

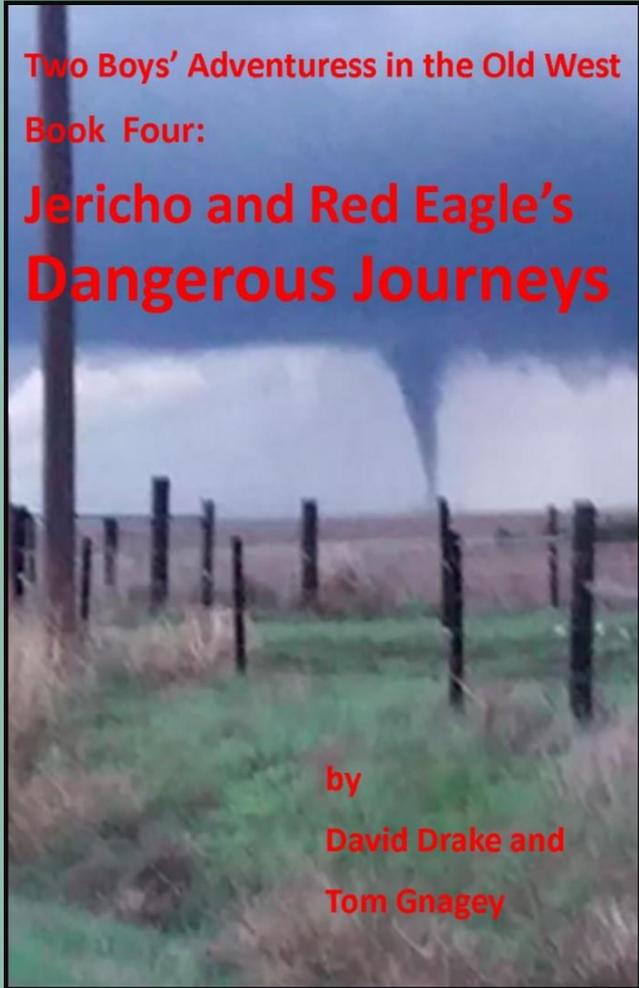
**Two Boys' Adventuress in the Old West
Book Four:**

Jericho and Red Eagle's Dangerous Journeys

by

David Drake and

Tom Gnagey



**Jericho and Red Eagle: Two Boys Adventures in
the Old West**

Book Four

DANGEROUS JOURNEYS

By
Drake and Tom Gnagey

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The Books Are Best Read In Order.

Book One: The Beginnings

Book Two: The Imposters

Book Three: The Greedy Ghost of The Golden Dutchman

Book Four: Dangerous Journeys

Book Five: The Boys' Great Adventure (Coming)

Book Six: (Have to wait and see)

**[Based on the short stories from 1961,
The Adventures of Jericho and Red Eagle
by Tom Gnagey]**

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A Few Things about 1870 in the United States

The Pony Express, started operation in 1860 and was gone by 1863, replaced by the telegraph and efficient cross country stagecoach lines, which had become the major means for long distance travel. Brave Families moved west from Missouri in covered wagons seeking better lives in places from Kansas to California. Stagecoaches would, in turn, soon be replaced by the railroad. Locally, people depended on horseback and buggies to get from place to place, and on sturdy livery wagons to haul cargo. Although trains had been in local use throughout the eastern United States for several decades, the first railroad to connect the east coast with the west coast was not completed until 1869. The bicycle would not be in general use until the 1890s and the common use of cars was still fifty years away.

Kansas became a state early in 1861 the same year the first telegraph communication was established between the east and west coasts. Common use of the telephone would wait until the early 1900s and radio was not widely available until about 1920 depending on where one resided. 'Town folks' bathed once a week in a large, wooden tub, everybody in a family using the same water. Rural folks often used the creek. Outhouses sat behind every home since indoor plumbing was not available.

The Civil War began in 1861 and ended in 1865. Many areas of the country, particularly Kansas, remained bitterly divided over the issue of slavery even after the end of the war. Abraham Lincoln (the 19th president) was assassinated

in 1865. The 1870s were ushered in under President Ulysses S Grant, a Civil War hero (the 21st and 22nd president – he served two terms).

Kansas, during this period in history, was still the old west as pictured in 'Western' movies with men strapped into holstered six-shooters; sheriffs wearing tin stars and carrying rifles; bad guys robbing stages; wide, dirt Main Streets separating rows of wood-front stores and raised wooden sidewalks with overhanging roofs. In the eyes of Kansas law, stealing a horse was every bit as wrong as killing a person.

Boys rolled large wooden hoops down the street for fun and girls played with homemade, cloth dolls. Most children were expected to work to help the family. In the best of times, a small-town man in Kansas earned between \$2.00 and \$8.00 a week. Families averaged five to eight children and one in three babies died at birth. Doctors were often twenty-five to fifty or miles away. Familiar names during the era included: Wild Bill Hickok, Butch Cassidy, Kit Carson, and Jesse James.

* * *

The story of Jericho and Red Eagle up to now.

[The term 'Indian' is used in these stories because that was the term used in 1870 America. No disrespect is intended to our precious Native Americans.]

Twelve-year-old twin boys were separated at birth. One was raised as a Cherokee and the other a white boy. In 1870, Kansas, they each undertook a separate journey to Red Bend Kansas hoping to discover who they were. They met along the way and soon accepted that they were twin brothers. In Red Bend, they discovered the circumstances of their birth and separation, and became friends with Doc Webber, Cilla who was the newspaper editor, Sandy the deputy sheriff and Cal, an older boy who hoped to someday become marshal of the territory. They discovered a secret cave, which they made their home, and a hidden gold mine that presented financial security for them. They each acquired a wonderful horse, stronger and faster than any others in Central Kansas. They outran a prairie fire, handled a runaway stage coach, and

captured a band of outlaws that was out to steal their gold. They found the blending of their backgrounds make for a remarkable life together. Red Eagle taught Jericho Cherokee and the ways of his people. Jericho taught Red Eagle to read English and helped him understand the ways of the white people.

In Book Two, the boys begin building a good friendship with a seventeen-year-old young man, Cal, who turns 18 and becomes a deputy. They go up against a despicable (wicked) rancher who is trying to me the US Government send all the Indians in the Midwest to reservations and commits robberies and other unlawful acts to make them look guilty. They care for an Arapaho boy and his sick grandmother and see them safely back to the Indian Territory, where they live. The rancher captures them and threatens their lives.

They had begun building a very good life for themselves among their new friends there in and around Red Bend Kansas. More and more it felt like home.

In Book Three the boys and Cal have to deal with the myth and sudden presence of the ghost of a long dead Pirate who reportedly buried his life time of treasure right there in the area of Red Bend.

* * *

[NOTE: The author often uses the 'best' word instead of the 'easiest to read' word. For the younger readers who may not know those words he inserts synonyms in parenthesis after those words. We hope that make the reading move along with less effort.]

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CHAPTER ONE

Looking Forward

With the restless ghost of the Golden Dutchman, Ditmer Dekker, safely committed to a hospital for the criminally insane in Chicago (for which the boys were paying), they were able to relax and put their efforts toward their dream – building the first home for orphaned children. That sounds pretty safe and straight forward, right? Think again! These are Jericho and Red Eagle we're talking about!

Besides handling Dekker, two other major things had transpired (happened). The first related to the treasure. Experts from the American Museum in Washington had come and sorted through the treasure. Just like Doc had expected, about ten percent could be identified so it could be returned to England and Spain. That made the boys feel really good. The only problem was, both countries insisted on giving them a reward – a finder's fee, they called it.

"Oh, no!" the boys said as one when they received the letter from Washington informing them of it.

"The last thing we need is more money!" Red Eagle said.

"It's going to take us a lifetime just to give it all away," Jericho added.

They sat and pouted about it for some time.

"I guess we'll just add it to the rest of our money in the Kansas City bank until we have time to think it through," Red Eagle said hoping to buy some time and not force it into a big problem right at that moment.

The rest of the treasure was being sold for them by

their KC bank. They had become just about the wealthiest boys in the nation, but insisted on keeping that a closely guarded secret.

The second big event was the progress being made on establishing their first home for orphans.

They were having breakfast with their friends on a Monday morning, which meant they were both dressed as Cherokee. Red Eagle spoke at his brother's urging.

"We have an idea for the name of our children's home and we want to . . . run it by you."

He looked at Same Face to make sure that was the right expression. Jericho nodded.

"Well, don't sit there like a bump on a log," Doc said. "Run it by us!"

"We were wondering about, The Happiness Place."

Doc mulled it over in his head and began nodding. Cilla did the same, followed by Sandy and Cal. Looking around the table Jericho pronounced the verdict.

"Seems unanimous. We hated using the name orphanage because that would just be a constant reminder about what wasn't right in the kids' lives – being orphans. And foster implies separate from the main family. We thought about Children's Home, but it will be a whole lot more than a home – a school, a huge outdoor area to explore, medical services, horses to ride, dogs and cats to play with, people coming to visit and lots of wonderful grown-ups to be there for the kids whenever they need them. So, we decided on Place. We demand that everything about it be aimed at bringing happiness to everybody who is associated with it – kids, staff, visitors – everybody!"

Doc removed a thick envelope from his inside coat pocket.

"I received my friend's response to the plan you submitted to him – his name is Milford Biden, by the way. He prefers to be called Mil. He broke his response down into three areas: the physical setting (buildings and grounds), the staff, and the programs (services for the children). Cilla and I went over it last night – it came on the 6p.m. stage – and we agree he did a great job for you."

"Good. We'll send him payment for his services, just

tell us how much.”

“He won’t take any money. Like I said he was an orphan and as an adult he has been very successful where money is concerned – both a physician and a lawyer. He has pledged his support and services in any way needed.”

Jericho turned to Red Eagle.

“And NOW, we can’t even give our darn money away!”

They folded their arms in front of them and pouted some more.

Cilla also had news so she took advantage of the silence, which didn’t come often when the boys were present.

“I have an interesting response to the advertisement you placed in the paper for land down near Sandy Ford.”

She handed the letter to the boys.

“I can have Sheriff Mason check it out. I’m sure he’ll know the seller and probably the land itself,” Sandy said. “Only a few farms and ranches down there. Not many settlers yet. The state just got it divided up into counties. Off to the west of Sandy Ford, parts of it are too sandy to grow good stands of grass.

“The sooner he can check it out the better, I’d say,” Jericho said.

“I guess you know how much we appreciate all of your help and support,” Red Eagle said, looking from one face to another around the table. “We’re so excited we can hardly get to sleep at night.”

“Yeah! Last night it took my poor brother ten, maybe fifteen seconds more than a minute before I heard him sawing logs.”

“They know what I mean, Smart Alec.”

“We will want to see the land,” Jericho said.

“You can telegraph the man and set up a time for a visit. It’s little more than a day’s ride south west and not really far from the Indian Territory,” Sandy said. “He owns a huge ranch so he’ll most likely have his own telegraph post. Benton is an important man in the state. In the meantime, I’ll contact the Sheriff.”

“That’s a long way from large population centers,” Doc said. “Do you suppose there will be a need for such a place down there?”

“We’ll, Red Bend is not a large population center and look here at this table, my brother, Cal, and me.”

“It really doesn’t matter how far away a baby is born, does it?” Jericho said. “Maybe that is another service we need to invent – ways to transport new babies and kids to our Happiness Place.”

“That brings up another point,” Doc said. “There will need to be a staff member designated as Legal Guardian for the children. Until you two are older, there will need to be a person with a spotless reputation to fill that bill. Mil pointed that out in the plan he returned. Remember, you two will still have final say about things. He has just taken your plan and made what he hopes will be helpful suggestions that will get it all running smoothly.”

After breakfast, they telegraphed the land owner and saw to it that Sandy prepared something for the Sheriff.

“I’d like to head south right away, wouldn’t you?” Jericho asked Red Eagle as they left the telegraph station.

“Yes, I would. I was also thinking that since we will be so close to Rising Sun’s Arapaho Reservation down there, that we should try and see him.”

(Rising Sun was the Indian boy who visited Red Bend in Book Two, *The Impostors*.)

That would be great. I wonder if they receive telegrams on their reservation.

As one, they turned around and reentered the office. They found there was an Indian Agent’s office on the reservation that had service, and that would give them the best chance of reaching their friend. They would find a place they could meet him and let him know when they would be there in case he was free to come.

They still had not retrieved Red Eagle’s bow and quiver of arrows from the mill where the Dutchman had captured them, so they took a leisurely ride north to get them.

“That mill would make a pretty nice house, you know,” Jericho said as it came into sight ahead.

“For how many dozen people? It is huge.”

“I guess you’re right. My whole village could have lived in there. We have no reason to live in a place that big. It would be a fantastic place to raise kids though, wouldn’t it?”

“It would be. You’re not going to go off and get married on me, now, are you?”

“Goodness no. I can’t take care of myself yet, according to Sandy.”

“According to Sandy and Doc and Cilla and Cal and the girls in the park, and the new kid who cleans stalls at the Livery and . . .”

“Okay. Okay. You made my point for me, now let’s move on.”

They found the bow and quiver right where it had been left. They rode back to the waterfall on Sunday Creek and swam for a short time before returning to town. They checked in first at the telegraph office.

“Got a response from the Benton fella,” the telegrapher said handing over the printed copy.

They read it: AVAILABLE ANY TIME. YOU SAY WHEN – Richard Benton, R Bar B Ranch.

“Okay. We leave tomorrow and get there sometime Wednesday?” Jericho said/asked.

“Sounds fine. We need to let both Sherriff Mason, and Rising Sun know were coming,” Red Eagle said.

They composed and sent those telegrams telling Rising Sun to send a reply collect (meaning they would pay for it when they picked it up). They doubted if he had money for such things. They really had no idea if he would ever receive it before they left the next day.

“We’ll check in here early in the morning,” Jericho said.

“I’ll be here. Sleep on the cot there, ya know.”

The boys crossed the street to let Cilla and Doc know about their plan before leaving town. They had food at the cave that needed to be eaten before they left so they bought supplies for the trip and rode on home. It was suddenly exciting to think they were finally really on their way to turning their dream into the real thing. It took them at least two full minutes to get to sleep that night.

The next morning, they rolled the telegraph guy out of bed at five o’clock. He had responses from both the Sheriff and Rising Sun. The Sheriff said to be sure and look him up. He knew the land man, Richard Benton, and vouched for his honesty. Rising Sun was happy to hear from them and said

he would meet them Wednesday morning at the trading post just south of Sandy Ford.

“This is going to be a great trip, little brother. Probably pretty tame compared with what we’ve gotten used to since we first met.”

“We have had some great adventures, haven’t we? The people in my village would have never guessed I was up to doing such things. You know what I have decided the best thing is about having lots of money?”

“What’s that?”

“You do not have to spend it. I was really bothered about being rich, you know.”

“Yes, I know; both of us are/were.”

“Well, once it came to me that I didn’t have to change myself in any way – that I didn’t have to spend all that money on things I don’t need – I finally feel okay about it.”

“I came to the same place you are in my thinking. I have wondered how we are going to explain where our money comes from – the money we live on – if it ever comes up. I think we need to get a good story to handle that. It has to be one that nobody can really check out.”

“Good thinking, big brother. Maybe we could say somebody from far away left the money to us.”

“A benefactor. Great idea!”

“Benny who?”

“No. Benefactor. It means somebody that supports you.”

“Oh. Benny Factor. Wasn’t he that man whose life we saved?”

“What man? Oh, I see. That is really great. Yes. Benny Factor. I remember now. He was on his way home to New York City and his horse bucked him off in the middle of that prairie fire and we dragged him into the river until the fire burned itself out. He was so grateful that he started sending us money every month.”

“A great story! Maybe we will become famous writers.”

“Or, famous liars, is more like it.”

They took Golden and Lightning to the livery for a breakfast of oats and fresh cut green hay while they bought ‘the gang’ breakfast (no hay or oats) with some of that money

they didn't really have to ever spend. They were on their way by six thirty. They took the road that followed Sunday Creek south to Sandy Ford. They had found that having one of them as a white boy and one as a Cherokee had lots of advantages when they were away from Red Bend. What one couldn't accomplish with folks the other generally could. Of course, they were each prepared to dress both ways. By nine, Jericho had shed his shirt under the hot sun. They stopped often to let the horses drink and for the boys to wet down their own hair.

Their destination was an hour's ride west-south-west of Sandy Ford following the creek after it turned west. Rising Sun had suggested they meet at the Trading Post on the trail just south of Sandy Ford where he had changed escorts on his way south with his grandmother the month before. Their plan was to check in with the Sheriff when they arrived in town and then camp near the trading post that night so they would be there when Rising Sun arrived the next morning.

At noon, they stopped to have lunch at a grove of trees along the creek. The horses enjoyed cooling off in the water while the boys ate jerky and hard tack. Mae, the older lady from the ranch near Big Red Rock Hill, hearing they were setting out on a journey, had sent ham sandwiches and potato salad with them. They were saving those for supper.

Red Eagle put his finger to his lips signaling quiet.

"Something moved in the trees over there," he whispered, indicating the spot with a nod of his head.

"Something what?" Jericho whispered back.

"I cannot see what it is."

"An animal?"

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"Big help. Oh, I see it now, too. It is coming closer, staying down close to the ground."

Jericho took out his knife and Red Eagle set an arrow into his bow.

"Maybe a dog," Jericho said.

"Or a wolf or coyote," Red Eagle said, beginning to draw some tension onto the string.

"Listen. Is that crying?"

After a moment, Jericho called out.

“Hello. Hello. Can we help? We have food if you are hungry.”

The ‘creature’ stood up – a six or seven-year-old boy. His shirt was torn and his hair uncombed. His dirty cheeks bore trickle marks where tears had found their ways down his face. Cilla would have described his appearance as disheveled (messy).

Jericho stood and opened his arms. The boy walked toward them – slow and uncertain, his chest heaving with heavy sobs. He circled to his right avoiding Red Eagle and moved toward Jericho.

“This is my . . . best friend, Red Eagle,” Jericho said realizing to introduce him as his brother would be fully confusing in that moment. “Why are you out here all alone?”

The boy went to Jericho and put his arms around his waist holding him tightly.

“The men took them,” he said.

“What men is that?” Jericho asked.

“The men that robbed us.”

“We need to have you tell us all about it.”

Jericho got him to sit with them and munch on a piece of hardtack as he offered the full story. They were traveling from St Louis toward Texas to start a new life. His father had just finished his medical training and had arranged to set up practice in a small town down there. Early morning, several days before, two bandits had come upon their wagon where they had stopped for the night. The boy – Benny – was off playing some distance away. He heard a ruckus (muffled noise) and made his way back toward the wagon, stopping at the edge of the woods to see the men holding his parents at gun point. They left the wagon behind, but took his parents and horses away.

“My father had told me if we got separated I should find a minister or a sheriff. I’ve been walking for three days and haven’t found anybody until you. Can you help me find my mother and father?”

The sobbing started again. Both Jericho and Red Eagle were familiar with being alone and frightened – and sobbing about it. They knew they had to help. They had no idea how to help! A little thing like that, of course, would never

stop the two of them from helping!

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CHAPTER TWO

Who's My Boss?

It was clear that Benny was starved. Red Eagle dug for one of the ham sandwiches. The little boy's eyes grew big when he saw what the Indian boy was handing him. He would have to rethink what he had heard about such creatures.

In and around the boy's story and other small talk, they shared about themselves. Benny gradually became comfortable with them. They managed to learn things about the men who abducted the boy's parents. There were two of them. They were, in Benny's words, scruffy, (disheveled). The one with the black beard did the talking. He wore a 'funny' hat with an arrow sticking through it and a feather sticking up in back. They had a pack mule with them, which the man called Obstinate. (means, stubborn)

The boys were amazed such a small child could put away a whole ham sandwich and drain a canteen. It made them hurt for him. Eventually he stopped sobbing – it had continued, but had not slowed his chowing down on the food. When he forced the last morsel of food into his mouth and swallowed, he wiped across his lips with the sleeve of his shirt and looked back and forth between the boys.

"Thanks, you know. I guess I didn't eat very polite like. Sorry."

"We were just glad to see you eating. We can always get more food when you get hungry."

Benny had things on his mind.

"My mother is going to have a baby. I don't know much about that yet but you two say you were born at the same time

with the same mother so you are twins. I know about twins – just hadn't ever wondered how it happened. You can tell me all about it later. I'm sorry I was a scared of you, Red Eagle. I've just never heard anything good about Indians. Like I said, I'm sorry. I can see you really look alike. I hope someday I get muscles like you guys have.”

It had been a list of random observations that had entered the boy's mind as important information related to his new friends. Red Eagle responded.

“I'm sure you will get muscles. Nothing to worry about. Right now, you need the bath of your life, young man. We have soap. There's the creek. If you'd rather take care of yourself go to it or we'll help or whatever. We're pretty knew to this having a kid to take care of thing.”

“I like you. You're funny. Come with me. I don't want to be that far away from you. My clothes are all muddy, too.”

“Well, this is your lucky day, Benny. My brother here is just about the best White boy's clothes washer I've ever seen. He can work on them while I work on you, okay?”

Apparently, it was okay, because a half hour later the boy was clean and wrapped up in a towel waiting for his equally clean clothes to dry. Jericho set the stage for the next activity.

“We will ride on south to a town called Sandy Ford. We know the sheriff there and he will know how to find your parents.”

“I don't have a horse.”

“You can ride with one of us,” Jericho said. “You can even choose which one.”

He looked them each over again and offered his decision.

“Red Eagle knows me best – the bath time and all – so I'll start out with him and then we can trade off after a while.”

“A young man who knows his mind. I like that,” Jericho said.

A few minutes later they were on their way south with Benny's clothes flapping in the breeze at the end of a pole he held across his lap. The 'big' boys continued to talk about their journey as they rode. Benny listened with interest, but in general remained quiet. They could only imagine how

frightening it must be to get separated from ones parents at his age.

They met a man coming north, driving a team and wagon. As was the custom on trails, they stopped and chatted for a few minutes.

“Our young friend, Benny, here, got lost from his parents and we’re hoping to reunite them in Sandy Ford. Have you seen two men and a woman between here and there?”

“Actually, I seen a group like that just south of town last evening. Looked like they was heading west on the trail toward the R bar B Ranch.”

“If one of those men wore an odd hat, will you describe it for us?”

“Well, yes, he did. Black felt, narrow brim, an arrow though it at a angle and a feather up the back. That sort a odd?”

“Exactly that sort a odd,” Jericho said. “Thank you.”

The boys urged their horses to a slow gallop feeling the urgent need to find the sheriff.

In the 95-degree heat of the day, it wasn’t long before Benny’s clothes were dry. They stopped so he could get dressed. He opted to ride with Jericho the rest of the way into town. He also carefully rolled up his shirt and put it in a saddle bag, apparently so he would match his two new, bare chested friends.

It was after five when they finally stopped at the city limit sign. The town sat across the creek at a wide, shallow, sandy spot – thus, the name, Sandy Ford (ford means crossing). On the other side, the trail became the hard-packed dirt main street as it did in so many small western towns. It looked like most – wooden buildings on both sides of the street, raised wooden sidewalks in front of them and roofs extending out to shelter them. Every store had a hitching rail out front.)

Jericho pointed.

“The big star in front of that building. The Sheriff, I suppose.”

He had been correct. They dismounted in front of it and Jericho helped Benny to the ground.

“Thanks, Jericho, but I’m going on seven and I can get on and off a horse all by myself now.”

“I should have known that. Like we said earlier, we don’t know a lot about boys your age.”

“You were my age one once, weren’t you?”

It implied the boy didn’t understand why they would not remember every aspect of being six and a half. He figured he had a lot to teach them.

The news inside the office was disappointing. The sheriff and his two deputies were away handling an overturned stage a good way east of town. The Sheriff’s grandson – 15 or so – was tending to the office in his absence.

“Minister?” Jericho asked.

“Dead,” came the one word answer. Then, a minimal explanation.

“Fell off the church roof a couple a months ago when he was fixing a leak in the roof. Plop! Ouch! Dead.”

Red Eagle glanced at his brother and then down at Benny.

“Looks like it will be the three of us for a while, Ben. That okay?”

“I just want to find my parents.”

“We’ll do the best we can.”

“Is the best finding them?”

“That’s our plan,” Jericho said not knowing how to answer.

He couldn’t promise not knowing how things would work out.

“Just tell the Sheriff that Red Eagle and Jericho passed through,” Jericho told the grandson.

The boy made a note asking them to spell their names.

Outside, they stood on the sidewalk looking up and down the street. Lightning and Golden, who they seldom tied up, had been waiting patiently. They suddenly became restless, looking south on down the street. The boys walked out into the street and turned, shading their eyes, to see what was going on.

“That Pinto with no rider coming our way,” Red Eagle said. “Look familiar?”

“It seems to look familiar to our horses for sure. Is that

Rising Sun's horse?"

"I'd bet on it. I wonder where he is."

They trotted after the horses who had left to meet the newcomer. The Pinto changed his path and walked right up to Golden and stopped. They nuzzled each other.

"Look," Red Eagle said, moving to the Pinto. "His quiver and bow and saddle bags are still all in place. Our friend is in trouble!"

Suddenly, problems were piling up on the boys – a lost boy and, well, another lost boy.

"Let's ride down and find the trading post where we were supposed to meet him," Jericho suggested. "We should be able to learn something there."

Red Eagle turned to Benny.

"You think you can take care of Pinto until we find the boy who belongs to it?"

"Sure. I'm good with horses. Father let me help drive the team sometimes – with both of us holding the reins. No saddle. No stirrups. I guess I'll need a leg up to mount this one."

Mounted at last, they rode on south toward the edge of town. After a mile or so they came upon the trading post. They dismounted – that Benny could do by himself. They went inside. Jericho approached the owner.

"We were to meet a friend here – a boy about our age - Indian. We found his horse running free and are concerned about him. We wonder if you have seen him."

"Cherokee, like your friend?" he asked.

The boys traded quick grins about the 'friend' reference.

"No, Arapaho," Jericho said.

"Can't say that I have."

The man moved to a glass case and removed a stick of hard candy and handed it to Benny.

"Your little brother, I assume," the man said.

"For the time being, anyway."

The man looked puzzled. Jericho removed a penny from his pocket and laid it on the counter.

"No. No. That's on me. I remember how it was to be that age."

Benny looked at the boys as if to say, 'See, he remembers how it was'.

He thanked the man.

Red Eagle spoke. The man was clearly surprised at his excellent English.

"Where is a good camping spot around here, close to the Post and near the trail?"

"West side a the trail, a hundred yards on south. Trees. At the bend in the creek. Can't miss it. Hope you find him."

"Thanks for your help. Sorry we don't need supplies."

"Maybe on your next trip. Keep me in mind."

Outside Benny had a thought – several in fact.

"He was a very nice man. I will share the sweet with you."

"The man wanted it to be for you. We'll be fine."

"Maybe my parents and your friend will all be at the same place when we find them."

"That would sure be nice. I guess we'll have to wait and see," Jericho said.

Benny led Pinto close to the porch and, from there, managed the mount by himself. The boys didn't know whether a compliment was in order or not, not wanting to offend him again, they remained quiet and moved off on south.

Benny pointed.

"That the campground?"

"Looks like it to me," Red Eagle said, picking up the pace a bit.

"Been lots of camp fires here – that probably won't be any help," he said after dismounting and beginning to look over the area.

Benny followed him trying the same, leg over the horse's neck and slide to the ground dismount he had seen Red Eagle use. He ended up flat on his face in the grass, but bounded up smiling. It was clear Red Eagle was going to be his go to guy. He followed him to the remains of a small camp fire close to the trees back a way from the trail. Red Eagle reached his palm out over the mound of ash. Benny did, too.

"Still warm, but not stirred out," brother. Either somebody was very careless or had to leave in a hurry."

“Here’s something,” Benny said reaching into the grass, hesitating to pick it up as he looked up at Red Eagle.

“I see. Good find. An arrow. An Arapaho arrow. Can you hand it to me?”

That completed, he took it to Jericho pointing out several features.

“This red ring just above the arrow head. It is a special mark hunters sometimes paint on their arrows so the game they hit can be matched to them. Every hunter has his own design. See this one has five thin lines crossing the ring.”

“Let’s compare it to the arrows on the Pinto,” Jericho suggested.

“Identical,” he said after just a moment. “Red Eagle was here.”

“And he might have left the arrow as a sign for us.’

“That would mean he knew he was in danger of being abducted.”

“Which way was the arrow pointing when Benny found it?”

“It was pointing west. Hard to know if that really means anything I suppose.”

Red Eagle walked to the edge of the woods which was at the west edge of the area.

“Wagon tracks,” he said. “Deep. It was a very heavy wagon. Harder to make out hoof prints in the grass.”

“I suggest we follow the wagon as far as we can,” Jericho said.

Red Eagle agreed with a nod. He picked Benny up and set him on Pinto; Benny offered no resistance. The boys mounted up. They proceeded west through the prairie grass. The soil in that part of Kansas was very sandy so the wagon tracks remained deep and clear.

They came to the bend in the creek which turned forming the southern edge of Sandy Ford. A half dozen boys were taking a late afternoon swim. They pulled to a stop to speak with them.

“Have you seen a wagon heading out west across the prairie?” Jericho asked.

“Yup. A big fancy painted wagon – like a little house on wheels,” one boy said. “A door in the back, but no windows.”

“Painted red and Yellow with a picture of a man in a tall hat on the side,” another boy added.

“The driver didn’t look like the picture,” a third offered.

“You talk with the driver?”

“Nope. He just kept going. We waved, but he didn’t wave back. Not the friendly sort, I guess.”

“Thanks. Have fun. It’s getting late. Won’t your parents be worried?”

It had been Jericho. He turned to his brother and spoke in a quieter voice as they rode on, urging the horses to a slow gallop.

“Hear that? I sounded like a grownup back there.”

“Yes, Father!”

It was worth smiles.

Benny didn’t understand, but it did bring a question to mind.

“Which of you is the boss?”

The boys had never thought about it. Red Eagle tried an answer.

“We don’t have a boss. We talk things out and come to agreements about things.”

Benny nodded.

“I think that’s how my parents do it. At my friend Tommy’s house, it was his Father who was boss. I like it your way best. I guess that means you’re both my boss, huh?”

The boys looked at each other and Jericho spoke.

“I’ve found it’s hard to have two bosses so why don’t we have my brother be your boss, when bossing is needed. Will that be okay with you?”

Benny nodded. It didn’t seem like a big thing. He had just wanted to know how things were.

And, how things were, was about to change in a BIG way.

CHAPTER THREE

They Wanted to Pound the Bad Man into Soup!

Within an hour they saw the big wagon ahead of them. Jericho figured it was one of those men who called himself Dr. Wonderful, or some such name, and sold people bottles of terrible tasting elixirs (fake medicines) he guaranteed would cure them of whatever ailed them.

The boys had each assumed they would just ride up beside the driver and start a conversation – to find out if he had seen Rising Sun. Something suddenly changed that. Jericho saw it first and pointed toward the wagon's roof. The metal chimney that stuck up a foot or so toward the front was moving back and forth, left and right and front and back. Suddenly it fell off. Apparently, the driver did not notice.

From inside, fingers showed above the roof and clutched at the rim around the hole. They were pulled back inside. The top of a head – black hair at least – emerged from the hole. Then, slowly, the entire back of a head appeared and turned around.

“Rising Sun!” Red Eagle said and began waving over his head. Rising Sun saw him and disappeared. His hands reappeared – elbow high.

“Sign language?” Jericho asked.

Red Eagle nodded and began translating.

“He says he has been captured along with three other boys his age. Only the driver is with them, but he has two side arms. They are on their way to Mexico. He doesn't know why. At least I think that's what he said. Sign language uses many parts of the body – not just hands and fingers.”

The arms disappeared and Rising Sun's head reappeared looking back. Red Eagle signed back that they would follow and find a way to rescue them.

"Ask him if any of them are hurt." Jericho suggested.

It was done. Rising Sun turned his head left and right.

"I suppose that means 'no', don't you?"

Red Eagle nodded. He flashed one final sign.

What did that say?" Jericho asked.

"Stay safe and don't worry."

"Next time you might try something that seems more likely," Jericho said only half way kidding.

"Like?"

"Like cross your fingers and pray!"

They fell back a bit so it wouldn't be obvious to the driver that they were following him.

"Mexico is a long way away," Jericho said. "I can't figure that, can you?"

"I have one idea and it is not good for those boys."

"Give!" Jericho said.

"Two boys were stolen from my village when I was small – they were about our age – thirteen as I recall. There is a sport in Mexico called something like 'Fighting Boys'. Boys are forced to fight each other and men bet on them. I guess the fights are terrible. Sometimes a boy will not survive. The men who own the fighting boys make lots of money. When they turn fifteen they are set free. One of the boys returned to our village to tell of his experiences."

"Well, we can't and won't allow that," Jericho said.

"Let's just trail them for them awhile until we can come up with a plan," Red Eagle said hoping to control his brother's first instinct to just wade in, fists flying, without a plan.

Jericho agreed and they let themselves fall even further back.

"You know," Benny said. "You two are that age. Don't let the bad man catch you or I won't have anybody."

The boys exchanged a glance that said Benny was right. They had a double task – free the others, and keep from getting caught themselves.

Then there was task three, of course, all the time keeping their new little sidekick safe.

“Do you suppose the guy will stop for the night?” Jericho asked really thinking out loud.

“He’ll have to stop sometime. We’ll just have to keep on his trail.”

The boys remained silent thinking that discussing plans might frighten Benny. They would talk after he went to sleep that night – if the wagon stopped.

“He sticks close to the creek,” Red Eagle said. “Do you know how far it runs?”

“No, but it is flowing on ahead of us, downstream. That means it probably joins up with a larger creek or river. It will go on to the ocean I suppose.”

“Ocean. The Caribbean where the Dutchman sailed?”

“Maybe to the Pacific Ocean. It goes clear over to Japan and China.

“I will need to learn about those places,” Red Eagle said.

“He needs to stay close to water for the horses, I suppose. If he is going to Mexico, it’s a very long trip. I’ve seen it on maps. It’s south of Texas.”

The sun was sitting on the horizon ahead of them so they figured it was around eight o’clock.

“If he’s going to stop I’d think he’d do it soon,” Jericho said.

“Half moon. I suppose he can see well enough to keep going through the night,” Red Eagle said.

Presently, their wondering could cease. The wagon pulled off the trail to the right – toward the creek – and stopped. They boys pulled into a stand of tall brush and dismounted to wait and see what the man would do. Red Eagle had noticed that Benny was so tired his eyes kept closing while he rode. He unrolled the bedroll that Pinto carried and made a place for the lad to lie down. He was immediately asleep.

“Exhausted.” Jericho said. “We should have thought about that. This being a parent thing is not easy.”

“That altruistic thing we talked about with Cilla – putting somebody else’s needs before our own. Harder than it seems when it’s a 24 hour a day thing.”

As they watched the man working around the wagon,

Red Eagle found them each a sandwich from his saddle bags. The man built a fire and prepared something in a skillet, which sat on a flat stone next to the fire to warm. They figured it was something like stew. While it heated, he tended to the horses, unhitching them and tying them on long ropes to trees. From there they could drink and graze.

Fifteen minutes later he carried the heated skillet to the rear of the wagon and opened a one foot square door at about his shoulder level. A bowl appeared and he ladled some of the food into it. It was pulled inside and another appeared. It continued until each boy's bowl had been filled. He closed the little door. It locked with a bolt through a hasp (Google). A few minutes later he returned to the rear of the wagon with a very large canteen of water. Again, he opened the little door. One at a time tin cups appeared and he filled them. A moment later the empty bowls were handed out nested into each other. He relocked the little door and took the bowls to the stream where he rinsed them out and set them in the grass to dry.

He then sat by the fire and ate from what was left in the skillet. When finished, he washed the skillet in the stream and left it to dry. He spread his own bed roll in among the trees, removed his boots, placed a rifle beside him on the ground and apparently went to sleep.

"I suppose we have a plan," Red Eagle said.

Jericho shared his thoughts. Red Eagle added a few ideas. They gathered the supplies they would need from their saddlebags and made it clear to their horses that they were to stay with Benny. They waited until they were quite sure the man was asleep. He began snoring so that was easier than it could have been.

They moved quietly in a big arch around the side of that wagon away from the creek and into the small stand of trees where the man lay asleep on his back. They each completed their part of the plan. Red Eagle first removed the rifle and stood it against a tree some distance away. Then, he wrapped one end of his lasso around a tree that was less than a yard from the man's feet. He left it loose, so when the arrangements were complete he could pull it tight and tie it in place at the tree trunk. Very carefully he placed the loop end

around the man's ankles and snugged it as tightly as possible without waking him.

The man lay on his back with his hands crossed on his chest. Jericho did essentially the same thing at the other end. He looped one end of his rope around a nearby tree trunk and quite skillfully managed to slip the lasso loop over the man's crossed hands, on up to his wrists and tightened it down.

At that point the boys nodded that they were ready, and each one pulled their rope tightly around the tree and tied it in place. The man's body was stretched out top and bottom. He yelled and cursed in most inventive ways. Using Jericho's bandana from around his neck they fashioned a gag and tied it in place across his mouth and around the back of the man's head. Jericho rolled him over onto his side and removed his wallet. It contained almost three hundred dollars. He immediately had plans for that. It also had an identification card in it so Jericho kept the whole wallet for the sheriff.

The man's brief outburst had awakened the boys and by the time Red Eagle reached the back end of the wagon, Rising Sun had poked his head out through the roof again. He soon understood what was going on. He spoke with the other boys back down inside.

Jericho had stayed to go through the man's other pockets while Red Eagle removed the bolt and opened the little door. A familiar face met him there.

"I don't understand how you did this, my friend, but you can tell me later," Rising Sun said. "There are three other boys in here. I was the last to be captured late this afternoon. They tell of a terrible fate waiting for us in Mexico."

"There is a padlock here," Red Eagle said as Jericho approached the wagon. "You will need to unlock it before we can open the main door."

Jericho had come prepared with his wire and in a few minutes the lock was open. The boys jumped to the ground ready to go to the man and beat him into a lifeless soup. Jericho spoke.

"Hey. We are trying to turn the West into a civilized place for families to live. We have laws that we have to follow or that can never happen. If we all did whatever we wanted to there could never be peace and happiness out here."

Rising Sun nodded and spoke.

“Jericho is right. Listen to what he has to say. My friend always has a plan.”

The other three nodded both disappointed and a bit ashamed. Jericho continued.

“How about this? We leave the man tied up here. We hitch up the horses to the wagon and return with it to Sandy Ford and go to the Sheriff. He’ll send a deputy out here and will help arrange for you to all get home. The man had some money on him. I will give that to the sheriff to pay your ways back to your families. Think that will work?”

They all nodded and began the task of getting things ready to leave.

“Did the man tell you his name,” Red Eagle asked Rising Sun.

“Not that I know of. The other boys call him the Devil.”

“It’s really Sam Croft,” Jericho said, “at least that’s what it says in his wallet.”

Red Eagle got the rifle and the man’s six shooters and put them in the wagon.

Rising Sun had a question.

“If you had his guns why didn’t you use them instead of just tying him up like that – which is really pretty funny if you think about it?”

Red Eagle offered the explanation.

My brother hates guns – not my favorite either. We have a policy never to shoot anybody if there is any alternative. When you hold a gun on somebody there is always the chance that might happen.”

“You two are really strange kids,” one of the other boys said.

“Just wait ‘til you really get to know my brother,” Red Eagle said. “THEN you’ll see strange!”

They could tell the other boys still wanted to gut the man like he was rabbit about to be somebody’s supper. Jericho figured they probably had good reasons for hating him, but like Sandy had told them, ‘Not even hate is ever a satisfactory reason to kill a man’.

Ten minutes later they had the team and wagon turned around and were on their way back to Town. They placed the

sleeping Benny inside the wagon and Red Eagle stayed with him in case he awoke. Two of the boys sat up front on the seat and handled the team while the other rode Golden between Rising Sun and Jericho. They took their time. It was near mid-night when they pulled up in front of the Sheriff's office. The Grandson was still their sleeping on a blanket in front of the desk. A deputy sat behind it and stood to greet them as they entered. Jericho explained the situation and made suggestions about how to handle things. Although the deputy smiled at him as if he were just a kid, he did exactly as had been suggested.

Willy, the grandson – come to find out he did have a name – led them and the wagon up the street to the livery stable where they tended to the horses and found places to sleep in the hay loft. The sheriff would not be back for several days. Two deputies rode to bring in the bad guy, Sam Croft. The following morning the boys would each write out a statement, Croft would appear before the judge, and arrangements would be made to get the 'stolen' boys home.

Jericho and Red Eagle figured they had just completed a pretty good day. They had even been relatively cautious so the 'gang' back home would probably approve – well mostly, cautious.

* * *

The next morning Jericho and Red Eagle decided that with the Sheriff still away, they needed to get on the trail of Benny's parents themselves, and tend to the men who had kidnapped them. Benny wouldn't hear to staying with anybody else so – and they really did know it wasn't a good idea – they arranged for a horse and equipment and agreed for him to go with them.

They saddled up in front of the livery stable.

"I hope I'm invited on this parent hunt," Rising Sun said mounting Pinto. "I came for an adventure and this looks like it's going to be one."

"A dangerous adventure, I'm thinking," Benny offered as he moved his horse a bit closer to Red Eagle.

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CHAPTER FOUR

What's That Funny Looking, Twirling Cloud?

The four of them set an easy gallop on the main trail west, just north (to the right) of the creek. They were already four days behind the kidnappers if Benny's estimate of when it happened was accurate.

Red Eagle tried to speak in code to his brother and Rising Sun.

"You know who are really, you-know-what, about our package."

Benny looked up at him.

"I'm not dumb, Red Eagle. I know you meant my parents are really worried about me."

"Sorry, Benny. I just didn't want to worry you."

"Thanks for that, I guess, but I'm already as worried as I can be."

"Thinking back on things, can you remember anything you haven't told us," Jericho asked.

"I don't think so. Maybe if you'd ask questions. That's what Father does to help me remember, sometimes."

"Okay. Were there any words on your wagon that might have given the bad guys some reason to pick on your family?"

"It said Dr. B. A. Fox, MD. – that's my father's name – Benjamin Alexander Fox. It's my name, too. Mother is Mary. And on the back it said, Texas or Bust – that was like a little joke I think."

"Was it a covered wagon?"

"Yes, covered in brand new white canvas, still a little

loose, waiting for that first rain to tighten it up. All our stuff was inside – most of it in wooden crates.”

“Do you know how soon your mother’s baby was going to be born?”

“I heard father tell another man, ‘any day now’. For some reason, she was really fat.”

The boys shared a set of concerned glances among the three of them. Benny noticed.

“It will be fine. My father is the best doctor in the world – mother says so.”

“I guess you didn’t hear the men say where they were headed,” Jericho asked.

“I really couldn’t hear very well from so far away. Sorry!”

“Did your father take his medical bag with him?”

“Yes. The man who talked got it from the wagon and handed it to him to carry. It seemed important to him. They took another small box of doctor things, too. I’m not sure what was in it.”

“I suppose your mother knows about doctoring things, too,” Rising Sun offered more as a question.

“Yes. She is my Father’s nurse.”

As was his habit, Jericho began wondering out loud.

“It could be that the men didn’t just go after the Fox family because it happened to be there ready to be robbed. Maybe they were searching for medical help and just happened to come upon them.”

“Seems like quite an unlikely coincidence, to me,” Red Eagle said.

“Our language includes the word, ‘coincidence’, because there are such things as coincidences – otherwise the word wouldn’t exist.”

“I’ll give you that, as Doc would say in the middle of one of your discussions with him.”

“Who would need a doctor so bad they’d have to take one at gunpoint? The way Doc works back home, if somebody needs him he just goes, no questions asked,” Jericho said.

“Somebody who couldn’t show himself in town, maybe – like a wanted man,” Red Eagle suggested.

“And when do bad guys need a doctor?”

“When members of a gang get sick?”

“Sick, or, more likely, wounded, I’m thinking. We need to find out if there has been a gunfight in the area.”

“Good. Okay then. Here’s an idea,” Red Eagle said. “We’re hardly a half hour out of town yet. Let me ride back and ask the deputy about that. You three keep going. No need to wear down all four horses by having all of us go back.”

“It makes sense,” Jericho said. “Be safe.”

Red Eagle turned to Benny.

“You will be fine with my brother and Rising Sun. I will be back very soon.”

Clearly, Benny didn’t like the idea, but since it seemed connected in some way to finding his parents he would go along with it.

Red Eagle turned around, and Golden flew back down the trail toward Sandy Ford. Jericho and Rising Sun set a slow pace and talked.

“I was glad to hear your grandmother got better.”

“These days she says if she lives to be 100 it is because of the magic man in Red Bend named Doc. She insists she is healthier than ever. Her older brother died a few weeks ago. We lived with him. She is feeling very lonely, now, I think. I try to be the man in her life, but I find I really do not know how. I feel bad, too, of course. She urged me to take you up on your offer to come up here. She said it will be good for me. She is with friends. I think that will be good for her, too.”

“Our lives are similar, Rising Sun. Red Eagle and I find we are taking care of a really great kid, and you find you are taking care of a really great grandmother. I understand it is a big job.”

“I didn’t mean to be a big job for you, Jericho,” Benny said looking up into his face.

“Hey. You are the most wonderful ‘big job’ either Red Eagle or I have ever had. We love having you with you. We are learning many important things by having you around.”

Benny seemed to feel better about it and even managed a quick smile.

Less than an hour later, Benny, who had been riding

backwards in his saddle for the obvious reason, announced he saw Golden's dust heading toward them. They stopped and dismounted. The horses moved to the creek for a drink. They would stop there for a few minutes to let Golden rest and drink and to hear what Red Eagle had learned.

"Your idea was right – like usual," Red Eagle said addressing his brother. "Willy had the whole story. A gang of bandits tried to rob a shipment of gold on its way overland north from Denver, south to Texas. They were unaware that a troop of soldiers was shadowing the wagon several hundred yards to the north. The bandits were badly beaten, but many got away. They had the advantage of knowing the territory, which the soldiers from Colorado did not. The bandits still have not been caught and that attempted robbery happened almost a week ago. The Territorial Marshal is handling it. Willy figures lots of the bandits got wounded."

"Did Willy know the general area where the holdup and escape took place?"

"Yes. He drew this map for us. It is still a half day's ride ahead."

Red Eagle scanned the sky with his eyes.

"Cloudless. Another very hot day ahead of us. We need to stay close to the water for as long as we can."

Jericho continued to study the map.

"Willy did a good job for us. There are two sets of hills in that area and lots of sandy prairie. It lies south of the creek. I can't figure distances real well from this map. I imagine their hideout is in the hills. What do you think?"

"It would seem hard to hide a gang and horses out on the open of the plains," Rising Sun said.

It meant he agreed with what Jericho had said about the hills.

"We need to find somebody who knows the territory," Red Eagle said.

"Sandy said this territory had very few settlers yet," Jericho said. "We may not be able to depend on others for help. I see Willy didn't put any towns on the map – probably because there aren't any. He did locate a few ranches by their brands. There is the one we are headed for eventually, the R bar B. It's still close to a day's ride ahead along the creek and

the furthest thing west on the map.”

Benny had been looking at the map and watching Jericho point here and there.

“That! That was on the two horses the bad men were riding – DDD – when they took my Father and Mother.”

“The triple D brand,” Jericho repeated. “That looks to be what, no more than a half day’s ride?”

“I would say about that, if the R bar B is out here,” Red Eagle said pointing back and forth between the two ranch sites.

“That ranch is not far from where he shows the robbery happened almost straight north,” Rising Sun added. “Did Willy say how many of the banditos escaped?”

“He just indicated a lot – I have no idea what that means. I should have asked.

It was going on nine o’clock by the time they were on their way again. It was already hot and Jericho and Benny had shed their shirts. If ‘young ears’ had not been with them they probably would have talked about girls, but, such as things were, they talked about the scenery and such.

“It’s impossible to make a plan until we know what the situation is,” Jericho said. “What resources do we have?”

“I have two dozen arrows,” Rising Sun said.

“And I have fifteen,” Red eagle said.

“I have a knife, a bow and ten arrows,” Jericho said.

“I have a sling shot,” Benny said figuring he was a part of the planning.

“You any good with it?” Red Eagle asked.

“I helped keep us in rabbit and squirrel on the trip.”

“Really,” Jericho said. “You must be very good.”

“I am! My Father carries a over and under Derringer in his boot if that helps to know.” [A very small, 2 shot, two trigger, hand gun, one barrel on top of the other]

“And we have rope, although we left some of it back with Sam the bad man. Should have picked up some more,” Jericho said.

“Maybe that’s what the TP means on the map,” Benny said.

No one understood.

“Explain, please,” Red Eagle said.

"T P. Trading Post where we can get more rope."

"Interesting idea. It sure could be," Jericho said.

"It could also be another ranch, I suppose," Rising Sun suggested.

The others nodded, hoping Benny was right, but really thinking the other idea made more sense way out there.

Benny saw them first.

"Riders coming our way," he said pointing in front of them.

Red Eagle and Rising Sun positioned arrows in their bows and held them in their laps waiting. The two riders were soon upon them and pulled to a stop. The boys immediately recognized the DDD brand on the horses. Benny immediately recognized the men as the ones who took his parents. He played it well, remaining silent.

Red Eagle, his forehead furrowed, looked directly into Benny's face. Benny understood it had been an unstated question. He nodded, a very smart response from a boy his age. They were the men he had seen before.

Jericho did the talking.

"Morning, gentlemen. We're heading out to the R bar B. Do we understand right that there's a Trading Post on our way?"

"About five miles. Sits north of the trail. Mostly trades pelts for supplies with the Indians and trappers. What's your business out there?"

Not that it seemed to be any of the stranger's business, but Jericho turned it to their advantage.

"We are meeting my uncle there. Going north with him to Denver. Need to get there by noon tomorrow or he'll be scouring the territory for us. He's been called overprotective. We're his only family."

"You should make that easy," the man said.

They tipped their hats and rode on east. The boys continued on west.

What Jericho told them was not the truth, of course, but he figured making them think they really weren't out there all alone should be helpful.

"They were each wearing two six shooters and carried two rifles from their saddles," Jericho said. "That's not usual

paraphernalia (equipment) for cow pokes would you say?"

"And," Rising Sun added, "They had no ropes – what you call them, lariats? That sure isn't like a cowpoke."

"Those are the men who stole my Mother and Father," Benny said. "Aren't we going to capture them?" He turned in his saddle watching them ride away.

"Three bows and a knife won't last long against eight guns, Benny," Red Eagle said hoping to calm him down. "We need to have you help us be smart about this."

"I think our destination just became the DDD," Jericho said.

"It seems to be about a four-hour ride from the DDD to the R bar B," Red Eagle said. "Should one of us go for help?"

"Why don't we go on down to the DDD first and see what we can figure out," Jericho said.

"The men keep looking back at us," Benny said.

He had been keeping track of them over his shoulder.

"Do you think they bought my story?" Jericho asked.

"Goodness, yes," Rising Sun said. "You even had me believing it for a minute – Uncle Bob, isn't it."

They laughed.

"My brother does tell stories very well. I've never known him to lie to get out of something he did or to get somebody else in trouble, however. He has a good heart."

Jericho sent him a nod and a slight smile.

The wind picked up and the sky darkened ahead of them.

"Prepare to get soaked," Red Eagle said looking about. "We are in for a good-sized storm."

"One of the hills is just south of us according to the map," Rising Sun said. "There may be trees or even a cave for shelter."

Without exchanging any more words, they turned left and urged their horses to a good gallop. Benny bounced in his saddle apparently enjoying the adventure.

A few minutes later, he voiced an observation.

"Look at that funny cloud over there?"

The boys turned and looked in the direction he was pointing. Several hundred yards on to the west was a black funnel cloud.

“A cyclone (tornado) Jericho,” said. “We need to push these mounts for all they have in them.”

They kneed the horses and they responded immediately.

“It is getting closer,” Benny said his eyes growing wide.

“You keep your attention on your horse and the ground in front of us,” Red Eagle said. “No time for an accident.”

Benny nodded and did as he had been told.

Rising Sun had taken the lead and was well in front of them. Pinto proved his speed and agility as he easily jumped rocks and fallen trees. Benny’s horse was not as fast, so the other boys remained back with him. Looking back, Rising Sun understood and decided he would be best used by going on ahead and finding them a place of shelter.

The boys felt the wind churning and circling them at ever increasing speeds, kicking up dirt and sand and tossing logs through the air like they were sticks. The horses ran on, their big eyes watering from the dust and sand. The funnel cloud seemed to slow – perhaps even stay in one spot for a short time the way they will do. As it sat there it grew in size.

Then: “Here it comes,” Jericho called out.

CHAPTER FIVE

Water Poured Over the Front of the Cave like a Waterfall

As they entered the stand of trees at the base of the low hill they had to slow to navigate in among the trunks and outcrops of rock. The boys could not see Rising Sun, but Golden and Lightning continued to move nimbly a few yards up the side of the hill as if they knew where they were going.

There stood Rising Sun whistling the way Red Eagle whistled. The horses had been able to hear it through the roar of the wind. He had found a shallow cave some six feet high and fifteen deep. The boys dismounted and entered with the horses. They were, as Red Eagle had predicted, soaked to the skin and cold.

“We will keep the horses up near the entrance,” Rising Sun said. “They are built to weather rain and wind and will act as a shield for us back here. There is a small amount of dry kindling at the rear. I managed to lug two small logs in as soon as I arrived.”

“They will be wet,” Jericho said implying the logs would not burn.

Rising Sun and Red Eagle rolled their eyes at each other, even managing a quick grin amid the danger. Red Eagle spoke to Rising Sun.

“Pale Face!” he said shaking his head.

Jericho understood it had been intended as a joke at his expense. He just didn’t understand why.

“Only the outside layer will be wet,” Red Eagle explained.

Jericho still did not understand.

Rising Sun removed a hatchet (small axe) from a saddle bag and began chopping away the wet surface of one of the three foot logs revealing lots of dry log underneath. Red Eagle set up sticks for a small fire. Jericho provided sparks by striking the metal end of his knife against a flint arrow head. They soon had a fire and, according to Rising Sun, enough wood to heat the cave for two days. It only required a small fire to keep such a small area warm.

Red Eagle looked out the entrance at the sky.

“Funnel cloud is still there and growing in size. The clouds have become thick and low. Two more small funnels have formed beside of the first one. We might as well settle in for a long hard rain and lots of wind.”

“Will the Cyclone come in here?” Benny asked moving closer to Red Eagle, clearly more frightened than the boys had realized.

Red Eagle picked him up and walked toward the front of the cave explaining the situation to him.

“This cave will keep us safe. The wind will blow over the hill and not even know we are here, and what does come our way is being slowed to a walk by the stand of trees out there. See their branches swaying. That is there way of catching the wind to protect us. We will be just fine in here.”

Red Eagle felt the youngster’s body relax and the boy laid his head over against his new friend’s head.

“I’m cold,” Benny said.

“Of course, you are. Let’s get your clothes drying by the fire. We’ll wrap you in the blanket from your bedroll. You will be toasty warm again in no time.”

Benny laughed.

“Toasty warm. I’ve never heard that before.”

“It is the saying of a doctor friend that Jericho and I have in our town, Red Bend.”

Jericho added his clothes to the rope Rising Sun had strung near the fire and pulled his own blanket close around him. It was somewhat comical to watch the two of them shivering uncontrollably, but the others did their best not to laugh – a few chuckles did get through, however.

“Another use for White Boys clothes,” Red Eagle said. “Dry, they cause people to sweat. Wet, they cause people to

shiver. I just do not understand why they torture themselves that way, do you, Rising Sun?”

He shrugged and grinned, as they shared an Indian Boy moment.

The cyclone grew wider at its base tossing everything in its path high into the air. Red Eagle hoped the ‘safe’ story he had spun for Benny was going to be true. The rain became so heavy that it poured down over the entrance to the cave like a waterfall. The cave was warm, dry, and appeared to be safe. Well, Jericho had heard of things being sucked out of basements by cyclones, but he didn’t mention it. That was, however, why he urged them all to stay toward the rear.

“Benny’s horse has come up limp,” Rising Sun said examining it.”

Red Eagle joined him.

“Cross wrap and pack?” Red Eagle asked.

Rising Sun nodded and removed a folded cloth from his saddlebag. He tore it into three-inch-wide strips and they carefully wound it – very tightly – up and down the lower leg. In the end, there were six layers of bandage. Red Eagle collected thick mud from just out front of the cave. They packed it over the cloth wrap.

“Explain,” Jericho asked fascinated by how they both seemed to know just what to do and yet they had never done it together before.

“The cloth strips bind the torn muscles so they remain in place to quicken healing. The moisture from the mud will shrink the cloth strips tight around the leg, then it will dry hard and protect the leg from further damage. From your reaction, I guess it must be an Indian thing.”

“Indian thing?” Rising Sun asked not understanding the phrase.

“I have learned that White folks just add the word ‘thing’ when they are too lazy to think about what they really mean – the parade thing, the dinner thing, the gun thing, a girl thing. I have heard White folks talk on for many minutes without really ever saying anything and yet they seemed to be having a very good time.”

It was an exaggeration, of course, and was only intended to get a big smile from Jericho. It did.

Benny was soon asleep. Apparently, he believed everything Red Eagle had told him and his worries had disappeared enough to allow him to relax completely. The boys talked in whispers so they wouldn't wake him, but more importantly so what they were discussing would not bother him.

"What are we going to do with Benny if we find out the worst has happened to his parents?" Red Eagle asked.

"Next year at this time, I'm thinking we could put him in our new Happiness Place," Jericho answered.

They had to explain that plan to Rising Sun who was clearly pleased with the idea.

"He really can't stay with us," Jericho said. "He needs a mother and father and face it, these past few days we've learned that we don't have any idea how to be those things. Doc and Cilla will know how to handle 'things' if it comes to that."

"First, we need to find out where his parents are so I hope we will be able to rescue them," Rising Sun said trying to put a more hopeful spin on things."

"I guess we don't really know much about you, Rising Sun," Jericho said. "Anything you care to share. Looks like we'll be here for a while."

"I don't usually talk about myself."

"That's okay. It isn't required to be our friend," Red Eagle said.

"I know that. I just meant that since I do not talk about it, it is hard to know where to begin. I was born . . ."

"No kidding!" Jericho said interrupting. "So were Red Eagle and I. I just knew we had things in common!"

They laughed. Rising Sun continued.

"I was born twelve years ago. When I was four, my father and all the men from my village left to make war on White soldiers. I do not know why. My father did not return. Later the soldiers came to my village and burned everything we had. Many of my people, including my mother, died in that raid. My grandmother protected me in a root cellar – it was underground. Since my uncle died, we are all that remains of our family so we have taken good care of each other. My Grandmother has good friends who are staying with her now

while I am away.

“There is a missionary who has lived on our reservation since the time of the raid. He is a good man who does not try to make us believe like he does. He teaches the children. He taught me to speak English and I read some. He first learned our language and our beliefs. That made everyone in our tribe respect him. He is called, Thompson. Just one name like Arapaho and Cherokee. And, here I am. The end of my story, I guess.”

“So, all three of us are orphans,” Jericho said. “We have to do everything we can to make sure that doesn’t happen to Benny.”

They talked on through the day and into the night. Soon after sundown the storm subsided (let up). On their own, the horses went outside to graze. The wet grass helped provide them much needed water. The boys built up the fire and slept through the night.

They managed to put together a satisfactory breakfast. Wearing dry, freshly laundered clothes – thanks to Mother Nature – Benny and Jericho were ready to face another day on the trail. Due to the problem with the horse, they decided it should not be ridden so Benny began the day sitting in front of Red Eagle. They were on their way again by six.

“Look at all the broken trees,” Benny said surveying the damage the cyclone had done the night before. Some smaller trees had been pulled right out of the ground and tossed many yards away. Others were cracked and split in two. Branches lay everywhere.

“It’s a good thing there weren’t people or animals out here,” Benny said summing up what the others were thinking.

Once out of the woods, they angled north west back toward the trail.

“I imagine there will be a lane north into the Triple D Ranch, don’t you,” Red Eagle said.

“Probably,” Jericho said. “I don’t think we want to take it, however. We need to find a way to sneak in without being detected so we can see what’s going on.”

“So we can find my parents, you mean,” Benny said wanting to make the most important ‘thing’ very clear.

“That’s exactly right,” Red Eagle said, firmly, as if to

offer some extra measure of reassurance to the youngster.

As it neared mid-morning they saw it. Again, it had Benny first. His entire focus in life at that time was on finding his Mother and Father. There was a lane – a trail heading due north away from the creek and road. As they neared it they saw the sign at the entrance that spanned two tall poles – Triple D Ranch. J. J. Smith, Owner.

“I wonder what the DDD stands for,” Jericho asked. “A brand usually is connected with the owner’s name.”

“Maybe it was sold after the name was given to it,” Rising Sun suggested.

That made sense so Jericho let it go.

“The lay of the land is completely flat out here,” Rising Sun said. “I don’t see how we are going to remain out of sight.”

“So, any suggestions?” Red Eagle asked as they sat there on the trail near the sign.

Jericho removed his spy glass from his saddle bag and began scanning the area up the lane.

“It is a two-story house. I count three barns – one is low and long – likely a bunk house. There are two corrals on this side of the buildings. The lane runs between them on the way to the house. Lots of horses in them. No cattle I can see. I think if we ride on west down the main trail here another thirty yards we can turn north and go in at an angle where we will be mostly hidden from view by the barns and corrals. These front fields are high with grass.”

“If we dismount and walk we’ll be lower and harder to see,” Red Eagle said.

The others agreed. They moved on down the main trail arriving at that point a few minutes later.

“As we approach, I suggest we spread out,” Rising Sun said. “One big bunch of us together will be easier to spot than four individuals here and there.”

“Excellent idea,” Jericho said.

They turned north off the trail into the tall grass at four yard intervals. Before Red Eagle left the trail, Benny slid to the ground and filled a small leather pouch with pebbles.”

“For my sling shot,” he explained.

“Oh, oh!” Benny said pointing back the way they had

come. "Two riders coming in fast."

Red Eagle made the announcement louder to the others. Get into the grass and get the horses down."

Being off their feet was not something horses did very often. Soon they were all pretty well hidden. They watched to see where the riders were headed. If they continued on past the lane they believed they were safe. If they turned in, that might not be the case.

Jericho kept his spy glass on them. He really couldn't make out the rider's features from there, but they were both dressed in long, brown trail coats – just like the pair they had met on that trail the day before.

They did not have to wait long. The pair tuned into the Triple D. The boys stayed down, hidden until the men passed between the two corrals.

"Okay," Jericho said at last. "I suggest a slow pace. Let's head for that biggest barn."

They could still talk back and forth in normal voices. Walking beside their horses they gradually made their way north toward the buildings.

"There are several men walking around up there," Red Eagle said. "Mostly close to that long narrow building that I figure is the bunkhouse."

"See the smallest building?" Jericho said. "There is smoke coming out of the chimney. Why would they have a fire in the middle of the morning on a hot summer day?"

"I have an idea if you want to hear it," Benny said.

"Of course, we do, buddy," Jericho said. "You are part of this team."

"My Father needs hot water when he is doctoring. That would mean he'd need a fire."

"Very good thinking," Jericho said. "It may mean that is where they are. It could be they set up a little hospital in the building to care for the wounded men."

"I think one of us needs to go in closer and check it out," Red Eagle said.

"I'll go," Benny said.

"I know you want to, but I think this is a job for a bigger guy," Jericho said. "I should be the one to go because we don't really know what their attitude is about Indians. They

may shoot first and ask questions later.”

The others understood that he was right. There were no objections.

They stopped close to the corral that sat on the west side of the lane.

“That’s Betsy,” Benny said, pointing, clearly excited.

“What do you mean?” Red Eagle asked.

“Betsy and there’s Rosy, too – the horses that pull our wagon.”

CHAPTER SIX

The Rescue

“I suppose that confirms that we have the right place,” Jericho said. “Stay here. I’ll be back. By the way Benny, I suppose you should describe your parents to me.”

“Father is a man. He has a little beard on his chin. He says he looks too young to be taken seriously without it. He has black hair and he is tall. He always wears a suit and a vest and on our trip, he’s been wearing black boots. Mother is a woman and she has long red hair and she is short. She has green eyes like a cat.”

“Great work. I’m sure I will recognize them from that. Do you have some little thing they would recognize – so they will know I am telling the truth when I say you and I are friends?”

He searched his pockets.

“Here is my blue stone. I always carry it. Mother often tells me to put it away when I play with it at meals – well she did when we were at our house back in St. Louis.”

“I’ll take good care of it for you. Thanks.”

He and Red Eagle exchanged a long look – the way they always did when they left each other. Jericho ducked through the split rail fence that surrounded the corral and quietly and calmly mingled in with the horses as he made his way toward the buildings on to the north. On the other side of the corral the grass was cut low so it provided no cover. The big barn was closest so, bending low, he ran to it and knelt on one knee there while he planned his next move.

He edged forward to the corner. The smaller building

where he was heading was across an open area of hard packed dirt some twenty yards wide. Two men were walking toward the bunk house. He waited until they entered. He then bent low and ran to the other side of the smaller building. It was square – probably thirty feet. The door faced away from the corrals. There were two windows facing the bunk house and he discovered two on the other side where he again knelt low. His friends would no longer be able to see him back there.

Slowly and cautiously he raised up beside a window hoping to get a look inside. The lower half of the all the windows were open – reasonable on such a hot day. The inside was divided into two rooms, front and back. He found he was looking into the back one. There were ten cots, each holding a man and each man wrapped in gauze somewhere to cover a wound. A short red headed woman was attending to them. Several of the men were groaning as if in pain. The woman wet cloths and spread them on their foreheads as if to bring down temperatures.

Jericho turned and made his way, back against the building, to the window in the front room. A rough looking man with a rifle sat in one corner near the door. The tall man with the short beard sat at a desk, counting out pills into small envelopes. He first wrote something on each envelope – the patient's name, Jericho assumed. With the guard right there, Jericho understood he would not be able to talk with the Doctor so he returned to the first window.

Kneeling beneath the window, he laid the blue stone up on the window sill and hooted softly like an owl – something his brother had taught him to use as a signal between them if they got separated.

She turned and walked to the window. She picked up the stone. Without showing himself, Jericho began to speak.

“Don't look out here. I am taking care of your son, Benny. My friends and I are here to rescue you and your husband. If you understand wipe your hands on your apron close enough to the window that I can see it.”

She wiped her hands.

“First, Benny is fine, he misses you of course, but he is being very brave. If you have a suggestion about when and

from where we can get you, write it on a slip of paper and drop it out this window. I will wait.”

He slipped his back down the side of the building into a sitting position to wait. Several minutes later a piece of paper floated from the window to the ground.

‘Benjamin says we cannot leave yet. Too many seriously hurt men. We will need to stay at least until tomorrow night. We stay in this building at night. One guard outside in front at night from sundown to sunup.’

Jericho folded the paper and pocketed it. He returned to the others by reversing the route he had taken before. He shared the message with them.

“It seems your father believes he has to be a doctor first and a prisoner second. Good for him, I suppose. It looks like escape time will be tomorrow night. It gives us some time to make plans.”

“Where is my stone?”

“Your mother kissed it and put it into the pocket on her apron. I think having it will make her feel close to you. I hope that’s alright.”

“Yeah. I don’t want her to worry.”

“I suggest we leave here and find a safer place,” Red Eagle said.

The others agreed without having to say it. They made their way back south toward the road.

“We passed a stand of trees not far back toward town,” Rising Sun said. “I imagine we could make camp in there out of sight.”

The others nodded. They mounted up and headed back the way they had come. Rising Sun’s observation had been correct. Just inside the little woods was a small clearing not far from the creek.

“Think we can have a small fire?” Red Eagle asked. “I’ve seen lots of small game that would make a fine meal.”

“We can cut wood from the fallen limbs of the oak tree, there,” Rising Sun said. “Hard wood makes very little smoke.”

“I guess that’s a yes, then,” Jericho said. “Benny and I will tend to making the fire while you two hunt.”

An hour later they were enjoying flame roasted rabbit and hard rolls with jelly that Mae had tucked into the brothers’

saddle bags. Having to kill time was not something any of the four of them did very well so they managed some tree climbing, a long swim, and archery practice. Benny proved that he was, indeed, quite expert with his slingshot and offered instruction to the others. Rising Sun pointed out to him that smooth, round pebbles would fly straighter than those that were sharp or odd shapes. He had to try it out and seemed to prove it to his satisfaction. Only at that point did he thank his new friend for the tip. It amused the older boys.

Benny had just assumed they would eventually find his parents and was relieved that he knew when he would be reunited with them. The older boys had not been sure they would find them – alive, at least – so they were also relieved, if for a different reason.

They fashioned fishing poles and by evening had a good batch of perch frying in the skillet. Rising Sun had been correct about the low level of smoke from the oak. What little there was spread out and became invisible as it rose through the tree branches above. After bringing the horses back inside the woods a few times they got the idea that was where they were to stay and didn't stray again.

"Red Eagle and I need to ride to the ranch tonight and determine if they have guards or sentries posted around the area at night," Jericho said. "We won't be gone long."

As Red Eagle prepared to mount Golden, Benny gave him a big hug. He understood he could not go along, but didn't like being separated from his guy.

They left their horses some distance away and walked a wide circle around the area that held the buildings and corrals. They didn't find anybody. That should make the rescue easier. They returned to camp with the good report.

When they spread bedrolls for the night Benny arranged his so close to Red Eagle that the blankets touched. The others enjoyed the humor in it, but were glad he had found someone that gave him a sense of safety and well-being. His horse was walking much better even after just one day. That amazed Jericho. Sometimes he envied his brother's time as a Cherokee. Of course, his brother had similar thoughts about Jericho's time with the White people.

They kept the fire very small throughout the night, not

wanting to attract the attention of any DDD people who might be passing by on the road. They spent the next morning reading. Red Eagle helped Rising Sun who had not yet learned to read very well.

They spent the afternoon planning how they would mount the rescue. They talked through many possibilities. It would need to be after sundown so the guard would be outside rather than inside the building. It couldn't be through a door – there was only the one – so a window was the only option. They figured the window in the front room because the wounded men would see what was happening in the other room and try to prevent the escape.

“The moon will be on our side, tonight,” Rising Sun said. “Only a tiny slip in the sky.”

“Although we haven't told them specifically that we would be there to get them tonight, I am assuming they understand that – in light of what they told us in the note,” Jericho said. “You three will remove one section from the corral fence close to where we were and get Benny's two horses out. Then put the fence back together. Benny, will the horses behave for you?”

“They love me like a brother. I can handle them.”

“Red Eagle and Rising Sun, you will ride those horses – you are both great with horses and used to riding bareback. That will leave Pinto and Golden for Benny's parents. Will Pinto be okay with strange riders?”

“He will be fine – a very gentle animal,” Rising Sun said.

“I assume your mother can ride, Benny,” Red Eagle asked.

“As good as my father can. You don't need to worry about her. I've been thinking I better stay with Red Eagle since neither of my parents are used to dealing with me on a horse with them.”

“Very good thinking, Benny,” Jericho said. “You have a good head on your shoulders.”

“We need to decide where we will go once we have them,” Rising Sun said.

“I suppose back to Sandy Ford so they can tell their story to the Sheriff.”

The others nodded. They each privately wondered if they would ever get to the R bar B Ranch, which, after all, was their original destination.

"I hope Mr. Benton is not worried about us," Red Eagle said. "We are long overdue."

"I hadn't thought about that," Jericho said. "If he is concerned he may have telegraphed Cilla and they will also be concerned. When we get back to town we will need to send both of them wires to let them know we are okay."

They saddled up at eight that evening. The sun had just touched the horizon in the west. They rode across country rather than on the road thinking they needed to take every precaution now that they were so close to making the rescue.

They dismounted and walked with the horses the final hundred yards to the same spot that had used the day before. Once at the corral Red Eagle and Rising Sun removed three lengths of split rails while Jericho and Benny went in among the horses to find Betsy and Rosy, the family's team.

They had them back at the fence just as the lower rail was removed. Once outside, Benny took charge of them. He had been right; they loved him and stuck right with him. It took but a few minutes to set the rails back in place to close up the fence.

Jericho turned and made his way back through the corral, ready to cross the open area to the little building. Again, he had to wait; a man was walking from the house to the bunkhouse. Bent low, Jericho took off across the open area as fast as he could run. He made it to the far side of the building and took a minute to catch his breath. He went to the front corner and peeked around. He wanted to make sure about the guard. He was there, sitting, back against a tree, rifle across his lap. He appeared to be sleeping. That would be good.

Jericho returned to the front window and carefully looked inside. What he saw was not what he expected to see. It complicated things in a major way. Benny's mother was there. Benny's father was there. Benny's new little baby sister or brother was, also, there.

Jericho rose up so they could see him. He whispered

into them.

“Can we still go?”

The man nodded and helped his wife toward the window. He leaned close to Jericho and spoke in a low tone.

“I will come out first. Then Mary will hand Jerome out to you. I will help Mary out. Then we will follow your directions. Thank you by the way.”

Holding the baby brought back lots of memories for Jericho about his years as a foster child when he was often charged with the care of the babies. He smiled to himself, thinking he'd probably make a pretty good mother.

Once Mary was safely on the ground, Dr. Fox took the baby and directed Mary to follow after Jericho. He brought up the rear.

“Let me make sure the barn yard is empty,” Jericho said. “We are heading for the west corral.”

He pointed to make sure they understood. They nodded.

He got his look-around and motioned for them to follow. As they reached the corral fence, a team and wagon came down the lane and into the open area. It pulled to a stop beside the larger barn. Jericho motioned the others to bend low by the fence. They waited. Jericho slipped through the fence and held out his hand to assist Mary. Once she was inside the corral he took the baby from Dr. Fox while he entered.

With the baby safely back in its father's arms, Jericho led them through the horses to where the others were waiting. When they saw them coming, they mounted up ready to leave. Benny administered the hugs of all hugs.

“What's that?” he asked pointing to the baby.

“Your new brother, Jerome,” his father said pulling the blanket away from his face for a quick peek. “You can get acquainted after we get away from here.”

“I hate to say it, but that kid is really ugly,” Benny said.”

“He's only six hours old,” his mother said. “By this time tomorrow he will be beautiful, I promise you.”

“Benny had never had any reason to doubt her word so he would wait.”

Jericho reached out to take the baby while Benny's

father helped Mary mother up onto Golden. Benny took a hand up from Red Eagle. With Dr. Fox on Lightning with the baby, Jericho mounted Pinto and they left with Rising Sun in the lead.

At the road, they turned left, east, and continued for nearly a mile before Rising Sun stopped.

"We should be safe here. I assume we need time for 'things'."

The boys smiled. They moved off the road some ten yards and dismounted so the family members could have a proper reunion. There were more hugs and tears and Benny told his story, not leaving out a single detail. His mother just couldn't seem to let go of him.

Twenty minutes later they were on their way again. Benny had opted to ride with his father, which was how it should be. Red Eagle understood that, but missed having his little buddy there with him.

Back in town they found that the Sheriff had returned and Dr. Fox told his story. A posse was gathered and they rode off to the Triple D. Willy arranged for the Fox family to stay at the hotel for as long as they needed to. Jericho sent telegrams to Cilla and Mr. Benton. He received immediate responses. Red Eagle read the wire from Cilla.

In part, it read, "Glad you are safe. We don't understand the part about you and Red Eagle being brand new fathers."

"What did you say in that telegram?" he asked turning to his brother.

"Well, let's see. I said we were fine. I hoped they hadn't been worried. That we had been delayed just a bit by needing to take care of two kidnappings, survive a tornado, and capture a gang of gold thieves. And, that we were the proud new fathers of a bouncing baby seven-year-old named Benny."

"You will have more than a little explaining to do when we get home."

"What will need explaining, brother, dear?"

"Well for one thing how we managed to become fathers eight years ago, when we were four!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Quick Sand in Kansas?

The next morning Red Eagle and Jericho accompanied Dr. Fox to find his wagon. It took several hours. Benny must have been walking in circles. Thirty minutes later they had it back at the livery in Sandy Ford. Nothing was missing.

"My wife needs to rest for a week or so before we move on," Dr. Fox told the boys. I think we will remain at the hotel. I really have not thanked you for saving our son and taking such good care of him. All he could talk about last night was his new big brothers and how one could do this and the other could do that. He will miss you."

"We will miss him. He worked his way into our hearts," Red Eagle said.

"There seems to be an unspoken, 'but', in that sentence," Dr. Fox said.

"There is," Jericho said. "We learned the responsibility of being a parent is a whole lot more than we are ready for, Sir. We worried about him every minute of every day. I don't know how parents handle it. So, I guess the 'but' was, 'We loved having him as a part of our lives, BUT the responsibility was overwhelming.'"

"It comes with parenthood," Dr. Fox said. "To this day, my mother worries about me every day of her life."

"They have no doctor in Sandy Ford," Jericho said. "While you're here maybe you could do some doctoring."

"We'll see. I'll speak to the Sheriff about it. You three will be leaving, I assume."

"Yes, we have big plans to set in motion," Red Eagle

said.

The boys went on to explain what they had in mind.

“What a wonderful idea. Have you thought about how much it will cost, though?”

“We have that covered – but would rather nobody knew about that.”

“I hope you will keep me posted.”

“He wrote on a pad he carried and tore off the sheet beginning to hand it to Red Eagle and then moved it toward Jericho.”

“Probably best if somebody with pockets gets this. It tells how to reach us in Texas.”

It required hugs for a proper good-bye. Benny shed a few tears. The boys promised to write.

They put in new supplies from the trading post and once again began the trip west toward the R bar B Ranch.

“Not exactly the relaxing time I figured I’d be having with you,” Rising Sun said.

“Is that a complaint?” Red Eagle asked with a smile.

“Oh, no. It’s been fine – wonderful, in fact. It’s helped me see that I need to find something exciting for my grandmother. Her life is very boring.”

“We’ll think on it for you,” Red Eagle said.

Everywhere they looked that first day reminded them of Benny. They decided to think about the good times and not how much they missed him. Once past the lane that led into the Triple D, the scenery was new and the boys got back to talking about their plans. Time passed fast. At noon, they stopped to water and rest the horses, but were eager to continue. They had beans out of cans, the last few hard rolls from Mae, and three sticks of hard candy Jericho had managed to squirrel away in his saddle bag.

Not ten minutes back on the road, a lone rider came toward them at an all-out gallop. They stopped to try and determine what was happening.

“It’s a woman,” Rising Sun said.

“She is not an experienced rider,” Red Eagle said.

“I hope she doesn’t fall off before she gets to us,” Jericho said.

Rising Sun moved out at a good clip to meet her, taking

the horse by its reins to slow it and calm it down.

“My husband needs help. I think it is called quick sand. He is sinking and cannot free himself.”

With no questions, Rising Sun, turned her horse around and they retraced her path. Having heard what she said, the others followed. She would point and comment and within a few minutes they were there. It was a very sandy area. The creek ran through it. Apparently, the rain associated with the storm several days before had super-saturated (really soaked) the sand so it, in essence, had become a pool of wet sand.

Even before they dismounted, Jericho began making suggestions.

“We need to cut several saplings. Leave all the branches on them.”

Red Eagle and Rising Sun set to doing that although they had no idea why?

Jericho removed his lariat from his saddle and drew it into a very large loop. He whirled it above his head and walked as close to the sand as he dared. He let it fly. It lit in a perfect circle around the man. Jericho spoke to him.

“Do not struggle. That only speeds the process of sinking.”

The man was already into the sand up to his armpits. He had managed to keep his arms floating on the surface.

“I will pull the loop tighter and very slowly you position it around your chest, under your arms.”

With no little difficulty, the man managed that.

The boys arrived with a sapling apiece. Jericho had more instructions.

“Tie the end of a rope at the center of each tree. Then throw them out as close to the man as you can – one on each side. Use the rope to pull them in close to him.”

Both boys were very accurate and soon had the saplings arranged so they were touching his arms.

“Now, sir, one at a time, and very slowly, put your arms over the trunks – try to move them up under your armpits.”

The man followed the instructions exactly and calmly.

“You are doing just fine, sir. Now, we will begin pulling you toward the edge. Keep the saplings with you. With their branches spread out over the sand like they are, they will not

easily sink and will help keep you afloat.”

Jericho tied the end of his rope to his saddle horn and urged Lightning to slowly move forward.

“Easy does it, boy. Easy does it.”

He kept the rope taut (tight) and slowly eased him ahead, one small step at a time. The saplings gradually began to sink. The man sunk to his chin. It was then or never, Jericho thought.

“Now, Lightning. Pull. Pull. Go, boy, go.”

Lightning put all of his strength into it. The man’s body did move toward the edge of the pool, but as he moved his head sunk further into the sand. He was up to his nose. The three boys took hold of the tow rope and added everything they could manage. At that moment, the man’s chin reappeared, then his shoulders and arms. His feet had hit the solid bottom. He was able to begin helping himself. Soon he was out on solid land.

His wife went to him as he collapsed onto the ground, exhausted.

“Do you think you need a doctor?” Jericho asked.

“No. I was not hurt in any way.”

His wife stood and addressed the boys.

“There is no way for us to thank you.”

“We are just thankful we came along at the right time. Is there more we can do for you?”

“My husband’s horse ran off.”

Red Eagle and Rising Sun mounted up and began the search.

“Which way were you traveling?” Jericho asked as he helped the man remove the rope from around his chest.

“On our way to Great Bend to the north. Taking this road to Sandy Ford and then north to Red Bend and back west to our destination. We are to be the new school teachers there. I’m Lawrence, by the way. This is my wife, Sarah.”

“There is a doctor staying at the hotel in Sandy Ford if you decide you want him to look you over. Just tell him Benny’s mommies sent you and yes, it’s far too complicated to explain.

Jericho took his rope to the creek to wash out the sand, then looped it back into a coil and tied it to his saddle. By then

the other boys had returned with the man's horse. Jericho saddled up and, as the couple waved them on their way, they set a quiet gallop back toward the road.

"So," Red Eagle began, "you going to tell us how you learned how to do a quick sand rescue, big brother?"

"From a book I read about some men who went hunting tigers in Africa. Instead of rope they used vines and instead of a horse they used an elephant, but the principles are the same."

"I have to ask you two," Rising Sun said. "Do dangerous adventures like this just always happen to you?"

The brothers looked at each and began to nod.

"It sure seems like it, doesn't it, little brother?"

"It sure does, big brother. Perhaps from now on we need to warn our traveling companions to proceed with us at their own risk."

Laughter followed even though it was clearly the truth.

They continued west until the sun was low in the sky ahead of them. Camp that night was at a bend in the creek under several tall pine trees. They made a roaring fire. They fished and swam. They ate 'til they could eat no more. They spoke of how they missed Benny and how good they felt about the way all the 'things' had turned out the previous week.

They set their sights on the future.

Late the next morning as they neared the spot where the R bar B should be, Jericho turned north off the road.

"Where you going, brother?"

Jericho pointed fifty yards to their right.

"Telegraph poles. I figure they go to the ranch. If we follow them I figure we should soon be there."

He was correct.

By noon they had the R bar B in sight. They stopped to look it over from a quarter of a mile away. There was a large, two story, white house, three large white barns and several smaller, lower buildings. The area was enclosed by a maze of white board fences. Tall, old trees were scattered across the area.

"It sure looks like 'rich' to me," Red Eagle said. "I've noticed the grass is not as thick as back at the Triple D.

Probably need more acres per cow to feed them out here.”

The creek turned south. At that point it become wide and ran swift, being fed by many smaller streams along its route. Jericho sat up high in his saddle and looked around.

“I’m going to bet the property he has for sale is that green, hilly area over there to our left – what, maybe a mile away?”

“What makes you think that,” Rising Sun asked.

“Cows graze on flatland not on hills.”

“Interesting. I hope the creek runs through it,” Red Eagle said.

The others agreed with some enthusiasm.

“We probably need to get on into the ranch and meet with Mr. Benton if we are going to find out for sure,” Red Eagle suggested.

A few minutes later the hands had been shaken and the small talk completed. Benton was a tall, thin, distinguished looking man in his fifties. His wife appeared and invited them for lunch.

Over a meal of fried chicken, mashed potatoes with white pepper gravy and a table full of other wonderful dishes, the boys laid out the basic plan for their Happiness Place and talked land requirements.

“I think what I have will fill your needs nicely.”

The boys were excited and after lunch they rode south with Benton (he preferred to be called, Benton). He pointed here and there out in front of them so they could see the boundaries and other features of the property he had available.

It turned out they could purchase any amount up to 500 acres.

“That’s a good deal more than we were thinking of,” Jericho said.

“Well, you look it over and decide if any part of it looks good. After that we can talk business if you think it fits your needs. I’m just going to let you look around on your own. I brought this bag of yellow stakes so if you want to you can set some to mark off what you’re interested in.”

“It’s a large area. Okay if we camp out here tonight?” Jericho asked.

“Up to you. We have nice soft beds available back at the house. If you don’t show up by sundown, we’ll assume you’re staying the night out here.

He rode back toward the house and buildings.

The boys stuck together and rode the area back and forth, up and down hills, and round and round. They soon fell in love with the area. It was formed with hills on three sides, open to the north. A large, lush green, valley floor boasted a small, spring fed lake as well as a small stream that eventually fed into the creek they had followed to the ranch. There were pines as well as oaks and elms. They happened onto several small caves high on the hills. In other words, it was every twelve-year-old boy’s ideal place to exist forever.

“If we took all of it – all 500 acres – there would be room for everything we had planned and much more,” Red Eagle said.

“Like much more, what?” Jericho asked.

“Like ten acres for you and your wife and kids and ten for me and my wife and kids and ten for Rising Sun and his wife and kids and places for Doc and Cilla and Sandy and Cal to retire.”

“I think you are letting your imagination run away with you. Doc and Cilla will never leave Red Bend” Jericho said. Sandy and Cal will die there. They are so tough they’ll ride themselves to their own funerals in the cemetery behind the church.”

“I guess I know that. It would just be nice to have all our people together.”

“I thought you two were going to be Governor and President,” Rising Sun said, naively believing things they had dreamed about to him out loud.

“I guess that’s too far off to make plans about,” Jericho said. “At any rate, we are here to find a place for the kids and I for one think we have found it.”

“Me too,” Red Eagle said.

“Me three, if my opinion counts,” Rising Sun said.

“Here’s a far-out idea,” Jericho said. “Maybe we could convince Dr. Fox to come and be our doctor and you and your grandmother can come – she can help take care of the kids and you can help run the place. And the quick sand guy and

his wife can be the teachers.”

“We are way ahead of ourselves,” Red Eagle said. “First we buy the land. Then we build the buildings. Then we hire a staff. Then we begin bringing in the luckiest kids in the World to grow up in this wonderful place.”

“You know,” Jericho said, “with all this land, instead of having just one big dormitory for all the kids to live in, we could build a lot of small houses and hire wonderful grownups to be like parents for three or four kids like a real family in each house. We could have the school they could go to and a library and a stable full of great horses and a little hospital, and a playground with stuff for all different ages, and lots more wonderful stuff for them.”

“I like that. We need to run it by Doc and Cilla.”

“You two kids, really have enough money to do all that?” Rising Sun asked having very little idea about money and its use.

“Our banker says we have enough to build dozens of places like this and still have way too much left over.”

“I can’t even imagine such a thing,” Rising Sun said shaking his head.

“To be truthful, friend, neither can we.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

HELP!

They spent the rest of the day riding and walking the area. The hills were not really high, but gave that illusion relative to the extreme flatness of the surrounding area. From a distance, they were mounds of solid green and yet up close they were a hundred different shades of green. The valley floor was flat and thick with grass, unlike the surrounding prairie. The boys figured that was because of the several sources of water from the stream and little lake. Depending on the angle from which one viewed it, the lake either reflected the blues of the sky or the greens of the hills.

In contrast to the brown and tan birds of the prairies, there were colorful birds they hadn't seen anywhere along the trails. The hills were alive with small animals scampering over logs and hiding behind large rocks. There were wild flowers that added islands of vivid colors to the landscape and ferns that swayed in the gentle breeze providing a sea of movement where it would not have been expected.

Benton's wife had sent cold fried chicken and bread and apples along in case they decided to stay out overnight. As the world turned dark outside the ring of flickering light from their campfire, life seemed very good to the three boys.

They talked until the moon hung directly overhead. They slept well dreaming of as yet unmet, wonderful possibilities. Although they would talk it all over with Doc and Cilla before signing the deal, in their hearts they knew they had found the perfect place.

Well before sunup, they were awakened by the soft

sounds of cows moving in a herd not far away. Something about it did not feel right. They mounted up and went to investigate. The sounds were coming from beyond the west hill so they climbed it to its top from where they could look down. What moon there was, lit the area well enough for them to understand. There were a hundred or more head being moved south toward the Snake River.

“We need a closer look,” Jericho said. “It doesn’t seem right that Benton would be moving cattle at night.”

They made their way down the hill and stopped at the edge of the trees – no more than twenty feet from the slowly moving herd.

“Look at that cowboy’s horse,” Rising sun said.

“I see,” Red Eagle said, “it bears the Flying M brand, not Benton’s brand.

“And so, do the two riding behind him,” came Jericho, his spyglass to his eye. “Rustlers, I’d say. One of us needs to go alert Benton. The other two must find a way to slow the progress.”

“I think Rising Sun and I know the most about herding cattle, City Boy,” Red Eagle said to his brother.”

“Right. I’ll ride back to the house. You got any ideas what to do?”

“To quote my brother, “Not yet, but we will by the time we get there.”

They exchanged smiles into the darkness and Jericho made his way silently to the rear of the herd. He then urged Lightning into a full out gallop toward the house.

Meanwhile, Red Eagle and Rising Sun took a moment to confer and then made their way through the trees to the front of the herd. Dismounting for only long enough for them each to find two thick sticks, each about eighteen inches long, they were then on their way across the front of the slowly moving cattle. Riding back and forth close to them, they began beating the sticks together in rapid fire succession.

The cattle out front, were immediately disturbed and turned back into the herd, to return the way they had come. The boys followed maintaining the rat-a-tat clatter with the sticks. Loud voices arose from the cowboys – the rustlers, they were sure. The boys began whooping and hollering and

producing ear piercing Indian war cries. Within no time the entire herd had turned and was on the run back toward the ranch buildings.

Two of the rustlers appeared on horseback out of the dark. They drew their guns. One spoke.

“So, you two are the trouble makers – two wet behind the ears Indian kids. We ought to plug you where you stand.”

“Actually, we are sitting, Sir, and I have no holes needing plugging,” Red Eagle said, immediately realizing it was exactly the kind of thing his brother would have said.

“I can make sure that you do.”

“You sound angry, sir. Have you had an unhappy life?”

The man raised his gun at Red Eagle. The other man reached out and pushed it back down.

“Don’t need none a that, Slim. Won’t change a thing.”

He turned to the boys.

“Drop them sticks. Whatcha doin’ with ‘em anyway?”

Rising Sun explained.

“The cows think the noise is from rattle snakes and get scared and run off. There is something about a cow and rattler that just don’t seem to mix. Actually, I’m surprised they didn’t run from the likes of you two.”

As soon as those last words left his mouth, Red Eagle knew they had not been the wisest things to say. The angry man lifted his right hand to strike Red Eagle.

Red Eagle spoke to the men again.

“May I suggest that you drop your guns and put up your hands?”

“And why would we do that?”

A new voice entered the conversation from out of the darkness behind them. It was Benton.

“You would do that if you ever want to see the sun come up again,” he said in his deep voice.

They dropped their guns. Two of Benton’s men pulled them to the ground and tied them.

“Hey, guys.”

It had been Jericho riding with Benton.

“Don’t know how you managed all this, but I assume it was some magical Indian thing.”

“Oh, yes,” Red Eagle said. “We stood out in front of the

herd and did our, 'turn-the-cows-back-toward-the-ranch-dance'.

"I wouldn't even doubt that," Jericho said.

"Really, what did you do?" Benton asked.

The boys explained.

Jericho looked puzzled.

"I don't think that would sound like a rattler."

"That proves it," Red Eagle said turning to Rising Sun. "My brother is not a cow!"

They laughed themselves off their horses.

"Don't know how to thank you boys," Benton said. "These will be worth \$25.00 apiece in a few months – nearly \$3,000.00."

"We really dislike bad guys, Sir," Jericho said. "Just being able to help catch them is all the thanks we need."

While Benton and some of his cowhands moved the herd back to where they belonged, others started to Sandy Ford with the Rustlers. The boys were awake and revved up from the excitement. They returned to where they had been camping. Jericho removed Lightning's saddle and the others slipped the bridles and blankets off their horses.

Jericho took out his pad and began drawing small houses settled in among the hills that surrounded them. He added several bigger buildings – school, hospital, indoor gym to play in during the winter and a stable with horses grazing nearby.

"That will be great to show Doc and Cilla," Red Eagle said. "They will be able to see just how it is here."

The boys had suggestions and Jericho added them to help complete the picture. In the end, they were all quite happy with it. They managed a few hours of sleep before breaking camp and heading back to the house.

"Breakfast in a half hour if you're hungry," Mrs. Benton announced as she met them at the door.

"We're twelve ma'am. We're always hungry," Jericho said.

She knew how to feed boys – bacon, sausage, eggs, pancakes, grits and fried potatoes. While they ate, they shared with Benton their feelings about the land he had available – all of it. He already had a contract drawn up, which just needed

the land description and the price added. He took care of that and handed it to Jericho – the boy with pockets.

“You take this back to your people and talk it over with them. It will need an adult to sign along with you since you aren’t of age yet.”

“Add our ages together and we are 24,” Red Eagle said, hoping it would seem funny.

It did. He was pleased.

By seven, they were headed east on the trail back toward Sandy Ford.

“That place gives me the shivers,” Jericho said as they passed the lane into the Triple D.

“I felt that way at first,” Red Eagle said, “but then I thought about the new little baby that came from there and I feel better about it.”

“I suppose. You tend to see the best parts of things, little brother. I’m inclined to see the worst. I hope you’ll always remind me of what you see. I need that sometimes.”

“We are sort of like Doc and Cilla in that way,” Red Eagle said. “Doc is always seeing things we need to be careful about and Cilla is always encouraging us to go try it.”

“I’ve missed them – and Sandy and Cal,” Jericho said.

He turned to Rising Sun.

“How long can you stay?”

“I told my grandmother I would be back by full moon. So, I can stay much longer if you want me. The Indian Agent said he would see she received any messages I sent to her by telegraph.”

“Of course, we want you. Wish you could come and live with us, but we understand about you and your grandmother. It must be wonderful to have family.”

“It is. You have each other – that’s family, too.”

“Oh, yes. I didn’t mean that. It is wonderful to have each other after being alone for most of our lives. It’s just that my brother and I never got to know our mother and father or our grandparents. It must be great to at least have memories of them like you do.”

Rising Sun nodded, but had nothing more to say about it. It was clearly still a very sad thing for him – having lost them the way he did.

Jericho and Red Eagle were eager to get home. They let the horses set the pace – which was usually faster than what they would have set. Still, they would not make it all the way back to Sandy Ford that day. They rode into the night before making camp, thinking the closer they got the more time they could spend with Benny one more time before leaving him for good.

It was ten o'clock the next morning when they pulled up in front of the hotel. Benny had been watching for them out the second-floor window. He was down stairs and administering hugs almost before the boys' feet hit the street.

"My brother's not much fun – he sleeps a lot and when he's not sleeping he's crying. I hope he will hurry and grow up. Father says he will depend on me to teach him lots of things."

"He will. He is so lucky to have you for a big brother."

"I know. I'll be the best one there's ever been. Everybody says so."

Benny sat with them while the boys had breakfast at the restaurant. He followed them to the Sheriff's office where the boys were brought up to speed on the gold bandits and the rustlers. He pulled them up the stairs to where he and his family were staying in the hotel. They shared the picture Jericho had drawn. Benny's parents were impressed. The boys thought Dr. Fox just might be interested in being a part of it, but said nothing. It was probably still a year away.

Then it was time for them to move on up the trail toward Red Bend. They didn't need new supplies because they had used very few of those they had purchased before leaving for the ranch.

At noon, the thermometer on the front of the hotel, already registered in the mid-nineties. Once out of town, Jericho shed his white boy's clothes and soon it was three Indian lads heading north. Rising Sun taught them a few Arapaho phrases and Red Eagle did the same with Cherokee. They stopped often so the horses could stand in the water to cool off and drink. The boys would get in the water as well.

At one watering stop Jericho looked out toward the horizon.

"I had forgotten there were hills over there to the north

west. How about a short side trip to check them out?"

The others were always up for side trips that held some prospect of interest. They exited the creek on the opposite side and took their time moving across the flat prairie. The closer they got the more detail they could see.

"Some of it's red rock like back home," Red Eagle said.

"Some is green – grass or trees," Rising Sun said.

"The top is fairly irregular," Jericho added.

They rode closer.

"It's both grass and trees," Red Eagle said.

"The higher areas are huge chunks of red rock," Jericho said.

"Maybe some caves like in your big old red hill," Rising Sun said.

They stopped fifty or so yards out. A small stream – a rill probably better described its small width and volume – began near the top at the west end and made its way generally diagonally down the side, entering the flats at the east. It then wound its way into Sunday Creek on north.

They dismounted at the base near a little water fall on the east where, from there, they could see the rill cascaded into a small pond before moving on across the prairie.

"How high?" Jericho asked.

"Forty yards at its highest point on the west," Red Eagle said. "Maybe as low as twenty in the dips and valleys."

"That's what I figured," Jericho said.

"Shall we climb it?" Rising Sun asked.

"That's why I came," Jericho answered.

"Let's follow the stream up to the top," Red Eagle suggested. "There must be a spring up there."

"An odd place for a spring, isn't it," Rising Sun said.

"It is," Jericho said. "Makes it all the more interesting. Let's see what it's all about."

They walked to the small pond looking for a good place to start the climb. The water fell no more than six feet but splashed high as it first hit a large rock surface. The pond was generally round – twelve feet or so and sat several feet above the plain.

"What's that," Rising Sun said pointing and walking to the pond.

“Looks like a shirt – small like a boy’s,” Jericho said.

“Looks to be in good shape, like it hasn’t been there a long time,” Red Eagle added.

He hung it on the branch of a short, scrub tree.

“What do you two make of it?” Jericho asked.

His question was met by double shrugs.

“How does this fit?” Jericho went on just the way the others knew he would.

“There was a boy here without grown up supervision or he wouldn’t have left his shirt behind. This is far away from any town and we haven’t seen any houses belonging to farms or ranches in the vicinity. He came here by himself. Maybe a runaway.”

“Where is he?” Rising Sun said. “If he left, he wouldn’t leave his shirt behind, would he?”

“Only place for him is up, I’d say,” Jericho said scanning the hillside.

“For now, let’s assume he would follow the stream as he climbed,” Jericho said.

The others agreed with nods and they began the climb, spreading out on both sides of the water.

Rising Sun, who had taken the lead, stopped and put his arm in the air as if to signal the others to stop.

“Listen?”

It was faint. It carried the tone of terror.

“H E L P ! H E L P !”

CHAPTER NINE

Are There Wild Cats Around Here?

“Where did it come from?” Jericho asked.

“I’m not sure,’ Rising Sun said.

“It was like an echo, maybe from inside a cave,” Red Eagle said.

“Listen! It stopped!” Jericho said.

“East or west end of the hill do you think?” Red Eagle asked.

“I would say west,” Rising Sun said.

Jericho agreed. They continued on up the slope along the stream. From time to time Jericho would call out.

“Hello. Hello. Call to us. Hello.”

They would stop to listen. Nothing.

“We need to widen our search area,” Jericho said. “I’ll stay below the stream by five yards. You two spread out above it at five yard intervals, okay?”

No words were required. The boys scattered according to the suggestion. Rising Sun was in front and furthest up the rise. When he stopped to listen, the others did as well. Jericho would call out again.

They were half way up the hill. It came again.

“H E L P !”

Although they were closer, it seemed fainter – weaker. It confirmed the person was still further west and higher. Perhaps he was hurt. The boys picked up their pace.

“This is something,” Red Eagle said holding up a tiny shoe.”

As much as Jericho wanted to say, ‘Everything is

something, little brother,' he held his tongue. Red Eagle tossed it to Jericho. The toss was high and outside, but he still managed to snag it.

"Smaller than Benny's shoes," he said. "I'm thinking about four or five. If he's lost in a cave he must be terrified."

"Why would he leave a shoe behind on this rough ground?" Rising Sun said.

"No idea. It makes no sense unless something was chasing him and he just ran out of his shoe. I've done that."

They continued to climb. Jericho continued to call out. He changed his message slightly.

"Hello. We have come to help you. Call to us so we can find you."

It appeared that the boy could not hear them even though they could hear him. Rising Sun stopped.

"There is an opening here. Very small. Maybe a foot wide. In an outcropping of rock two feet off the ground."

"Call into it," Red Eagle suggested.

He called and waited.

"I'm in here in the dark, mister."

"We are here to help you. Are you alright?"

"No. My leg hurts very bad and I can't use it."

"How did you get inside the cave?"

"I crawled into a hole in the rocks."

"Then what happened?"

"I fell down a long, long ways. That's when I hurt my leg. Will you come and get me now?"

"We will get you out just as soon as we can. It is going to be fine now. It may take a little while, but you don't need to be afraid now because we are right here."

"You sound like a kid."

"There are three of us. We are twelve. How hold are you?"

"Five and a half."

"Can you see the opening you crawled into?"

"Yes, way up high."

"That's where I am. I'm going to stop talking to you for a few minutes while I talk with my two friends. I will be right here, though."

"You are GREAT with him, Rising Sun," Jericho said.

“Later you’ll have to tell us things we don’t yet know about you.”

“So, a plan?” Red Eagle asked.

By then the others had joined Rising Sun up at the opening.

“None of us can get through that little hole,” Jericho said when he saw it. I see two possibilities. We go get sledge hammers and make the opening larger or we find another way into the cave.”

“I say look for another way in,” Rising Sun said. “This opening goes through rock that’s five feet thick. It would take us a week to make it wide enough.”

“Makes sense,” Jericho said examining the inside of the hole himself.

“Rising Sun better stay here talking to him, don’t you think,” Red Eagle said.

They all agreed.

“Now, hear me on this,” Jericho said. “If this hole is way above the boy, then the floor of the cave is below us, so does it make sense another entrance would also be below us?”

The others nodded.

“Or, from on the other side of the hill to the north,” Rising Sun said.

“Let’s hope not,” Jericho said. “That would really complicate things.

What if there isn’t another way in?” Rising Sun asked.

“We know there is at least another opening of some size,” Jericho said.

The others looked at him puzzled.

“Hold your hand up to the opening. There is a flow of air out of the hole – it has to be coming from somewhere.”

“Good observation,” Rising Sun said. “And probably from below, right – air flows from bottom to top doesn’t it – like in a chimney?”

“Cold air sinks. Warm air rises. That tells us several things. This air is warmer than I’d expect to find in most caves, so it is probably rising from an opening below and it can’t be too far away or the cold cave would have cooled down the warm outside air.”

“That makes me wonder if the boy is cold in there,” Rising Sun said.

“I’ll ask him.”

Rising Sun positioned himself back in front of the opening.

“Hey. This is your friend, again. I was wondering if you are cold in there.”

“Yes. I’m shivering a lot.”

The other boys heard.

“If I drop a blanket into you can you move to get it if I miss you?”

“I can scoot. It hurts.”

“Okay. You wait a minute, now.”

Red Eagle whistled and the three horses climbed the hill. He removed his bed roll and made ready to drop it though the opening.

“Let’s untie the leather thongs that keep it rolled up,” Rising Sun said. “That will make it easier for him to unwrap it.”

It had been a first-class suggestion. That Rising Sun kid knew a lot about little people. That done, he dropped the blanket.

“Here it comes. Tell me when you have it in your hands,” Rising Sun told him.

A few minutes later he reported he had it wrapped around him and was feeling warmer.

“Let’s go find that cave, little brother.”

Red Eagle removed the roll of fishing line he carried in his saddle bags. Although Jericho had not thought of it, he immediately knew it had been a great idea in case they needed to mark their path through a series of tunnels. It gave Rising Sun an idea.

He removed his own fishing line from his saddle bags along with a candle and two wooden matches he had picked up at the trading post. [Back then, stores often offered wooden matches free from containers on their counters. Matches were essential when people depended on lanterns for light and fires for heat.]

“Hey, down there. Do you know how to light a candle with a match?”

“Sure. Been able to do that since I was a little kid.”

“I’m going to lower a candle and two matches so you can make some light down there, okay.”

“Light would be really good.”

“Can you find a dry place to strike the match?”

“Let me feel around. . . . Everything is wet – well sort of wet.”

“Are you wearing a belt?”

“Yeah.”

“You need to loosen it so you can strike the match against the inside of the belt. It is dry, right?”

“Let me see. . . . Yeah. It’s dry.”

“Here comes the candle on the end of a string. I will move it around so you can hear it hitting against the side of the cave to help you find it.”

A few minutes passed.

“I got it. What’s your name, anyway?”

“Rising Sun.”

“That’s a funny name.”

“I suppose it is. What is your name?”

“Tommy Keppy.”

“You are doing great, Tommy.”

“So are you Rising.”

“Did you find the matches tied against the candle?”

“Yes, sir. I know what to do, next. Give me a minute, here.”

Rising Sun struggled to make out any light inside the cave. He could not.

“I got it lit. That’s a lot better. There aren’t any monsters in here in case you were wondering. Thanks.”

“Tell me what you do see in there.”

“Rocks! Reddish rocks.”

“Okay. Sure. Rocks. Tell me about the size of the cave.”

“It is about four of me’s tall and one, two, three, four, five of me’s wide I’d say. There is a hole in the back wall.”

“I guess there is no light coming in that hole, right?”

“Right.”

From Tommy’s description of the cave, Rising Sun estimated it was about twelve feet high and fifteen feet in diameter.

“How big is that hole in the back you told me about?”

“About one me tall. A little bit wider.”

“My two friends are looking for a way into where you are. They may come through that hole so don’t be afraid when that happens.”

“Okay. They got names?”

“Yes. Jericho and Red Eagle.”

“Them is funny, too. I guess you ain’t from around here.”

“You are right. We are just passing through.”

“Two a them names could be Injun, ya know.”

“Would that be okay with you if they were – Injun?”

“Depends on what kind.”

“What do you mean?”

“If they are boys that’s okay. If they are girls that wouldn’t be okay.”

“They are boys and you were right, they will look like ‘Injuns’. They are very friendly.”

“I already got that idea, Rising.”

It was the second time he had used that term and it was momentarily puzzling. Then it came to him. White boys had two names – a first and a last. Tommy assumed Rising was his first name. How interesting. He thought it would be hilarious when the little boy called black haired, bronze skinned, brown eyed, Red Eagle by his first name.

* * *

Meanwhile, Jericho and ‘Red’ were scouring the hill below. Twenty minutes later Jericho called up to Rising Sun.

“Not an opening down here. I’m going on west to search and my brother will go east. If we need to we will turn the corner and explore the east and west ends and then continue around the other side.”

It was a strenuous (tiring) activity – up and down the hillside and then on a bit further only to do it all again.

Two hours later they had both moved to the opposite side of the hill (north).

“Got something here, little brother. Come and take a look.”

Red Eagle ran half the length of the hill – not an easy task with one leg shorter than the other.

“A cave entrance.”

“Much lower on the hill than we expected, I think. Almost down to ground level. Stand here in the opening and tell me what you feel.”

“A breeze going in – like suction. It is what we are looking for.”

“We didn’t bring candles,” Jericho said and as you see, I have no handy dandy White Boy pockets in which to have carried them.

While Red Eagle whistled for the horses, Jericho climbed to the top of the hill and called down to Rising Sun giving him the good news.

“It might be a good idea to tell the kid it will be Indians coming for him. Don’t want to frighten him.”

“Good idea,” Rising Sun said, figuring there was no reason to mention his previous conversation with Tommy.

Back down at the mouth of the cave Jericho thought out loud to his brother.

“Standing on top just now I estimated the hill is probably about a hundred yards wide at its base – 300 feet [100 yards]. That will be a lot of cave and tunnel between here and the boy – if we are even at the right starting place. Better take three candles and extra matches in this breeze.”

“Ropes?” Red Eagle asked.

“I think so, don’t you? Best to be prepared.”

They each always carried a lariat and a longer coil in their saddlebags. They soon had them draped across their chests – over their heads onto one shoulder and under the opposite arm. Red Eagle held out one candle and Jericho lit it. Red Eagle took the lead with the candle and they began the trek back through the hill. It sloped upward at a slight angle.

At the beginning, it was six feet wide and high. After a few yards that collapsed to only four feet wide. From time to time the ceiling would drop to five or only four feet. A few minutes into the hike they came to a fork in the tunnel – angling off to the right and left. Jericho spoke.

“From up on top I saw that the new opening we used was considerably west of where Rising Sun was. So, I’m thinking we go left, which would be back in his direction.”

Without further discussion, Red Eagle turned down that

tunnel. It had narrowed to little over two feet wide and no more than four tall so they had to stoop and be careful not to scrape their legs and thighs on the rocks that were protruding (jutting) from each side.

Presently they came upon a small 'room' some eight feet in diameter and over twelve tall. It posed a problem. The far end of the room was a sheer (steep) wall. The tunnel continued up some seven feet off the floor.

"Shoulder time, little brother. Then you can lower a rope and I'll climb up and join you."

Jericho bent down and clasped his hands together making a stirrup for Red Eagle's foot. From there he raised himself to a sitting position on his brother's shoulders. Using the rough wall ahead for hand holds he managed himself into a standing position. He was high enough that he could lap his elbows over the top of the wall and soon had pulled himself up onto the ledge.

"I'll toss the candle up. If it goes out you have the matches."

Miraculously, it remained lit.

"There's a rock up here I can wrap the rope around. Give me a minute."

Jericho felt the rope snaking down against his chest there in the dark. A moment later Red Eagle held the candle out over the edge so Jericho could see things.

"Okay. I'm coming up."

Although a short climb, it was a difficult one because the rope hung tight against the rock surface leaving Jericho's knuckles to scrape against it. At the top, Red Eagle was down on his stomach dangling his arms over the side. His brother grabbed onto them and pulled himself up and over Red Eagle's body.

"First obstacle resolved," Jericho said. "I see the tunnel gets small up here, doesn't it?"

"It seems to, yes. How far into the hill are we, do you think?"

"I counted my paces on the way in. Sixty one. My steps in here are about two feet long. That's nearly forty yards. Not quite half way."

"But this tunnel climbed and it veered off at an angle to

the left so it will be less than that – thirty yards maybe?”

“About that, yes. Not quite a third of the way to the other side, then.”

The lower tunnel slowed them down. Both the width and the height varied a great deal from place to place.

“Another fork – this one three-way,” Red Eagle said. “Right, left, and straight ahead.

“Hmm?”

“Hmm?”

“Got it, maybe, perhaps, I hope,” Jericho said at last.

“That doesn’t really fill me with confidence, brother – maybe, perhaps, I hope!”

Red Eagle couldn’t see Jericho’s smile there in the darkness behind him.

“Assuming only one of them goes all the way through the hill since we didn’t find a second opening over there – this breeze should only continue to move through the tunnel that reaches the kid.”

“Brilliant! Let’s test them out.”

Red Eagle went left and Jericho right.

“Nothing here.”

“Nothing here.”

“Must be the center one,” they said together.

It contained the breeze and continued as a slightly smaller tunnel. They bent lower and slowed even more.

“It’s colder in here, I think,” Jericho said.

“See, wearing all those clothes makes you weak,” Red Eagle said, chuckling.

Jericho had no come back. His brother was probably right.

“I think we covered another 30 yards up to the three-way fork – that should be a little beyond the half-way point,” Jericho said.

They continued on in silence needing to watch their step. The floor of the tunnel became strewn with stones, which slowed them down even more. It also probably meant those chunks of rock had fallen from the ceiling, which could have indicated an imminent (any moment) collapse. They didn’t let themselves think about it.

Red Eagle stopped.

“Listen! Up ahead!”

“I hear it. What could it be?” Jericho asked.

“A wild animal?” I’m thinking. “Just what we need. A wild animal whose only way out is through us!”

“Sounds more like a cat than a coyote or wolf. Are there wildcats around here?”

CHAPTER TEN

Snakes in a Cave!

“The chief of my village had a Cougar skin he wore over his shoulders. He killed it when he was a young brave. It was when the Cherokee lived in the east so I don’t know where he was when he came upon it.”

“I think we need a plan,” Jericho said.

“I suppose they’re afraid of fire – the big cats?”

It had been more a question than a statement and wasn’t answered because his brother had no idea.

The sound continued.

“I guess it’s coming from up ahead, isn’t it,” Jericho asked confirming his initial feeling.

“Yes, but it isn’t getting any closer. Shall we move on ahead?”

“I suppose so. Wish we knew whether or not Rising Sun is hearing it.”

Jericho removed his knife from his belt and Red Eagle set an arrow into his bow. They moved on, suddenly a good deal more alert than before. The tunnel remained about the same in height and width until at last they came to a wide low area – twenty feet in diameter and filled with water wall to wall.

“An underground pond,” Jericho said, labeling the obvious. Red Eagle was getting used to that.

“Not real wide. Maybe we can wade it.”

“First look for snakes in it,” Red Eagle said. “If there are snakes in a dry cave like this one, they will live in and around any water that it contains.”

“Good thing to know. Generally useless information, but

certainly not at this particular moment in our lives.”

With only the candle for light it was difficult to see very far down into the water. Red Eagle dropped a few small stones into it.

“Probably no snakes. The rocks would disturb them and we’d see movement if not actual snakes coming to the surface.”

“So, those stones you tossed in were like invitations to the snakes to come and play with us?”

It deserved no more than a weak smile and that’s all it got.

“The tunnel continues on the other side. Into the water, I guess,” Jericho said.

He reached his hand in to check the temperature.

“Freezing!”

“Really?”

“No, but teeth chattering cold, at least.”

Without more conversation about it they slipped over the side. Their feet could not find the bottom.

“Swim I suppose,” Jericho said.

Holding the candles and matches above the water with one hand, he pulled his way across to the other side. He waited so he could hand them up to his brother, then joined him up on the rock floor of the tunnel which continued.

With their wet bodies in a breeze, both boys shivered, but neither commented about it. They paused to listen for the eerie sound. It had stopped at about the time they came upon the pond. The tunnel widened somewhat and grew high enough that they could stand pretty much straight up as they moved ahead. It curved gently to the left.

“We should be getting close,” Jericho said. “Maybe twenty yards or so.”

“We still have the breeze at our back,” Red Eagle said reassuring himself they were still on the right path.

“And thanks to it we are forming icicles on our ear lobes.”

Since it wasn’t like Jericho to whine about things, his brother assumed he was trying to make a joke.

They moved forward another ten yards where they came to still another fork. The one to the left was tiny. It

would require belly crawling and that would tear up the skin on their chests and stomachs. Jericho pointed to the right, which continued as the main tunnel.

“We’ll know the small one is here if this one doesn’t get us to the kid,” he said.

Suddenly the noise began again – much louder. Red Eagle stopped them to listen. Their hearts began pumping wildly as they prepared to run back the way they had come if that would become necessary.

“This makes no sense,” Red Eagle said, “but that cat is singing the tune of a Cherokee lullaby. Not the words, but the tune.”

“I think being underground this long has affected your brain, little brother.”

Red Eagle went down to his knees and slowly crept forward. Jericho followed. They rounded a bend. Immediately, the area grew lighter – just a bit, but compared to nearly complete darkness it seemed downright bright to the boys.

They saw the boy, Tommy, wrapped in a blanket, sitting back against the wall singing his heart out. From the opening above him, came another voice – presumably that of a ‘singing’ Rising Sun. The brothers didn’t say it out loud, but it was all quite obvious – those other two would never make a living singing.

“Hey,” Jericho said as they entered the little room.

“Hey back. You are Jericho and Red Crow, right?”

“Right,” Jericho said, seeing no reason to correct him.

“Rising said you’d be here for me. He’s been teachin’ me Injun songs. Want to hear?”

“We’ve been . . . enjoying them back down the tunnel.”

“Hey down there,” Rising Sun called. “That you?”

“It is if you are referring to the handsomest set of mixed race twin males the world has ever seen,” Red Eagle replied.

“So you made it?”

“No. We drown in a pool of swirling water and our guts were eaten by a huge cougar wearing a funny hat.”

“That sounded a lot like me,” Jericho said.

“I noticed that, as well. Let us say that is a good thing.”

“My leg really hurts,” Tommy said uncovering it so the

others could see.

Red Eagle knelt down to examine it. The boy was wearing long pants and leather shoes well, shoe – one foot was bare – the one at the bottom of the damaged leg.

“Looks like you threw a shoe,” Jericho said as he watched.

“That’s funny, but I really did throw a shoe.”

“What?”

“I threw one out the window up there. It took like a million tries. I figured somebody might find it when they came looking for me.”

“That was brilliant!” Jericho said.

“And, it worked,” Red Eagle said. “We found it right outside.”

Tommy nodded as if he assumed it would work. After all, it had been his idea!

After only a few moments Red Eagle had the diagnosis.

“I’m afraid the leg is broken,” he said.

“Will it fall off?” Tommy asked clearly worried, not understanding.

“Oh, no. Just the bone in the lower part of your leg got broken – on the inside. We will get it as comfortable for you as we can and then we’ll take you to a doctor who can make it as good as new for you.”

“I never been to a doctor. Do they hurt?”

“Maybe just a little bit, but only as much as they need to in order to make you well so you can walk again and you won’t have to keep hurting. You seem to be very brave so I’m sure it will all be over before you know what’s happening.”

“Are you Jericho or Red?”

“I’m Red I guess if those are my choices.”

“Rising tells me you are almost a Cherokee.”

“He said that, did he? Well, I suppose it is as good an explanation as any. I need to have ‘Rising’ help me now.”

“Hey up there – singing boy! I need sticks to make a leg splint. The fall broke his lower leg.”

“Give me a few minutes.”

His face disappeared from the opening.

“You’re not gonna pound sticks into my legs are ya?”

“No. Just use them to support the broken bone so we

can move you out of here.”

“Okay, then. I’d a let ya do it if it had to be done, but I wouldn’t a liked it.”

Jericho and Red Eagle talked.

“Do you think we can hoist him back up out this opening?” Jericho asked standing back and looking it over. “That would sure be easier than the tunnels – water and cliff and all.”

Red Eagle turned to Tommy.

“Was it a tight squeeze for you when you came in through the ‘window’?”

“Heck no. Pardon for the cussing. I got a awful habit that way. It’s why I’m here.”

“I don’t understand,” Red Eagle said.

“You don’t understand cussin’ or bein’ here?”

“Being here, I guess.”

“Well, I cussed when Ma told me to get to my chores this morning so I knew I had a switchin’ comin’ so I headed out to put it off. I ended up here.”

“So, you live around here, then.”

“Just moved here. Dad’s workin’ at the Flying V just north a here.”

Rising Sun soon dropped the sticks into the cave. They were perfect size for a boy Tommy’s age. Jericho held them in place while Red Eagle tied them in place with many turns of the fishing line. Tommy didn’t make a peep even though it must have hurt to be moved the way they had to move it.

Fifteen minutes later they had fashioned a rope halter to put around his chest and shoulders so he could be pulled out.

“You will need one of us up there to help you pull,” Red Eagle said.

“I’ll be fine. Pinto will do all the work.”

“Good thinking.”

It took less time to get the boy out than it had to fashion the ropes to hold him and hoist him out. Rising Sun made a suggestion.

“Why don’t I go ahead and start Tommy back to Doctor Fox. After you two get out of there you can ride to meet me in town. It will speed things up for Tommy.”

“Fine. If a saddle will help, take the one off Lightning.”

“We’ll be fine.”

“One question before you go,” Jericho said. “What were you two singing – and I use that term, ‘singing’, with great reservation?”

“It was a lullaby my Grandmother sang to me. Tommy liked it so we sang it over and over again to keep his mind off things.”

It had apparently been a tune shared by the Arapaho and Cherokee and, of course, Red Eagle hadn’t understood the Arapaho version of the words.

Tommy, Rising Sun, and Pinto carefully made their way down the slope and across the meadow to the road, south toward Sandy Ford. It was slow going and called for many more renditions (versions) of the lullaby.

Jericho and Red Eagle found that it was a good deal faster making their way out than it had been to get in. They rode south at a good gallop, both of them concerned and eager to hear Doctor Foxe’s evaluation. As they entered the room at the hotel that the doctor had started using as his office, Tommy made the introductions not knowing the man already knew the boys.

“These are my other friends, Doc – Red and Jer. They came into the cave and saved my life, I reckon.”

“Doing that seems to be a big part of their lives,” Doc said. “You are going to need to stay here with me and my family overnight. The gash on your leg was pretty dirty so I want to make sure no infection sets in. We’ll know by then. How can we contact your parents?”

“It’s the first house on the trail west, just north of the hill. Ma’s gonna be mad as a wet hen.”

“We can stop and tell her on our ride north,” Jericho said.

“I wouldn’t advise, that,” Tommy said. “She’s as likely to shoot ya as look at ya when ya ride up the lane.”

“It sounds like a job for the Sheriff,” Dr. Fox said.

The boys agreed.

Jericho took the doctor aside to make arrangements to pay for his services.

“This one probably needs to be on me, son. You took

care of my boy. I'll take care of this boy. I'm betting someday Tommy is going to take care of lots of boys. He has a good heart. We'll just keep passing it on that way."

Dr. Fox offered his hand for a shake.

Back outside Red Eagle turned to his brother.

"We should probably telegraph Sandy and let him know we won't be home this afternoon like we had planned."

"Good idea. We sure spend a lot of money on telegrams. Maybe instead of buying a railroad like Doc said, we should buy the telegraph company."

It was worth a round of chuckles.

Then, for the second time that day, the boys set off toward home.

"I have a question," Rising Sun said. "Do you two even ever try to plan your lives? I mean things seldom seem to go the way you think they are going to go."

"Let's put it like this," Jericho said, "we always have plans, but we really enjoy having them interrupted with exciting distractions."

They laughed, even though it was 100% true.

"Shall we ride straight through?" Red Eagle asked. "We could sleep in the livery when we get in. The telegram we sent said we would see them at noon tomorrow."

"Or, we could ride until dark and then camp and eat up some of the supplies we still haven't touched."

"I vote for that," Rising Sun said. "I like to swim at night with the stars up above. I enjoy floating on my back and painting pictures in the sky by connecting them up."

"Star pictures it will be then," Jericho said looking to get a confirming nod from Red Eagle.

They built up a large fire and feasted on ham, jerky, hard tack, cold fried chicken and apples.

"We're so full we won't be able to float," Rising Sun said patting his stomach.

Jericho looked at his brother.

"I suppose we should see if he's right before the two of us enter the water, shouldn't we, little brother?"

"I am sure you are right, big brother."

They picked up their friend – Jericho under his arms and Red eagle at his feet – and, after a one, two, three,

swings, they tossed him out into the middle of the creek.

They stood there, hands on their waists, laughing hard. Then, not quite so hard. Finally, not at all. Rising Sun had not come to the surface. Darkness had overtaken their world, which made it difficult to see. The boys looked at each other – worry clung to their faces.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A Bleeding Woman!

Just as the brothers prepared to enter the water, Red Eagle surfaced well down stream barely visible in the darkness.

“Looking for something?” he called to them, wearing a face-filling grin.

“You had us scared to death!” the boys said running to him.

“That seems fair considering . . .”

“We thought you’d enjoy it,” Jericho said trying to save face.

“I did, but I enjoyed the looks on your faces just now even more.”

The boys shrugged and entered the water. They were amazed at all the pictures they could find in the night sky as they floated there on their backs. They weren’t at all sure why so many of them were girls, but they accepted it and enjoyed the view.

They were up early and on the trail by sunup.

It had been a relaxed ride home filled with laughter at things only twelve-year-old boys really ever recognized were funny. At ten o’clock that morning they entered Red Bend from the west at Main Street. They dismounted in front the newspaper office. Doc’s front window was open so they pushed and shoved their ways up the steps and into his office.

“Scrapes, cuts, broken bones?” he asked as he humorously turned them each around looking them over.

“All in three pieces,” Jericho said meaning each of the

three was still in one piece.

The boys thought it was hilarious and Doc chuckled as well – more at them than at Jericho’s words.

“We won’t keep you, Doc,” Jericho said. “Just wanted to let you know we were back safe and sound. How about we meet for lunch and we’ll fill you in on the amazing place we found.”

Doc agreed, eager to hear about their trip.

Their next stop was Sandy’s office. Cal was taking care of things. The horses had already left for the livery to see Gray. Pinto seemed to fit in well. They spent more time than they had intended filling Cal in on the adventure. He had questions apparently related to several telegrams Sandy had received from the Sheriff. They boys promised to answer them all over lunch.

Then it was back across the street to Cilla’s office.

“Before you start extracting (bringing out) all of our secrets, Cilla,” Jericho said, “just know we plan to fill everybody in over lunch – on us, of course.”

Like Doc had done, Cilla looked them over amazed there were no scrapes to clean out or cuts to bandage.

“Glad you’re back safe and sound. Thanks for the telegrams, by the way. That was very thoughtful.”

“You are welcome,” Red Eagle said. “My brother is going to purchase the telegraph company.”

“What?”

“A joke among the three of us, I guess,” Red Eagle explained. “Not really, though – I think – maybe. With Jericho, you never really know for sure.”

Jericho handed her the picture he had drawn. She spread it out on her desk and immediately took great interest in what she saw. She’d point to things she wasn’t sure she understood and the boys would provide the information.

“Individual houses for a family-like atmosphere.”

“The school, the medical facility and the indoor play building for winter.”

“A slope that will be cleared out for sleds and skis.”

“The pond for swimming and fishing.”

“The corral and stable.”

“The huge, big, colorful sign at the entrance that says,

'The Happiness Place – everybody welcome'."

Finally, Cilla spoke.

"It is a beautiful looking spot. Trees on the hills?"

"Yes," Rising Sun said. "Trees and bushes and grass and see all the wild flowers."

He pointed from one spot to another.

"It seems you are really into all this, Rising Sun."

"Oh, I am. I am going to run the place – probably with some grown up help at the first; there will be a lot of things for me to learn. Red and Jer seem to recognize that I am much better organized than they are."

The boys' faces showed puzzlement for just a second before they cleared and nodded, fully accepting the fact that Rising was, indeed, better organized than they were.

"What's this, Jer and Red, about?" she asked.

Jericho attempted the explanation.

"A long story about the second little kid whose life we saved – third if you will count Rising, here."

"Not sure I can wait until lunch," she said, kidding.

"The short story," Red Eagle said thinking Cilla deserved some immediate explanation, "that kid figured Indians had two names like White folks so he began calling the two of us by what he thought were our first names – Red and Rising. Not sure how Jer came about, Cil."

The boys laughed themselves back out onto the street thinking his 'Cil' reference was quite funny. They walked the two blocks to the park and sprawled out on the grass to wait for noon.

"I'm already missing, Benny and Tommy," Rising Sun said.

"I've been meaning to ask you about you and them," Jericho said. "You were really, really, good with both of them. It was like you always knew just what to say or do."

"After the battles with the soldiers there were lots of children in my village who no longer had fathers. I knew how that was so I just started spending time with the boys. Very soon I became the 'man' in their lives – a man when I was only a few years older than they were. I did my best to fill in for their fathers. I taught them how to fish and make bows and arrows. I showed them about tracking animals and which

prints belonged to which animals. I guess they taught me a lot about younger boys.”

“That was really nice of you. You will make a wonderful father someday.”

“I hope so, but first I really need to learn how to talk to girls, don’t you think?”

It was true for all of them, but still brought a round of chuckles and knowing nods. They lay back down looking up through the branches of the trees. Before long their short night had caught up with them and they were asleep.

Rising Sun felt it first – Pinto nuzzling his face. He awoke. Soon his friends had also been awakened by their four legged friends. They heard a familiar voice from way up above them. It was Cal sitting on Gray.

“Rise and shine, guys. You’re late for lunch and Doc is already grouching (complaining) about the fact he’s not going to pay. I told your horses to find you and this is what happened.”

“We appreciate your efforts,” Jericho said.

They were soon at the restaurant in their usual chairs. Sandy walked in behind them.

Jericho turned to him.

“You’re late, Big Fellow.”

“I was out chasing bad guys. What’s your excuse?”

The boys knew they had been bested. It was worth chuckles.

Jericho spread the picture and the boys took turns explaining things and dreaming out loud about the grand possibilities of the plan. With that finished and lunch delivered to the table, Sandy spoke.

“About these seven telegrams?”

The boys looked at one another.

“Seven?” Red Eagle asked. “We only sent three.”

“The other four came from your guardian angles.”

“Why? Things were fine.”

“There seems to be some difference of opinion about the definition of fine. Let’s see here.”

He shuffled through the telegrams – “Sheriff Mason, Willy somebody, Benjamin Fox, MD, two from him, Richard Benton, who, by the way, will probably be the next governor of the state.

“Let’s see what they say: Apparently, you adopted a boy whose parents were captured and taken away from him. Assisted the Sheriff in the capture of a band of gold thieves. Captured a kidnapper and freed four boys. Saved a man from drowning in quicksand. Rescued a boy lost in a cave with a broken leg. Foiled a plan to rustle cattle from the R bar B. Seems to me you packed a whole lot into your short, recent, road trip.”

“You left out that we thought Rising Sun had drowned,” Jericho said.

“All that and yet, here we are without so much as a scratch,” Rising Sun said.

Sandy turned to the twins.

“See what you’ve done. You’ve worked your evil spell and turned this fine young man into one of you!”

“We do our best to improve humanity – one fine young man at a time,” Jericho came back.

“Well, we are all happy to have you back here where you belong,” Sandy said.

Although he couldn’t know, that phrase sent a very warm, safe feeling through the boys – ‘here where you belong’.

“We are ready to revise our plan,” Red Eagle said. “Then, we’ll have any of you who care to, look it over before we return it to Mr. Benton or Dr. Benton or whatever he is in Kansas City.”

“First,” Jericho said, “I guess we want to know what you think of the place – shall we buy it?”

Always practical Doc asked the question.

“How much?”

“\$2,500. That’s \$5.00 an acre – about half the going rate for flat ranch land, Sheriff Mason told us.”

“I’d say jump on it, then. If it doesn’t work out you can still double your money if you resell it.”

“Or quadruple it,” Cilla said. “The price of land down there is rising fast since the railroad will open it up for all kinds of agriculture as well as more ranching.”

Jericho looked at the others. They nodded.

“I guess that’s settled, then,” Jericho said. “It suddenly feels like a huge responsibility. Do you think we’re up to it?”

Doc tried an answer.

“You are twelve. Of course, you aren’t. You will hire a – I don’t know what to call him – a Project Manager to handle all the details once you have explained exactly what you want. You will meet with him every week or so to make sure things are going the way you want them to. He will give periodic updates. As the years go by and you become older, you will take on more and more of the responsibility. You can decide how much of your time you want to spend on it and hire help for the rest. It is going to turn out simply wonderfully. Now, since Cilla says you two are buying, I’m having dessert!”

* * *

Doc and Cilla helped the boys set things in motion and, like Doc had predicted, things moved along very smoothly without a whole lot of ‘tending’ by the boys. After a few weeks, Rising Sun returned home, riding south to Sandy Ford with Sandy on one of his regular visits to the Sheriff. They agreed to write every week.

One morning, soon after that, as the brothers were riding into town, they came upon a saddled horse grazing alongside the road.

“That’s odd, a horse alone out here,” Red Eagle said.

They rode to it, slowly, Red Eagle speaking to it calmly in Cherokee. It moved toward them and stopped as the boys dismounted. They looked around. There was no one to be seen between them and the horizon.

“The horse is cool – not like it has been running recently,” Red Eagle said.

“There are saddle bags,” Jericho said. “Let’s take a look.”

“The last time we rummaged through saddle bags it changed our lives, if you’ll remember [the gold],” Red Eagle said.

They each took a saddle bag and began the search.

“Girl stuff in here,” Jericho said.

“Same here – combs, brushes, lavender smelling soap, long stockings, perfume, frilly unmentionables. What do you think?”

“First, I think whoever she is, she isn’t with her horse and that may not be good. Second, maybe the horse threw

her and she's hurt, lying in the grass some place. You know of any way to trace the horse back to where it came from?"

"Not sure," Red Eagle said looking around. "The ground is hard. I will say this. The horse does not seem concerned. That could mean it doesn't really belong to the rider – they have no bond like we do with our horses – maybe rented from a livery."

"It doesn't have a brand on it. I wonder if it might be one of Harry's in town."

"I guess we can take it in and ask him."

"If the rider is hurt and laying around out here somewhere we need to get to her in a hurry. We shouldn't take time to go into town first."

"Good point, little brother. How about this . . .?"

"Of course!"

"What? I didn't finish."

"You always have good ideas so I just agreed before I heard what you were thinking. You know I will anyway and it will save time – or it would have if you hadn't forced this fully useless discussion."

Jericho nodded and removed his pad and pencil from his saddle bag.

"I'll write a note to Sandy and Cal to check with Harry – Cal will know the horses, anyway. We will tie the horse to Golden and send them to town. Then we can begin our search out here."

"Like I said, I agree. Let's do it."

Red Eagle arranged the lead rope while Jericho finished the note and placed it a saddle bag. Cal and Sandy were used to that form of communication from the boys. Doc had called it using four-legged homing pigeons.

Those things done, they sent the horses on their way.

"Find Sandy, boy. Find Sandy or Cal."

"I noticed the stirrups on her horse were wet," Red Eagle said. "That suggests it was recently in or crossed the creek."

"And, crossed it at a pretty deep spot. It doesn't run that deep until it's on east a quarter mile or so."

They mounted Lightning – Jericho in front and Red Eagle behind. There was no saddle that day since they were

Cherokee Twins. Even with the heavier than usual load, Lightning wanted to travel at a gallop. That worked fine. The sooner down the stream the better.

Five minutes later they arrived at the area where the deeper creek began. It narrowed there between banks that were mostly solid rock. It had cut a three-foot-deep trench.

“The only place flat enough to ford it is still downstream a way,” Red Eagle said.

Jericho urged the horse on. What they found was not good.

“Look there,” Jericho said pointing.

They slipped to the ground and trotted to the bank. A woman in light brown riding pants and a puffy, white, long sleeved shirt lay half in and half out of the water.

“Her head is on the bank – that’s fortunate,” Jericho said.

They bent beside her.

“Shall we pull her out?” Red Eagle asked.

“We need to make sure she isn’t badly hurt first.”

“I’m not sure how to do that. Do we dare touch a woman?”

“Of course, we do. She needs our help.”

“Look at her head,” Red Eagle said. “A really bad, open cut – looks to be deep clear into her skull.”

Jericho proceeded to feel her legs and arms to determine if there were any broken bones.

“Looks like a broken arm is all. Let’s pull her up onto level land. Easy.”

Red Eagle furrowed as he helped.

“That’s all – a broken arm seems like a lot to me.”

“Better than two broken arms, right?”

Red Eagle shrugged. His brother was right but still . . .

“There may be something else,” Red Eagle said pointing to the spot where she had laid.

“A heavy blood trail along where we pulled her. Too much to have been from the cut on her head, don’t you think?”

Jericho nodded.

“Help me roll her over on her left side – careful with that right arm. We’ll keep it on top as we move her.”

“Not good, little brother. Looks like a bullet wound to the

back of her shoulder.”

“She’s not from around here,” Jericho said. “Not dressed in fancy clothes like she is.”

Both boys looked around as if expecting to see something nefarious (like a really bad, criminal) closing in on them.

“I think Doc would say the bullet entered well above any vital organs – heart or lungs,” Jericho said. “I imagine that is good.”

Red Eagle felt her forehead.

“She is already burning up. Let me wet a cloth.”

“She needs more than a cloth. We need to wet her whole shirt.”

“Do we dare do that to a woman – us being boys?”

“I imagine if it saves her life she will think it was just fine.”

Red Eagle used the tin, which cups they carried, to douse her in water. Jericho kept her on her side assuming that position would do the least harm to her. He kept pressure on the open bullet wound.

“Let’s run water over both wounds to begin cleaning them out for Doc. I wish we would have asked for him to come.”

“We hadn’t found her yet. That would have been premature.”

“Premature – to early – excellent word, little brother.”

“I listen to you and Doc and Cilla when you talk like dictionaries.”

“I didn’t mean to imply you didn’t. Your vocabulary has probably doubled since I’ve known you.”

They traded their special smiles.

“Let’s find some sticks so we can splint this arm,” Jericho said.

Five minutes later the arm was immobilized and they waited, keeping her wet. Jericho had moved into a position so his body shielded her face from the sun.

“We have moved a good distance from where we were when we sent Golden off on his mission,” Red Eagle said. “I think I better go out to the road and wait. When I see him I can whistle and wave my arms.”

“Good. Do that. Her bullet hole really isn’t bleeding all the much now.”

Ten minutes later Golden came racing down the road in their direction. It was Sandy and Cal, close behind. They were soon there. They immediately saw what there was to see.

“Was it Harry’s horse?” Jericho asked.

“No. The stamp on the saddle indicated it belongs to the livery back east at McPherson,” Cal said.

“We’ll need to sit her in a saddle,” Sandy began. I’ll ride behind her on the horse and hold her in place. We will need to move slowly. I’ll use Gray since he’s the largest of what we have here.”

As they prepared to pick her up, shots rang out from across the creek. A dozen men, guns drawn, were riding toward them!

CHAPTER TWELVE

Bullets for Our Hearts?

“Where’s Benny and his slingshot when we need him,” Jericho said not really joking.

The riders were still fifty yards away. Six shooters were not going to be accurate from that distance. Sandy laid a few shots in their direction, which slowed them to a walk.

Cal took a rifle from Sandy’s horse and tossed it to him. Jericho laid the woman on her back. Red Eagle had retrieved the two quivers and bows from their horses. The men had come to within twenty yards. Sandy laid several more shots over their heads which stopped them in their tracks although they still waved their guns about. A few continued to fire.

Swish! Swish! Swish!

Each brother was managing one arrow every five seconds in one smooth motion – hand over their shoulder grasping the end of an arrow in the quiver, end of the arrow brought over the shoulder and onto the string, string pulled and arrow released.

Ouch! Oh! Darn! (and a selection of other X rated words and phrases your mother would rather we didn’t print here) came from men across the creek whose gun hands had just acquired some pretty ‘sharp’ Indian decorations.

Sandy stood up from where he had been kneeling on one knee. Gradually the men dropped their guns and raised their hands. One, who seemed to be in charge, spoke.

“She stole one of our horses. You should be hanging her instead of shooting at us.”

“You know her?”

“Sally Coffelt. Got a reputation as a horse thief.”

“None of that explains why you’re shooting at a man wearing this badge,” Sandy said motioning for them to dismount.

One of the men turned his horse and started to ride away. Red Eagle let fly one more time. The rider clutched at the back his shoulder and fell to the ground.

“You actually shot him in a serious place,” Jericho said in disbelief.

“I did not mean to. I was aiming to take his hat off, but he suddenly stood tall in the saddle and turned a bit to the west. I will apologize to him.”

“Not on my watch, you won’t,” Sandy said.

He raised his voice calling across the creek.

“Listen up! Here’s the plan everybody. The boys will tie your hands to your saddle horns and string your horses together. My deputy, Cal, here, will lead you back to town where we’ll get all this sorted out. We have a wounded female here – I assume you know about that – and I’ll follow along behind with her; my rifle will be at the ready. Jericho, also known as Same Face, and Red Eagle will ride to your right and left. You have already seen what they can do with a bow so don’t get any ideas.”

The brothers waded the stream, first sitting the wounded man back on his horse and, cutting a length of rope from the man’s lariat, tied his hands to his saddle according to plan. The arrow head was in so deep it would need to be cut out.

“You be sure I get that arrow back,” Red Eagle told him. “Takes over an hour to make a true-flying arrow and I think we can agree that one was a true-flying arrow.”

The others were also soon tied in place, each of their lariats a few feet shorter.

“You know how Doc hates hand and foot wounds,” Jericho said to Red Eagle. “He’ll be on us like flies on honey for what we did.”

“We’ll be fine. We have blackmail stuff on him, remember – his age?”

With everybody in line they moved to the road and headed back west toward Red Bend.

At the lane to her ranch they met Mae in her buggy on her way home from town. She immediately saw what was going on.

“Let’s lay the poor dear in my buggy. That will be much easier on her.”

Sandy agreed and they made the transfer.

When they hit the city limits, Jericho urged Lightning on ahead so he could alert Doc. He filled him in on what was coming.

“I’m going to warn you ahead of time, Doc, there are ten hand wounds,” he said, hoping to ease into things with his dear old friend.”

“You get Cilla up here to my office to look after the woman. Take the men to the saloon and lay them out on the bar counter. I’ll see if any of them are in any danger then come back and see to the woman. A gash on the forehead and a bullet to the back of the shoulder, right?”

“Yes, sir – well, left – shoulder that is. You can see the skull bone at the base of the gash. It must be six inches long, diagonal down her forehead from up in her hair.”

“Good observations. Now git and tell Sandy the plan before he herds a dozen smelly men in my direction. AND, you boys stay out of here. The woman will be in a state of partial undress while Cilla and I work on her. Got that?”

“Yes, sir.”

Jericho took the steps two at a time down to meet Sandy.

After everybody had been taken care of Sandy began sorting out the problem between the woman – Sally Coffelt – and the men who were doing the shooting. The leader of the men had a woman’s purse in his saddlebags that contained Sally’s name and address. Sandy also found a necklace that matched the earrings she was wearing when the boys found her. A telegram to the livery in McPherson verified that Sally had rented a mount for three days and even supplied the matching number on the saddle. It appeared the men had shot the woman and left her to die.

Sandy addressed the men, who by then had been bandaged and were rowed up on the street out in front of his office.

“I need two things. Once I get them, most of you can go. One, who decided to shoot and rob Miss Coffelt? Two, who fired the shot that wounded her? I already have number three – who possesses Miss Coffelt’s belongings?”

As if on cue all the men, using their one good arm, pointed to the leader as the answer to both questions.

Cal took the man into custody and moved him to a cell inside.

“The rest of you men git and don’t come back.”

They seemed happy to leave town.

The boys made arrangements for the two extra horses at the livery – Miss Coffelt’s and the one from the man Cal had jailed. Then they made sure ‘Aunt’ Mae – as they had come to call her – was okay after the excitement.

“I’ll be fine once I get home and start baking,” she said with a wink.

The boys received her message – dessert at her place after lunch. They would do their best to force down whatever she created. They had not spoken with her about their big plan, but would fill her in over the goodies.

“Her wood pile is low,” Red Eagle said. “I noticed yesterday, but let it slip my mind.”

“We’ll take care of that for her before we pig out on pie, or cake, or cookies or whatever she’s up to today,” Jericho said. “We also need to begin getting ahead on wood for her and for us for the fall and winter. Be here before we know it.”

“Do you suppose our cave will stay warm enough this winter?” Red Eagle asked.

“With the heat from the warm water in our pool I think we will be fine. Maybe we need a cow hide or deer hide fixed across the opening to keep out the outside air.”

“That’s a good plan. We can make a wooden frame around the opening to tack up the hide. That will be a good project for a rainy day. We need to be on the lookout for a nice big piece of leather.”

“I’m thinking two,” Jericho said, “so the cover can be split down the middle and overlapped to make it easy on the horses. There are two by fours left at Aunt Mae’s from the Dutchman’s ghost I built a few weeks back.”

“That sounded funny.”

“What?”

“Building a Dutchman’s ghost out of Aunt May’s two by fours.”

“Did you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Then please close your noise hole about it.”

They had a good chuckled.

The plan was set for the entrance makeover. They would get on it before the first cold spell.

Their intention had been to go to the park that morning and hope the girls showed up. That plan had been changed by the doings with Miss Coffelt. They chuckled thinking back to what Rising Sun had asked about whether or not their lives ever really followed a plan. They missed him.

“We need to write Benny and Rising,” Red Eagle said.

“Let’s go to Cilla’s. We can write in there.”

“Gentlemen!” she said as they entered. “Seems you’ve had a busy morning.”

“Just another day at the office,” Jericho said going for a chuckle.

“I’ve written a story about it for the paper from what Cal told me,” Cilla said. “You can look it over and make any necessary changes.”

“Glad to,” Jericho said. “Can we stay here ‘til lunch time and write letters?”

“I am sure you ‘can’ and as far as my permission is concerned you even ‘may’ stay here.”

“You sound like a teacher,” Jericho said.

“And don’t forget it. When you get your letters finished, I have a couple of flyers you can – and may – typeset for me.”

“Great. We love doing that.”

They spent a half hour on the letters, Jericho to Rising Sun and Red Eagle to Benny. Cilla provided envelopes. They would put them in the mail at the stage office on their way to lunch. They just had time to finish the flyers – one from the general store about a sale on canning equipment for the fall season and one from the leather shop advertising a sale on saddles.

They stopped at Sandy’s office on the way to the restaurant.

“Will you boys run this money up to Doc for me? Jasper – the head bad guy – generously offered to pay for Doc’s services.”

“Sure. Just hope that money wasn’t really Miss Coffelt’s,” Jericho said.

“She said she kept her money in her pocket and for some reason it wasn’t taken. It seems more like what they took was to prove they had done her in than anything else. I still don’t have the whole story.”

The boys ran their errands – Doc’s and the letters – and took Cal to lunch – the others were busy.

They had a good time together and made more noise than they probably should have. The townsfolk seemed to be used to that and appeared to be more amused than bothered. Regardless, always polite Red Eagle, apologized to them as they left.

In Red Bend the people had come to divide folks into three groups: children, adults, and the bronze skinned twins. Each seemed to function according to rules and expectations that were appropriate just for them. Kids behaved like kids. The Adults behaved like adults. The twins behaved like – well, the reader understands.

Cal had the story about Miss Coffelt. As it turned out, Jasper – the bad guy – had been hired to scare the Coffelt woman out of Kansas. She had inherited a small piece of land between Red Bend and Great Bend, but if she didn’t arrive there to claim it by June 30th – a few days away – it would go to her younger brother. It was he who had hired Jasper. Miss Coffelt was from way back east – Baltimore, a city in Maryland. She had traveled to Kansas City by train and from there to McPherson by stage. She liked to ride, so decided to make the last leg of the journey on horseback.

As the three boys left the restaurant, Doc called to the brothers from his window over the newspaper office across the street. He motioned to them.

Cal returned to the office and the boys ran across the street and up the stairs. Doc met them in the outer office.

“Miss Coffelt wants to talk with you. It seems she had questions about who had found her and Cilla was more than happy to fill her in. Who knows what secrets she told the

woman. Women do talk, you know!”

“Thanks for the heads up, Doc.”

She was propped up on the patient bed, just through the door in Doc’s room.

“Sally, these are the boys you now probably know more about than they wish you did,” Doc said. “Jericho and Red Eagle.”

He pointed as he made the introductions.

“You two have quite the story, according to Cilla.”

“She is a newspaper woman and tends to make small stories into spectacular epics,” Red Eagle said.

Miss Coffelt smiled a wonderful smile not buying a word of his comment. She appeared to be in her early forties and was very attractive. Her skin was white and her hands soft, suggesting to the boys she was the inside type.

“I have a proposition for you,” she continued. “I need to get to Great Bend by the day after tomorrow. Considering the wounds to my shoulder and forehead, and generally weakened condition, I would like to have you accompany me. I will need a buggy for the trip. Doctor Webber says it is a six-hour journey. I will be there overnight and will take the stage back east from there. Can I count on your help?”

The brothers looked at each other and nodded. Jericho spoke for them.

“Sure. We will be happy to help. We can get a good buggy and horse from the livery and can even arrange to return the horse you were riding to the livery in McPherson if you want.”

“You seem to be just as efficient as Cilla suggested.”

Not knowing what to say to that, the boys shrugged.

“Will ten dollars cover your services?”

“Oh, we can’t take money, ma’am. We’re just kids. Happy to have something to do.”

“The way Cilla tells it, you two never lack for things to do. We will see about the compensation (payment) later.”

“When do you plan to leave?” Red Eagle asked.

“Mid-morning tomorrow, if the good doctor will agree to it.”

She looked at Doc. He nodded.

“I will need to get a new outfit or two. Can you arrange

for a clothier to bring me a selection from which to choose?"

"I assume clothier means a store person that sells clothes?" Jericho asked.

"Sorry. Yes. I forget I am in the west. I guess I am spoiled living in the city."

"Tell us what sort of outfit and we will get Maudie up here as soon as she can be free – she handles women's things at the general store."

She told them what she had in mind and they left to take care of things. From the general store, they went to make arrangements for the buggy and horse with Harry at the Livery.

"This will be nice," Red Eagle said as the boys sat on the edge of the raised sidewalk in front of Cilla's office. "We have never been to Great Bend."

Jericho nodded, agreeing.

A man, riding slowly down the street from the west, approached them. It could have been one of Jasper's men – they couldn't be sure. He stopped and looked down at them. He tossed a .44 caliber bullet to each of them and dropped a cricket on the street. He rode away, urging his horse to a gallop.

"What the?" Jericho said.

"Look at the lead," Red Eagle said. "Mine has a figure etched into it."

"Mine, too. A heart."

"Does that mean what I think it means?"

"Doubt if it's a love message; more likely bullets for our hearts." Jericho answered.

"And the cricket?"

"A cricket is a bug, maybe something about the buggy?" Red Eagle said.

"So, if we go with the buggy we can expect to take a bullet to our hearts?"

"Ouch! We better talk with Cal."

"Cal? Not Sandy?" Red Eagle asked.

"Sandy will keep us from going. Cal may be more reasonable about it."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Well, at Least it Wasn't More Money!

They chopped wood, pumped water and downed half an apple pie between them before leaving Aunt Mae's for their cave. They had a very good thing going among the three of them.

Before leaving town, they had talked in private with Cal. He convinced Sandy it would be a good idea for him to accompany Miss Coffelt the following day just in case any of the men decided to earn for themselves whatever her brother had offered Jasper for his services.

They were back in town the next morning in time for breakfast and to get the buggy ready. As had become their habit on journeys to other towns, they were dressed one as Cherokee and one as White. At 8:45 they were at Doc's office ready to help Miss Coffelt down to the street. They entered the office. There she was. The boys gulped.

"You look like a real woman, ma'am," Jericho said.

Although it was correct in every way, from the moment it left his lips he understood it had not been the way to say it."

"Well, thank you. I do my best."

"The clothes I mean."

"I understand what you mean and take it as a compliment. I assume you are ready. My things are in this new carpet bag if one of you will help with it."

Red Eagle handled the door and the bag. Doc and Jericho helped her down the steps. Cal remained on Gray by the buggy with the boys' horses.

"Sandy decided it would be best if Deputy Cal, here,

rode along with us in case any of Jasper's men got any ideas," Jericho explained.

She turned to Cal.

"Be sure to thank Sandy for me. I appreciate your willingness to accompany me. Who drives the buggy?"

"Jericho grew up in the city," Red Eagle said. "He is more used to handling buggies. His horse will follow along."

"I'll start, then, and we may trade off later," Jericho said. "Cilla packed a lunch for us. She's a great cook. We have plenty of water. Just tell us if you need to stop or anything."

He flipped the reins and they moved off toward the west end of Main Street.

"So, I understand you have some land out here somewhere," Jericho said trying to get a conversation started. "Red Eagle and I have just purchased a piece west of Sandy Ford – a day and a half ride south west of here."

"So Cilla said. I love your idea – the kids and all. She indicated you might eventually be starting others like it in various places."

"First, we have to learn how to do it right with this first one. We have been fortunate to have some really good help to get it going."

"That is a very mature approach for boys your age."

"Doc kids us that we have four ages: Twelve years on Earth. Thirteen-year-old bodies. Forty-year-old dreams and seven-year-old judgment. I really think he's jealous of all four of them."

"May I ask how you spend your life back in Baltimore?" Red Eagle asked her.

"Mostly just counting the money I inherited from daddy. All quite boring, actually. I admire you two with grand plans and a lifetime ahead of you in which to help them come to fruition."

"Fruition is a new word for me, Ma'am," Red Eagle said.

"Completion, realization, achievement."

"Thank you. I am finding English seems to have many more words than Cherokee. I am surprised my head has not already burst just trying to hold them all."

"I admire your English. Cilla said I would be impressed. As if you haven't guessed, I am a teacher – well, was before I

buried daddy and he buried me under his money.”

“Did you enjoy teaching?”

“Very much. I taught at an academy for teen age girls.”

“We don’t know much about teen age girls, I’m afraid,” Jericho said. “We’d like to learn, but the opportunities have not really presented themselves.”

Cal smiled and spoke as if in an aside just to Miss Coffelt.

“First, they have to get up the courage to stay within the same block where they are; then there’s that thing about being brave enough to talk with them.”

“We’ve talked with girls,” Jericho came back.

Red Eagle had a comment.

“Mostly, brother, they talked at us.”

Jericho nodded and shrugged. He still figured it counted.

“We need to get something straight, young men,” she said. “I once read that being out west is the great equalizer – everybody’s treated equally here. So, I’m not Miss or Ma’am. I’m Sally – Sal-ly. Understood?”

“Yes ma’am,” Cal said not even recognizing what he had said.

The other boys laughed. ‘Sally’ rolled her eyes.

Once they forded Sunday Creek just west of town, it seemed like they were really on their way. The scene was mostly identical to that to the north and south along the creek – flat with clumps of trees here and there. Brush and grasses of widely varying heights and hues of greens, yellows, and dirty whites covered what remained. The road was somewhat narrower than it was back to the east of Red Bend. That was likely due to the fact there was only one stage a day that traveled it. Cal said it was a straight shot all the way to Great Bend.

“Will we be going to see your property before we hit town,” Red Eagle asked.

“I have a map here, Sally said reaching for her purse. “Maybe you can ascertain how far south off the road it lies. If it’s not too far we could take a little side trip, I suppose. I’m not as much interested in the land as I am in keeping my brother from getting his hands on it. It’s a wooded area and

he'll cut the trees for profit and leave the soil bare to blow away in the Kansas wind. I want to make sure it is preserved as woodland."

"We like the way you think," Jericho said. "Cilla says if people aren't careful about preserving the trees and grasslands, all of Kansas could turn into a dust bowl – that's a terrible image for a place as beautiful as this."

"May I see the map?" Cal asked.

She opened her purse and handed it to him. He studied it for several minutes as he rode.

"Doubt if it's more than two miles from the road – about a half hour one way."

"You have convinced me we should see it," She said. "Where do we turn?"

"Not 'til after lunch. It is actually very close to Great Bend. I see there is a stream that looks to have its source there. It flows south east and feeds the Sunday. The area may be just a bit rolling. Certainly has the trees you mentioned."

"If you boys won't starve, why don't we wait and have lunch down there?"

The boys nodded. They had become intrigued with what that area had to offer.

Several hours later Cal indicated it was the place to turn (left) and head out over the prairie – there was no road or trail to follow.

"Will your land be marked in any way?" he asked.

"Daddy had a plaque forged in iron and, as I understand it, he attached it to a large boulder marking the north-west corner."

"I see that, now, marked here on the map. It reads, 'Green Haven' (safe place)."

"Daddy loved the place. That's all I really know about it. He visited it every fall."

The prairie was relatively level and smooth, but still, Jericho slowed the buggy to keep from jostling Sally. She understood, but didn't comment. It was about one o'clock when the gentle green rise came into view ahead. Cal had read the map quite accurately. With the light blue sky behind it and surrounded by the yellow-greens of acres and acres of gasses swaying in the breeze it looked to be floating on a sea

reflecting the gold of the sun.

Before long they stopped in a small clearing just inside the north edge of the area near the plaque. There were birds singing and a variety of small animals scurrying to safety from the intruders (invaders) into their sanctuary.

"I wouldn't doubt if we saw deer in here," Red Eagle said.

"It is beautiful," Jericho said looking around. "I understand why your father liked it so much. How many acres are there, do you know?"

"About 200 I believe. The deed I will be picking up will say for sure."

The boys spread a blanket and helped Sally get comfortable with her back up against a tree. Cal set the lunch box beside her. There were ham sandwiches, potato salad and Peach Cobbler.

"Enough here to feed a small army," Sally said.

"Then that seems about right," Jericho joked looking at the others.

Half an hour later they had proved his prediction had been correct.

Half an hour later their day changed abruptly (suddenly)!

Out of the trees that surrounded the clearing stepped several men, guns drawn and bandanas hiding the bottom half of their faces.

"Sorry guys," Jericho began. "Nothing but crumbs left in the lunch box, I'm afraid."

A man whose bandana couldn't hide his full beard spoke. They recognized him from the day before.

"You will stay here until the deadline passes."

"Deadline? What are you talking about?"

It had been Jericho, of course. Someday he was going to smart off to the wrong person. Actually, that someday was going to be that day. The man approached him and knocked him to the ground with one well-placed fist to his jaw. He was out cold on his back.

Red Eagle moved as if to attack the man. Cal put out his arm to stop him.

"Drop your weapons!" the man said.

Red Eagle set his quiver and bow on the ground. Cal unbuckled his guns and dropped them. He was instructed to tie the boys' arms behind them. Then one of the men did the same to Cal.

The bearded man holstered his gun and went to Sally looking specifically at her shoulder. He knelt and tied her ankles together sparing her the pain of pulling her hands behind her back. It seemed unusually kind for a bad guy, Red Eagle thought.

Jericho continued to lie there still as a log. The plan seemed to be to detain them just long enough so Sally would miss the deadline and her brother would gain possession of the land.

"Our horses need water," Red Eagle said, knowing men would always take good care of them.

Beard Man nodded at one of the men. He unhitched the horse from the buggy, then he and another man led them east through the woods. That left only two men behind with the leader. Three against three seemed quite fair to Red Eagle. Now, all he needed was a plan! It might also be well if his brother would wake up. Jericho's face had not been cut by the blow, but he would have a beastly headache for some hours.

They made Red Eagle scoot closer to where Jericho lay, probably to make them easier to watch. They tied Cal – the one with the Deputy Badge – to a tree on the other side of the clearing. Sally remained sitting on the blanket near the center of it all.

Red Eagle arranged himself with his hands – tied behind him – close to his brother's boots. That much of the plan they had worked several times before, although unconscious Jericho would not be of much help as he lay there on his side, his hands tied behind him. Red Eagle sat facing the men who had seated themselves, backs against trees across the clearing closer to Cal.

Red Eagle's fingers were soon inside Jericho's boot, out of sight of the others. He found the knife and was able to remove it. Unlike the previous times, he would need to hold it himself so he could cut the ropes around his own wrists. He began the task. It was more than a little difficult.

Jericho moaned – well, the others heard a moan. Red Eagle heard a well muffled ‘I’m free’. He assumed his brother meant free of the ropes. He looked across at Cal. Cal winked. Red Eagle wasn’t sure what it meant.

Jericho ‘moaned’ again. Red Eagle heard, ‘move’.

‘Move’, Red Eagle wondered to himself. ‘Where?’
‘Oh!’

He eased himself back toward his brother’s hands, making it look like he was just trying to get comfortable. Somehow Jericho had freed his hands. His fingers felt the rope around Red Eagle’s wrists and somehow untied them within just a few seconds. Red Eagle really didn’t understand. Jericho took the knife from his brother’s hand.

From the way Red Eagle had positioned himself, Jericho was mostly hidden from the men from his waist up. He was able to move his hands to his mouth and managed a quick, shrill, finger whistle, immediately returning his arms behind him before the men could see what he had done. Beard man stood, looking around, ill at ease, thinking it had been Red Eagle. With the man’s right hand held against his holster he walked toward Sally.

Several things happened during that next thirty seconds. Golden, Lightning and Gray broke into the clearing fully disrupting things. Sally removed a two shot Derringer (small hand gun) from somewhere under her dress and shot Beard Man in his right hand. He fell to the ground. During that same moment, Red Eagle, jumped to his feet and ran headlong into one of the men’s stomach, knocking him to the ground.

Jericho ran to Sandy and cut him free and was soon standing behind the one remaining man, his knife at his neck. Cal took the men’s guns and the tables had been turned.

“Everybody face down on the ground,” Cal said. “Now!”

The two men who had left with the horses returned to all quite unexpectedly face Cal’s guns. They joined the others on the ground.

By shortly after three, a strange procession entered Great Bend; five men tied to their horses, followed by the youngest looking deputy in the territory and finally a buggy carrying the most beautiful women seen in that town for years.

Then, of course, there were the Cherokee and the White kid who wore the same face. A strange procession that drew everybody's attention!

Cal directed them to the Sheriff's office, related the short version of the story, and handed his catch over to the deputy. Sally pointed to the saloon.

"I think we all need a drink, men – four tall milks and keep 'em comin'."

It had been the first thing worth a laugh since lunch and it received a good round of chuckles.

They settled for the restaurant where their needs could be better served.

"I have to ask you Jericho," Red Eagle asked. "How did you manage to untie yourself and then me?"

Jericho and Cal exchanged a smile. Cal as the one who spoke.

"I took a lesson from you two and tied your wrists with slip knots."

"I woke up almost immediately after I hit the ground," Jericho said," but I figured it would be best not to let on. When Cal finished tying me he slipped the end of the rope into my palm and bent my fingers over it. I figured I knew why."

They turned to Sally. Cal spoke.

"You are a great shot with a gun that is notoriously not accurate, ma'am Sally."

"One thing Daddy insisted on – that his little girl knew how to protect herself."

"Well, good going, Daddy!" Jericho said.

From the restaurant, they went directly to the office of the lawyer who was handling the land transfer. After a short private conversation with the man, Sally signed the paper. The lawyer turned to the boys.

"Now if Jericho and Jacob Palmer will just sign down on these lines we will be finished here."

The boys looked at each other and then at Sally. She explained.

"Boys, as much as I wish I didn't, I really hate Kansas. I think Daddy's land will be much better off in your care, so I have signed it over to you. Maybe someday it can be the site of your next Happiness Place for kids."

Red Eagle turned to Jericho and said, "Well, at least it wasn't more money."

It was worth a private chuckle between them.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A Fine Idea, Little Brother

The workman began work on Happiness Place number one – lumber arrived along with bricks and cement and roofing and pipes and all the things necessary to help it spring to life there on the beautiful green hills just south of the R bar B Ranch. The project director figured that given a mild winter it would be open for business by the following spring. The plan was for the boys to ride down several times a month to make sure it was all going according to their plan.

Sally telegraphed that she made it back safely to Baltimore. She was surprised by the fact that she actually hated Maryland as much as she did Kansas. The boys took delight in her final sentence. 'I THINK I KNOW A RICH, MIDDLE AGED, TEACHER THAT COULD LEARN TO BE HAPPY IN KANSAS IN CASE YOU ARE LOOKING FOR ONE.'

Dr. Fox agreed to sign on as doctor and he and his wife (and Benny) would be 'house parents' for the first home that was completed. Rising Sun and his grandmother agreed to move into a place that would be built just for them – they didn't want a white man's house so Rising Sun designed an extra-large 'Tepee', which they built from wood rather than skins. It would have three sections inside – one for grandmother, one for Rising Sun and one to be used for cooking and conversation. Grandmother would cook for the workman and later would do the same for the staff. They would be close enough to their reservation so they could visit often. Several of the youngest orphans from his tribe just might be among

the first Happiness Kids – as they decided to call the residents.

Back in Red Bend, the boys found themselves visiting the local park more often. Surprise, surprise! So, did the two girls. Not only did they find they could actually hold extended conversations with them – the girls – but when they walked along the creek together the girls often let them hold their hands.

They put up the skins at the entrance to their cave. They found that not only was it going to keep the cold winter air out, it already kept out the hot summer air and the constant waves of Kansas dust that it contained.

One night in early August, they were talking as they spent quiet time in their pool.

“I’ve been thinking,” Red Eagle said. “I would like to see the places you lived when you were younger and I would like for you to see where I lived. I know you would love the Cherokee people and they will love you.”

“Sounds like a fine idea, little brother. Here’s an additional proposition. We go down to check on the ‘Place’, have Rising Sun take us from there down to his reservation so we can learn about the Arapaho and his life there; then you and I continue on east to your Cherokee reservation. From there we go further east to Kansas City and Independence and some of the smaller towns where I lived growing up. We can even look up Zeke in KC.”

“Do you think we can we do all that and make it back here before the big snows of winter?”

Jericho grinned.

“There is certainly one way to find out.”

[Does it sound to you like a new story is about to happen? Perhaps it could be called, Book Five: The Boys’ Great Adventure.]