

Chapter One

JOHN BARRON was fourteen years old.

Just.

Yesterday, he thought—I was fourteen yesterday and nothing changed. He wasn't sure what he wanted to change, or how it should change, or even why it should change but he wanted something to change and nothing had and he felt cheated.

He stopped halfway between the house and horse barn and smelled the air, looked at the mountains to the west. It was early summer and summers in Wyoming were hot but it hadn't been hot yet and he wondered if rain would break the cool spell and bring hot weather.

They said weather came from the mountains and it smelled of rain and maybe it would change things.

There it was again, he thought—change. Why did he want it to change? Heat made the sheep stink more and die more and get sick more and they weren't up in the mountains yet—why hope for heat? Four dogs, drawn by the sound of the screen door slamming, came running from in back of the barn. They were border collies—named Pete, Billy, Jenny, and Peg—for working the sheep. They climbed on John and he petted them and ruffled their hair.

He scratched where something had bitten the back of Peg's neck—blackfly, mosquito, tick, or all of them. Once petted the dogs swirled around him, made dust, and were gone.

John was wearing jeans and cowboy boots and a denim shirt and a straw summer western hat and when he lifted the hat there was a white line where the hat kept the sun from burning. The rest of his face was past burned, past tanned—looked like brown leather. He had wide blue eyes and a straight mouth.

He looked exactly like his father. Who was also named John Barron. Who looked like his father had looked when he was young and his father who had started the ranch where they still lived.

The Barron spread, they called it.

They said the old man, dead for thirty years, had come west with a gun and two horses.

"He was mean," John's father had told him on one

of the rare occasions when they talked. "Meaner than nine hells. He just said, this is mine, and nobody dared argue. . . ."

He had claimed nine hundred and sixty thousand acres of Wyoming with nothing but that gun and two horses and a half-broken saddle and made the claim stick, made the Barron spread his and all his.

Then he sent back east for a mail-order bride. Her name was Emma and she tamed him some and then turned as tough as him. She had John's grandfather in the back of the chuckwagon during roundup, was out one day having the baby, and then went back to cooking for the hands and kept John's grandfather in an old dynamite box next to the stove.

The wagon was still there, next to the barn, dried and weathered and not used but sitting there.

All of this John knew. All of this he'd been told and told again, to be proud of it, to know it and take pride in it because it was family pride and that was the only kind of pride to have.

Even though it was all gone.

The ranch was called the Three Bar S now and had all sheep and was owned lock, stock, and barrel by eastern corporations who had taken it over when banks had foreclosed during the Great Depression because John's grandfather had made bad loans and didn't understand how to save money and be mean the way *his* father had been.

The family was still there. They had never left. The corporations hired them to run the ranch, paid the family to stay and take care of things—be caretakers on their own place. But they owned nothing, the Barrons.

And we're supposed to be proud, John thought, looking at the old wagon where his grandfather had been born.

Proud.

Of nothing. Of being fourteen. Of nothing.

"Hey kid, where's your old man?"

John looked to the corral in back of the barn where Cawley was working with a horse. Cawley was one of two permanent hired hands—the other was an old man named Tinckner. Horace Cawley—always called just Cawley—had been with the ranch since before John was born, was probably about thirty-five, skinny with sloping shoulders and almost a perfect half-circle bitten out of the top of his right ear from a bar fight at a rodeo in Cheyenne years before.

"Town," John said. "He's gone to town until evening—left early this morning with Tink."

"Damn." Cawley was leaning against the corral fence—three-inch steel pipes welded to uprights to make a steel circle eighty feet across. He spit tobacco juice in the dust.

"What's the matter?"

"I was going to work on that truck today but I need

plugs and a new fan belt. I should have told him to get the stuff in town.”

“Did he know about the truck?”

“Yeah. We talked about it last night.”

“Then he’ll probably remember to get plugs and stuff on his own.”

“We need the truck to pull the trailer up to the haymeadow. . . .”

John nodded but said nothing and Cawley went back to work.

The truck was little more than a frame with a motor on it—an old 1951 GMC half-ton with the box gone and chains on the rear wheels. It only ran once a year, to pull the trailer up to the haymeadow.

The haymeadow.

John smiled when he thought of it. The haymeadow was in a valley up in the mountains where the Barrons had always summered their cattle. It was four sections—four square miles—of sweet grass between two ridges of peaks, all at and above timberline. With the cattle gone and the ranch in sheep every summer they took the sheep up there and Tinckner would stay in the small shepherd’s trailer—something like a covered wagon with rubber wheels that the old truck pulled up every summer—until it was fall and time to bring them down before the winter storms hit.

Almost three months the old man stayed alone with

the sheep and the four dogs and once John had asked him if it wasn’t lonely up there, with just the sheep.

“Got the dogs,” Tink said.

“Well then, lonely with just the sheep and the dogs.”

“Got the mountains.”

And John knew that if he kept asking it would just keep going. Got the mountains. Got the trees. Got the rocks. Got the elk . . .

John had quit asking. Tinckner didn’t like to talk much and sometimes went days without saying anything at all except to whistle at the dogs. Short whistles that meant go left, go right, take the sheep out or bring them in; all command whistles. John knew some of the whistles, or knew how to do them, but there were many of them he didn’t know. Tinckner could send two dogs out to bring in two sheep, open a gate, close a gate, then separate the two sheep and bring one in to shear—all with whistles.

The dogs were part of him, almost knew what he was thinking.

Chores, John thought—he couldn’t stand around and think all day. There were chores to do. He had to clean the barn, clip hooves on two horses, then start stocking the trailer for Tinckner.

He smelled the air again. Rain.

Maybe it would change things.