

## Chapter Eighteen

NOW, HE THOUGHT—just that. Now.

Now what? Now to see if I'm really alive. That's next. He tried to think.

He had never really lost consciousness. He knew/felt the horses near him, knew the wagon was upright, heard the sheep in the distance, the rambling gurgle of the stream going by just to his rear.

But his shoulders, his neck, the lower part of his head were alive with pain; throbbing, pounding.

And he could not get air. He pulled, heaved, but it didn't come until just before he passed out a small trickle of air came down, sweet as sugar, and he followed that with another and another and the world stopped swimming.

He raised his head, rolled onto his back.

"God . . ."

New pain pushed out of his shoulders, down his back.

In stages, slowly, he sat up—grunting with the effort—then over onto his hands and knees, up on his knees and, finally, onto his feet.

Not two minutes had passed since he'd slapped Speck on the rear. Two minutes and a life, a whole life. Had the board caught him six inches higher it would certainly have broken his neck.

And I'd be dead, he thought. Just like that. I would be dead.

He shook his head, took a step. It was wobbly—he nearly fell—but he made it and he took another and felt things loosening up.

He leaned on Speck, patting her neck. Peg and Billy had heard the commotion and had come running from the herd to check on it but went back to the sheep as soon as they saw everything was apparently all right.

They watch, John thought. They watch all things all the time. He hung on Speck's collar for a full minute and felt his strength come back. He left the horses for a moment and went to the stream and splashed water in his face, drank a little.

"So—what have we got?"

He moved to the wagon. It was on its wheels, sitting

in the shallow water. The board had snapped out of place just as it came vertical and left it standing. Other than the broken side board he didn't see any real damage.

He moved to the side and looked at where the board had come out, found that it would be easy to cover with a piece of tarp or jam the board back in place, and turned to go back to the horses and bring them around to hook them up and pull the wagon out when something caught his eye.

It was a glint of black metal, down in the water, and he leaned closer to it and found himself looking at the rifle.

It was half buried in gravel, under the water.

"How . . ."

He remembered the wagon going over. The rifle had been leaning against the high side wall and it must have been flipped over against the tarp as the wagon moved, then fallen down through the opening and been under the wagon when it went over.

"It's no wonder I couldn't find it."

He pulled it out of the water, tipped it so the water could run out of the barrel.

It was a mess. Sand and mud came from the barrel and it seemed to have gotten up inside the lever-action housing as well. But there didn't seem to be any major damage. Where the rifle had fallen there had been soft

sand and the weight of the side of the wagon coming down on it had merely pushed it down into the sand and not broken anything.

Still, he wouldn't know until he could take it apart and clean it.

That would come later. Now he had the wagon to handle.

And he ran into a snag.

He moved to get the horses and Speck followed easily enough but Spud rebelled. When he got to the edge of the stream he stopped, dead, and didn't want to budge.

"Oh, come on, I've ridden you across streams before. . . ." But even as he said it he knew it wasn't true. The truth was he rode Speck almost all the time and he couldn't honestly remember a time when he had actually ridden Spud into water.

Some horses were like that—were afraid of the water. Cawley told him once it was because they saw the sky in the water, the reflection, and they thought they would fall forever but he'd had a few beers when he said it so John didn't know.

He did know that some horses didn't like to go in water and he led Spud again and again to the edge of the water, taking him back in a circle and bringing him down to the water again and each time he stopped.

Speck was in place by the tongue of the wagon and she watched with interest, whickering now and then to

them, shaking her head and whether it was this or just John trying again and again Spud finally agreed to do it.

He stepped off the bank carefully, slowly, one foot high out over the water. He brought the foot down hard, clearly thinking the water would be very deep and he would be swimming.

When it stopped in only three or four inches and hit the bottom it jarred Spud's whole body but he still couldn't believe that the water wasn't deep.

He followed John slowly, taking great high steps and slamming his feet down into the water until John—who was by now completely soaked from the splashing—had him in position. John was laughing so hard by this time, he had to stop.

"You look ridiculous. . . ."

Finally he had the doubletree back in place and hooked the horses to the wagon and then it proved to be surprisingly easy.

They just walked out of the water—Spud still taking giant steps—and pulled the wagon up into position.

"Up," John said, walking next to them, "farther up."

He pulled the wagon well away from the stream, onto a bit of high, flat ground near some aspens. Then he unhooked the horses, picketed Spud again so he could get to him in a hurry and let Speck run and went to work.

First things first, he decided, and the first thing had

to be the sheep. The coyotes would come again tonight, if not sooner—they would stay around the herd and hit as soon as they thought they could get away with it—and he had to handle them.

That meant the rifle and he spread a piece of tarp on the ground and sat to work. It was slow because he had the wrong tools. He had a pair of pliers from the tools in the wagon and a screwdriver-shaped blade on his knife and with these two tools he dismantled the rifle as best he could.

He took the lever off, opened the end of the magazine housing and took the spring and plunger out of the tube—water poured out as it had from the barrel—and he removed every part that he could with his limited tools.

Each piece he placed carefully on a piece of tarp on the ground, in the order that he removed them, trying to keep everything straight in his mind.

Then he used the torn corner of a T-shirt to dry each piece and when that was done he looked for oil.

There was none, but he had Vaseline for the dogs' feet or any other wounds and he placed a thin film of Vaseline on each piece to stop any rust. He used a string to pull a piece of shirt with grease on it through the barrel several times until it shone like a mirror.

When everything was dry and greased he started to rebuild the rifle and did well until he was nearly done

and saw a small piece of metal with a screw that had been hidden under a fold of the tarp.

“What . . . ?”

It was a piece of the ejector that was screwed into the side of the receiver. He had to remove the bolt and lever and put the small piece in or the spent cartridge cases wouldn't eject.

Finally it was done. It had taken him most of the day but except for some scratches in the blueing the rifle looked almost as good as new.

He worked the lever a few times, easing the hammer down with his thumb, and everything seemed to work right.

Now, he thought, to check it out.

He didn't have a lot of cartridges to waste but he decided to use one to test the rifle.

He pushed the shell into the magazine from the side, then levered it up into the barrel just to make certain everything worked well and fed the shells correctly.

Across the stream, about fifty yards away, there was a mound of dirt left by a badger looking for a place to den up.

John squatted by the wagon and propped the rifle on the tire. He cocked the hammer, took half a breath, let it out and squeezed the trigger.

The recoil slammed back into his shoulder and the crack was stunningly loud in the narrow, quiet confines

of the valley. It echoed and reechoed off the sides and filled the whole canyon with sound.

Hundreds of sheep ran, this way and that, and the dogs worked to settle them in. All except for Peg. She came running to John and sat next to him, shaking, and he remembered how much she was afraid of gunfire.

“It's all right, all right. . . .” He petted her, ruffled her ears, and after a moment or two she went back to the herd.

John looked at the target. The bullet had hit within an inch and a half of where he'd been aiming and blown the back of the mound of dirt apart. His father had taught him to shoot, showing him how to hold and squeeze and anytime you could put a bullet within an inch of where you were aiming it would get the job done. John had started to get into shooting the year before, almost too much. He'd spent most of the money he earned on shells and worked day after day on sighting and squeezing until his father had stopped him one morning.

“A rifle is just a tool,” his father had said. “So you can throw rocks harder than you normally can. Don't ever forget that. It's not anything—just another tool. Like a wrench or a hammer.”

Still, he thought, looking at the mound—it would be different tonight. Much different.