

Heather had used her to get Rimfire to the show. Laura apologized profusely to Nicholas, even though it wasn't her fault, and promised to keep Heather from competing.

"Heather," she called out, but it was too late.

Heather charged into the ring, her whole body tense, her mind on her problems instead of her horse, and her trembling hands clutching the reins tightly. Rimfire tossed his head as he neared the first barrel, trying to release the pressure on his mouth. The reins were too short and pulled the bit back against the bars of Rimfire's mouth, forcing his head close to his chest. He needed to stretch his head out to help balance his body, but Heather refused to loosen the reins.

Rimfire managed to clear the first barrel, and as he aimed for the second one, Laura reached the ring. The instant she saw the pair in the ring, she noticed that Rimfire didn't have his overreach boots on. "Heather!" she screamed, "Stop! Stop! Rimfire doesn't have his boots on!" but her voice was drowned out by all the other people screaming, cheering, and yelling, "Pocket! Pocket!"

Coming around the second barrel, Heather's preoccupation with Nicholas's finding out what she'd done destroyed what little concentration she had left. She couldn't hear Laura, nor did she notice all the screaming. Heather clenched the reins, and as Rimfire tried to curve his body around the barrel, his constrained body position

forced him to stumble. He fell toward the barrel, and Heather's shin slammed into the metal rim. The barrel moved and tilted and almost rolled over but then wiggled back into place. Meanwhile, pain tore up Heather's leg as a small trickle of blood oozed out onto her sock. At the same time, Rimfire's back leg overreached and tore at the bulb of his front heel. He too, felt pain shoot up his leg, but the proud Morgan was in full race mode, and his competitiveness would not allow him to stop.

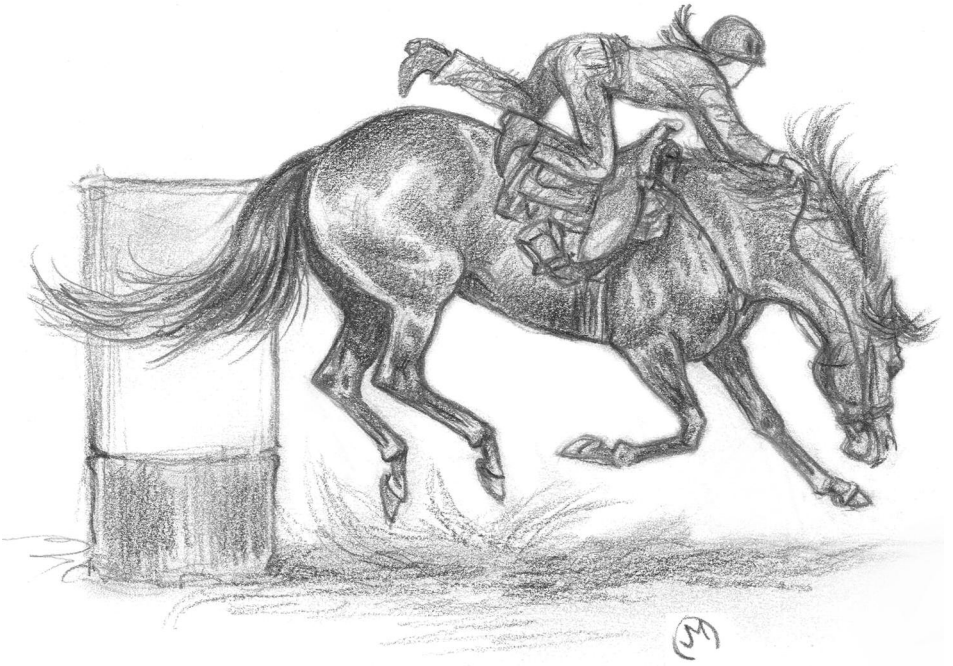
Rimfire took several tumbling steps forward, and the entire audience cringed. Would he fall?

The horse refused to succumb to defeat and fought the urge to go down. He wanted to run! Rimfire struggled to regain his balance and somehow, in mere seconds, he was back on his feet, charging to the final barrel.

"Pull up! Pull up!" shouted several people who could see blood seeping out of the back section of the horse's front hoof. With the roar of the crowd once again at thunderous levels, Heather couldn't hear what they were saying. She continued onward, still clutching the reins.

Rimfire raced around the last barrel, but the pain in his heel was too much, and he stumbled a second time. However, this time, he was unable to regain his balance and fell to the ground, tossing Heather into the air.

Heather flew forward with her arms outstretched, her left hand still holding the reins. As



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