

Chet turned his mount to go in the opposite direction, heading toward his brother Cody's place. Just before reaching the main house, he reined Rebel up to the gate, unlatched the chain, and gently urged the horse to push the gate with his chest. The two had been practicing the routine. Although Rebel placed his ears back slightly, it was apparent that he and Chet truly had an understanding of the duties that the horse was expected to perform. Chet left the gate open intentionally, knowing that all the cattle were up in the other pasture. He would close it on his return.

The animal eased up some after getting through the gate and then began to prance as he headed up the hill to a path that led through the woods and opened up into the graveyard field.

"Let's see what you can do on speed," Chet said as he encouraged the horse with the heels of his boots. The horse jumped forward roughly, but then opened up in a dead run. The animal rounded the corner of the field, clearing the trees in a full gallop. That all changed for the horse and rider after the horse had traveled another two hundred yards.

"What the...!"

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"Uncle Chet, Uncle Chet! Wake up! Are you okay?"

Chet's vision was blurred as he tried to sit up. His head pounded like he had been hit with a club. He laid his head back down on the grass.

"Andy, give me just a minute. What the hell, uh heck, happened?"

"Your head's all bloody, Uncle Chet. You must have fallen and hit your head on a rock. When I came back from fetching the mail, Rebel was standing next to your corral. I opened the gate and led him in. Then me and The Colonel came lookin' for you."

Chet attempted to sit up again. Still drowsy, he grabbed Andy's shoulder to brace himself. The six-year-old dropped the reins of the horse and did his best to keep his uncle from falling backwards. After more than five minutes, Chet's vision began to clear, although some of his

dizziness remained. With Andy's help, he stood and reached for the saddle horn as The Colonel stood completely still. He leaned up against the horse's side for several minutes and now noticed the droplets of blood dripping from the side of his head.

"You're gonna' have to get up in that saddle, Uncle Chet. You're too big for me to hold you up while you walk."

"Andy, while I hold on here, slowly walk The Colonel in a semicircle so I'm on the high side of this incline. Move him over to the steeper part of the hill."

The boy did as instructed, making sure the horse took only the smallest of steps. With the The Colonel finally in place, Andy held Chet's waist with both hands as his uncle attempted to lift his left foot into the stirrup. It took three tries. Chet finally pulled himself up and onto the saddle seat. He was completely exhausted from the move and leaned over on the horse's neck.

Andy looked around. Chet's straw hat had been stomped by the Rebel's hoof. One of the horse's metal shoes had apparently cut through the crown of the hat. The boy picked it up anyway and placed it on his own head. Chet's Peacemaker also lay on the ground a short distance from where he fell. Carefully, the boy reached for its handle. Seeing that the hammer was cocked, he held it with his thumb while squeezing the trigger to release the action.

"Here, Uncle Chet. I'm putting your six shooter back in your holster. Come on Colonel, we got to get back to Aunt Callie's. She'll know what to do."

Chet drifted in and out of consciousness as his nephew walked the horse down the hill through the woods and eventually up to his back porch.

"Aunt Callie, Uncle Chet is hurt, bad!"

"That darn fool," she said. "He should have sold that Rebel off at auction. Help me get him down and into our bedroom."

Chet lay in his bed with his head propped up with pillows. A cold compress was on his head.

“Andy stay here, and don’t let him fall asleep. Keep talking to him—about anything. I’ll drive up to the Mister Nelson’s to call the doctor. Remember, don’t let him fall asleep.”

“Yes ma’am.”

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Beth and Callie stood behind Doctor Milburn as he attempted to examine Chet.

“Ladies, I know you mean well, but I need a little room in here. “Get me a pan of warm water, a towel and some soap. He’s going to need some stitches in that hard head of his.”

As the two left, Milburn forced Chet to open his eyes so he could examine him.

“How many fingers do I have showing, Chet?”

“Two? Yeah, two for sure.”

“You’ve got a bad concussion, plus you’re going to need about six stitches in your head to keep what’s left of your brain from falling out — probably wasn’t much up there anyway. I’m going to have to shave some hair off your scalp so I can see what I’m doing. What the hell happened, Chet?”

“I honestly don’t know, Doc. I was just getting my new horse into a gallop and the next thing I know I was laying on the ground and saw Andy standing over me. Honest. I wish I could remember.”

“That happens sometimes,” Milburn said. “It might come back to you, it might not. The brain has a funny way of blocking out trauma sometimes.”

Within twenty minutes, Chet’s head was stitched up and he was sitting up in bed, drinking some water.

“You need to stay in bed for the rest of the day, and you need to take it easy for at least a week. And, put a hat on your head if you’re outside or you’ll get a terrible sunburn on your noggin where I shaved off some of your hair.”

Milburn scratched his left ear with his thumb and index finger. Then, he turned his head and looked at the destroyed cowboy hat, lying in a nearby chair.

“That one won’t do at all,” he said. “No heavy chores or horse riding until I come and examine you again next week. Understand?”

Chet nodded.

“I’ll make sure of it,” Callie said.

As Doctor Milburn walked down the path to his faded blue Oakland, he saw Andy by the corral, waving his hands to try and get his attention.

“Doctor Milburn, do you treat animals too? Uncle Chet’s horse is hurt too.”

By now, Andy had removed the horse’s saddle and had tied the reins to the corral railing. Rebel’s ears were pinned back on his head. The doctor moved slowly as he approached the sorrel and talked gently as he came closer.

“Easy boy. I know all about horses,” he said. “I used to have one pull me around this county in a buggy until I was forced to buy one of these contraptions,” he said as he pointed to his car. “Let’s take a look see,” he said as he pulled his bifocals down further on his nose.

“He’s got this really bad cut on his shoulder,” Andy said. “I ran home and got some ointment out of our barn. Pops used it on one of our mules the other day when it got its foot caught in the fence.”

Milburn tried not to show any alarm as he examined the wound.

“You did just fine, boy. Wipe that area with a clean, wet rag once a day and keep putting that ointment on it until it starts to crust up some. How’s a little fella’ like you so good with this horse? Your Aunt Callie says he’s a wild one.”

“Don’t tell my mamma, or Aunty Callie,” Andy said. “They told me to stay away from Rebel. But Uncle Chet has calmed him down quite a bit. Every day, when I go to fetch the mail up on

the main road, I stop by and give him a piece of carrot if we have any in the house. He likes apples too. He lets me brush him as high as I can reach. I ain't told nobody, not even Uncle Chet."

"Well, you've done a good job, young man. Cody has taught you well. I forgot to tell Chet something. I've got to go back to the house for a minute."

"Rebel was shot?"

"That's right, Chet. It just barely grazed him, but the bullet ripped into his hide making a cut about six inches long. That's how you got thrown. That nephew of yours patched him up really nice. I don't think the horse would tolerate me putting in any stitches. He should be fine in a week or so. That boy has a way with animals. Do you remember hearing a shot, anything at all?"

Chet shook his head and then glanced at his gun belt hanging on the bed post. Callie had placed it there when she put him back in bed and no one had touched it since.

"Hand me my revolver, Doc. I want to check something."

Chet opened the gate and turned the cylinder.

"Doc, two rounds have been fired off. I reloaded it this morning just before I left for my ride. But there's no way I could have shot my own horse."

"I agree, the angle would have been impossible with you in the saddle, and, there were no close-range powder burns on his fur."

"Doc, can you keep this quiet? I don't want anyone to get upset around here."

Milburn scratched his chin. Then he squinted as he looked down at Chet.

“Technically, I can’t tell anyone because of our doctor-patient relationship,” Milburn said.  
“But you better not hide this from your family. Something happened up on that hill, something serious.”

“Thanks Doc. See you next week.”