

Chapter Fourteen

JOHN'S EYES were open and he was sitting up but he couldn't think why he was awake.

It was pitch-dark and totally silent. Even the sheep were quiet, down for the night. John found his digital watch and pushed the illuminating button.

Three in the morning.

No sound, not even night sounds. Jenny had been asleep and when he raised up she did the same, raised her head and looked at him.

"The storm is over," he said. Way off, now that he was awake, miles away in the mountains he heard faint rumbling. "Why am I awake?"

Jenny moved from the bed, stretched, and went to the door of the trailer.

"Back to work, eh?" He dropped his feet to the floor and padded to the small door, let her out, and stood for a moment on the steps, listening, waiting.

For what?

There was nothing wrong. Overhead the sky was brilliantly clear. While there was no moon the stars splashed across the sky and gave enough light so that he could see the sheep, bedded, sleeping, or watching him. Jenny trotted off silently to the edge of the herd and sat, watching.

Waiting.

For what? It was there, something was there but he couldn't for the life of him think of anything wrong, anything that needed doing.

He shook his head, shrugged, and returned to the trailer. The night was cold—he had seen his breath when he was standing on the steps—and his sleeping bag was still warm. He zipped it up to his shoulder and lay, still awake, thinking.

Something.

Something bothered him. Was it the sheep? The dogs? No . . . it was all right. Everything was all right.

It was just the day, he finally decided. It had been a rough first day and the hangover from it was bothering him. Maybe tomorrow would be better and he could settle in. . . .

He closed his eyes and sleep started to come and just there, just between being awake and being asleep—he

almost thought he was dreaming it—he heard a faint sound.

Nearly thunder.

Maybe that was it. It was so warm in the bag and he was so sleepy and the sound was so faint he thought it was more of the storm up in the mountains, the far-off rumbling of clouds bumping in the peaks. What had his father said that time?

Oh, yeah, the devil bowling. The thunder was the devil bowling up in the mountains. It was something his grandfather had said and before him, his great-grandfather. The thunder was the devil bowling up in the peaks but there was something else, something to do with the sound he was hearing.

It was getting louder now, still faint, but growing. A larger hissing to it, and a rumble—something to do with a thing his father had said about the mountains.

The mountains and rain.

It was still louder, a crashing sound to it, and he knew suddenly what it was, what was coming, what was already here.

A flash flood.

The heavy rain had moved on *up* the canyon, but it had kept raining, up into the higher canyons still.

And they all fed this one. This canyon that he was in with the sheep formed a giant bowl to catch water, not just from rain but from other canyons as well, washing

down the slopes of the valleys and canyons, filling small streams and all of it, all of the streams, emptied into this one main stream.

Going by right next to the wagon.

He was sitting up and as he reached for the zipper on the bag the first wall of water tore past the wagon.

For a moment he felt relief. The wagon was above the cut bank of the streambed—it stood four or five feet high. And from the sound of it all the water seemed to be roaring past well inside the streambed, easily contained.

But the wagon was on the outside edge of a curve, a curve made of soft dirt and gravel, and the wall of water hit it, bounced off and away to the side, with tremendous force.

He was up, out of the bag, and opened the small door, caught one glimpse of the water foaming downstream in the starlight, turned to see if the sheep were all right—the dogs had them well up and away from the streambed—when the water cut the dirt away and the bank gave way beneath the wagon.

There was at first a small lurch and John actually looked down at the floor by his feet, as if expecting to see the reason, and then it was gone. The part of the bank supporting the two right wheels of the wagon gave way completely.

The wagon fell sideways, rolling as it went, and landed on its side in the water. John had not completely unloaded the wagon yet and boxes of canned goods

tumbled over to the side, making the down-side heavier. The wagon didn't slow when it hit the surface but continued over and down until it was three-fourths of the way over to upside down.

The end wall on the front of the wagon was made up of canvas to keep out wind and rain. It was nothing to a six-foot rip of current moving at thirty miles an hour and popped loose almost instantly.

The giving of the canvas probably saved John's life—although he didn't have time to feel grateful.

When the wagon had tumbled the door-opening end had kicked slightly up and knocked John back into the wagon.

He had time to suck just one breath and he was covered with cans of beef stew and pork and beans and chili and close to a ton of water that had come swirling in around the canvas when the top started under.

He would have drowned there, tangled in his own bedding and food, except that when the surge blew in the end of the wagon it turned the whole inside into something close to a tube.

With the door already open because he had been looking outside there was nothing to stop the water and it blew through the wagon with a large *whushing* sound—John later thought it must have been like getting flushed down a giant toilet—carrying everything that was inside the trailer out the back end.

Including John.

He shot out through the door at nearly current speed—from a dead stop to thirty miles an hour in eight or nine feet—and roared downstream like a runaway train.

As he went through the door his head hit the top—which was now the side—and it momentarily stunned him. This added to the confusion of being suddenly tumbled and he was for a few seconds overcome by vertigo. He had no idea which way was up and he kept pulling and pulling trying to get to the surface only to finally realize that he was swimming down, not up.

The water was not deep and there were no boulders, but there were hundreds of other objects caught in the water. Logs and limbs from trees and gear from the wagon—all his gear from the wagon. He kept hitting things, coming up under them. Once he thought he was breaking free only to find that his face was coming up inside heavy, wet cloth and realized he was under his sleeping bag.

He broke loose, caught a breath and then another and was immediately slammed sideways into a bank as the stream curved.

"Ooofff!"

The blow knocked the wind out of him and was followed by another hit as a floating pine snag ran into him and smashed him once more into the bank.

"Get away!" He screamed and kicked at the dead tree

as if it were an enemy. The branches tangled around him and he fought savagely for two or three seconds, then realized he could simply push it away. As soon as he drew free of the snag the current took him again and he moved downstream two hundred yards before his clawing hands found an aspen trunk along the edge and he stopped himself.

He hung for a moment getting his breath and strength back, then pulled up onto the bank and dragged himself well away from the rushing water. He felt pummeled, beaten, and he sat curled in a ball with his face on his knees, dazed, still confused.

Something came next to him and he opened one eye to see Jenny standing there. He could just see her face in the darkness and she studied his eyes.

"All right," he mumbled. "I'm all right."

But it was a lie and he knew it and so did Jenny. He wasn't hurt bad physically—bruises and some scratches—but was most definitely not all right.

Jenny sat next to him, leaned against his leg, propped her head on his arm and whined.

"It's all right," he repeated, dropping his hand to her head and neck and petting her. "Just a little rest now and it'll be all right. . . ."

He closed his eyes.