

## Chapter Twenty

### DAYS WENT BY.

On the second day after he'd shot the coyote John found a long, dry willow stick and started carving notches, one for each day. There had been a calendar in the wagon. Tink had put it on the wall. It showed a pretty blond girl holding a horse by the bridle chewing on a piece of straw and it was dated 1959. So it wouldn't have been accurate and it didn't matter anyway since the water had taken it on downstream forever.

He didn't count the days so much as want to keep track of how many he was spending in the camp and when he had fifteen days cut in the stick he stopped one morning and realized that he didn't mind it.

None of it.

He didn't mind being alone. Or not alone, but with the dogs and the sheep and the mountains, as Tink would say it. He had at first missed sound—voices, talking, other people, but it wore away in some manner and now he didn't mind so much.

Birds sang in the morning, the sound of the water running by in the creek was almost like music, and he found himself listening more, hearing more. It was almost as if he was waiting to hear something new, waiting to see something different.

And things had definitely changed around the camp.

He imagined himself to be his great-grandfather, or how he thought the old man must have been, and he tried to do everything the way he thought the old man would have done it.

When he did something, he did it to last and did it right. He set the wagon up well away from the stream, even farther than he had it when he first pulled it out of the water, and he put rocks under the wheels so it couldn't move.

He relashed the tarp to the wagon top, stretched it taut, and tied it so the wind couldn't come through.

The inside of the wagon had been a shambles. The water had gutted it, taking even the iron stove nearly out the door. He found all the parts and used a smooth stone to pound the worst dents out of the chimney and by the

third night he had a cheerful fire going inside to cut the chill of the night air.

The lantern had been tangled in the tarp and was not broken. And the five-gallon container of kerosene had been caught up on a snag by the handle so he had plenty of light.

Within a week the inside of the wagon looked almost orderly. The food was stacked in neat rows—still by guess because all the labels were gone—and the bunk was back in place with the mattress dried, the sleeping bag in a neat roll unless he was airing it outside or getting ready to sleep.

At night the rifle was next to the bed—though the coyotes had not returned—and the last thing he did before going to bed was collect dry kindling, small dry sticks of pine or aspen from the stand of trees along the stream, to make a fire in the morning. These he would put beneath the bed and the first thing in the morning he would reach over, still inside the bag, put the wood in the stove over a small pile of shavings, light the fire and heat coffee in a saucepan to have when he got up.

Coffee.

He smiled when he thought of it. It wasn't real coffee but hot water with a small bit of instant coffee in it, just for color and a tiny amount of flavor.

He didn't like it, didn't really even want it, and

certainly didn't need it—but it fit the mornings in some way. So he would put his feet down in his boots and take his cup of “coffee” to the door and sit on the steps and watch the morning start.

Probably, he thought one morning, just like Tink. And he worried that he was becoming a fourteen-year-old, old man. It stayed in his mind for a couple of days but work soon took its place.

And there was plenty of work.

The dogs could herd the sheep, and run the herd, but when problems occurred they came to John.

The rocks tore their feet up at first. It wasn't that there were major wounds—not after the first time. But their feet would get scuffed and rescuffed in the sharp shale on the sides of the valley until they seemed to be running on raw hamburger.

There was no way to heal them while they were running and no way they would stay in camp unless they were forced to stay. What he finally did was work a roster and two dogs would work the herd—a male and a female working in teams—while he tied the other two to the wagon with bits of rope. He would rub ointment on the feet of the two who were “resting” by the wagon—they hated it and wanted to be with the herd—and it worked to switch dogs every two days. Their feet healed amazingly fast and by the second day they were tough and pliable enough to run.



Which meant the sheep had to be herded by only two dogs.

Sheep, he thought, lived up to their reputation of not being terribly smart. Two dogs were not enough to move them when the grass began to get chewed down in a particular spot—which took only hours. The outside edges of the flock would move but that often meant that the inside area would only have prechewed grass to nibble on and it wasn't as good as the fresh, longer grass. And they wouldn't move on their own but would just stay in the center of the herd, eating the poor grass.

And so they had to be moved.

But two dogs couldn't quite get it done. The sheep would start to move, then filter back around the dogs and go to nibbling again.

John would take Speck or Spud—whichever horse was on duty that day—and ride up to help the dogs. He would work back and forth across the rear of the herd and yell and wave his arms to get them going.

"Huh! Huh!" He made a low, guttural sound, almost a bark, and by the tenth day he noticed that the sheep were maybe a little smarter than he thought.

They watched him and if they saw him riding up from the wagon and the dogs started to move them they would take off on their own before John actually rode close enough to make them move.

The next time he tried it he just saddled the horse and

climbed into the saddle and yelled "Huh!" without leaving the camp area.

The sheep moved, or started to move, and the dogs kept them going until they were all in new grass. And the day after that John didn't saddle up but just walked to the edge of the camp and waved his arms and yelled.

And it worked.

They looked like a huge gray carpet sliding sideways. "Huh! Huh!"

And they slid sideways on the side of the valley wall, fully half a mile from John, and then Billy and Jenny, the two dogs working the herd, kept them moving until nearly all the sheep were in new grass.

"Like magic," John said. Four days later he noticed that they started to move before he yelled and he realized they were responding to his arm movements. The next morning when it was time to move them to new grass he merely walked to the side of the camp, faced the sheep, and waved his arm.

Over they went.

Six thousand sheep and lambs, one wave.

"Tink must have known this," he said, watching them move. "And he never said a word. . . ."

There were many things his father, Cawley, or Tink had not told him. It wasn't that they were holding back on him so much as he hadn't asked and they might not have known how to say things if he had asked.

Everything was so beautiful it seemed to be not real, almost a movie. He had always had what he called “pretty country” around him. Raised on the Barron ranch made it automatic.

But it was different here.

Down on the ranch there was outside interference. Man-made things were always around. And he liked them, and thought some of them were nice to look at. His saddle, for instance—something about the deep, rich brown of the oiled leather made it seem that he could see down inside it.

But here it was all . . . clean, clear. Just beauty. The mountains rose on both sides and at the far end of the valley, just shot up, and always looked different. He could look at them for ten minutes, look down, take a step, take a breath and look again and they were all different, all new.

Clouds, high giants of white, slashing storms—they were always new and changed while he watched and their beauty matched the mountains.

Matched all of it.

By the end of three weeks things had reversed and he decided one afternoon to try and find what *wasn't* beautiful.

He was sitting on the side of the stream and had his pants rolled up and his bare feet in the water and he looked around and thought of the last three weeks and tried to think of something that *wasn't* beautiful.

And he couldn't.

Maybe the coyotes, the one that grabbed the lamb—but that was part of it as well, part of the beauty. Even that.

His toes.

He looked down at his toes and smiled and nodded.

His big toes were ugly.

Really ugly.

In all of this, he thought, in all of this country it's my big toes. I've got the ugliest big toes in the world.

He wiggled them and slammed his feet together like a seal flapping its flippers and lay back and laughed until Jenny—Jenny and Pete were tied to the wagon for their foot-off day—looked at him and whined, thinking he was crazy.

“It's my toes,” he said, turning to her. Pete wagged his tail but Jenny studied his face. “They're ugly. Man, I've got ugly toes.”

And, of course, he thought, they didn't get it. Dogs don't think about ugly toes. And that set him off again and for the rest of the day, every time he looked down and saw his boots he would think of his toes and smile.

That night the bear hit and he didn't think he would ever smile again.