

Chapter Fifteen

HE DID NOT sleep but a kind of rest took him. Sometime later, still before daylight, he heard/felt the water going down again and raised his eyes to see that it dropped almost as fast as it had risen. In seeming minutes it was back to a small, peaceful, meandering stream moving through a meadow in a high mountain park.

Like a snake, he thought—raise and hit and gone. He tried to see his watch but it had been smashed when he blew out of the wagon and didn't work.

It didn't matter. Time didn't matter. Nothing much mattered any longer. He was done—the day had whipped him. One day. The old man had come into this country with two horses and a gun and his own father had taken the herd all summer when he was a boy and John made one day.

One day and he had a dead sheep, an injured dog, and his camp gone. Not just wrecked, but gone somewhere downstream.

Daylight came slowly. John sat and watched the eastern sky over the canyon mouth grow faintly gray, then a little more, then brighter until he could see around him.

He thought of leaving. He thought his saddle must still be where it had been. The wagon had tipped off but the saddle had been sitting on the ground and might still be there. He could saddle Speck or Spud and say to hell with it and ride home.

It would take a long day or a little more and he'd be in his room in dry clothes and everything would be all right.

Except the sheep and the dogs.

Yes, he thought—there was that, wasn't there? He couldn't leave and he couldn't stay and he couldn't do anything right. . . .

When it was light enough to see where he was walking so he wouldn't step on a snake he stood, like a rusty hinge opening, and started to make his way barefoot and half naked—he was wearing his pants, which he'd been sleeping in, but no shirt—back to the campsite.

Or where the campsite had been.

The wreckage was complete. His saddle was still there, along with the bridle and rope—and the box of medicine for the dogs and sheep. There were also two

boxes of gear and a soaked bag of dog food that he'd taken out of the wagon.

He couldn't even see the wagon at first, not until he'd walked almost to the edge of the stream.

"Ahhh . . ." He thought of about six choice words that Cawley or his dad would have used and wondered why he didn't swear.

The wagon was on its side in the stream, but the streambed was deeper than it had been before. When the flash flood came down it gouged and raked away the bottom and bank to deepen the bed and the wagon had settled over on its side until the top was angled downward and the wheels stuck up in the air.

It looked hopeless.

The stream had dropped back to five or six inches, rambling through a gravel bed, and it seemed that a garbage truck had dumped its load along the bed.

Cans of food, parts of the bedding, paper—the paper seemed incredible, scattered bits by the hundreds and he couldn't think how he could have brought so much paper until he saw that all the cans had lost their labels. The water had washed off all the paper labels and scattered them along the streambed.

Junk, he thought—it just looked like junk. Trash.

My trash.

"And it's all I've got," he said to Jenny. "My own private trash. . . ."

He went to the saddle. It was wet, as were the saddle blanket and bridle but the sun was well up now and it looked to be a clear day and the things would dry fast. Maybe too fast. He worried that the leather in the saddle would crack if it dried too fast and he pulled it into the shade of the willows.

He picked a flat place near the same willows, out in the sun, and started gathering all that he could find.

The force of water had not only pushed him out of the wagon but virtually everything else.

He crawled inside the overturned wagon and fished out what was left. The harnesses for Speck and Spud were still there. They had tangled on their hooks and had been held in place. But the collars—the thick, padded collars that went around the horses' necks and took the strain of the load—were both gone.

He put the harnesses—they were very old and well oiled but were made of leather—back in the willows with the saddle to dry slowly.

He found one boot almost immediately, just downstream from the wagon.

"At least," he said to Jenny, "I can hop around."

In a short time he found there was some logic to the destruction. At first look the current had seemed just to flush everything away. But the stream wound severely as it moved through the flat of the meadow and at each turn it had to cut into a bank.

As it cut and was forced to turn the water had dropped much of what it was carrying. The part of each turn where the water surged and was forced around proved to be a treasure trove.

He found most of his lost canned goods and the other boot on the second turn down from the wagon. There was also one sack of dog food. The paper of the bag was soaked through and he feared the dog food would be ruined but the manufacturer had thought to put in a plastic liner and it had not been torn.

His pile grew steadily.

He found two boxes of ammunition but could not find the rifle. It didn't seem possible that the steel of the .30-.30 would let it be taken downstream very far but he combed the streambed for it without success.

The rest of his canned goods—or so it seemed, he couldn't be sure—he found in the second and third bends and the dog food sacks were there as well. One of them had been slashed open by a snag and the dog food that hadn't spilled was soaked.

He carried it carefully to the pile. They could eat it first, wet, and maybe that way he wouldn't lose so much.

The search for food took most of the day. In the middle of the afternoon he stopped to eat. He had found his spoon, but couldn't find the can opener. Still, he had his pocketknife and he went to the pile of canned goods.

Without labels it was a gamble. He picked a short, stout can that he thought would have beef stew—there were many beef stews—and he wound up having a spaghetti and meatball lunch. For dessert he opened a can he thought would have fruit cocktail and it proved to contain stewed tomatoes. He didn't remember packing stewed tomatoes, he didn't even *like* stewed tomatoes, but he ate them and tried without much luck to make believe they tasted like fruit cocktail.

He worked until dark and by then he thought he had everything. Or at least everything there was to find. He'd even found the horse collars, not twenty yards apart hung on snags.

The rifle still eluded him, and the wagon was still in the stream, but there wasn't much else missing. He had a stroke of luck. A tree limb snag had jammed across the streambed a quarter of a mile below the wagon and the branches had formed a mesh net across the flow of water.

His sack of extra clothing and the sleeping bag hung up on the mesh. Had they not caught there, floating as they did, he figured they could have gone to Casper, a couple of hundred miles away.

At dark he set up a crude camp. He had found the plastic bag of matches—Tink had taught him that—and he made a fire. His sleeping bag was still wet but his jacket was dry, as were his clothes, which he'd hung over the willows, and he lay next to the fire and settled back

to spend the second night, leaning forward now and then to feed a piece of wood to the fire to keep it going.

He had remembered about the horse—about keeping a horse to hand—and he had Speck tethered to the long rope. She could graze and reach water but she was also close if he needed her.

Spud didn't want to be too far from her so he stayed near camp as well and John listened to them rumble and chew and thought that it must not have been so different when the old man had come with his two horses.

I wonder if he had dogs, John thought dreamily, on the edge of sleep. Nobody ever said if he had a dog with him. Maybe he had a dog or two and maybe he camped right here, right on this spot.

He let sleep take him in fits and starts, dreaming about his father and the old man and two horses and the fire, all mixed together, not really hard sleeping.

At two in the morning, with a sliver of moon starting to show, the coyotes hit the herd.