

From their first encounter, Rusty Blackstone and Warren Weston become bitter rivals. When they both turn to rodeo, their rivalry enters a whole new level. Chasing championships and love, they battle to stay ahead of each other.

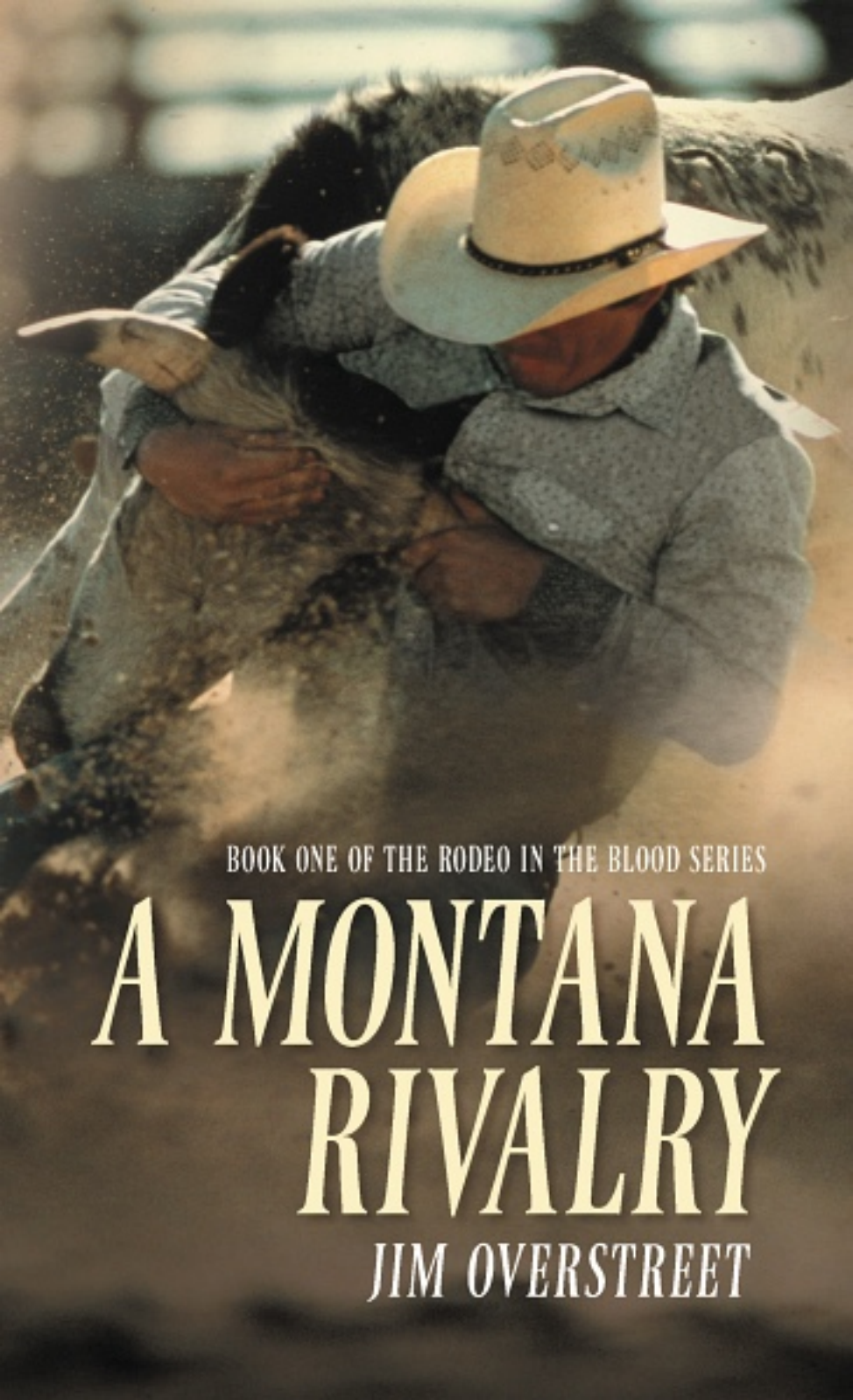
A Montana Rivalry

By Eric Perry

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BOOK ONE OF THE RODEO IN THE BLOOD SERIES

A MONTANA RIVALRY

JIM OVERSTREET

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CHAPTER 19

September 2010
White Sulphur Springs, Montana

Although Rusty had been riding saddle broncs in the high school rodeos for a couple of years, his mom would not let him compete in the other nearby rodeos against adults. As the Labor Day rodeo in White Sulphur Springs approached, he asked her to let him enter. "It's my hometown rodeo. I rode pretty good in the high school rodeos. I qualified for Nationals, and I didn't get to go," he said. "I've been working all summer. I can enter as a local and not have to join the Association. I can pay my own entry fees. Please, please, let me ride."

"I wish your dad was here," Edith said, "These might be a lot ranker horses than you've been riding. Before I say yes, I'm going to have to talk to him. I'm not sure where he is right now but I'll try to call him tonight. If it's okay with him, it'll be okay with me, whether I like it or not."

Rusty knew it would be okay with his dad. "Thank you," he said.

The White Sulphur Springs rodeo ran two days, Sunday and Monday, but the contestants competed only once in their event. Rusty was slated to ride on Monday. He'd drawn a horse named Red Hot. Of

course, he attended the rodeo on Sunday as well. Rusty loved watching rodeo and socially, the rodeo was the place to be on that end-of-summer weekend. Everyone would be there. Plus, Rusty figured he could talk to some of the other bronc riders and find out what kind of horse Red Hot was and maybe a few tricks to watch out for.

The day was sunny and hot, by Montana standards, with no wind, a perfect day for a rodeo. The first event after the grand entry and the national anthem was bareback riding. Rusty had no desire to ride barebacks, but he enjoyed watching none the less. He stood against the fence outside the arena as close as he could get to the chutes. The absolute violence and power as the horses left the chute thrilled him. The second event was steer wrestling. Rusty watched because it was a pretty interesting event, but he didn't feel the enthusiasm for it that he did for bucking horses and bulls.

The first contestant leaped off his horse and threw his steer in 6.2 seconds. Not too bad to start with. The second steer ducked away just as the 'dogger stretched out for him. The man reached back for the saddle horn, but his arm wasn't long enough. With no steer to cushion his fall, he thumped down on the ground, bounced and rolled. He got up slowly, picked up his hat and tried to brush the dirt out of his eyes with the back of his hand. Rusty grinned and shook his head thinking, 'Crazy.'

The third contestant's steer barely got out of the chute before he slammed on the brakes. The steer wrestler's horse charged past carrying his rider to the

end of the arena before he stopped. The contestant had the option of chasing the steer around the arena without benefit of the chute and try to jump off. Too much time had passed already, and he waived off the judge's inquiry.

The announcer said, "Now we have a local man. Warren Weston. He looks big enough for this event."

Rusty did a double take. He knew Warren, in some ways, very well. Although they were the same age, they'd spent more time fighting than being anywhere near civil to each other. Warren was a rich kid who went to a fancy private school back East. 'Counterfeit' was how Rusty would have described Warren's character. I'll bet he rides by, Rusty thought not believing Warren would have the nerve to jump off a running horse onto a horned steer.

Rusty recognized Harlan riding into the hazer's box while Warren rode into the box on the other side. Harlan was an old man, but Rusty had known him since he was seven and they'd always been friends. Rusty felt a little twinge as he realized that Warren also shared a bond with Harlan. Rusty knew that Harlan worked for Warren's father on the Westmont Ranch and probably had to help Warren as part of his job. But it still bothered him.

He watched Warren turn his horse in the box, sit for a few seconds and then nod his head. The chute gate popped open. The steer started running down the arena. Warren's horse charged after it. He and Harlan rode up on each side of the steer at the same time. Rusty heard Harlan bark out, "Jump!" Warren's horse was close and

all he had to do was reach out for the steer and slip down onto him. To Rusty's amazement, he did it and came up with his arms around the steer's horns. As he twisted the horns, the steer took a step back and nearly got away. Warren hung on and managed to reposition himself and throw the steer. The time was 12.7 seconds, not particularly good, but as Warren walked back to the arena gate, he looked triumphant. As Harlan rode out the gate leading the steer wrestling horse, he said, "Good job, Warren. Way to hang in there."

Shit, Rusty thought, if he can do it. I can do it better. It never occurred to him that Warren's large size would give him an advantage. All he wanted to do was beat him.

During the night, between Sunday and Labor Day, a thick layer of clouds moved in and by morning the temperature was in the upper 30s and a fierce wind was driving small, scattered droplets of rain in a sideways drizzle. Rusty's younger sisters, Ruby and Corinne, insisted on going to the rodeo anyway to watch their big brother. Edith wrapped them up in waterproof jackets with hoods and took along several extra pairs of dry mittens. "No," she told the girls, "You can't go with Rusty. He has too many things to do. We have to just sit here and watch." The crowd was sparse, mostly the contestants' friends and families huddled together in small groups.

Rusty talked to his friend Benny, a former high school champion, who was three years older and who had been riding in rodeos all summer. He said that Rusty's horse, Red Hot, was generally considered the

hardest bucking horse in the rodeo string. He had only been ridden once all summer. "If you can ride him, you're probably going to win," Benny said.

Rusty took a deep breath at the news but didn't say anything. He thought, I'm going to give it a try. He may throw me but I'm not just falling off. He's going to have to buck me off—big time. "How much rein do you give him?" he asked.

Benny said, "I don't know. Let's go find Smoky. He's the guy who got to the whistle on him this summer."

Rusty threw a raincoat over his bronc saddle and stood in the tiny lee of one of the posts that held up the announcer's stand that rose above and behind the bucking chutes while he waited for the horses to come in. A man with his hat pulled low and a yellow rain slicker snugged up around his neck, said, "Hey Rusty, I thought maybe you could use a little help getting on your bronc. He's a real buckler."

"Harlan," Rusty said. "I can always use a little help from you."

"You probably didn't know. I rode a few bronses in my day."

Rusty felt heartened as they stood together in silence for a couple of minutes. He hadn't realized that he'd been feeling kind of awkward and alone until Harlan made things better. Among other things, it was nice to know that Warren hadn't caused Harlan to like Rusty any less. Finally, Rusty said, "Harlan, will you teach me to bulldog."

“Check with me in about a week. Warren’s headed back to school and we’ll still have our steers for a while. We’ll set up a time. It isn’t something you learn overnight, you know.”

The horses came up the alley from the corrals in back and turned into the line of chutes. As the horses moved forward, gates closed behind them, locking each horse in a separate space. Red Hot, a rangy bay with the identifying number 151W branded on his hip, shifted restlessly in one of the middle chutes. Butterflies rioted in Rusty’s stomach as he grabbed his saddle and headed for the horse. He climbed up the fence and set his saddle down on Red Hot’s wet back. Harlan fished the cinches from underneath and helped Rusty tighten them around the horse. The bay sucked in a breath and expanded his rib cage against the cinches. “We’ll come back and tighten them again, in a minute,” Harlan said.

Rusty leaned over the fence and slipped the leather bronc halter over Red Hot’s head, buckled it and then pulled the buck rein back over his saddle. He measured a full hand width plus two fingers behind the swells, plucked out a few strands of hair from the horse’s mane and slipped them under a strand of the braided buck rein to mark the spot where he would hold when he rode. Smokey had told him to just allow a fist behind the swells, but Rusty figured that his arm wasn’t as long as Smokey’s, so he’d gone with a little extra.

Third in line, Rusty thought about his coming ride. Harlan said, “This horse comes out high and fast. You’ll want to start reaching with your feet as the gate starts to open.”

The first rider had drawn a strawberry roan and rode him to a score of 72. The second rider fell off on the third jump away from the chute but stood up quickly, covered with mud. As the fallen rider walked back, Rusty stood over his horse with his feet in the space between the second and third rail, one on each side of the chute. He had the rein in his hand gripped just above his mark. He watched until the pickup men got control of the loose bucking horse and then he slipped down into his saddle. The butterflies were gone, and it was business only. The gruff-voiced arena director said, "You're next kid."

As Rusty leaned forward and worked his feet into the stirrups, the announcer said, "Our next contestant, Rusty Blackstone, will be a senior in Meagher County High School starting next week. I watched him at several high school rodeos this spring. He rides pretty good but today, he's drawn the toughest horse in the pen."

Focused on getting ready, Rusty didn't hear the announcer's words. He leaned back deep in the saddle, tucked his chin, lifted the rein and said, "Outside."

Red Hot reared and spun as the gate opened. Rusty reached high and planted his spurs in the horse's neck, mid-leap. As the bay's front feet hit the ground, Rusty braced against the stirrups just long enough to avoid plummeting forward. He released, dragging his spurs back along the horse's sides. This pushed his knees against the saddle's swells while Red Hot rose in the air and flew ahead. As the horse's drop began, Rusty whipped his feet forward. When the horse's hoofs

planted in the dirt, Rusty again braced briefly in the stirrups. He felt the strength of the horse test him almost to the limit each time those front feet struck the earth. Time and again, he stayed in rhythm with the animal's leaps even when the horse whirled back and then away.

To the onlooker, this battle of strength and timing seemed much more graceful than it felt to Rusty. The violent dance appeared coordinated and elegant from a little distance away. Then unexpectedly, Red Hot slipped in the wet dirt, skidding briefly on his knees. Although the horse didn't fall completely, his motion broke the rhythm. Energized by the near crash, Red Hot leaped forward stronger than before. The elegance in the ride evaporated and Rusty found himself tumbling alone in the air. The eight-second whistle ending the contest sounded before he hit the mud.

That night Rusty's dad called after lights-out. "Chip, he's in bed," Edith protested. "Can't this wait until morning?"

"Oh, forchristsake Edith, go get him. He needs to hear from me now."

Rusty had been lying in bed still awake, thinking about getting bucked off in his hometown, in front of everyone he knew. He pulled his pants on and took the call in the kitchen. "Hi, Dad."

"Well, tell me about it. How did it go today?"

"I got bucked off."

"Actually, I'd already heard that part. I talked with Harlan this afternoon. He told me you made seven and a half seconds of one of the best bronc rides he's ever

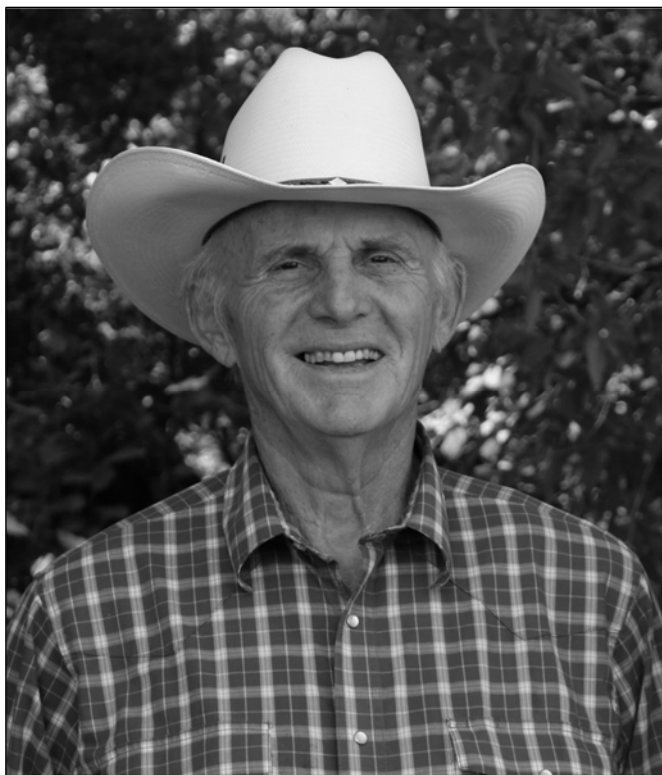
seen. He told me if the horse hadn't slipped and messed up your timing, you'd have won the whole thing."

"Well, I don't know," Rusty said. "He's a strong horse. I tried real hard."

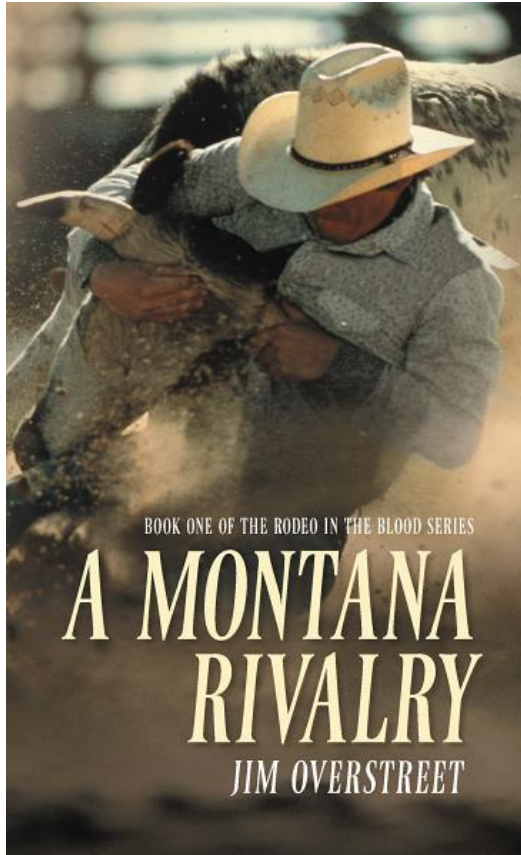
"You're damn tootin' he's strong," Chip said. "You did better than me. I drew him at Butte six or seven years ago. Bucked me off, big time. Red Hot has bucked off more than one World Champion. You done good."

When Rusty finished, Edith took the phone back. She waited until Rusty's bedroom door closed before she said, "Chip, you don't need to be encouraging him like that. He's not a big conversationalist but when he talks, it's all about riding bucking horses. I don't want him to be a rodeo bum."

"Sorry, babe," Chip said. "It's in his blood."



This is the first book in my series *Rodeo in the Blood*, if you enjoyed it, please look for the next book titled *A Montana Inheritance* and join these characters in their next adventures. The third book in the series, *A Montana Feud* is also available. The fourth book in the series, *The Canadian Horse*, will be out soon. In the future, there will likely be others as well.



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