

Chapter Three

AT NOON John went into the kitchen and made a sandwich with peanut butter, lunch meat, grape jelly, and a sliced pickle—he'd learned it from Jimmy Cranney, a friend in school. Jimmy went to the same school but lived nearly forty-five miles away, so during the school year they were best friends and come summer they just about didn't see each other. Jimmy's place was small—about six hundred acres—and they raised Appaloosa horses to sell. Which wasn't cattle either, John thought, but then again it wasn't sheep.

They did all their own cooking at the ranch—which meant they ate mostly out of cans because usually there was too much work going to come in and cook—and John took the sandwich and a glass of milk up to his room.

His room was the top, back room in the two-story ranch house. It was not the original Barron house—that had been a log house and burned down under mysterious circumstances before even John's grandfather was born—but had been built around 1900. It was frame construction with white-painted wood boards for the walls and the only thing John liked about it was the view. He could sit in his room and look out the window and see the mountains. He had a small desk there—an old wooden table, really—and he sat at the desk and ate the sandwich and looked at the mountains while he chewed.

When he was done he cleaned the crumbs and dumped them in a small cardboard box he used for a wastebasket and started back out of the room but stopped and looked at the poster on the wall.

There were four pictures of his great-grandfather made during his entire life—that's all. Four. And John had made blowups of them and had a photographic studio in Cheyenne make a large poster with the four pictures on it, and he could not come into the room without stopping to look at them.

It was like looking at himself.

The resemblance was more than striking—it was uncanny. Even John's father noted it. At the same studio in Cheyenne—more as a joke than anything else—John had ordered an old-time photograph of himself, done

with a floppy old cowboy hat and a broken Winchester the photographer had there for props. The picture was shot in black and white with a slightly fuzzy focus and he had taped it on the wall next to the poster.

It looked exactly the same. The same slight droop to the left eyelid, the same straight nose, the same set to the shoulders and eyes that looked dead out into the camera. He could have put it in any of the pictures on the poster and it would have fit perfectly except that his great-grandfather had been older in the pictures and had some marks of age—weathered lines in his face and scruffier, torn clothes.

And the gun.

In every picture he was wearing a gun, an old Colt single-action .45-caliber with smooth wooden grips in a worn, oiled cartridge belt and holster. John did not carry a gun but he had seen the gun owned by his great-grandfather. John's father had it in a wooden box, along with the old man's chaps—scarred and ripped—and a pair of his work gloves. They had the ends of the fingers cut off so he could feel the rope or use the gun easily.

It was heavy, the gun, and it didn't look heavy in any of the pictures. John had picked it up, hefted it, aimed it and it must have weighed close to four pounds, maybe five with the cartridge belt full of shells and the holster. Five pounds on one hip his whole life and yet except to go

to bed he was said never to take it off and when he finally grew so old—he made ninety-two, if the records were accurate—that they had to put him in a nursing home he took the gun with him. And kept it. They were nervous about it in the home and removed the firing pin but he kept the gun and it was hanging next to his head the night he died in 1954.

John had studied the poster so long he'd memorized everything on it and yet he stopped every time he came into the room and looked at it and wondered what it would have been like if *he* had lived then and somehow had known the old man when he was young and had only the gun and two horses and all that land before the eastern corporations took it. . . .

He shook his head and left the room. There was work to do still and he put his hat on and went outside, was walking across the open space leading to the barn when he saw the dust.

From the yard and house area, which was on a slight rise, it was possible to see the mile and a half to the main road—it was low, rolling hills of grass with small rocky outcroppings—and he saw that a vehicle had turned off the main road and was coming toward the ranch. It left a plume of dust and for a moment he couldn't recognize it. Then it crested a rise and he saw the dark blue of the ranch pickup.

"They're coming back early," Cawley called. He'd

seen the dust as well and was leaning on the rail of the corral. "I'll bet he didn't get the plugs and belt. . . ."

John shrugged. "I don't know." It was strange for his father to come back early. The trip to town took close to an hour and a half, one way, and he didn't like to waste it. Usually he did it once and stayed all day rather than have to make another trip soon.

He watched the truck and when it was still over a quarter-mile away he saw that his father was alone.

"Where's Tink?" Cawley asked. "Your old man is alone."

John said nothing but stood and waited while his father drove into the yard and stopped the truck next to him. Cawley had come from the corral and the dust cloud that followed the truck settled over them.

John's father stepped from the truck.

"Where's Tink?" Cawley asked.

John's father spit and looked past the barn to the lambing pens but he wasn't seeing anything. They were empty—all the sheep and lambs were off on the west side of the ranch in a four-hundred-acre pasture. Being held so they could be more easily started on the drive to the mountains.

"Tink's not coming back," he said after a moment.

"Not coming back?" John asked. "Why?"

"He's got a cancer. They've got to do more tests on

him but the doc told me he thought it was all through him and the tests would just confirm it." He was still looking at the lambing pens, as if something very important were out there. "I've got to go back. They're going to try some different ways to fix it and I should be there. It don't look so good."

"Damn." Cawley rubbed his neck. "Old Tink . . . damn."

"I don't know how long I'll be. I'll stay with him until . . . well, until it doesn't matter. The doc says if the therapy doesn't work it will go fast but it might be two weeks or a month or even longer before it ends. I can come home now and again but I should be there as much as I can."

"But what about the drive up to the haymeadow?" Cawley asked. John was thinking about Tinckner. How he did things—the way he looked putting snoose in his lower lip. The way he smiled. Gone.

"Tink worked here man and boy," John's father said. "He worked with my father, John's grandfather, and knew his great-grandfather. We're his family and I can't let him rot alone."

Rot, John thought—he was going to rot. Old Tink. God.

"I know," Cawley said. "I wasn't arguing with you. I just meant what about it?"

"You and the boy." John's father looked at him. "You

and John take them up—you can do it. Then you come back down and John stays with the sheep.”

“Me?” John said. “Alone?”

“No. You’ll have the dogs.”

Yes, John thought, and the sheep and the mountains and the coyotes and the bears and and and. “I don’t know what to do—how to do it.” *He* wouldn’t do it, he thought—not the old man. It slipped in. A quick thought.

“There’s nothing to know. You take the dogs and you take care of the sheep. I did it when I was fifteen and you can do it. Cawley has to be here to run the ranch—the folks from back east are coming and we have to be ready for them—and I have to spend time with Tink.”

“I’ll take him up there,” Cawley said. “Don’t worry about it. We’ll talk as we go and he’ll be fine—hell, you were, weren’t you? He’s as good as you.”

The two men smiled and John’s father left them, went into the house and was out in three minutes with his shaving kit and a paper sack with magazines.

“Tink likes the stockman magazines,” he said, dumping the sack and the kit on the seat of the truck.

“What he really likes is *Playboy*,” Cawley said.

“Not in the hospital.” John’s father climbed into the truck. “In the hospital he likes the stockman magazines. . . .”

He nodded to John and wheeled the truck and drove

away—not fifteen minutes had passed since he arrived—and John watched him drive away until it was just the dust out by the main road. He watched until even the dust was gone, settling back, then he turned toward the barn.

Well, he thought.

You wanted a change.