Chapter Eleven

"No," he said. "I don't think they're right. . . ."

He stood and picked the lamb up. It did not want to come and fought against his hold, bleating. Peg came running back, brought by the disturbance, and tried to herd the mother—who was following John and bleating anxiously at the lamb—back to the herd.

"Peg, leave it be—she can come."

The dog stopped, caught by the tone in his voice more than any command, and John pointed with his chin because his arms were holding the lamb. "Back—herd. Get 'em."

She knew that, knew the command to "get 'em," and she turned back to the main part of the herd, pushing them farther and farther away from the dead snake.

"We're going to try to help him," he said—and realized once more that he was talking to a sheep. Well, why not. "We'll try. . . ."

At the trailer he tied the lamb to a wheel with the end of the rope that held the tarp and rummaged in the boxes inside until he found the box of medicines for the sheep.

Mostly it was salve—Corona. Balm to put on scrapes and minor wounds. And cans of pine tar to put on cuts to keep the flies off. There was nothing for snakebites.

"I'll have to cut it." He remembered from biology that there was some argument over whether or not to cut and suck a snakebite wound. Some said it helped, others said it didn't, and in either case it was dangerous because taking the venom in your mouth could be bad if there was a small cut or cavity. But if he cut it—he couldn't bring himself to suck the wound—it might help, might allow some of the venom to drain.

He took the folding knife out of the case on his belt. In the box there were several bottles of disinfectant and he poured some strong-smelling purple fluid from one of the bottles onto his knife blade. He'd seen his father do the same before digging a staple out of a horse's hoof.

He held the lamb down with his knee, pushed the wool away from the bite mark with his finger, and pushed with the knife.

A tiny hole appeared and the lamb blatted and the

mother came closer, looking down on the lamb and John.

It wasn't enough.

He'd have to cut it really deep. Across both fang marks and then down vertically across each of them in turn—that's what they'd said in biology. The teacher—Mr. Fender. It's always so neat in a classroom, John thought suddenly. This and that, just so. A wound. You cut or you didn't cut. But here—the side of a sheep that's kicking all the time, wool all over the wound, dirt, flies.

He took a breath, held it, and slashed across the two bites, then down vertically across each of them.

The lamb kicked and bucked sideways, lunging up against his knee and blood welled instantly into the wool, dripping on the ground and against John's leg where it pushed the lamb down.

So much blood.

It seemed to be endless and he wondered if he'd cut an artery by accident but didn't think there would be an artery running down the side of the lamb and then realized that he hadn't the slightest idea of where a lamb's arteries *did* run.

He stood back and away, the knife hanging at his side, and the lamb jumped up, twisted, and tried to bite at its side again.

In a moment the blood seemed to lessen and not long after that, while he was watching, it slowed to a stop.

Pine tar, he thought. They always put pine tar on cuts to keep the flies out. But if the pine tar was there, would the venon still come out? His father told him that back in the old days, before they used rubber bands to castrate the lambs, they used a knife and they would dab pine tar on the wound to keep the flies out.

He dug through the medicine box and found the pine tar—a can with a Pop Top. He probed at the lid with his knife and it finally came open.

Inside was a thick black tar. He used a stick to remove a clump and smeared it on the side of the lamb, getting some in his hair and on his face and clothes as he worked.

When he was done he threw the stick aside and stood and looked down on the lamb. It was on its feet, goobered in tar—during the struggle much of the tar had gone astray and there were dark marks all along the side of the lamb.

"There."

All of this had taken twenty or thirty minutes—it was, he thought, maybe forty minutes altogether since he got up—and he looked at the morning sun, just coming into the cut between the two hills at the entrance to the canyon, and wished he hadn't come.

I could've said no, he thought. I could have. But he

knew he couldn't. Saying no just didn't come into it. His father would not have sent him up here if he hadn't thought John could do it. And then there was the old man—the old, old man. He would have done it, and more.

First morning, first hour, and look at it, he thought—I've got one lamb hurt, a mess, and I haven't even unpacked the trailer.

He turned to start unpacking but as his eyes moved off the lamb it went down—as if hit with a hammer. It lay on its side, raising and lowering its head in jerky movements.

John kneeled next to it again but there was nothing he could do.

The lamb's legs and feet made running motions, it bleated low—the ewe came forward and smelled the wound on the lamb's side, snorted—and the lamb curved up at each end, obviously in great pain, and then it died.

It was very fast. Half a breath came in, went out, and the lamb was gone.

The ewe nudged it, pushed at it, tried to get it up and then stood next to it, guarding it.

"Ahh . . ." John rubbed the back of his neck. "Ahh, hell."

He picked the lamb up and waded across the stream away from the camp, the ewe following. There was a

thick stand of willows and he went inside them, found some rocks and laid the lamb down and made a small pile of rocks over it.

He did not know why he did this. He had seen many lambs die. During lambing when they came fast sometimes eight or ten would die almost at once and they had a pile of dead sheep and lambs in back of the lambing pens every spring that Cawley used the tractor to load and haul out to a gulley for the coyotes and buzzards to clean up.

But this was different.

This, he thought, was his lamb—a lamb he had been supposed to care for—and it had died and needed to be covered.

The ewe had followed him into the willows and he pushed her away from the rocks that covered the body, tried to get her to go back to the herd. But she wouldn't leave. She kept working back around him to get to the rocks, smelling the dead lamb through them.

Finally he left her there but he kept looking back at her, standing over the small pile of rocks, until the willows covered her and he couldn't see her and then he thought of her. He stood, wondering what to do next and thought he should unpack the trailer but he kept thinking of the ewe and it bothered him so that he went back across the stream to check on her. She was still there, standing with her head down, her nose smelling

the rocks that covered the lamb. She looked up at him and bleated when he walked up to her.

"Yeah—I know. I feel bad too—but you have to leave it now." He tried to push her away again but once more she evaded him and at last he decided to let nature take its course. Short of dragging her away and tying her to a tree he didn't see how to stop her.

At the camp he reached into the wagon to pull out the first box and there was a sudden high-pitched barking from the direction of the herd. He turned to see Billy on the far side of the sheep, dancing around something on the ground and he thought, oh, great, another snake, and he turned to see if Speck was handy but she was away and gone back up the canyon a quarter mile or more so he turned and started to run.

Keep, he thought, his breath coming in cutting rasps—*keep* a horse to hand.