

Chapter Twenty-one

HE HAD no idea what it was when he heard the noise and rolled out of the bunk.

He was ready now, always ready to hit the ground running. His feet dropped into the tops of his boots and he pulled them on—he didn't take time for socks—and his left hand automatically grabbed the rifle and he was at the door and outside before his mind really had time to kick into gear.

There was no moon and it was the middle of the night. Flashlight, he thought—I should have a flashlight. He thought momentarily of taking time to light the lantern but decided it would take too long.

Noise.

Something had awakened him. What?

There. It was high in the herd. His eyes were already accustomed to the darkness and in the faint light provided by the stars he could see the sheep up on the side of the valley.

Something was in them. They were scattering and running in all directions and he thought for a moment it was the coyotes, that they had come back.

Then he heard a new sound. A bellowed growl—very deep, guttural, almost human, if a human could get low enough.

On top of the growl he heard a scream of pain from one of the dogs and he was on Speck and riding, bare-back, the rifle in one hand and his other tangled in the mane to hang on.

He didn't have time to bridle her and he steered with his knees at first. But she knew probably better than he did where she had to go and inside three leaps she was moving at a lined-out full gallop.

John let himself move with her, felt her slide over the ground.

It was too dark to see anything but shapes. The light color of the wool on the sheep made them relatively easy to see, and the white patches on the dogs made them show a bit. He saw them running, moving back and forth, trying to get at something but whatever it was did not show until he was nearly upon it.

It was a black bear, still down on all fours, swinging

around to hit at the dogs. There were three dogs up and trying to dash in and snap the bear on the flank. One dog was down and off to the side—John could just see it against the ground.

There were dead sheep everywhere. He didn't count, didn't even think of it, but they were scattered around and in some cases lying one on top of another.

Everything happened at once. Not just seemed to—everything happened exactly at the same time.

Speck smelled/saw/heard and recognized the bear just as two more leaps would have taken her right on top of it.

She turned sideways. Didn't pivot, but suddenly went from a horse racing one direction to a horse racing another. It was too fast for John. He had raised the rifle, holding on the center of the black mass—a darker place in the dark night—and Speck turned just as he squeezed the trigger, still at a full run. The gun was unbelievably loud—cracked the night open in a flash-sound. He shot at least a foot wide of the bear.

Without a saddle he couldn't stay on and as she turned and he fired he was at the same instant alone in the air, floating, floating it seemed forever.

He was heading directly for the bear.

He had time for thoughts. The rifle, he thought—if I could work the lever and maybe get the barrel down I could get another shot in before . . .

It was too late. The thought came, hung as he hung in

the air, and ended as he landed spread-eagle full on top of the bear.

Everything ended when he landed on the bear. He had seen them before, seen them in the mountains, and knew they could take a terrible toll of sheep. But he had always thought of them as almost cute, like pets, and slow and plodding.

He could not believe how fast this bear moved. He wasn't a large bear—perhaps three hundred pounds—but he was a very mad bear. All he wanted was a few sheep and dogs had come from all directions, snapping at him, and then a horse came out of the night and nearly ran over him and somebody shot at him and then that same somebody flew through the air and landed on him.

He seemed to turn inside his skin, shifted beneath John, rolled and came to his back legs just as John landed, half on his feet.

The bear swung sideways with its right paw. One sweeping hook and it caught John on the left shoulder. "Ooofff!"

He'd never been hit so hard. Even getting kicked by a horse in the stomach had not been this hard.

He almost literally flew sideways and all still at once, almost at once. Off the horse, the rifle shot, onto the bear, knocked sideways all in less than a second.

A ball, he thought. He'll come after me, try to finish me. Roll in a ball and try to get through it.

But the bear didn't come.

Except for Peg, who was on the ground, the dogs were still there and when he rose to hit John they came in on him. Billy got a mouthful of rump, tore hair out, and went back in. Pete and Jenny took the sides and as the bear wheeled to get one, another came in, snapping, to dance out; and in the spinning to get one dog and then another, the bear forgot John and the sheep. He lowered and backed away, cuffing at the dogs until he could detach from everything and then he moved off into the darkness and was gone.

He left carnage. Dead sheep were everywhere, Peg was down and John was driven into the ground against a small hummock of dirt.

Like a fence post, he thought, or tried to think. He drove me in like a fence post.

He couldn't believe the bear was gone, couldn't believe he was still alive, couldn't believe his brain still worked. It was like getting hit by a car, he thought—a car moving about sixty. Just wham, and I'm gone.

He was on his right side, his face speared into the dirt, and he rolled onto his back. There was a numbing jolt from his left shoulder and it seemed to pop and he realized the blow had partially dislocated it and he'd moved it back into position when he rolled.

He wanted to scream. It felt like somebody had driven a spike into his shoulder joint.

John lay on his back for a moment, his breath coming in quick pants while the pain rose and fell and finally dropped enough so he could think straight again.

He had been certain the bear would come at him, take him, and he was surprised when it didn't.

John rolled forward, grabbed his shoulder, and held it in place.

Speck had gone off a bit and was standing. He could just see her in the darkness.

Peg, he thought—Peg was down. It was Peg.

He rose to his knees, stood. The gun—he needed to find the rifle. The bear might still be there, waiting to run over him.

His legs were rubbery but they worked and he walked back to where he'd come off the horse. The rifle was there but it took some seeing and he had to lean to finally find it in the dark grass.

He picked it up, worked the lever—there was some sand in it and it grated—and put a fresh shell in the chamber.

Now Peg.

He moved to where she was down. The other dogs had gone back to the herd but several sheep were around the dog on the ground, smelling it and snorting, stamping their feet.

She's dead, he thought. He put his hand to her throat, her chest. It seemed still. No. There. A small move-

ment, she was breathing—just. Short breaths, little tight whuffs of air.

The bear must have hit her, smashed her as he had smashed John. He leaned over Peg and felt her sides, her neck, and then along her back and while he was there, working his hands down the side of her back, he felt wetness.

He couldn't find a wound but the wetness grew and he dug deeper into the fur and then he realized that the wetness was on *top* of his hand and that it was dripping down.

It was from his shoulder.

He was dripping blood from his shoulder where the bear had hit him and with that knowledge the wound shock came and he slowly rolled onto his right side next to Peg and thought, this isn't so bad, not bad at all, and he closed his eyes and decided to take a little nap.

Just lie down next to Peg here, he thought, and take a small nap. It's been such a long day and I'm so tired, so tired, so tired. . . .