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My dad flew off the big three-year-old gelding buckskin and landed on the rock hard ground with a thud. He and I stared at each other for a moment, him flat on his side in front of the crowding alley and me in the doorway of the old barn on his South Dakota ranch.

"Are you all right, Dad?" Blood poured from a chunk of skin ripped off his nose.

"Well, I think I might have broke nail," he said and held his wrist aloft. It was in the shape of a well-formed S.

Dean Wink has a long history of breaking bones, then waiting too long to go to the hospital. Whether it was the time he broke his sternum, had the bones in his thumb splintered into shards when his horse went down in a bog and crushed it against the saddle horn, or the most recent shattering of his right hand when a cow kicked it against a pipe holding her in the branding chute, he waited a week or two before going. Just enough time to give the broken bones time to heal and be rebroken and set. Even he agreed that we needed to head to the emergency room this time.

The closest hospital was 80

Last December I spent a week on my parents' South Dakota cattle ranch to write and gather information and images for my current novel. I found myself chuckling when I realized that once again I was trotting along at his heels as we walked out to doctor a filly with a torn leg. I was doing the same thing at age 36 that I'd done at six. And I was still loving it.

That day, Dad and I were going to ride in the Breaks, where the flat prairie pours down into rugged cedar and juniper-dotted ravines leading to the Cheyenne River. It had been six months since Lucky (now renamed Bucky) had last been ridden, but he came in from the pasture and took the saddle well. Dad did expect him to crow hop a bit, so he mounted right there in the corral. As soon as Dad climbed into the saddle, Lucky started bucking. He bucked and lunged and spun. Several jumps later, Dad got off to the side. With the next buck, he was down on the ground.

Several weeks later, he wryly told me he was reading a book on horse training and had discovered what we'd done wrong: "We skipped chapters one through 10!"

He eats pain like others eat Wheaties. He has ridden over cliffs on crazy horses nobody else will ride; been caught between a gate and the corral fence and worked over with a 2,000 pound Brangus bull rammed against it all the way up and then back down again; and been rolled over by a horse more times than I could count. After all of which he bounced back up with a smile on his face and a twinkle in his eye. Never once have I seen him do anything more than a brief wince so I knew this was serious. When your dad's a cowboy, you think he's invincible.

Seeing Dad in such pain led me to the previously undiscovered wonders of straight tequila and cigarettes. At one point after a long day of painful tests for him, he was getting an MRI and for the umpteenth time that day I thought I was going to pass out. I lay down on the cool tile floor right there in the office, cheek to the tile, bum in the air.

The doctor turned and saw me and said, "Um, ma'am? Would you mind waiting somewhere else, please?" No problem. I crawled out of the office and into the arms of Jose Cuervo and the

miles away

"You got good tires on this truck?" Dad asked as we flew over the prairie into town, making good time. "I don't have time for a broken wrist," he said over and over during the trip, his arm now packed in ice. When your dad's a cowboy you learn to smile, nod, and put the pedal to the metal.

For as long as I remember I have been trotting at the heels of my Dad's well-worn cowboy boots, bouncing beside him in a dusty pickup, or riding along with him as we moved cows. Whether the ranches were in Wyoming, Arizona or South Dakota, I've frequently been at my happiest helping him with ranch work.

By the time we made it town, Dad could no longer move his legs. An hour later he was in excruciating pain with any movement of his torso, despite a pain threshold that mere mortals can only dream of. Before becoming a rancher 30 years ago, Dad played defensive tackle for the Philadelphia Eagles.

Marlboro Man. When your dad's a cowboy, I recommend them for fainting spells in the hospital.

A separated pelvic done, shattered wrist, internal bleeding--and, one week later, Dad was released from the hospital. His first day home, the yearling fillies got out of the corral. Dad was out there shuffling along with his rolling walker, trying to bring them back in, with Mom following along behind carrying his catheter bag.

Is it any wonder my heroes have always been cowboys?