

# One



The ranch sat in a hollow in the land—house, barn, a tin-roofed shed that once had been a bunkhouse. Nearby trickled a creek. The house was low and squat, hunkered down on the line of a low ridge. The barn, on the other hand, was spacious and soaring, with an airy loft that stretched beneath a high rounded roof. Inside the barn was room for a dozen horses, two rows of box stalls on either side of a long concrete aisle. The feed room sat at one end of the barn, the tack room at the other. In the middle was a ladder, leading up to the loft, along with a washroom and two wide doors, set directly across from one another.

The barn doors were open now, letting in the warm spring air, letting out the scratchy thin sound of a radio playing big band dance music, golden oldies from the 1940s. A pair of barn swallows busied themselves building a nest in the eaves, fetching mud and straw from the haystack. The haystack itself was not far away, just behind the barn, alongside a row of long, rectangular paddocks that held horses needing turning out for their exercise. In front of the barn, beside an oval riding ring, a pump dripped cold spring water into a mossy tin trough. A pickup truck and flatbed horse trailer with red slatted sides sat by the house, at the end of a long drive. Far in the distance, across the broad plain, the mountains hugged the horizon in a blue-tinged haze.

It was early morning, the time that has always been best for exercising horses and always will be. A seventeen-year-old boy was in the ring now, riding a roan colt. He was tall and wiry, with rangy limbs and

the clear-eyed look of a boy who was still young enough to believe he knew what he wanted—to believe he knew what was right. He wore his cowboy hat low on his forehead, his flannel shirt tucked into his jeans, his raw leather chaps buckled tight. Just outside the ring a man stood watching. He was tall like the boy and had the same broad shoulders and trim waist. But his face was lined and weathered, his hair stone grey, and he held himself with the rigid bearing of a man who'd seen too much and wished he'd forgotten more.

The colt was acting up, acting unruly. He clamped down hard on the bit, his withers wet, his jaw flecked with foam. The boy put his leg on him, giving him a gentle squeeze, but the colt reacted by taking off, lunging and bucking across the ring. "Get after him, Eason," the man shouted. "Goddamn it boy, use your spurs."

The spurs came nowhere near the horse. Eason rode the colt in an easy manner, his body following the horse's movements with a fluid grace. At last he brought him to a halt. "He just needs more time."

The man shook his head. "You can't always gentle them." But the look on his face had softened. "Try him again."

Eason nodded, put his leg on the colt, and once more the horse took off, skittering across the ring. This time when he brought the colt to a halt, his father wasn't watching. He had his eye on the creek. Eason followed his gaze and caught sight of a girl, riding towards them on the creek trail. He could just make out the blood-bay coat of her gelding, the black mane and tail. She was wearing blue jeans, along with English riding boots and a long-sleeved sweater. Her hair was fashioned into a braid, which hung long and dark down her back. Much of it had come loose, so that from time to time, as her horse picked its way down the creek trail, she reached up with an absentminded gesture to brush the stray strands out of her eyes. Eason gave his father a questioning look.

His father wasn't in the mood for answering questions—or didn't have any answers to give. He shook his head and with a grimace pressed a hand against his hip. Then he jerked his chin at the colt.

"What are you waiting for? We don't have all day."

Eason readied himself, put on his leg, and once more the colt re-

sponded by leaping and crow-hopping across the ring. This time when he halted his horse, the creek was empty, the girl gone. Confused, he cast about with his eyes. The creek bed was wide and shallow, the banks low, affording no place to hide. She couldn't have just disappeared, could she? She couldn't have just been swallowed up by the earth. With a sense of relief that surprised him, he found her standing on the ridge-line that ran between the house and the barn. His father was studying her, too, the grimace on his face deepening to a frown.

"You have some reason for being here?" his father said.

The girl glanced at Eason then at his father. "No, sir." She rode down to them, the dark hair matched by equally dark eyes. "I was just riding."

"Just riding." The older man made no attempt to hide the sarcasm in his voice.

"Yes, sir."

She brought her horse to a halt and crossed her hands over the pommel of her saddle in a casual way—in a way that implied ease, or a sense of belonging. This, as Eason expected, only increased his father's irritation. "Do you know where you are?"

Once more the girl glanced at Eason before answering. "Not really."

"For one thing you're on private property. This is the Swale ranch, my ranch." Eason's father put a hand on the rail, drawing himself up. "I'm Cyrus Swale. Do you always make a habit of trespassing on other people's property?"

The girl shook her head. "I've never been out this far before. But I like it." The wind was blowing down the ridge behind her, and she turned her face towards it, tilting her head. "I like the way it sounds."

"You—what?" Astonished the two men looked at each other.

"The wind. I like the way it sounds." She turned her face to it again, listening. "It's different at home."

Curious, Eason cocked his head and listened to the wind, but all he heard were the familiar sounds it always made—the ones he'd been hearing all his life. There was the faint rattle of cottonwood leaves by the creek, the whispery call of the willows, the keen note of emptiness the wind always conjured when it blew across the plain.

The girl noticed him listening and smiled at him. Her smile made him feel warm, but his father would have none of that. He gave his son a sour look and turned back to the girl. “You have a name?”

“Evie.” The smile withered under his father’s stern gaze. “Eve Glauber.”

“Glauber. Like *The Sun*?”

She nodded.

“Jase Glauber’s girl.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you live there.” He pointed westwards down the creek, towards the city. “In Danvers.”

“Yes.”

The older man considered this. He took his time, his fingers kneading the muscles of his hip. “So you like to ride, do you, Eve Glauber?” he said finally.

Evie nodded again, but with an air of uncertainty this time. Her eyes found Eason’s, but he responded with a slight shrug, as if to say, *Don’t ask me.*

“Then maybe you’d like to ride this colt.”

The remark surprised them both. Startled, Eason turned to his father, who dismissed him with a wave of his hand. “Eason can’t make any sense of him,” he said with an air of nonchalance. “Might as well give someone else a try.”

Eason’s face colored, and he shot his father a look. “Don’t,” he said. He didn’t know if he meant the warning for Evie—*Don’t ride him*—or his father—*Don’t let her*—or both. It didn’t matter. Neither was listening to him. Their eyes were locked on each other as if he weren’t even there.

“Okay,” Evie said.

“Okay—what?” the older man said. For the first time that morning, Eason saw a hint of doubt come into his father’s eyes.

“Okay, I’ll ride him.” She got down from her horse.

This, Eason knew, was the last thing his father had expected. He’d only meant to get rid of the girl—to scare her away. But one glance

at Evie—and the set of her jaw—convinced Eason there was no turning back. They'd both misjudged her. She wasn't the kind of girl to be scared off easily—to be scared off, Eason guessed, *ever*. “You don't want to do this,” he warned her, but he knew it was too late. She was already coming towards him, and there was nothing left to do but hand her the reins.

Evie eased herself into the saddle. She'd never been in a Western saddle before, and it felt strange to her, deeper and stiffer than her English jumping saddle, encumbered by the large horn. Eason's legs were much longer than hers, and her feet wouldn't reach the stirrups. But she didn't know how to shorten them, and didn't want to admit she didn't know. She just slipped her feet into the stirrup leathers on top.

She took up the reins automatically with two hands. All at once she remembered that Western riders reined with only one hand. She let her hand drop, but then she didn't know what to do with it, and it dangled awkwardly by her side. Stupid, she thought to herself. *Stupid, stupid*. She was always getting herself into dumb trouble like this, especially when it came to horses. She'd seen the colt and knew what he could do. She'd never ridden anything as wild as him before. Still there was nothing to do about that now. She'd just have to trust herself to figure him out. She settled herself as firmly in the saddle as she could and turned to the Swales.

“Make him trot,” Cyrus said, his face impassive.

Eason's eyes met hers, and then he glanced away. There was still time for her to back out of this—if her pride would let her. He wasn't about to make her.

She turned back to the colt. He seemed to have lost interest in the whole proceeding. He was dozing lightly in the sun, breathing softly, his eyes closed. Good, she thought, maybe he's tired out. She clucked to him cautiously, and he heaved a sigh and ambled towards the rail. His gait felt odd after her horse, stiff and leggy, his withers narrow, dropping precipitously away. He held his head high as he walked, jerking it from side to side.

“Trot,” the rancher repeated, a note of impatience in his voice.

Instinctively she reached for the reins with both hands, then forced herself to let her left hand drop. She clucked to the colt, a little louder this time, but he just continued his sleepy walk. She tried clucking one more time, and then she put on her leg.

Instantly the colt broke into a dead run, his head down, his back arched, his body twisting and lunging. She tried to pull his head up, but it was no use—the reins were jerked cleanly out of her hands. She lurched backwards then forwards, jamming her stomach hard against the saddle horn, losing her wind. As she gasped for breath—for some way to hold on—the colt charged across the ring, heading straight for the rail. It was a high fence, a good four feet, too high for him to jump. He wouldn't make it, he'd get hung up, flip, or fall, crushing her beneath him. But he was going to try it anyway—she knew it just as she knew there was nothing she could do about it. He was completely out of her control.

Panic rose in Evie's throat. She'd bitten her tongue, and the taste of blood flooded her mouth. She'd lost one of the stirrup leathers. Stupidly, she tried to regain it—reaching for it blindly with her foot—when she remembered the reins. At the last second she managed to grab them and by yanking hard on one side with both hands, turned the colt. He swerved along the rail and back to the middle of the ring. Then he stopped.

For a moment she sat there, catching her breath, swallowing down the taste of blood and bile. Then she bent over and found her stirrup. As she settled herself back in the saddle, she glanced over at the rail. Eason looked like he would be sick, but his father's face was unchanged. "Trot," he said.

This time she ignored convention and took the reins with both hands. She clucked to the colt and headed him towards the rail. Before she put her leg on, she braced herself, gripping hard. She managed to hold the reins for a few seconds before the colt yanked them from her. Then he was off as before, lunging for the rail.

Once again she managed to stop him, but not before he'd scraped her knee hard on the fence. As the pain hit, tears came to her eyes.

Evie blinked hard, fought them back. When she turned to the rancher, there was a faint look of disgust in his eyes. The blood rushed to her face. She took the colt to the center of the ring, gripped the reins with both hands, and readied herself to hold on. Just as she was about to put on her leg, something came to her mind. She'd been wrong about needing to trust herself. What she needed to do was trust her horse. She looked down at the colt. "You want to act crazy? You want to jump that rail? Get us both killed?" She hissed the words at him so that he heard but no one else. "Well, then, c'mon. Let's get on with it. Let's go."

She lifted both legs and kicked the colt as hard as she could, the loose stirrups banging against his sides. Startled, the colt took off across the ring, twisting and lunging as before. But this time Evie didn't even try to stop him. She let go of the reins and held onto the saddle horn with both hands, whooping and hollering the whole way.

They reached the rail. At the last second the colt reared back and swerved. Stunned, he came to a stop on his own. He was trembling, confused. He wanted time to think about it, to figure out what had happened—what had gone wrong—but Evie didn't give in to him. She loosened the reins, kicked him hard, and made him do the charge all over again. The third time she kicked him, he didn't even bother to run. He broke into a stiff, jerky trot. She picked up the reins and rode him a full circle around the ring, trotting all the way. Then she took him over to the rancher.

"He trots okay."

"Son of a bitch." The rancher looked at her for a long time, and then he shook his head.

Evie's tongue was burning, and her knee hurt like hell, but she broke into a grin. She couldn't help it. Her grin widening, she looked for Eason. Only he wasn't there. His spot by the ring was empty, and in the distance, the screen door on the house was flapping shut.