

## Chapter Five

JOHN AWAKENED slowly, opening his eyes last, when the rest of him was full awake. There was just a smoky bit of light coming in the window. Dawn. It must be about four-thirty. And quiet outside. They had had chickens for a while, and a rooster that crowed them awake, but the dogs herded anything they could—sometimes tried to turn birds flying over the yard or water running out the overflow on the stock tank—and they kept herding the chickens into a small group, worrying them and pushing them around the yard until a couple of them died and his father got rid of the rest.

But as he shoved his legs down into the cold tube of his jeans he heard a meadowlark sing, then another answered him and then he heard Cawley come out

on the porch and hawk and spit and he knew another day had started. He smiled, thinking of Cawley. He'd made fun of Tink once for staying in the old bunkhouse when he could have had a room in the main house. But after they'd put in a septic and had running water and a good bathroom Cawley still went outside to spit.

"You spit in dirt," he'd said to John's father. "Not in some bowl of water in a special room in the house. Besides, it wasn't any part of hiring on, you telling me where to spit. . . ."

Two days had passed since John's father had come home with the news about Tink.

John pulled his socks and the pointed-toe boots on and went downstairs with his shirt on but still open. He splashed water in his face, dried on the towel that had been hanging in the bathroom for going on a month, and went into the kitchen.

Cawley had opened two cans of corned beef hash, emptied each one on a separate plate and was frying eggs in lard on the stove. When the eggs were crinkled and starting to burn he dropped two of them—the yolks still runny with the whites not quite cooked on top—on each pile of cold hash.

"Eat. We start up today and we won't have much for lunch. This will stick to you."

John looked at his plate. The uncooked egg white

looked just like the boogers that were always hanging out of little Davey Haller's nose on the bus.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing." Maybe, he thought, if I jam it all down into the hash and eat it without looking or thinking about it. He used his fork to mash the eggs down and mix them in with the hash and then tried a mouthful. The hash was cold and at least half grease and the lard on the eggs turned hard when it hit the cold hash and he ate without looking. Just take a mouthful and swallow, he thought, then another. It'll go down. He thought of the day before while he was eating.

It had been one of those disasters that maybe turned out for the better. Cawley had decided to start the old GMC even though he didn't have new plugs and belts, just to see if it would run, and it promptly threw a rod and started hammering and bouncing.

"Well," he'd said. "That tears it."

"What about using the ranch pickup?" John had asked.

"Your dad needs it. No, we'll have to do it the old-fashioned way."

John had thought the old GMC *was* the old-fashioned way. It was the only way he'd ever seen them pull the wagon up.

But Cawley showed him a long piece of wood with a bolt hole through one end out by the side of the barn. It

had been there as long as John had known things but he just thought it was an old piece of wood.

"Wagon tongue," Cawley said. "White oak—lasts forever." He went to a pile of junk in the granary and found other pieces of wood and bolts and chains and then, from the wall of the granary, harnesses.

"You're going to pull the wagon all the way up there with horses?"

Cawley had looked at him in surprise. "Sure. That's how we always did it. Trucks is a new idea. . . ."

"But we don't have workhorses," John said. "We just have riding horses."

Cawley smiled. "They'll drive just fine. Don't worry about it. We'll harness Spud and Speck today on some weight and you'll see how they do. There won't be no problems."

John had doubted it but Cawley had been right. They brought the mare and gelding out of the corral, let them smell the harnesses and collars, then harnessed them up. They both stood quietly while Cawley finished harnessing, though Speck—she was always curious—looked around at the contraption on her back for a moment. John helped Cawley back them into position, one on each side of the tongue, and they hooked the trace chains to the doubletrees, snapped the tongue crosspiece up to the collars, and they still stood quietly.

Cawley climbed into the seat of the wagon, John sat

next to him, and Cawley slapped them lightly on the rump with the lines.

That did it.

They slammed forward so hard, John went over the seat backward and landed inside the wagon and Cawley had all he could do to hold them while they took out across the prairie.

They calmed down after a bit, snorted some, then went to work and in ten or fifteen minutes acted like they'd been pulling wagons forever.

"Slick as a wet cat," Cawley had said. "We'll throw your saddle in the back and you'll have two horses up there to use."

I won't get lonely, John thought, looking at the empty plate, wondering how he'd eaten it all without throwing up. I'll have the horses and the dogs and the sheep and the mountains and and and. . . .

After easing Spud and Speck into driving instead of riding they spent the rest of the day getting ready. Cawley brought out a box of shoes and tools and shod both Speck and Spud because they wouldn't be here when the farrier came. John had never seen him shoe before—other than to repair a problem shoe if it came loose—and he was surprised at how well Cawley did it.

"How come you don't shoe all of them?" he asked. Cawley was putting the tools away and he turned after setting the toolbox on the shelf.

"Because I didn't hire on to shoe horses. I hired on to hand, and that's it. Being a hand don't mean shoeing a whole herd of horses come summer every year. Now, let's load that wagon."

John's list was nothing compared to what Cawley put in for him. Cans and more cans of food—he stripped the house, which was always full of canned food.

"Can't have nothing much fresh," Cawley said. "It'll go on you right away. We could have tried some of that freeze-dried stuff you just boil with water and you wouldn't have empty cans to carry back in the fall. But Tink, he don't trust that dried stuff, wanted canned goods, and we had already made a run to town for Tink so you're stuck with canned food."

There were whole canned chickens, canned bacon, canned potatoes, canned fruit and beef and vegetables and dozens and dozens and dozens of cans of fruit cocktail.

"Tink, he liked his fruit cocktail," Cawley said, sitting on a box while he shoved other boxes under the bunk. "I mean likes—I guess he ain't gone yet."

John thought the wagon was nearly caved in with just his food but Cawley added the dog food. They used a high-protein, high-fat dry dog food and he put in two hundred pounds.

"Thing is, there ain't no way you can carry everything you need. You'll need more food and so will the dogs."

"We will?"

Cawley nodded. "It'll go fast once you start eating it and you'll start eating it once you start working."

"What work is there? I thought you just sat and watched the sheep."

Cawley laughed. "Well. That's true. And the dogs do most of the true work. But you'll be on horse for ten, twelve hours a day and that has a way of making work. Then too, things happen."

"What do you mean—what things?"

"Things come along to happen to sheep. I don't know why it is, but if you have fifteen horses, twenty cows, and one sheep standing on a hill and a thunderstorm comes, lightning will hit the sheep. Every time. Things just happen to sheep."

As if to emphasize his point he loaded a big box of medicine, ointments, salve, and even sutures and forceps. "You'll know when to use them."

That was when John had dug his heels in—halfway through the afternoon when he saw all the medicine. "Cawley, I ain't the one for this job."

Cawley nodded. "Could be, could be not. But *I* ain't the one you talk to. The boss is in town, your pa, and I was just told to get you ready and take you up there."

"I'm just fourteen and he's sending me off with six thousand head of sheep. . . ."

Cawley sat back and filled his lip with chew. "You take a shine to the old man, don't you?"

"Who do you mean?"

"The old, old man—the first John. The top waddie who started all this. You're always talking about him, asking about him, wanting to know more about him."

"Well—I guess so. Yes."

"He stuck his kid on a drive, had him riding drag, when he was ten years old. On longhorns. Eating dust and worse for eighteen hours a day at ten. Your pa went out with the sheep to the haymeadow when he was fifteen."

"He never talks about it."

"He keeps close, your pa."

John agreed. Sometimes he wanted his father to talk to him, tell him things—tell him more about his mother, his great-grandfather. Or just tell him what to do. But he was almost like Tink. Some days would go by and he wouldn't say ten or twelve words, and they might be to a horse and not all of them nice.

"Your pa summered the sheep at the haymeadow for four years, then Tink came along and he's done them ever since. So you taking them up when you're fourteen ain't so bad." Cawley spit out the back of the wagon. "Not bad at all. And you'll learn as you go—learn more than you'd ever believe you could."

But now, this morning, as they were making final preparations, John stopped on the steps out of the house.

"You said yesterday that I couldn't carry everything I need to eat—for me or the dogs."

Cawley was in back of him and he nodded. "Yup. That's right."

"So what happens when I run out?"

"You eat sheep."

John turned, looking for a smile, and finally saw one. "You're kidding. . . ."

Cawley snorted. "Time was, they ate sheep. Or cattle. Or deer and elk. But in your case one of us, me or your pa, will bring you some more fodder in a month or so. You'll be fine, just fine—don't worry."

They hooked Spud and Speck to the wagon—they settled in with no problem even with the morning coolness when they liked to pop a little—and pulled the wagon to the end of the yard by the barn. John loaded his saddle and blanket in the back of the wagon—on top of everything it nearly filled the wagon to the height of the canvas top—and Cawley saddled a horse named, simply, Roan. It was a big red, almost a bloodred gelding and Cawley rode him out of the yard the half a mile to where the sheep were being held in pasture.

They were like a gray carpet—six thousand of them pushed against one end of the large holding pasture.

The wrong end, naturally, John thought. He was driving the wagon—trying to master it in the short distance from the buildings—and it was coming hard. It wasn't like riding a horse at all. He had to pull hard on the left rein to turn them left, rather than neck-reining, and had to think to turn wide on corners to make up for the length of the wagon and team.

The dogs were so excited they could barely contain themselves. All four of them had gone to the mountains with the sheep for at least three years running now. Peg was the youngest and she was four and had been doing it since she was a one-year pup.

They ran ahead of Cawley and the red gelding, came back, streaked out to the sides, ran ahead again and couldn't stay still. At the fence they ran through the end of the gate where there was a small gap and went out wide around the herd at the other end of the pasture.

John loved to watch them work and was always amazed at how smart they were.

Cawley opened the gate without getting off the red and swung it sideways, then sat on the horse and waited.

The dogs did the rest.

Billy and Peg went out to the sides of the herd and Jenny and Pete went up on their backs, ran across the herd jumping from sheep to sheep and came in on the back side of them and started them moving with barks and small bites at some of the sheeps' legs or rear ends.

Most of the herd had done the same trip several times and as soon as they saw the open gate and the dogs running at them they started across the field, out the gate and onto the road, a stream of gray backs and bleating heads.

The dogs kept them moving, snapping and using the small excited barks they used on stragglers and lambs and in an hour the herd was out of the pasture.

Cawley closed the gate, grinned at John, and pointed at the dogs. "Ain't automation great?"

And they were on the way.