

THE
BRONCOBUSTERS



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Chapter One:

The Defiant Horse

In the West, cacti grow abundantly while trees remain scarce. The hills become mountains when you are chasing a cow across the Sonora southwest. As the ground clears from the lack of rainfall in the summers, small thickets of shrubbery get so dense it's hard to see where they start and stop. These are the areas where the hardest of wild cows survive and are the most difficult to catch.

My family settled in this valley after moving west with one of the great covered wagon caravans. With Mathew John, the name that was chosen for the first son, a custom was established when we arrived in the United States. Fourteen members of the original Spinhirne family departed from the immigrant ship. My mother has it written in the Bible; each generation writes their part inside the cover. My name is now the last branch of our tree. Most of my uncles died fighting in the war. The last died during a rash of fever that swept through the valley.

The relatives who settled here farmed. Their animals were used for work and running the ranch. Grandpa understood and nurtured Dad's passion for horses. He always said, "You never know where it comes from, or where it goes. The spirit just becomes part of your soul."

He began his taming career at age sixteen. Dad loved the wild cow hunt, so training meant riding a horse and working cattle every day. A tamer's salary was double that of cowhands. He worked hard and cherished traveling the countryside. It gave him time to sow his oats before he married and settled down to raise a family. However, when my grandparents passed, he had to take over the ranch.

Dad paid attention as a young lad to Grandpa's teachings. He knew how to farm, but preferred breeding horses. After few good years of farming, he earned enough money to purchase the southern section of land. It has a vast valley and stream that runs through the bottom. A suitable water source for the animals is essential during the summer months when rain is scarce. The adjacent pasture land is perfect for raising any livestock.

My grandfather worked hard to formulate solid relationships with surrounding neighbors. In return, the property was held for purchase. Grandpa never wanted the property for himself; he had it earmarked for Dad. A grand celebration took place when we bought the acreage. From then on, Dad set his sights on finding excellent bloodlines. One advantage of raising superior animals is they are sought after at auction. A key to producing excellence is good mares and stallions, yielding extraordinary foals. It requires weeding out the mediocre yearlings and only using the best colts for breeding. They are separated and sold at auction. Even Dad's second tier brought premium prices. His reputation spread far and wide. The tedious part, however, was maintaining superb bloodlines. Any breeder needs to retain a plethora of choices. Dad preferred to acquisition his stallions during late spring. That's when the horses are out of the gangly stage and becoming mature adults. The choice was a personal decision.

The new colts that are born replace the older stallions as they age and their fertility fades. During the last several years, finding acceptable replacements has been difficult. Our old stud, while still dominant at his age, raised concern. One Sunday afternoon toward the end of March, we got word a neighbor had a renegade colt he wanted to sell. The alert set forth was Dad's cue. We took a drive, and it was love at first sight. He found the perfect addition. His name was Rebel, and for obvious reasons, it suited him.

We had several maiden mares ready for breeding in the spring, and the black stallion complemented them. I still remember the day we brought him home, tied to the buckboard, ears pinned and every muscle tense with anger. Dad loved the high-spirited horses. Raising cattle was a dangerous profession and required a hardy mount to survive.

Most of these steers never see humans, except during the round-up. The bulls are territorial and will defend their domain. There is an unexplainable rush chasing wild cows across the desert on a horse with a mind of his own. The drama increases when an angry cow chooses to protect her young in the midst of driving the bull. High alert and fast-paced is an understatement, and this life is not for everyone. It took a long time to determine my role as a tamer. It wasn't until the day we brought Rebel home that my true destiny surfaced. The fire and drive in his soul fueled my passion.

We had our work cut out for us that year. Rebel had to be under saddle and working cattle before the breeding season ended. If his talents didn't match his heart, then producing foals was pointless. Unlike most men, Dad learned his training skills as a tamer from the Indians. The colts took longer from the start, but the results were incredible. Cowboy ranchers spend most of their time alone on the range. The idea of riding a broken horse surpasses my idea of comfort. When started correctly they will stand and fight when necessary.

Horses have a sixth sense for survival and reading cows. When a steed is taught to think, he works with a rider, being able to read a bull before the cowhand realizes what happened. The decisions could decide life or death.

Once the stallion's talents are proven, he is used to cover a few mares. The second- string stock are bred first. It will show how well the stallion transfers his genetics. The daunting phase is waiting around for the colts in spring. Winter exceeds my patience; the months are spent pacing the floor. The first ride out is exasperating. The anticipation continues while you ride past the line of trees and thick vegetation bordering the drive. Penned up from the weather, we are eager to stretch our legs. Dad could be aggravating at times, his fortitude solid and stable. When my impatience surfaced, he'd grin and taunt my haste. Then want emerged, and we'd race to open pasture.

The sound of horse hooves brought the herd to full attention. Mares stood alert, and the foals appeared to witness the event. Dad smiled, "Do you see the colt, Mathew?"

"Yes, but how can you tell it's a colt?" I never figured out how he knew.

"Mathew," he told me, "you should know better than to question me." A closer view of the horses proved his initial assessment. The young black horse was the spitting image of his sire. Dad lit up with joy. "We'll come back this afternoon before chores and round these two up."

"Alright," I replied. We finished inspecting the herd and counted about ten new colts on the ground.

Horse taming is not easy, but when the foals are handled at a young age, it lessens the task. That part is called imprinting. We handle the babies daily for a few weeks, then return them to pasture.

Over the past few years, our cattle herds grew, and we were running out of room. Before we started branding or separating for market that year, new pens had to be completed. On our first stock check, we found several calves injured. To treat them, we had to move panels inside the barn for shelter from the weather. Dad put most of the ranch hands to work clearing and sorting while they waited for me to return from town with supplies. He and Walter set off to doctor the hurt animals. One calf we rescued had the worst injuries. The wounds had weakened him, so he laid down much of the day. The prognosis looked bleak, but as long as he had the endurance to survive, we kept treating him.

There was so much commotion from the back pens that morning no one noticed the ruckus in the barn. Mended from his gashes, our young bull escaped his captivity and wandered off, frolicking with the other animals. His antics sent his mother into a frenzy, but unconcerned about his mother's distress, the cavorting continued. As his distance expanded, so did her anxiety.

After the sound inside amplified enough, everything stopped. Cowhands were on full alert. Dad cautiously entered the barn and surveyed what was going on. When Molly's calf did a Houdini, she panicked and tried to break free, wedging her horns in the railing. Her determination to break free caused the commotion. To calm the cranky mother, they had to catch the calf. At that point, it was safer to move the panels. A dangerous task either way.

The men rounded up grain buckets and fed the animals. Once everyone calmed down, snagging the escapee was easy. Since Dad was comfortable at Molly's head, Walter took apart every panel. Nonessential personnel waited outside just in case hell broke loose. Each section had four pins per slot, and removing them was time-consuming.

He finished quicker than anticipated; they were both relieved. Molly stood patiently for the duration, but as the pressure from the panels released, she grew anxious. Dad had her head controlled for the moment, so Walter was able to finish with the pins before she started to fight. But, his foot caught under the feeder as he pulled the last section. Dad had to drop the grain bucket, releasing Molly. She thrashed, swinging her head to break free from the corner. Walter was pinned by the feeder and fought to get his foot loose.

Seconds count when dealing with a raging cow, especially if a calf is involved. As the situation intensified, Molly's aggression grew. Dad struggled to regain control with grain, but the efforts were failing. Coercion drove Molly to shove the feeder forward enough that Walter was able to get his boot freed. As a result, she broke loose and bolted for her calf. Dad witnessed the incident as it played out. He grabbed Walter by the shirt, and the whirling stampede shoved him to the ground, but Walter was safe. Dad's actions saved one man but cost him his own life. He died instantly.

Words cannot ease the pain. The loss was unbearable. Loneliness crept in and made itself at home. Time is the cure for agony. The only consolation was that Mom had passed many years ago, and Dad had missed her beyond description. They were grade school sweethearts and love never fades. Buried on top of the hill in the family cemetery, they could now both oversee the ranch for eternity. The universe stopped for me that day; burial is so final.

As I rode home, the sun set low on the horizon. It turned the sky into a magnificent array of colors. Life is an unyielding partner; it never pauses for our existence, only passing without hesitation. No one should be alone. The loss alerted me to a new appreciation of what my father went through since Mom died. Seasons passed, and time moved forward. The winters were less monotonous. Death has a way of aging people.

Over the next several years the valley experienced a severe drought. We lost numerous animals during the winter. The first ride out in the spring validated our concerns: the green fields were now dried yellow weeds. Our apprehensions built as we rode, seeing no signs of life. It took most of a day to locate the stock. To our amazement, we found them in the southern section, a field filled with rich green grass. Our only conclusion to this mystery was an underground stream or river. We made it through the lack of rain without any further casualties. Alive and well, we breathed a sigh of relief.

My anticipation waxed when the black colt was not present, and the uneasy sense of loss settled in once again. Then a commotion stirred, titillated by suspense, the horses split, and a black stallion with white spots emerged. It was shocking to see spotted coloring in this part of the country. To my knowledge, colored stock came from the Indians. The event was a heart charging experience. Rebel had surpassed my expectations. Exhilaration filled my soul; Dad would have been proud.

Mesmerized by the markings, they shined like a copper penny in the sunlight. His name hit me: Cash. No pun intended, but he was worth every dime spent on the sire. Our silence broke as we rode back to the ranch, the stock healthy and our livelihood safe. It lifted our spirits, and a celebration was in order. Dinner greeted us with smiles and laughter, our hearts gay with opportunity. The next few days entailed health checks and branding the new horses.

We gathered the two-year-olds with ease, but locating Cash was another story. We searched every known hiding spot. With morning fading, the boys headed back while I continued to hunt for him. The foliage was thick, making it impossible to see, so for the second pass I paid close attention to the outskirts. Camouflaged by the greenery, hidden in the shadows, he stood

barring his presence. The delay cost us most of the afternoon, so promptly formulating a plan was imperative.

The cove was perfect for capturing him, bordered by trees and shrubs, and only two exits: one where Cash was standing and the other behind me. The preferred choice was to drive him forward and block any outlets. In this case, the second-best option was to force a confrontation. If he gained his sire's heart, that should be an easy task. This plan was not without risk; incarceration brought on a fight, a wrangle that I deemed acceptable.

We braced for battle. The lasso circled high in the air as the storyline played out. It was mind over matter; the throw had to be perfect. A gentle tug and it firmly grasped the throatlatch. The dally had a snug fit, and the rope tightened for an instant. In the next few minutes, his intentions materialized. The ground shook; the sound of striking feet and gnashing teeth filled the air. I observed it all in slow motion. I prepped for impact, and everything stopped. Silence ensued, and it was a deafening quiet. Nothing moved, just utter stillness.

The suspense kept reality at bay. As the stun wore off clarity stirred, and life resumed. After a sigh of relief, we were still breathing. It took a few seconds before I could peel my hand from the saddle horn. Not one of my brightest moments, but problem solved. After a brief pause, he backed to a safe distance, and we stopped moving until he relaxed. For the meantime, things remained calm but, it was a tedious ride home.

We hit the south pasture with our final destination in sight. I noticed riders approaching; it was getting late, and they must have gotten worried. We were about twenty minutes from the ranch and our trek was almost complete. The minimal cuts and scrapes meant we had a good day.

Once they got close, I signaled them with a simple wave. They backed off and followed behind until we made it home.

We entered through the south side of the pasture leading into the newly completed back pens. Any wild mustang should be confined in a large area to start. They can be handled in a controlled environment. Once removed from the herd, instincts take precedence. It creates a dangerous situation for anyone who handles them, but it's the best setting for training purposes.

All hands were on deck and curious for details. I was itching to tell the tale and engage their eagerness. But, our jawing was interrupted when a buggy approached the house.

“Hold on boys, get the stock settled. I'll be right back,” I said.

The wagon looked familiar. It was Conner, but it was strange for him to come out so late in the day. He was my dad's business partner before I was born. It was hard to see the details, but he had a passenger. My mind swirled trying to remember, but nothing registered. The vision standing before me so captivated my thoughts, only sounds resonated. Their meaning escaped my awareness.

“Mathew.... Mathew?” Conner said. My mind went blank.

After a few minutes of searching my memory banks, it flooded back. An image from fifteen years ago, a twiggy little kid. The girl had grown into a beautiful woman. Her dress a brilliant blue, it glowed in the twilight. Free from any decorations, the material flowed easily over the curvature of its frame. Long locks of brown hair dangled along the nape of her neck, wrapping around the delicate pearl necklace laying against her skin. Like before when I was fighting with Cash, my knees buckled, but there was no saddle horn at my fingertips to balance.

As the conscious ability returned, I realized how fifteen years can change a person. Her mother sent her to a boarding school on the East Coast. She was educated on proper etiquette, whatever that meant. No one person had ever captivated my attention like this beautiful woman. Seeing her brought clarity to the love my parents had for each other. Life alters destiny in the blink of an eye.

I heard Conner say for the second time, “Mathew... do you remember my daughter, Sarah?”

Cotton balls filled my mouth, stopping all speech. The only sound I uttered was, “Uhhhhh.”

She smiled and said, “Hello Matthew, how are you this evening? It is nice to see you again.”

A smile stretched across my face. My gut wrenched, butterflies did somersaults in my stomach, and I felt sweat pour from my skin. My head spun trying to form a response.

“Men endure fierce battles, yet beautiful women bring them to their knees and zap their strength in one fell swoop,” I thought.

The encounter left me stupefied and utterly useless, a single interaction that lasted maybe five minutes. At this point, acknowledging her was moot. Hopefully, my reaction was acceptable.

Suddenly, we heard a crash behind the barn. Thinking to myself this was my ticket to run, someone yelled, “Mathew come quickly, we need your help!”

Thank God for the distraction. The commotion disrupted my chain of thought, and I was able to respond, “Sarah it’s a pleasure to see you again.”

The image of her face stuck square in my mind, a figure firmly implanted.

A well-placed diversion was spotted rounding the corner: Men atop the rail and Cash guarding the door. Horses are herd animals. When removed from natural surroundings the fight-or-flight instinct emerges. They become aggressive when their escape route vanishes. Instincts are what keep them alive. As the seasoned stock was brought inside to grain and stall, Cash found himself alone in unfamiliar territory. His fear forced a confrontation.

The sight of them cowering from this wild beast tickled me. “Alright, boys, come now... you’re not going to let this horse scare you on the fence?” I grinned.

Our skirmish that day in the cove had given me an advantage, and Cash was moved into the subordinate position. I became the dominant member of the herd. Proper taming trains them using their natural instincts. It is the most difficult lesson to understand and stay consistent. Our ranch stock is well trained and experienced with age, so to these cowhands starting a young horse was foreign. In this case, we killed two birds with one stone. School was in session for all parties.

My voice alerted Cash to my presence; he instantly whirled to face me. “Easy boy, come now let’s talk,” I told him.

The best way to minimize a confrontation is to avoid personal space - close the can of worms before a battle starts. The process takes time, and patience is the name of the game. We reached the entrance together, and he surveyed it and gleefully entered.

Cheers of adoration rang out behind me once the catastrophe was resolved. Until today, the men doubted my taming methods. In a way, I questioned my talents and knowledge as well. Since Dad passed, this was my first test as a

ranch owner and tamer. Questions among the crew had surfaced many times over the last few months, and we lost several hands. It was an unforeseeable incident losing the ranch hands. Nevertheless, doubt was squashed tonight.

Feeling confident in my achievement, realization smacked me in the face. The reason I had desperately run for cover still waited in the driveway.

Suddenly, I felt nauseous, “Relax, breathe, deep breaths,” I said to myself.

The distance gave me time to gather my thoughts.

“Sorry for the interruption. Our newest addition is headstrong...” My insolence registered mid-sentence. “Forgive my rudeness. Hello, Sarah, it’s nice to see you again. Can I get you something to drink?”

Her voice cleansed my soul, “Lemonade is fine,” she replied.

Conner left to handle business with the neighbors. We sat on the swing watching the sunset. During our conversation, sadness appeared in Sarah’s voice. Her schooling on the East Coast opened countless doors of opportunity. Society was evolving, and women were becoming more than just nursemaids. Her passion fell into the realm of healing people. She’d been given a grant to enter medical school.

“A doctor,” I said. “Isn’t that a man’s profession?”

She informed me the world was evolving; we didn’t live in the Dark Ages any longer.

“What about children? The responsibilities are demanding,” I stated.

“When did raising a family become the woman’s responsibility?” Her voice became aggravated as she continued.

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