

Chapter Nineteen

HE SPENT part of the afternoon cleaning up the camp—he wished he had a hose to clean the mud out of the wagon—and then he rested. The whole night chasing coyotes, the blow he'd taken from the board, and the work of getting the wagon out and clean had exhausted him.

In late afternoon he lay out on his sleeping bag on the ground in the warm sun and lay back to take a nap. He went out like a light.

It was dark when he awakened, dark and cool enough so he could see his breath. The moon was just showing over the eastern rim of the opening to the valley. In his sleep he had pulled the bag over himself and he wanted to close his eyes again and snuggle into the warm bag.

But he heard noise—sheep bleating, running—out on the far side of the herd and knew they were back. The coyotes were there. He couldn't be certain how long they'd been back but the noise snapped him out of the lazy feeling and he jammed his feet into his boots and stood.

He'd tied Spud to the picket rope before sleeping—he would never be without a horse near again—and he bridled and saddled him in less than a minute. He was glad it was Spud because Speck was jumpy when a gun went off. Spud didn't care if you shot right over his head.

There was an empty rifle scabbard tied under the right stirrup of the saddle but he didn't use it. Instead he made certain the rifle was loaded and swung onto Spud and rode with the rifle resting across the saddle.

He let Spud head for the noise on his own and tied a knot in the two reins so they would hang up on the saddle horn and free his hands for the rifle.

It did not take long to get to the trouble. The coyotes were hitting in three places at the same time. The lack of reaction the night before had made them brave, almost cocky, and one of them—a large male—stopped in the moonlight, actually holding a jerking lamb by the back leg, and merely watched as John moved toward him on Spud.

John stopped and raised the rifle. For a second every-

thing hung still, the coyote looking at him, holding the jerking lamb who was bleating for its mother, the horse stopped, little jets of steam from John's breath in the cool night air and he almost didn't shoot.

It was beautiful, too beautiful to end. There would be a crash and then an end to the coyote, an end to the animal standing there. In some way that bothered him. To end an animal, end the life.

But he would shoot, and he knew it. If he did not end the coyote, the coyote would end the lamb. It was that choice.

He squeezed the trigger.

The rifle was thundering—enormously loud in the night. Spud jumped sideways and in the glare from the fireball coming out the end of the gun John saw that he had held right. He could not see the sights on the rifle but his father had told him to always hold low at night, that people tended to shoot over things in the dark, and John had held on the low edge of the coyote's chest.

The coyote had been hit in the center of the chest and was dead instantly. But it wasn't over. In the half second before John squeezed the trigger the lamb had pulled and the coyote had pulled back and the lamb had been yanked around in front of the coyote. The bullet had gone through the neck of the lamb before killing the coyote and it flopped down on top of the dead coyote.

"No."

John dismounted and ran to the bodies hoping that it hadn't been as bad as it seemed, that maybe the lamb was just stunned.

But it was dead.

He pulled the lamb from the coyote, carried it off to the side. The mother nudged it with her nose and tried to get it up, bleating in small noises.

"I'm sorry," John said. "I didn't mean it. . . ."

Stupid, he thought—stupid. To hesitate. It was the hesitation that had caused the trouble. That half a second of hold let the lamb come around.

But he knew it was more. It was all of it. It was the gun, the killing that caused it. It was wrong, felt wrong, but there was no way around it.

If the sheep were to live, the coyotes had to die.

It was like a law in mathematics. Sheep and coyotes could not be together.

He took the rope from his saddle and looped the noose around the coyote's neck and used Spud—who was half spooky to be dragging a dead coyote around in the dark—to pull the body of the coyote off into the dark brush and then in a large circle around the herd.

Some ranchers hung the bodies of coyotes on fence posts and let them mummify there, and swore that it helped keep others away. John couldn't bring himself to

leave the body around but he thought the dead smell might help and after he'd circled the entire herd he pulled the body into some brush and buried it in a shallow trench, covering it with sticks and rocks.

He carried the body of the lamb off, heeling Spud in a run to leave the following ewe behind, and buried it on the far side of the streambed in some rocks. The coyotes would get it, he knew, but the rocks might keep them away for a time.

Then he moved back to the herd. He rode around them twice slowly and found to his surprise that all the coyotes had gone, vanished. He thought they would stay even with one gone but apparently the sound of the rifle had done the trick.

After the second round he sat still for a time, watching the sheep in the moonlight.

It's always been like this, he thought. For so long nobody can really remember there have been people watching sheep and protecting them, just like this, in the moonlight.

It was in the Bible. The whole thing about Christmas. That night there were shepherds watching their sheep, close to two thousand years ago.

The same moon. The same stars. The same kind of animal. He wondered if they had dogs and thought they must have. They couldn't have worked sheep without

dogs, he thought, then wondered if they had dogs why dogs hadn't come into the story of Christmas. That whole business should have dogs in it. . . .

He was dozing before he knew it—sitting in the saddle asleep, the rifle across his lap, Spud's head hanging down while he caught a nap as well.

John awakened some time later. He had no idea how long he'd slept. It was still dark and the sheep were still bedded down and the dogs were still taking care of things and the coyotes were still gone.

He wiggled the reins to awaken Spud, who snapped his head up, as if surprised to find he was standing with somebody on his back.

John guided him quietly around the herd back to camp where he unsaddled and picketed Spud in case he needed him.

Then he crawled in his bag, put the rifle close by, and lay back to count stars until he was asleep again.

Which took less than thirty seconds and the last thing he thought was that it's always been like this—always just this way.