

Chapter Six

WHEN THE HERD was moving well Cawley came back to the wagon.

"You want to ride the red and I'll take the wagon?"

John shook his head. "It doesn't matter. What are we going to do at the highway crossing?"

"I don't know. Let's think on it."

He spun away and let the red move up with the sheep again and John traced the path they would take in his mind.

They would stay on gravel and secondary farm roads for all of this day until just before dark. Then they hit the main highway. It wasn't a freeway, but it was well traveled with a lot of trucks and they had to cross it once they got to it because they would not be able to stop the sheep, even with the dogs' help.

When the sheep came to the road they would start to spread—they did every year—and try to go up and down the highway instead of across and it usually took one person on each side, one pushing, *and* the dogs to get across the highway. From there they stayed on gravel roads and open range for three more days, then up through the canyons to the high country on Barron land again.

With only two of them the highway was a problem and Cawley must have been thinking about it constantly because when they were four hours down the roads, moving well, the dogs keeping them compact and the pace up, Cawley came riding back.

"Any ideas?"

John shook his head. "Just push them across and hope the dogs can hold them. . . ." In truth he'd been looking at the morning, listening to the meadowlarks and feeling the warm sun on his face and thinking how pretty it looked, and felt. The sky was a clean blue—he had a shirt that looked the same color right after it was washed—and even the smell from the sheep coming back over him, the ammonia-lanolin stink of them, didn't seem bad.

He'd read a book once about a man who felt guilty because he was being paid to be a forest ranger in a national forest, doing something he loved and getting

paid for it, and John thought that if the herd were cattle instead of sheep and he was riding a horse instead of the wagon he would feel the same guilt. He didn't read much, maybe two books a year other than reading for school, and the story stuck with him. Being paid for doing exactly what you wanted to do—that must be the best of all.

"Well, think on it some more," Cawley said. "And so will I." He looked at the sun—he never carried a watch and went completely by the sun—and then the country around the wagon and sheep. "We got two, two and a half hours at this pace and we'll be at the highway. We want to have a plan when we get there."

John nodded again, watched Cawley ride back up the herd and the solution came to him. Just that fast. He whistled and Cawley came back.

"I just figured it, I think. When we get closer I'll stop and take Speck out and saddle her and then help you across. When we get them lined out again I'll come back, put Speck back in, and bring the wagon up."

Cawley seemed to think for a moment, then nodded. "Sounds good . . . we'll do her."

As he turned away John saw him smile and thought: He knew that. He knew to do that and he let me make the decision. But why? Why not just tell me? . . .

It was part of all of it, he thought, part of taking the

sheep up to the high country and being alone. Cawley was setting him into it a bit early, letting him be the one who made the decisions.

When they were still a half hour from the highway—John could see it two miles off, trucks and cars sliding by—he stopped the wagon, unharnessed Speck, and took his saddle out of the back of the wagon.

It took him a couple of minutes to saddle and bridle Speck and he settled into the saddle like an old friend. He would rather ride on a horse than a wagon, would rather ride on a horse than walk. It was another tie to the old man. He couldn't remember when he'd started to ride. One day, when he was about eight, he was sitting on a small horse named Hammer with a saddle too big for him, riding across the short grass of the prairie with two dogs loping alongside and he had no idea how long he'd been riding or how he started.

He asked his father once and he'd just shrugged.

"I don't know. There was an old Morgan named Doofus around here and one day I came out and you were sitting on him. You were small but I can't remember how old. Three, maybe, or four. I don't know how to this day you got up on him—must have climbed a leg or something. That might have been the first time. Just seems like you was always on a horse. . . ."

It didn't matter, John thought, catching up to the herd and riding out on the right to get to the highway

ahead of them. He rode, that's all that mattered, and he'd rather ride than do almost anything. No. Than anything. Ride and "see the country." That's how the old man was told to have said it. He just ". . . rode to see the country."

The crossing went as well as it had ever gone. He and Cawley stopped traffic from both directions and the dogs started them across.

The front end tried to spread on the highway but Peg and Billy came up to help and pushed them back, barking and biting, while John used Speck to turn back a group of twenty or so that squirted through and mixed with the stopped cars and trucks.

One car with New York plates was full of tourists and there was a girl with long brown hair who got out with a camera and John felt a little shy but tipped his hat to her. She smiled back and waved and he felt himself blushing but was glad he'd done it anyway. He sat and watched the sheep until the drag—the last of the herd—had crossed and felt her eyes on him the whole time. When they were all passed he called the dogs up—which was silly because they knew more about highway crossing than he did and were already pushing the drag down the gravel road—and turned back to where he'd left the wagon. As a little bit of show-off he let Speck jump off the road into the ditch, bound once, and jump up the other side and knew he looked good but thought it

would be too much to look back and see if she was watching.

When he did turn, the car was gone and he felt stupid about doing it all. She was probably not watching anyway.

He unsaddled and harnessed Speck once more and used his tongue to make a clucking sound and move them along.

The herd was already a mile ahead and he had to catch up. Cawley would be getting hungry and the food was all in the wagon and he knew it was foolish but he looked back past the side of the wagon twice after he'd crossed the highway, thinking of the brown-haired girl.