

Chapter Thirteen

THE DAY PASSED, somehow, with nothing truly getting done.

He found some saddle oil in a box in the trailer and cleaned and oiled his saddle and put it under the wagon. Then he started to unload and rearrange the inside of the wagon so that he could sleep there for the night and he found a needle and thread and he tried to patch his shirt and pants and in some way the whole day went that way. One thing to another until it was dark and he really couldn't see that anything was done. Even the wagon wasn't squared away. The bunk was clear, but the rest of it was still a shambles and when dark came he lighted the lantern, hung it from the bow holding the canvas up, and sat in the yellow glow and

ate a can of cold beef stew with a metal spoon. He caught himself starting to wipe the spoon on his pants leg, smiled, and went outside and washed it in the stream, using sand to clean it and rinsing it when it was spotless.

He went to bed not so much because he was tired as to get away from the day, his first day, and he was nearly asleep when he remembered he hadn't put down dog food. He climbed out barefoot and put a pan down, kicking himself mentally for being so stupid. All four of the dogs were there to eat, sitting watching him, waiting for the food, and he relighted the lantern and used the light to examine Pete's foot.

The pad had already worked back into place and seemed to be sticking there, healing in. It was impossible, but it was there. He touched it and Pete jerked his paw away, went back to eating, and when he was done he returned to the herd at a run. He still limped, but he was moving better and John went back to sleep wondering how it could begin to heal that fast.

The first smash of thunder awakened him, seemed to come from inside his mind. It was close, so close he could smell the stink of burned air and he was sitting up, awake, before he realized what had done it.

He knew mountain thunder was worst—because you were right inside it, right in the clouds. And he'd heard

it before. But it still surprised him, to be in the middle of a storm.

Lightning came fast for seven or eight minutes, seemed to smack back and forth across the valley, from peak to peak and into the trees and was followed instantly and almost continuously by the thunder and made it so bright he could almost have read.

And loud. It actually *thunders*, he thought, jumping for the end of the wagon and opening the door to watch.

He could see the sheep in the constant blue light and they were afraid—were milling and bleating, though he couldn't hear them well. The dogs were working the edges of the herd restlessly except for Jenny.

He couldn't find Jenny.

"Jenny!" He called her name several times but she was nowhere near the herd—only three dogs were there.

Then she showed.

She was under the wagon and came out slowly, her tail down, her ears laid back.

"Jenny—what's the matter?"

She was terrified of the thunder, stiff with fear.

"Well—it is scary, isn't it?" It was starting to rain and she looked so bedraggled, so afraid and lonely that he smiled.

"Why don't you come on in?"

He motioned with his hand and she was inside the trailer in part of a second, almost knocking him down.

She jumped on the cot, curled up about halfway up from the bottom, and tucked her nose under her tail.

"I see," he said. "You must have done this with Tink." He smiled. "Well, I guess it's all right . . ."

John slid inside the bag, scrunching his legs past the sleeping dog, and blew the lantern out by raising the globe and blowing across the top. But the light from the lightning kept a dim blue glow going inside the trailer for a long time and just when it seemed to be stopping, the lightning cutting back, the rain started.

It was not hard at first, but grew in intensity until it drummed on the waterproof tarp so that he could not hear himself think. He sat up, lighted the lantern, but everything—for a change—seemed to be all right. The tarp was not leaking except for a small drip around the chimney hole but that was nothing. Even as he watched, the yellow light making shadows jump, the rain and noise let off and the storm moved off up the canyon, back up into the mountains.

Where it belongs, John thought, blowing the lantern out again and lying back in the bed.

He closed his eyes and waited for sleep but it didn't come. Something was working at him, bothering him, and he couldn't pin it down. Something about the storm.

He waited, letting his mind wander, but nothing came and, finally, his eyes closed and he went to sleep with his hand on Jenny's forehead.