busy. Billy and I have some talking to do." The pair walked off toward the river and the trees.

Mrs. Duncan took her husband by the arm. "We'll watch you from the arena," said Emma's mother. "Come on, Ray. You need to cool down."

Ray Duncan tossed Emma a threatening look.

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Aubrey took Mrs. Duncan's cue to separate Emma from her father. The petite girl pulled on Emma's arm.

"C'mon, Emma. We need to go."

Emma groaned as they walked back to the trailer. "Did you see my dad? What's the use? I'm a condemned woman."

A trilling voice interrupted her misery.

"Oh, Emma, they're calling you! Better not be late...again."

Caitlin O'Connor rode into view. The curls of the girl's bright blond ponytail bounced under a pink visor. Caitlin boasted fitted jeans and a cornflower blue tank top.

Emma tried to shrink inside the body she lovingly thought of as "the stick".

“Miss Diplomatic strikes again, I see,” said Aubrey.

Caitlin snickered. “On second thought, it probably won’t matter.”

Emma’s rival ruined her fashion model smile with a leer. “I see you’ve already had an event, of sorts,” said Caitlin. “Genghis and I are going to win anyway, because it’s my birthday. By the way, I get my drivers license tomorrow.”

“Spare the world, Caitlin,” said Aubrey. Emma’s friend planted her hands on her slim hips and glared up at Caitlin. Aubrey’s dark eyes flashed. “Can’t you see we’re busy?”

“Well, I was just teasing and I was going to offer to help,” said Caitlin. “I can see I’m not needed.” The girl tossed her curls, and passed Emma and Aubrey on her horse.

“Give it a rest,” said Aubrey to Caitlin’s back. “We don’t have time.”

Emma and Aubrey didn’t see the other girl’s mouth quiver. Caitlin put the back of her hand to her mouth.

“Nobody’s getting to me,” said Caitlin to herself.” The girl gritted her teeth. Caitlin let her hand drop, and looked out over the show grounds. “Not today. Not any day. How dare they!”

The rejection stung. Caitlin bit her top lip, and looked for something, anything to take her frustration out on.

The girl saw a lime green riding crop dangling from the saddle horn. The angry teen grabbed it and reached back to slap her sorrel Quarter Horse on the rear. The gelding skittered forward with his ears pinned back and trotted off.

Caitlin yanked on the reins.

“Slow down, you stupid idiot,” said the girl.

Sam and Billy had returned from their “talk” in the trees. Sam watched Caitlin’s actions. “Man, if the Humane Society were here, she’d be sorry,” said the boy. An angry flush crept up Sam’s neck and over his freckles. “I ought to turn her in myself.”

From a distance, Caitlin’s horse Genghis tossed his head and laid his ears back.

“Slow down!” Caitlin jerked the reins again.

The horse slid to a stop on the gravel.

“Not only is she the meanest thing on two legs, but that girl is also a fool,” said Emma.

Bonnie’s owner sniffled into a tissue and pocketed it. Emma turned toward Bonnie, stroking the mare’s silken neck. The horse nuzzled her pockets, first the right, then the left.

“Quit it, Bonnie. That tickles,” said Emma. “Aubrey, toss me that bridle.”

“Ay, ay, Captain, right away. I’ll get the saddle too,” said Aubrey. “Hey, did you hear about the 12 saddles stolen from Sage Creek Outfitters? I see Caitlin’s got a new-used gymkhana saddle.”

“Wow, 12 saddles, said Emma. “That’s going to cost somebody. I hope they have insurance.”

Emma frowned. “Do you think Caitlin stole her saddle?”

“Oh. Nah,” said Aubrey. Emma’s friend handed over the bridle. Aubrey set the pad and saddle on Bonnie’s back. A few seconds of silence passed. “It would be a little too obvious, don’t you think? And what would Caitlin need with a stolen saddle?”

Emma didn’t hear. Talking about Caitlin made Emma brood. The girl noticed that the first-place blues of the morning hung in Caitlin’s truck, not hers.

Emma wished her father had said yes to a second horse. The handsome red Genghis could have been Emma’s. “But of course, no,” thought Emma. Bonnie’s owner had seen Genghis advertised on the Internet by a ranch somewhere in Texas. It didn’t ease Emma’s suffering to watch Genghis do everything right while Bonnie relished a good prank.

Caitlin knew how to dress. Caitlin had a body. Caitlin showed up early.

Emma thought to herself. “I’m doomed. Why does she always get to me?”

“Maybe Caitlin’s just mean because they’re going bankrupt,” said Aubrey.

Emma started. “I hate it when you do that,” the girl said to Aubrey. “How did you know what I was thinking?”

Aubrey shrugged.

Emma untied Bonnie, and the horse moved closer to the girl. With the crown of the bridle in her right hand, Emma used her left to guide the bit on to Bonnie's tongue. Emma took care not to clank the bit against the mare's teeth.

Emma thought out loud. "I thought The Livery, as they call it, was renting out horses right and left. Caitlin's dad, Aidan, seems OK. Who says they're going bankrupt?"

"Oh, everybody, said Aubrey. Emma's friend looped the latigo strap to hold Bonnie's saddle in place. "That is if you call Mark and Seth everybody." Emma nodded. The sons of the local newspaper owners usually knew the good gossip.

"Well, if that's true, how can Caitlin be on a \$15,000 horse?" said Emma. Bonnie's owner remembered the expensive asking price on Genghis.

Aubrey nodded toward Caitlin sitting mounted on Genghis at the arena rail. "Maybe Caitlin's horse didn't cost that much. He's sure worth it, though. Look at his build. It's awesome." Aubrey shook her head. "I think I'll stick with Mark and Seth, though. They usually know what they're talking about."

"Well yeah, if you can get Seth to say anything," said Emma. "He hardly talks to anybody. He just disappeared after we caught Bonnie. Did you notice? I've never seen two more different twins."

"Well you can ask Seth the next time he comes out to the stable." Aubrey said this with a knowing grin.

Emma blushed.

"No, you should ask tall-dark-and-handsome Mark the next time he comes out, or have you already been talking to him at The Hayburner?" Emma knew that Aubrey found lots of excuses to visit the weekly newspaper.

"Seth has a lot more going for him than his brother," said Emma. "But hey, who am I to say?" Emma stared at the river trees as if Seth would suddenly appear.

“Louise Dane you’re next, Emmaline Duncan on deck,” said the announcer. “Emmaline Duncan, to the gate please.”

“Hey, anybody home?” Aubrey knocked on Emma’s head. “They’re calling your name.”

Emma shook her head and reached up to unbuckle Bonnie’s halter from around her neck. The bay mare nickered softly, and butted Emma.

“Stop it, Bonnie. We don’t have time now.” Emma pushed the mare’s velvety black muzzle away. The horse sighed and stood still. “That’s more like it,” said the girl.

Sam led Billy over to them. “OK, Billy and I had a little walk in the cottonwoods and we got it all worked out. He apologized.”

“Really,” said Aubrey. “I didn’t know horses could talk.”

“They have their ways,” said Sam. Sam nodded wisely. “We’re going to try the bow again. You want to watch?”

Emma rolled her eyes and turned on her brother.

“Oh, that’s just a wonderful idea. I have all sorts of time.” Emma almost spat out the words. “It’s your horse’s fault that I’m in trouble with Dad, anyway.”

Sam looked crestfallen.

Emma relented. The girl shook her head. “Just not now, Sam. I’m late.”

Bonnie’s owner unfastened the buckle, and let the halter fall against the side of the trailer with a clang.

“Emmaline Duncan. Emmaline Duncan, now please,” said the announcer. “You will lose your turn.”

Emma groaned.

"This always happen to me."

Aubrey bit back her urge to point out that Emma always waited until the last minute. It shouldn't be any surprise that bad luck followed.

Emma's longtime friend leaned against the trailer with her hands in her pockets. Aubrey watched Emma yank Bonnie's cinch tight. Emma's friend shook her head. Bonnie kicked out a hind foot and turned her big, dark eyes on her owner. The horse nipped the hip pocket of Emma's jeans.

"Oops. Sorry." Emma spoke to Bonnie. "I'll be more careful."

"Good thing Mom didn't catch you, or you'd be getting the lesson on cinching," said Sam. "Or maybe Mom would kick you out of the 4-H club."

"Not," said Emma, sticking her tongue out at her brother.

"Mom doesn't put up with any back talk," said Sam. "And then she'd tell you, 'Always check your cinch how many times? Three.'"

Sam held up three fingers, and put his other hand on his hip, just like his mother. The boy batted his eyelashes.

"Hah!" laughed Aubrey. "You better hope your mother doesn't see you doing that, Sam. And in case you'd forgotten, Emma, I still have to do my bridle."

The girls looked at each other. Dirt streaked Emma's sweaty face. Through wild locks Emma saw Aubrey's dark hair escaping from its ponytail in electric ringlets.

"Oink!" They said it together.

"We must be twins separated at birth," said Aubrey.

"Yeah," said Emma. "My parents say stuff at the same time, too. Thanks for the help."

"No problem," said Aubrey. "But get going!"

Emma vaulted into the saddle. Just then, her mother came around the corner of the trailer.

"I thought I'd better check." Mrs. Duncan took a hold of Bonnie's reins. "Where is the helmet that's supposed to be on your head?" Nina Duncan's green gaze pinned Emma to the

spot.

"Aw, Mom, do I have to?" Emma added a note of disgust to the complaint. "It makes me look like I have a mushroom for a head."

"Get off that horse right now and get it," said Mrs. Duncan. Emma's mother clamped her jaws together.

Emma sighed the sigh of one resigned to death. "But Mom, nobody, let me repeat, nobody, wears them. I'm late already."

Nina Duncan said nothing. The woman just looked at Emma.

The girl rolled her eyes and dismounted. Emma climbed back into the horse trailer tack room. The teenager searched for her helmet.

"And Louise Dane, nine-point-nine seconds in the Keyhole Race," said the announcer. "Emmaline Duncan, Emmaline Duncan. Where are you?"

Emma made a note to tell her mother never to enter her under "Emmaline" again. The girl rummaged through the upper bunk.

There it sat. The ugliest helmet in the world. Big, white, and truly stupid.

"About time," said Emma, as if the helmet had been hiding. The girl slammed it on her head. A piece of Velcro holding a pad caught in Emma's hair. It pulled. "I hate you too," the girl said to the helmet.

Emma closed the plastic catch on the chinstrap, leaped out of the trailer, and hit the ground running. Her mother silently handed over the reins.

"Thanks, Mom."

"Don't mention it," said Nina Duncan.

"Emmaline Duncan, No. 313, you have a one-minute gate call," intoned the announcer. "I repeat: you have a one-minute gate call."

Mounted again, Emma squeezed Bonnie forward. The mare sensed her owner's hurry and tried to pick up a lope. Emma sat down more firmly in the saddle and gave the reins a

slight pull. The edgy horse slowed. Emma knew the saddle club rule: Stay at a trot unless you were in one of the two arenas. Emma jogged Bonnie through the parking area. The girl waved frantically to get the gatekeeper's attention.

"I'm here! I'm here!" Emma pressed Bonnie into a faster jog.

Emma's father had been watching for her. Ray Duncan stepped away from the arena rail and blocked Emma's way.

"Late again, I see," said Emma's father. "Do you know how many times they called your name?" The man folded his arms across his chest. Ray Duncan pulled his dark brows together and glared at Emma.

"You know what last-minute-itis leads to." Emma felt her father's icy eyes bore holes into her. "Disaster."

Emma gulped. Bonnie snorted.

"Sure, Dad, but not right now," Emma said, looking away. The girl swallowed hard. "It's my turn."

Ray Duncan stepped back and Emma passed him on Bonnie. The mare shied near Emma's father.

"Easy, girl. Easy," said Emma.

The girl and horse slipped into the arena as the announcer said, "We'll move on to our next rider...oh, here she is. Emmaline Duncan. Riders, please be on time."

Emma held the reins firmly. Bonnie's ears turned toward the pattern set out in the arena. Bonnie chomped on the bit, and flipped her nose. Emma set her own mouth in a determined line. The girl looked out at the giant keyhole shape created by white hose. Emma doubted whether Bonnie could make a good time without touching any of the hose. Emma knew that at Cottonwood, touches meant disqualification.

"I'll just play it safe and take it slow," she thought.

Emma circled her horse to the left. The girl pressed her right leg behind the cinch,

looked up, and cued for a lope on the left lead.

From her own spot on the rail, near the announcer and grandstands, Nina Duncan watched. “Good, Emma remembered to set Bonnie up,” murmured the girl’s mother. The woman gripped the railing.

Emma could feel Bonnie’s muscles bunch up under her. The pair completed their warm-up circle at the lope and straightened out to gallop to the keyhole.

Mrs. Duncan continued talking. “Left lead, good. Perfect set up for the rollback in the hole. Good. Come on, Emma.”

Emma held the eager mare back as the keyhole loomed.

“Take it easy, girl,” the teen whispered to the horse.

Bonnie raced through the six-foot opening and spun left, putting most of her weight on her hindquarters. The pair returned through the entrance without touching any of the hose.

Competition burned in Emma’s veins. The girl abandoned her plan to go slow.

Bonnie felt the change in her rider and surged ahead. Emma gave the mare more rein and clicked to the horse.

“Yes!”

Mrs. Duncan shouted. People in the grandstands turned to look at the woman. “My daughter,” said Nina Duncan. Emma’s mother stuffed a stray lock of red hair behind her ear. The woman turned back to the horse and rider in the arena.

Bonnie leaped forward on the loosened rein.

“Yeah! Let’s go,” whispered Emma.

The horse added a move of her own. The mare kicked out with her hind legs in a small hop. Emma tipped forward. Bonnie upped the crow-hop to a buck.

Emma started to come off. Bonnie took the bit, plunged her nose down between her knees, and bucked hard.

The horse and rider made it to the finish line. Just before they got to the arena fence

however, Bonnie swerved.

Emma flipped forward. The girl was off. Her mouth opened in a big "O." Emma hit the ground with her head.

Bonnie ran off, still bucking. Halfway along the rail, the horse switched to galloping. The mare flagged her long, black tail. Suddenly, the horse stopped.

Bonnie's head went up. The mare's gaze followed movement across the river that bordered the show grounds. The horse's nostrils flared. People watched as Bonnie snorted and took off again at a dead run.

Ray Duncan gripped the railing. The man shouted at his daughter's horse.

"Bonnie! Whoa, I said! Whoa!"

Emma's father threw his six-foot-two frame over the railing and ran to Emma. The girl lay on the ground in a crumpled heap.