

Chapter 23

“C’mon, Dobe!”

His dream was frightful with Indians bearing down on him. Then Dobe pulled up lame just as he rode off the open plains and into some trees where he knew he had a chance to get out of their direct line of sight, and perhaps he could find a defensible position.

“C’mon boy! You can’t fold now!” he yelled. But the rock of reliability could move no farther and stood with quivering forelegs and raspy, heaving breath that Sammy mystically understood as Dobe’s cries for him to get away and leave him behind.

He grabbed his rifle from the scabbard and two boxes of cartridges from his saddlebags, then he slung his canteen over his shoulder. “I’ll be back for you, boy! I’m comin’ back!” He ran a jagged course through the trees up a mild slope, his eyes searching for a natural redoubt, something somewhere where he had cover and could make a fight. He saw the rock outcropping fifty yards ahead and scrambled to it with the sound of pounding hooves and yipping Indians close behind.

Jenny’s voice floated from all around him like an echo of last hope. “Hide Sammy! Don’t let them get you!”

He reached the outcropping and jumped into a hollow that of-

ferred a perfect hiding space with a rifle portal between the rocks, giving him good visibility of both flanks. Sammy jacked a shell into the chamber of his rifle and sighted in on the Indians. They had reached the trees and were fanning out as they cantered up the slope. There were about a dozen to his left, their course veering away from his position. He trained his rifle toward them as they gradually disappeared from sight. When he could see them no more, he listened to the retreat of sound as it faded like a rising wish. Minutes passed, and the silence came as a beautiful comforting blanket, a void from all sound that enveloped like the warmth and safety of a womb.

Sammy looked back down the slope. Through the trees a hundred yards away, he could see the lone Indian examining Dobe, running his hands over the right shoulder and foreleg. He knew the Indian had deduced the horse was lame. He trained his rifle on the Indian, knowing what would come next as the Indian pulled the long knife from its sheath. The Indian was about to cut Dobe's throat. As Sammy took final aim, the sudden sensation of nothingness in his hands turned to disbelief and horror as his rifle vanished like the treachery of unstoppable fate. The Indian moved smoothly into position, holding his blade low at his side.

"Noooooooo!" Sammy yelled as he leapt from the rocks and sprinted down the slope, pulling his own knife in a desperate rush to save his horse.

He hit the wall with a force that broke the doorjamb and awoke everyone in the bunkhouse. A moment later, Lundy appeared at the open doorway to Sammy's room with a lit oil lamp in one hand and a pistol in the other. J.P., Franklin, and several other men were right behind Lundy and all had either pistols or rifles.

"Light a couple of them wall lamps so we can see what the hell's going on here!" Lundy said to no one in particular. Sammy was on his hands and knees just inside his room, his head hanging and blood dripping to the floor from a cut on his head. He was dazed and just becoming aware that he was in the bunkhouse.

Lundy could see the increasing puddle of blood on the hardwood. He knelt down close to Sammy as the stunned cowboy rolled over on his hams and looked past Lundy at the men huddled in the doorway, cast in the eerie half-light of Lundy's lamp.

"What happened here, Sammy? Are you all right? I heard yell-in', and then there was a giant crash like a bull had stampeded into the wall," Lundy said.

Sammy's heart still pounded from the adrenaline rush of the dream, a nightmare he now realized as the cause of his current position on the floor. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Teach that son of a bitch Indian not to mess with a man's horse."

"What the hell's he talking about?" Franklin said as he stepped around Lundy and Sammy who were blocking the doorway. "Were you havin' a dream? Some kinda nightmare or something?" Franklin asked.

Having regained all of his senses, Sammy felt slightly embarrassed. He got up and looked blankly ahead as he spoke. "That was the realest damn dream I ever had. Crazy savage was gonna kill my horse. I had to go for him."

"Well, did ya get that red varmint? 'Cause ya sure got that wall," J.P. teased. Laughter erupted down the hallway.

"You know, I think I head-butted that ole boy up to Wyoming Territory," Sammy replied with a goofy grin and blood running down his face. The men laughed again.

"I reckon you might a-taken too big a pull on that cough syrup," Blaine Corker speculated. "Doc warned me that too much would stone ya crazy. Said it has some opium in it."

"Yeah? You drink some of his loco tonic, did you?" Lundy asked.

"Sure did. Had a cough this evenin' and Blaine said it would help."

"That's right . . . I remember," J.P. said. "Come to think of it, you did swig on that pretty good."

"Well, I ain't coughin' no more," Sammy replied.

"No, you ain't. Now you're bleedin'," Lundy said.