

chapter 4

Finally the day of the cattle drive arrived. Tex knew because everyone was up earlier than usual. The moon was still in the sky and the horizon was still dark, but she could hear the sound of boots scraping on the house's dusty, wooden floor. She saw the glow of kerosene lamps through the house's windows, and the sheep -- wide awake too -- darted this way and that in their pen. Something was happening!

Before she could join the other dogs barking at the fence, Tex saw the door of the house fly open, and out ran Billy in his spurs and hat. He looked like a real cowboy!

"Tex!" he called out, opening the gate, his breath steaming in the cold morning air. She ran toward him, her heart singing, "Today is the day!" He looked so grown up, but when she jumped to lick his face, he still laughed like he always laughed.

"Good girl!" Billy said to her. "Are you excited to go to Oklahoma? We're going there today!" Tex, smiling at his feet, heard the big word, and it did sound exciting! She wagged her tail. It was hard to keep still with the adventure starting so soon. "Pa says I can ride all by myself! He's going to let me ride Old Red, all the way there!" Billy smiled his big, dimple-cheeked smile, and Tex couldn't wait.

It seemed like it took forever for everyone to get ready. Billy had to go inside to eat breakfast because Ma said so. Smoke spilled out of the little brick chimney and the air filled with

the juicy smell of chops and eggs. As dawn crept over the mountains, Pa's friends started riding up in groups of two and three, tying their stomping, snorting horses up outside the house and getting their own fill of Ma's cooking. Tex listened to them talking and laughing inside.

Tex kept her eyes fixed on the door of the house, waiting. She almost didn't want to blink in case it was bad luck. "Let's go!" she thought. "Let's go now!" The other collies ran in anxious circles near the fence, eager to get going too. All year they had been training with the sheep for this day. Now they would at last get to work, and Tex would get to help too!

Ma was the first to come out of the house, little Betsy behind her. They both wore big full skirts and crisp white bonnets because today was a special day. Betsy, her red hair in a neat braid down her back, peeked out from behind her mother's dress, a pail in her hands. "Now, don't be scared, Bets," Ma said in her warm voice. To Tex, Ma's voice sounded like it was full of honey and sunlight. Billy had told her that nothing could go wrong that Ma couldn't fix, and Tex agreed.

The dogs stopped barking and sat like they'd been told along the fence as Betsy tottered, her freckled cheeks blushed pink. She was always scared to come running up to them the way Billy did. She was so small compared to him. Lily, the oldest collie among them, broke away from the pack and walked up to the little girl, who looked like she might cry.

"She's just saying hello," Ma told Betsy. "Why don't you give her one of your treats?"

Betsy reached a small hand into her pail and brought out a bone that smelled of heaven and bacon. Tex could see the other collies licking their lips, but none of them made a move. Lily pressed her soft nose against the little girl's cheek and wagged her tail. Betsy giggled in spite of herself and handed her the bone. Lily always knew the best thing to do. Tex wanted to grow up to be just like her.

One by one, each dog got a juicy bone dripping with sweet and salty-smelling bacon fat. Ma must have put them in the pan just for the dogs. It was a special day and everyone knew it! Tex took hers and gave Betsy a little lick on the back of her hand. Betsy smiled Billy's same dimpled smile, and Tex's heart almost burst with how much she loved them all.

The sun rose bright in the sky, but its light was cool -- a sign that winter was coming and it was time to go somewhere warmer. The sheep, still dashing and bleating restlessly, knew it too. Oklahoma would be warmer, Tex knew. They would all be happier there, wherever Oklahoma was. It didn't really matter as long as they were together.

Billy reappeared, this time carrying a big heavy saddle that was almost half his size. Tex could tell it was heavy, but he would not give up. He was going to help the other men, because he was one of them now too. Pa's friends smiled at him and one or two tipped their hats in his direction as he ran back and forth from the barn to the field where the horses were kept as fast as his short legs would carry him. He carried leather harnesses, and metal buckles, and armfuls of horseshoes until he was panting, just like Tex after a long run.

"Is there anything else Pa?" Billy asked, looking up at his tall father who was dressed in the same type of plaid shirt and jeans. Pa looked down at him, his eyes shining with pride.

"Well, there, partner, I think that just about does it," Pa said, trying not to smile too big. "I think it's time you got all saddled up."

Billy took off running toward the horse paddock, as Pa watched him go. "Mother!" Pa called into the house. Ma came out and he put his arm around her waist pointing in Billy's direction. "There goes the bravest little boy ever to hit the trail, huh?" he said to her. She smiled up at him and turned back to her son, who stood on a bale of hay to slip a bridle over Old Red's bobbing head.

“None braver. Maybe only one came close,” Ma said, heading back into the house and blowing Pa a kiss. He blushed through his beard and kicked the dirt with his boot, grinning ear to ear. It was time for him to saddle up too.

Tex watched as Pa made his way over to the horses, who bobbed their heads at him almost like they were nodding, saying, “Yes, it’s time to go!” The leather saddles shone in the sun, perched high on their backs. Tex liked the horses. Running with them made her feel fast and almost as big. And now, if what Billy had told her was true about the cattle drive, she’d be able to do that for miles and miles.

Here came Billy now, trotting over on the back of Old Red. His name was earned for sure -- he had seen a lot of years on the ranch and had the gray hairs to prove it -- but Tex always thought his age made him seem more noble, not weak. She knew Old Red would take good care of Billy on the trail and was happy to see the boy smiling, a natural born rider, with the reins in one hand. They would take care of Billy together.

It was almost time. Pa’s men were ready and the sheep were growing restless. Over the next several months the fifteen of them would move 300 sheep from Montana to Oklahoma. Tex had no idea how far that was, but it seemed like something big and amazing, and she couldn’t wait to see it for herself. It felt right that Billy’s first year on the drive would be her’s too. Now that they were both old enough, they were ready for whatever the trail would throw their way.

One of the men opened the gate for the dogs and they flooded out, a train of ten collies jumping and yipping with glee, unable to contain their excitement. Tex ran to join them at the gate where the sheep would come flooding out. Their job would start immediately. No time for rehearsal or practice. Tex knew in her heart that even though this was her first time, she’d prove

herself to be the sharpest eye and the quickest helper. No sheep would get lost or left behind with her by Billy's side.

This is what she was thinking when she heard his voice behind her, saying something awful: "Ma, how come you can't come with us?" Billy asked, looking up into the beaming face of his mother, her own red hair catching the sunlight. Tex turned, fixing her worried eyes on the boy. Ma wasn't coming? How could that be? She was one of them! Everything worked because of Ma!

"Oh, Billy, don't worry. Someone has to stay behind and take care of the ranch, don't they?" Ma said, in her sweet voice that was like music drifting on the breeze. "Isn't that right little Bets?"

Betsy peered out from behind her mother's thick flowered skirts, looking up to meet her kind green eyes, and then at Billy. She furrowed her wispy red brow and her bottom lip trembled.

"Aw, Bets, don't you go crying on me now..." Billy said, as the small girl ran to wrap herself around his waist. He hugged her back and crouched down to face her. "You'll be big soon and then you'll come with us too. I was once your size and now I have my own horse and I'm going to help Pa." His voice cracked as he said the words and Tex ran toward him, hoping to stop the tears. She would lick them up, and set things right. But Billy was determined not to cry.

"Look Bets, Tex wants to say bye too," he said, standing up and giving Ma one last hug goodbye. Tex wagged her tail and nuzzled the girl's cheek, just as she had seen Lily do before.

"You've got a good girl here, Bill," Ma said, giving Tex a pat on the head. She had never called him Bill before. Always Billy or Sweetheart. The new name seemed to fill the boy air. He stood up straighter and walked taller. "Now, Tex, you take good care of my men, you hear?"

Tex gave her the most confident nod she could muster, but her heart already ached for Ma -- her gentle touch and kind words, the treats she sneaked to the collies after supper, and the way she made everyone around her smile. It would be months before they'd see her again. Billy would miss her terribly, Tex knew, and even if he promised he would not cry, she promised to be there to lick up his tears. Just in case.

A horn broke the silence and the heavy gate containing the sheep clanked open. The fluffy creatures poured out onto the red dirt path one after another, running every which way. But wherever they went, it seemed like a collie was already there, circling the group, nudging their ankles, forming them into a long white cloud that started walking away from the ranch and toward horizon. Tex ran to join them, bringing up the rear. She barked to get the last few strays moving and it worked! The sheep hurried along the path after their friends. She could do this!

The last remaining morning clouds had burned off, revealing a brilliant blue sky, and under it, the dazzling emerald green of the grasslands surrounded the ranch. The sheep bleated and trotted along, happy to stretch their legs, and Tex watched, amazed, as the men and her fellow dogs worked as one to keep it all moving in the right direction. It was a sight to see!

Behind Tex, two carts containing their food and supplies for the journey rumbled down the road, led by two pairs of horses so huge that they made Pa's horse look like a pony. And behind them, there were the fading voices of Ma and Bets yelling, "Good bye! Good luck!"

Tex looked up to see Billy concentrating hard, swaying back and forth in time to Old Red's footsteps. He looked different but also the same, and her heart swelled with excitement for finally being on a real adventure, just like they had talked about on so many summer nights before.

“This is it, Tex!” Billy called to her above the clip-clop of hundreds of hooves. “Here we go!”

He nudged Old Red with his spurred boots and leaned forward in his saddle as the horse took off, galloping to join Pa at the front of it all. Tex took a deep breath and chased after them, stretching her stride, feeling the wind in her face.

Up ahead, Billy’s wide-brimmed hat blew off, but Tex was there to catch it before it could tumble any further. He turned in his saddle, saw her with the hat in her mouth, and smiled his amazing, dimpled smile. She was right behind him, just like she would be the rest of the way.