

Chapter Ten

THEY WEREN'T THERE.

The night before, he'd turned them loose so they could graze and shake and roll. Cawley hadn't said anything so he hadn't retied them. They would stay around the sheep herd, or nearby, and Speck always came when he called.

Except they weren't nearby. They were over a quarter mile up the valley, along the river. He could see them and he yelled for Speck. She raised her head, looked at him, and started walking toward him and Spud followed. But she wasn't hurrying, stopping to take a bite of the fresh green grass next to the stream now and then, and she would be fifteen minutes getting to him.

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He looked the other way, to the herd, and saw that on the side along the creek there was a cleared area—a round spot in the middle of the gray backs. Peg was there, dancing around something on the ground, bouncing on her front feet, getting close to it and away. He saw Billy coming across the herd from the far side to help her.

John looked back to Speck. Too far. He started running toward the herd.

Keep a horse to hand, he thought—each step pounding it into him. A horse to hand, a horse to hand, a horse to hand . . .

It was probably not three hundred yards to run but the altitude caught him. They had climbed for two days and were close to nine thousand feet—up from six thousand or so. In fifty yards he was winded and could not run faster.

He did not see the snake until he was thirty or forty paces away.

It wasn't huge—perhaps two or two and a half feet. It was past coiling and raised in the powerful S shape they used just before striking, the S up and back so that only a third of the snake was on the ground and the rest of it was in the air and free to strike.

"Peg, back—get back!" The snake struck at her but she was dancing backward as it flew out and the snake missed by almost nothing. A tiny gap.

He caught Peg's collar and held her back and when she realized he was holding her she sat quietly and watched the snake.

Billy had come by this time and was circling warily, his nose almost to the ground, well out and away from the snake.

All right, John thought. It's controlled. It's all controlled.

With all the activity around it calmed a bit, the snake lowered itself into a coil again, the rattles—John counted ten—buzzing now and then in short spurts as Billy moved or it sensed John.

"Anybody hit?" John asked. Peg seemed to be fine and Billy was holding well back.

He'd have to kill the snake. He didn't particularly want to—not like most people out here, he thought. Some would drive five miles extra to run over one. He had always thought that if they left him alone he'd leave them alone and he almost liked their attitude.

But that was just it—the snake wouldn't leave them alone. It was where the sheep had to pasture and if he didn't kill it they'd run into it again and again.

He picked up a large rock from the streambed, so heavy he had to lift it over his head with both hands, and brought it down on the snake as hard and as fast as he could.

There were several more buzzes as the snake's nerves wiggled the tail but it was dead and he turned to go back to the wagon.

Billy came in close and smelled the snake, jumped back when the tail wiggled, then went back to the herd. Pete and Jenny were working together and had never left their positions on the far edge of the sheep.

Peggy watched John walk away, sitting still.

"What?" He turned. She was still sitting there, watching him, not moving to get back to the sheep.

"What's the matter now?"

Then he saw the lamb.

The sheep had cleared a circle around the snake—thirty, forty feet across. They had gone back to grazing almost immediately, heads down, many not even watching as John killed the snake.

Directly across the cleared area from John a lamb was biting at its side, chewing at the wool and drooling.

"Oh, no . . ."

Peg had known. The lamb was hit. It must have come on the snake first and been struck in the side and Peg was waiting for him to do something.

He ran across the clear area. The sheep jumped at the sudden movement and ran away a short distance—all except the lamb and its mother. She stayed near him,

making worried bleating sounds as the lamb twisted in short circles trying to reach its side.

John caught it by wool on the back and held it to the ground with his knee. It struggled for a moment, then lay still.

"Where is it? Where . . ." The wool was half an inch thick and very tight and he thought for a moment that he wouldn't be able to find it or that the snake hadn't been able to get through the wool.

He dug with his fingers, pushing the wool sideways—it was wet with spit where the lamb had been chewing—and finally he saw where the snake had hit.

Low on the side, just in back of the shoulder there were two small wounds, slightly swollen, one a little bigger than the other.

What did he do?

What could he do?

In school in biology they'd had a full day on snakes and how they bit, what the venom did, and he somehow couldn't remember any of it.

The lamb struggled against his hands and the mother came in to lean down and smell it. She looked up at John with frightened eyes.

She can't know, John thought. "It ain't good. . . ." he said aloud, then realized he was talking to sheep.

Tink, he thought—he must have talked to the sheep all the time. What would Tink do? What would his pa or Cawley do? What would the old man have done?

And he knew.

They would shoot the lamb.

All of them would shoot the lamb.