

Chapter Twenty-five

IT WAS THE NEXT MORNING.

His father was set for leaving. He'd talked most of the night and still got up early to make a fire and coffee and feed some oats to his horse to get ready for the ride.

The two were silent but it wasn't uncomfortable. John saddled Speck to check on the herd and his father saddled his own horse and joined him.

John showed him where the bear had attacked, how he was working the herd up one side of the valley and back down the other to keep them on fresh grass, how the herd responded to his hand motions.

But at last they were back at the wagon and it was time for his father to go and just then, just at that moment, John didn't want his father to leave. There was

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some new thing between them, from the talk all night, and he didn't want him to leave and he finally said it.

"I don't want you to leave."

His father had just finished tightening the pack saddle on the packhorse and he turned and nodded. "I feel the same but there's the ranch and Cawley and all."

They said nothing more about it. His father mounted and caught up the packhorse lead and John mounted Speck and rode with him down the canyon, both of them riding in silence, until they were near the end and John stopped. "I'd better get back to the herd."

His father nodded. "I'll see you in a month or less. . . ."

And he left, went into the small hills and was soon out of sight, gone from the valley, and John waved at where he'd been. Then he turned toward the herd and thought he would miss something now, now because his father wasn't staying with him. There was something special he would miss and he didn't even know what it was and he was halfway back to the wagon when Speck stopped.

"What's the matter with you?"

He nudged her into movement but she hadn't gone twenty feet when she stopped again and this time turned her head and looked back, past John's leg, back down the canyon.

John turned.

Way back at the mouth of the valley where the stream

cut through the hills he saw the small figure of his father riding back toward him, picking his way slowly.

John turned Speck and set her into a lined-out run until he swung wide and pulled in next to his father so sharp she settled on her rear.

"I started thinking it wasn't but three weeks till we take the herd down," his father said. "And Cawley can handle things down there for three weeks and it's been some time since I spent any time in the haymeadow and there's some things I ain't told you yet."

John pulled Speck over and fell in beside him, the horses walking and thought: Ain't it funny what makes a person glad? Just to see that little figure riding back with the packhorse in back of it and you could feel all glad.

"Like the time your mother was leading the parade in Cheyenne on a palomino that wasn't good for nothing but show and her pants split? She always did wear them too tight, her pants, and they split like a gunshot and she went right ahead and finished the parade. I found some of that shiny tape and she put that over the split and pretended she was the Queen of Sheba and nobody said a word, not a word. Of course, she could do things like that, your mother. . . ."

Ain't it, John thought again, ain't it just crazy what makes a person glad?

And they rode up the canyon into the haymeadow. And the sheep. And the dogs. And the mountains . . .