

He beat the horse to death. It broke his hands to do it and I couldn't stop him."

Once a month John's father went to her grave twenty-three miles away near the Sidown Baptist Church that wasn't a church anymore but just a graveyard out in the middle of nowhere, on a bluff above a valley. She had loved mountains, his father said, and you could see the mountains from the grave site, spread out wide and beautiful, and he thought she would want to be there even though they weren't Baptists or anything else, for that matter. Once a month he went there and cleaned the grave and put fresh plastic flowers in a small brass vase bolted to the granite stone.

CYNTHIA BARRON

Died in Full Beauty

And the date. He would bring a thermos of coffee and sit and talk to her, tell her things that had happened and once he had brought John to spend the day. John tried to understand but it all seemed vague and after sitting staring at the stone trying to remember her, trying to separate the memories from the pictures he'd seen and the things his father had told him, his mind drifted and he didn't hear.

His father had not taken him again but still went, once a month, and everybody at the ranch was glad he did.

Chapter Two

JOHN BARELY remembered his mother. Long, dark hair and a smile. He was three when she died. She loved to ride and had a horse come over on her backward and she lived for a week and then was not alive anymore and he didn't know much of her except pictures that his father kept and now John wasn't sure if he remembered her at all or just thought he did from the pictures.

He knew his father had loved her. No, that wasn't right either. He still loved her. He had never remarried, though there had been several opportunities.

"He beat the horse," Cawley had said once, sitting drinking Canadian whiskey out of a small bottle next to the bunkhouse. "With his hands. I couldn't stop him.

"It calms him," Cawley said. "You need that with him. They've all needed that, the Barrons—calming. There's that wild blood, that wilding blood in you that needs taming now and again. You'll need it too."

John worked all morning. It took him twenty minutes each to clip the hooves on the two horses—it reminded him of cutting fingernails whenever he did it. One was a mare named Speck and the other a large sorrel gelding named Spud. They were the same age—eleven—and had been his horses, the ones he usually rode, for at least six years. Altogether he didn't know how many horses the ranch had. Sometimes the rich people from the corporation would bring in twenty or thirty—some of them plugs, some good—just to keep them. But the steady herd John thought must be over a hundred. Cawley took care of the horses—he wouldn't work with sheep except to help in lambing and shearing and when they moved them to the high country.

"I hate 'em," he said, and John agreed with him.

"They're stupid and all they do is blow snot all over your legs when you walk through them and stink and die for no damn reason. Cattle maybe ain't much, but they beat sheep solid when it comes to brains. . . ."

Cutting their hooves was just a matter of getting the clippers and bringing Spud and Speck into the stall. They'd done it so many times they would practically lean against the wall and raise each hoof to be clipped.

He trimmed them evenly, mostly so he wouldn't be embarrassed when Al Spencer came to shoe them. Al came every year in late spring or early summer to shoe the horses they were going to use. They let the horses run shoeless all winter in the low country but the ones they used to drive the sheep into the high country—to the haymeadow—had to have shoes to be able to take the rocks. If the hooves were ragged when Al came to shoe them—he was due tomorrow—he would chew on John for it and John would rather avoid the chewing.

Like black butter, the hooves cut. They trimmed in neat little snicks, then he used a rasp to even them off—even though Al would do it again when he came, even them around the shoes so they fit well.

When he was done John gave each of the horses a small handful of oats—they would get their regular ration later in the day—and turned them in back of the barn with the other horses pulled in for the drive into the high country.

He loved the drive into the mountains. The sheep were slow and they went down roads only with persistent coaxing and pushing. It took a week to make the drive, riding in the smell of them—ammonia from their urine, oily lanolin that made everything taste bitter from their skin and the short wool, not grown much after spring shearing. Then there were the flies, hordes of them biting and stinging, swarming on the sheep and horses

and dogs and him. Still, it always reminded John of what it must have been like to drive cattle in the old days. He had never done it—his whole life the ranch had been in sheep and he had only been on five drives. But driving cattle, just the words—*cattle drive*—seemed to draw him.

He had read about it—everything he could get his hands on. And watched old movies. They had a satellite dish and received close to two hundred channels. And he'd learned some from the movies and much more from books but he still could only imagine it. Living in the saddle that way.

His great-grandfather, it was said, kept a horse saddled by the house all the time—even at night while he was sleeping—and wouldn't walk even to the outhouse to go to the bathroom. There were many legends about him—some of them true. He'd ridden out the front of a stampede, ridden them out and turned them when another man would have run for his life or died, stomped into mush.

The barn needed only minor cleaning and he did it with the wheelbarrow and shovel and the thought came while he was scooping up horse manure. A nudge thought.

His great-grandfather wouldn't have cleaned the barn, wouldn't have gone to sheep, wouldn't have—wouldn't have been too busy for his son.

There.

The thought had come before. Not so much a year or two ago, but more often now, and not always when he really expected it except that it sometimes came when he was doing something he didn't like.

When he was studying. He hated studying and had to work at it and his father made him do it and his grades were all right but he didn't like it and sometimes the thought came then: The old man would have spent more time with his son.

Or during lambing. They had to be ready twenty-four hours a day when the lambs came and it took about a week and a half and the whole world seemed to be made of stink and afterbirth and dead lambs and dead sheep and that led right into shearing, so that everybody worked until he dropped every night and John hated it and the thought would come then: He wouldn't have kept so much to himself, would have talked more to his son, his blood.

The problem was, he didn't really know one way or the other what his great-grandfather would have done.

He didn't know that much about him.