

Chapter Twelve

IT WAS NOT a snake.

He could tell well before he arrived at the clearing, his breath tearing at his lungs, his legs wobbly—he could tell by the smell.

It was a skunk.

The sheep had wandered on a skunk or it had come upon them. How it happened didn't matter. What mattered was that it was a skunk and that Billy was close to it.

The sheep had moved away except for one ewe that kept rubbing her face on the ground and snorting to clear her nose out. In the middle of the cleared space—almost the same size as the snake had caused—stood a skunk on all fours, its tail raised but not fully ready to

spray. Billy stood with his shoulder hair up, his tail plumed and his teeth bared. The stink was everywhere.

When the dog saw John coming he took it as encouragement. He feinted once to the left and then dodged right and tore into the skunk.

"Billy!"

The reaction was immediate. The skunk instantly raised further until its back legs were off the ground, pulled its tail up over the top, and caught Billy head-on with a vaporous cloud.

The stink drove John back but it didn't slow Billy down even momentarily. Caught square in the face, half blinded, he continued his attack and snatched the skunk up, shaking him so that John could hear the bones crunch.

"Billy—drop it!"

And he did, finally, drop the skunk. But not until it had sprayed itself empty and not until it was broken and dead and by that time Billy was drenched and running in circles rubbing his head and face on the ground to clear his eyes and get rid of the stink.

"Oh . . ." John had been too close and caught the edge of the spray and it was in his clothes.

He found a stick and hooked the dead skunk and dragged it down the canyon away from the sheep—though they had moved well away from the smell on their own.

Then he came back to Billy.

"We've got to get some of that off you. Come on."

Billy hung back but at length followed and John led him down to the stream and walked in, fully clothed.

"Come on—*now*."

Billy's tail went down but he came until he was standing in the belly-deep water next to John and he continued to stand quietly while John used his hands to cup water and tried to wash the stink out of him.

It didn't work very well and soon the smell seemed to be smeared all over the dog, all over John, all over the world.

At last he gave up and let Billy go back to the herd. The dog shook the water off and rubbed in the dirt some more, then went to work on the far side of the herd and John looked down to see that he was completely soaked, smelled worse than before, and somehow—spitting and gagging—he had apparently gotten it inside his mouth.

Everything, he thought, for the rest of my life will taste like this—forever. He let his eyes find the sun—not two hours had passed since the snake had hit the lamb.

The first day wasn't half over, not even started, and he was a mess and just when he wondered what could happen to make it worse he heard a short yip-yip of pain and looked up at the herd to see Pete running on three

legs around the back side of the herd, headed toward the wagon.

John ran from the stream toward the wagon and arrived—soaking wet, stinking, his hat gone somewhere—just after Pete.

He knelt next to the dog, raised the right leg, and the dog screamed. Not the leg, he thought, lower—the foot.

He turned the pad back up carefully and stopped. Half the pad on one of the toes was torn almost completely away, hung by a shred of skin. He must have stepped on a broken shard of rock or flint, something very sharp. The dog squirmed and whined in pain when the flap of skin and flesh wiggled and John fought a rising sick feeling in the middle of his stomach. The dogs, he thought—the dogs were everything. He couldn't do this without the dogs. He might not be able to do it anyway, but without the dogs he didn't stand a chance and now Pete was crippled. Just like that. Torn like that.

What could he do?

He had to help Pete. Somehow fix the foot and help him but it was so bad—the damage looked so awful. How could he get the flap back in place and hold it?

He tied Pete to the same twine he'd tied the lamb to, then dug around again in the medicine box. There were liniments and salve and some bandages and an elastic

kind of covering bandage called Vet-Wrap. There were also some bottles of a blue-colored disinfectant.

So.

He brought a cup of water from the stream and washed the wound. Then he raised the bottle and poured some of the blue medicine into the cut.

Pete screamed and jerked and snapped at the bottle.

“Sorry, sorry.” John spoke in a low voice, tried to sound confident—which was more than he felt.

He took a gauze pad from a small container in the box and put it on the torn pad, then wrapped the whole thing with the Vet-Wrap, which had a stickiness to it that held it in place. When it was done he leaned back and looked and almost smiled.

On the end of Pete’s leg there was a large pink balloon—the Vet-Wrap was pink—that made it look like he’d stepped in six or seven pounds of sticky bubble gum. Pete stood with a forlorn look on his face, the foot raised.

“Well—maybe it’ll work.” John rubbed the dog’s ears and turned to himself.

He still smelled like the bad end of a skunk and was soaked.

“So I’ll do my laundry,” he said to Pete.

He stripped to the skin, emptied his pockets—a billfold with nothing but some pictures, one of his mother, one of his father, and three dollars, a

pocketknife, and a fingernail clipper. He hated long fingernails.

With his clothes emptied and the belt stripped out he walked naked into the stream, sat down and washed them and himself without soap as best as he could. Then he hung the clothes on nearby willows to dry, found his other shirt and jeans in the wagon and started to put them on.

He was just jamming the second leg into the stiff jeans when his thinking was stopped, and almost his heart, by a high-pitched scream. He knew the sound, had heard it before—it was either a bobcat or mountain lion, he couldn’t tell which. But it didn’t matter. It came from up the side of the canyon, above the sheep, and he looked up to see roughly six thousand sheep coming straight at him at a dead run.

But there’s no room, he thought—not for all of you to be in camp. We just don’t have the room . . .

And they were over him. He stood and braced his legs and they tried to go around him. But they were panicking and wide-eyed, snorting snot, bleating, and many of them ran into him and he knew he could never stand. He’d never heard of anybody being killed in a sheep stampede but he didn’t want to try to be the first.

He saw that Pete had run under the wagon and he made a dive for the small space, bounced off woolly backs, went down, staggered back up and scrambled in

next to Pete, around in back of the wheel while the sheep ran over and around everything else.

“My clothes . . .”

When the mass of running sheep hit the willows they went down and John’s clothes went with them, churned into the ground by thousands of feet.

In less than a minute it was finished. All the sheep and lambs had crossed the stream and the front of the herd was grazing peacefully on the opposite side of the canyon from the scream.

There was no second scream. John crawled out from under the wagon. It was probably a bobcat—the lions were usually higher—and if so there was little danger. Lions killed sheep but the smaller bobcats would only take lambs when they were very small and alone. They almost never bothered adult sheep or protected lambs. It was probably just marking its territory.

But the damage was done.

The camp was a shambles—or actually, he thought, it looked very neat. Almost swept. The box of medicines had been tipped and everything scattered and driven into the dirt. The steps were carried off the wagon and broken apart, the boards thrown every which way. He found his shirt and pants after some searching and almost threw the shirt away. The pants, being heavier material, had come through with just a few small cuts. The shirt was of thinner cloth and was literally in shreds.

But he had brought only three work shirts for the whole summer, and one lined jacket, three pairs of pants, so he decided to keep the shirt. For rags, if nothing else.

His saddle had been on the ground next to the wagon and it had been tossed sideways but he’d always kept it oiled and pliable and the leather was tough. It had not been hurt.

The wagon had remained upright and everything inside it was all right.

“It could be worse,” he said, and looked around to see that Pete had torn the bandages off his foot, had chewed through the twine holding him to the wagon, and was limping back to the herd to help the other three dogs.

“Pete—come here!”

The dog stopped, looked at John, wagged his tail, looked at the sheep, then back at John once more, then back to the sheep and he limped again toward the herd.

And John couldn’t stop him.

He stood, holding his rags, the camp in a shambles and he couldn’t stop the dog and realized he had no control.

Over anything.