

Chapter Twenty-three

HE WASN'T SURE when he saw the difference in himself, or when he started to see it, but a month had gone, then another week, and he wasn't the same any longer.

The camp seemed to be running by itself. He had a ritual. Up just before light, get a fire in the stove, make coffee—he was still drinking it weak and wished he had some tea—and sit on the steps of the trailer and watch the sun come up.

He had never done any of this before—sit and relax and meditate—and now he did it and he would think while he was doing it. Not of work, or what had to be done that day, but just let his mind go and think. Once he thought of his mother, and missed her though he hadn't really known her, and another day of Tink. And

again of Cawley and one morning of the girl in the car when he was at the highway.

With sunup he would saddle the horse he was going to use for the day and slide the rifle into the scabbard and move out to check the herd to see if they had weathered the night all right.

The bear never came back. The coyotes did. They cleaned up the dead sheep and then tried the herd again one night but he shot near one—he'd been trying to hit it and shot wide—and they had all disappeared and he hadn't seen them since.

But sometimes the dogs would become too enthusiastic and keep them in such a tight herd that the inner ones didn't get to good grass and John would use his horse to break them open and spread them out.

All around the herd, looking for bear tracks, then back to the wagon to make breakfast—some mystery meal from a can without a label—and straighten the camp, which really only took a few minutes. He put the sleeping bag out to air, washed any dirty socks or other clothing out in the stream, gathered enough driftwood for the stove for the next day or two and dried it beneath the wagon, put ointment on the feet of the two dogs he kept tied to the wagon, rolled the tarp up on the wagon to let fresh air breeze through (unless it was raining), and then it was lunch. Another mystery meal—he was

amazed at how often he would guess wrong—and after lunch check the herd again.

All ordered and neat and correct and just falling from one day to the next. He kept a count of them, made the marks in the wagon, but he did not miss home, did not miss anything. It wasn't that he wanted to be alone, or that he wanted to be here—he didn't want anything.

A horse, he thought, and the dogs and the sheep and the mountains. That's all he wanted. Or seemed to need.

Just like Tink had said.

But there came a day, when he had forty-seven days marked in the wagon, he was coming from the afternoon check on the herd and he looked back, down the canyon, and far off saw a figure on a horse emerge from the streambed cut, followed by another horse, a pack-horse, and they came moving slowly up along the stream.

At first it was too far to tell who it was and John sat, watching, letting Speck pick her way back to the wagon.

Then he saw the shoulders, and the way the person was sitting on the horse and knew it was his father and he forgot how he hadn't missed anything, how he liked being alone, how perfect everything was, and slapped Speck on the side of the shoulders with the reins and set her into a flat-out run, heading down the canyon waving his hat and yelling and whooping like a wild thing.