

Chapter Four

HE SAT in his room that night and started a list:

Gun
Food
Sleeping gear
Four pairs of socks
Four pairs of underwear
Two shirts
Three pairs of jeans
Toothbrush
Three months

The last thing on the list seemed to write itself.

Three months. He was going to be alone with the

sheep for the rest of June, July, and August, until the first week in September.

I'll go crazy, he thought. Nuts. I don't even know what to do, how to do anything. How can Cawley teach me? Seven, eight days and he's supposed to teach me how to take care of six thousand sheep for three months?

He threw the pencil down, looked out the window at the mountains. It wasn't the range he could see but the next one, the next one over where they had to take the sheep, but he visualized it in his mind.

The large meadow, huge, surrounded by peaks, and in all the vastness the small trailer and him. Just him.

And the dogs, of course.

And the sheep.

And the mountains.

The day had started wrong, with the sad news about Tink, and it hadn't seemed to get better.

John's father had gone back to town promising to come back to the ranch with plugs and belt and to pick up the list for provisions the next morning. John had to have the list ready by then.

After that he and Cawley had gone to work on the wagon. It wintered next to the old granary—a building made of logs hand-hewn by John's great-grandfather. The wagon sat there without moving so that the tires had gone flat and needed pumping with the hand pump and then Cawley decided they should grease the bear-

ings, which meant pulling each wheel and repacking it with the thick wheel-bearing grease they kept in a bucket hanging in the granary and by three o'clock John was grease to his eyeballs.

Then they had to restretch and retie the canvas top to the wagon and clean the stove—a small wood-burning stove in the corner of the trailer—and while they were cleaning the stove Cawley went to the barn for something and John was left alone in the trailer.

He had been in it before, of course, many times. But never to stay.

Never to stay for three months and he looked at it differently now. It was tiny—six feet wide, twelve feet long, with a bunk and wooden boxes nailed sideways to the wooden side to make shelves and a Coleman lantern hanging from the center bow that held the canvas up.

Tiny.

The mattress smelled, well, like Tink and on his best day Tink didn't smell good. Even if they aired it out the smell would be there and the thought of three months sleeping in the little wagon on the stinky bed. . . .

On the side of the wagon, just below where the canvas top started up, there was a calendar sheet nailed up, the kind with all the months laid out in squares and next to the calendar there was a stub of a wooden pencil tied hanging on a string. The three months for last

year—when Tink had done it last—were marked off a day at a time, each day with a small X and each month with lines through the X's to mark the end of the month.

So Tink hadn't liked it that much either, or why would he have kept track of each day?

They had worked on the trailer all day and the thought of summering in at the haymeadow with the sheep didn't seem to get any easier to handle.

They stripped it out, aired the mattress, used a hose to clean the box of the wagon until it was fresh and new, and when they were done Cawley shook his head.

"Let's let her dry until tomorrow, then we'll start loading her up."

They had eaten canned chili and crackers for dinner and John had come up to his room to do the list while Cawley sat down below in the living room watching reruns of *Bonanza*, which he loved.

Dog food.

God, he'd almost forgotten dog food. Let's see, four dogs, a pound a dog a day, four pounds a day, say thirty pounds a week, a hundred and twenty pounds a month, three hundred and sixty pounds of dog food.

Three hundred and sixty pounds of dog food. Where would he keep it?

He went back to the list.

Dog food
Batteries (for the flashlight)
First-aid kit
First-aid kit for the dogs
Feed for the horse

He stopped writing and leaned back. Downstairs he heard the phone ring and thought it was his father, but Cawley got it and didn't call him down so it was probably some corporation business.

His eyes fell on the poster and some of the stories came to his mind.

Stories about the old man, the first John Barron. About how mean he was, how tough he was—none of the stories talked about humor or anything happy. Only about mean and tough.

There was a bad man who came to the territory at one point, just bad. He killed a rancher and made off with his wife and when he was done killed her and they'd gone after the man with a posse—more a group of ranchers—but hadn't caught him. John Barron the first declined to ride with the posse and they made fun of him for that, thinking he was afraid but it wasn't that.

He went alone and he found the man and killed him and skinned some of him and kept the head and used the skin for a vest and part of the skull for a button bowl and

the vest and bowl were on display in a museum in Cheyenne if anybody doubted it.

Mean. Nobody ever found the rest of the body because he dragged it out in a gully and let the coyotes have it.

He used that gun, John thought, looking at the poster. He killed the man with the gun I held and then skinned him with those same hands that are holding the reins of the horse in that picture.

He thought suddenly of Tink. He'd known John Barron the first—known him and spoke to him and knew more about him than anybody else. John had always meant to sit down with Tink and ask him, talk to him, find out more about his great-grandfather but Tink had never been close to anybody—not even John's father. He slept alone in the old bunkhouse, even though Cawley slept in the house with John and his father.

Had slept, John thought. Tink had slept in the bunkhouse.

He felt a sadness about the old man, about Tink, but he had never really known him. Just seen him working, or sitting, or tending sheep. There never seemed a right time to sit and ask him anything, and now it was too late.

He shook his head and stood. It was early yet, just getting dark, but he had to get up early and he stripped for bed and dropped his clothes on the chair by the desk under the window.

With the light out he could see the glow from the moon and he opened the window and lay on the bed without covers, letting the cool evening come over him.

Outside, one of the dogs barked—he couldn't tell which one—and he heard several coyotes answer it.

Sleep came slowly, and all the way down he thought of Tink and how he had missed the chance to talk to him.