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# Jed Cartwright and the Comanche Raiders

A novel  
by Ed Dunlop

(Book Three in the Jed Cartwright adventure series)

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## Chapter 1 – COMANCHE ATTACK

The scream cut across the stillness of the November afternoon like a rifle shot. The sound was a woman's voice, shrill with the raw edge of terror. After the one short outcry echoed over the hillside, silence followed. Nothing moved in the forest. Even the birds sat motionless and quiet.

"Someone needs help!" Nathan Cartwright, eleven years old, drew back on the reins and brought the powerful black horse to a sudden stop on the treeless slope above the roadway. "Jed, it sounds like someone's in trouble!" His clear blue eyes were clouded with worry as he looked over his shoulder at his brother, one year older, who was seated behind the saddle.

Jed pointed. "It sounded like it came from just over that hill yonder. Let's go!"

Nathan used his heels to urge his horse forward. "The only place thataway is the Skyles homestead," he told Jed. "Elijah

Skyles and his wife have a little farm just over the ridge. They have three little girls."

A second scream reverberated across the hillside, a woman's prolonged scream of horror that echoed across the hills and sent a chill up Jed's spine. Jed leaned forward against his brother. "Hurry, Nathan!" Nathan kicked Champ's flanks again and the powerful horse leaped forward, crossed the roadway, and entered the woods on the other side.

As the horse crested the ridge, Nathan abruptly reined to a halt. He stared for an instant and then rode behind a huge cottonwood on the ridge. "Get down before they see us," he whispered urgently. Both boys dropped to the ground behind the tree.

Before them was a scene that made their hearts pound with fear. At the bottom of the slope a tiny cabin sat in a small clearing beside a winding, shallow creek. Three horses stood in the front yard of the cabin. A young, blond-haired man was down on his knees in front of the cabin door, holding his hands up as if to protect himself from three Indian warriors who towered over him. Two of the warriors held lances; the third held a shotgun, which he pointed at the helpless settler. A

pretty woman with long, dark hair stood terrified against the cabin wall, while three little blond-haired girls stood sobbing, clinging to her skirts.

“Please, leave him be,” the woman pleaded, sobbing and wringing her hands. “We ain’t got nothin’ you want. You kin have anything in the cabin. Take it. Jest leave my husband be!”

“What are we gonna do, Jed?” Nathan gasped, watching the horrifying incident from behind a thicket. “The Injuns are gonna kill Mr. Skyles!”

“I don’t know what we can do,” Jed replied. An empty feeling of helplessness swept over him. “That Injun has a scattergun.”

“He took it from Mr. Skyles!” Nathan said fiercely. “Jed, we have to do something!”

“I’ll ride for help,” Jed offered, rising to a half crouch and turning to dash to the horse.

Nathan grabbed his arm. “Jed, there isn’t time! We’re two miles from the nearest house. By the time you get back, Mr. Skyles will be dead and the Injuns will be long gone.”

Jed bit his lip and looked back at the heart-rending scene in front of the cabin. “Help them, dear God,” he prayed fervently. “Don’t let the Injuns kill this man. Please, God.”

“Please, leave him be,” the woman implored again. Her voice rose to a shrill scream. “I’m begging you! Take anything you want; jest leave him be.” The little girls wailed in terror.

One of the braves stepped forward and thrust his lance at the terrified woman in a threatening gesture. He shouted a single angry word at her, and her head jerked back abruptly as if she had just been slapped. She lapsed into silence, sobbing and nervously biting the back of a trembling hand. The Indian laughed and stepped away from her with a backward look of contempt.

He walked over to his companion with the shotgun and grabbed his arm, chattering and gesturing wildly. The warrior with the shotgun shook his head vehemently and jerked his shoulder away, pulling free of the other’s grasp. The other brave grabbed him again, and again he pulled away angrily. The third Indian stepped over and began to shout at both of them. In a moment’s time, all three Indians were engaged in a vigorous argument.

The brave with the shotgun lowered the weapon to the ground, resting the wooden stock in the dirt. Ignoring the white settlers, he turned and shook his fist in the faces of both his companions. Angry words flew back and forth. The controversy became more animated and more heated. The Indians gestured and screamed at each other.

Nathan was wide-eyed as he watched. "I can't tell what they're saying, but I think the brave with the gun wants to kill Mr. Skyles, but the other two don't want to."

Jed nodded soberly, unable to take his eyes from the engaging scene thirty yards below. "I think you're right. I wish I had my rifle."

Nathan suddenly pointed. "Look at Mr. Skyles," he whispered. "Mr. Skyles, don't do it!"

The settler had risen from his knees to a half-crouch. Watching his attackers as they argued, he was clearly looking for an opportunity to jump the brave with the deadly shotgun. "Don't do it," Nathan whispered again. "They'll kill you."

"It may be his only chance," Jed replied softly, secretly hoping that the settler *would* jump the Injuns. "If I have to die,

I'd rather die fighting. And if they kill him, they'll kill his family, too. I'm sure he knows that."

The Indian warriors were now arguing so fiercely that it looked as if it would simply be a matter of time before they came to blows. They screamed at each other, jumping up and down in rage and shaking their fists at each other. Mr. Skyles crept forward. The brave with the shotgun spotted the movement and spun toward him, shouting angrily at the settler. Mr. Skyles stepped backward. The brave raised the shotgun.

"What are we going to do, Nathan?" Jed whispered. "We can't just stand here and let them kill him!"

"There's nothing we can do," Nathan replied.

"Maybe we can create some kind of a diversion. You make some kind of a noise to distract the Injuns while I—"

"While you get yourself killed!" Nathan interrupted. "Jed, those Injuns would kill you and me in an instant if we tried to interfere. We can't risk it."

Jed thought it through for just a few seconds and realized that his brother was right. "Dear God, help Mr. Skyles," he prayed desperately. "The Injuns are going to kill him, Lord, and there's nothing we can do."

## Chapter 2 – THE INCREDIBLE SURPRISE

Jed and Nathan stared in horror at the frightful drama unfolding in the valley below. The Indians were going to kill Mr. Skyles, and there was no one to stop them. Jed sighed in frustration, feeling utterly helpless. There was absolutely nothing he or Nathan could do to save the settler from certain death at the hands of the Indian warriors.

“Lord, help him,” Jed prayed desperately.

A rifle barked in the distance and the bullet whined across the clearing, shattering the glass in the cabin window. The three Indians whirled around, took one look, and instantly sprinted for their horses. The shotgun fell in the dust.

As the braves scrambled into their saddles and wheeled their horses from the yard, Mr. Skyles leaped forward, snatched the shotgun from the ground, and threw it to his shoulder. The

shotgun roared as he fired a hasty shot at the departing warriors, but they rode away unscathed.

A big man with a bushy black beard rode a tall gray horse into the cabin yard and reined to a quick stop. He held a shiny new lever-action Henry in his big right hand. “Is everyone all right?” he called.

“Come on, Nathan!” Jed and Nathan dashed back to Champ, scrambled aboard, and rode hurriedly down the slope into the homestead. Several shots rang out from the woods nearby.

Mr. Skyles was shaking as he lowered the shotgun and rested the stock in the dirt. “We’re all OK, Adam, thanks to you,” he said slowly, shaking his head as if he couldn’t quite believe what he had just been through. “Thanks, neighbor, for showing up when you did. I thought fer sure I was about to see the angels.”

Adam Slade smiled grimly. “Thank God that John Phillip and I were in the area and heard Miriam’s screams.”

Mrs. Skyles rushed across the yard and threw her arms around her husband. “Oh, Elijah,” she sobbed. “I thought I was going to lose you!”

Her husband took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "It was beginning to look that way, wasn't it?"

Mr. Slade dismounted and approached the embracing couple, who were now surrounded by three crying little girls. "Miriam? Are you all right, ma'am?"

The woman nodded, catching her breath in a choking little sob. "I'll be fine, Mr. Slade. I just... I'll be fine." She wiped the tears from her cheeks with the back of a dirty hand. "Thank you for saving my husband's life!"

The big man smiled and nodded. "I'm thankful we could do it, ma'am."

A tall roan horse galloped into the yard just then, and Adam Slade looked up questioningly at the rider. "They got away, did they, John Phillip?"

The newcomer, a thin man with a hook nose and a huge mustache, nodded slowly. Frustration was written across his face. "Them savages made it into the woods afore I could get 'em in pistol range. But now iffen I'd had my rifle, things woulda been different."

Mr. Slade turned to the young couple. "I think you've met my hired hand, John Phillip?" Mr. and Mrs. Skyles both nodded.

John Phillip holstered a six-gun and swung down out of the saddle. "You shoulda seen 'em ride, Mr. Slade. They was Comanches, all right."

"Comanches?" Elijah Skyles looked worried.

Adam Slade nodded. "We didn't get a good look at them, but it appears they were Comanches."

"What if they come back?" The question came from Mrs. Skyles.

Mr. Slade shook his head. "I don't think they will, ma'am." He looked at Mr. Skyles. "You've been around Injuns some, Elijah, and you got the best look at them. Were they Comanches?"

The settler frowned. "Can't rightly say," he said slowly. "Reckon I was so terrified that I plum forgot to notice."

The bearded man laughed. "Can't say that I blame you, Elijah. But didn't you notice anything distinctive about them? Were there any symbols on their clothing? Did they have jewelry or tattoos? Did they wear headgear?"

“Can’t rightly say,” Mr. Skyles replied. “I really didn’t see.”

“I did.” Mrs. Skyles took a step toward Mr. Slade. “One of them had a tattoo on his forearm. A snake, it was. A crawling snake.” She shuddered at the memory.

“It was Comanches, all right,” Slade’s companion spoke up. “The crawling snake is the sacred symbol of the Comanches.”

Jed was curious. He and Nathan dismounted and approached the adults. “There were three of them, sir, and only two of you. Why did they run off so fast when you showed up?”

Adam Slade turned and looked at Jed. “We both had guns, boy, and they didn’t. They knew they was outgunned, so they did the smart thing and high-tailed it outta here.”

“They had Mr. Skyles’ scattergun,” Jed pointed out.

“Yes,” Mr. Slade replied, “but they may not have even known how to fire it. And if they did know anything about guns, they’d know that I could pick them off with my rifle long before we were within scattergun range. They were smart to

take off when they did.” He looked from Mr. Skyles to his wife, and then back again. “What happened, anyway, Elijah?”

“They jumped me when I came outta the barn,” the settler replied. “I think they was after my two horses. Miriam heard what was going on and brought the scattergun, but they got it away from her. They took me up to the house and was fixing to do me in when you two showed up jest in the nick of time.” He grinned. “Was I ever glad to see you, Adam Slade!”

“What if they come back?” the woman worried aloud.

“I don’t think they will, ma’am,” Mr. Slade replied. “They were mighty anxious to leave when they heard the sound of a bullet headed their way.” He grinned sheepishly. “Sorry about the window.”

“But what if they do? What if they do come back?” The woman’s mind was not on the broken window. Her face was drawn and anxious, and her eyes were filled with fear. She turned to her husband. “Elijah, let’s leave this place! This very afternoon!”

“Sweetheart, everything we’ve worked for these past three years is right here,” her husband argued. “We can’t jest walk away from it now, can we?”

“It’s not worth gettin’ kilt over. Please, Elijah, let’s go into the city tonight and stay. Tomorra we can sell out and head back east.”

“Ma’am, if I can offer an opinion, I don’t think them savages will be acomin’ back,” John Phillip reassured her. “This here ain’t Comanche territory, ma’am, and I have no idea what they was doin’ this fur east, but I doubt they’ll be back to bother you agin.”

The woman grabbed Mr. Slade by the arm. “But Mr. Slade, isn’t there a chance they will? We have no way of knowing that they’re gone fer sure, do we? And what if they do come back after you and yore man are gone? You know what will happen.” She threw a fearful glance toward the woods. “They could be awatchin’ us right now, jest waitin’ fer the chance to strike again!”

She looked at her husband and then back at the tall neighbor. “Wouldn’t you leave, Mr. Slade, knowin’ that yore wife and younguns was in danger? Tell him. Tell my husband that we gotta leave!”

Adam Slade thoughtfully twisted his beard as he pondered her request. “Tell you what I’ll do, ma’am,” he said finally.

“My man John Phillips here is a crack shot with a rifle, and he’s dealt with Injuns before. He and your Elijah could stand off a whole passel of them Comanches if they had to, what with your cabin situated the way it is and all. How about if I send him home to get his rifle, and then have him stay here with you folks for the next two or three days? Would that make you feel better, ma’am?”

The woman relaxed as she heard Slade’s words, and an expression of immense relief appeared on her face. “We’d be obliged, Mr. Slade. That would ease my mind sumthin’ tremendous.”

“John Phillip, ride back and get your rifle. I’ll stay here with the Skyles until you return.”

The hired man nodded. “Yes, sir. Be right back.” He mounted and rode away.

“Come children, into the house with you,” Mrs. Skyles said, grabbing two little hands and leading the three little girls toward the cabin. She turned when she reached the door. “God bless you, Mr. Slade. Thank you for helping us. We will never forget you.” Wiping tears from her eyes, she disappeared inside the cabin with her three daughters.

Jed and Nathan stood beside Champ and listened for the next several minutes as Mr. Slade and Mr. Skyles discussed the Comanche situation and the possibilities of another attack.

“There’s no way to know for certain, of course,” Adam Slade said, “but I don’t think those Comanches will be back. I think you’ve seen the last of them.”

He turned to Nathan. “Aren’t you Jake Cartwright’s boy?”

Nathan nodded. “Yes, sir. I’m Nathan Cartwright.”

“Ride into town, would you, Nathan, and tell Judge Farley and Sheriff Bates what happened today. Tell them we think that the raiders were Comanches. I think this is just an isolated incident, but I think the town ought to know. Tell them that I said it was up to them to decide if they should call in the cavalry.”

“Yes, sir.”

The Cartwright boys mounted Champ and rode from the yard. “Thank God that Mr. Slade and John Phillip came when they did,” Nathan remarked. “Those Comanches would have killed Mr. Skyles.”

Jed nodded soberly. “I know.” He was thoughtful for a moment. “You think there’s any more of ‘em around here?”

“Comanches? I don’t think so,” Nathan replied. “This never was Comanche territory. Pa says that the Osage Injuns used to live here, and from time to time some Shawnee, but I don’t think the Comanches ever roamed this far east.” He frowned. “I wonder what they were doing here today.”

The boys rode along in silence for several minutes, each deep in his own thoughts.

“You know,” Jed said, after a few minutes of riding, “I wish I had a horse of my own, so we wouldn’t have to double all the time. Suppose the Injuns came after us—do you suppose that we could outrun them, doubling like this? Not a chance! Now, if we each had our own horse...”

“Pa says that you can ride Mack.”

“That’s not the same,” Jed argued. “Mack is Pa’s horse, not mine. I want a horse of my own. A horse that I can ride any time I want, that I can take care of, that would be really mine. You know what I mean?”

“You can ride Champ any time you want,” Nathan offered. “And you can help take care of him, too.”

Jed shook his head. “That’s still not the same. I just want a horse of my own. I’ve wanted one ever since I was a little kid.”

“Then pray for a horse,” Nathan challenged. “God can give you one.”

Jed nodded. “I will. I really will.”

Nathan and Jed had just recently become brothers. Jed and his sister Mandy had been orphaned by the fever of 1860, and had been sent to an orphanage in Kewanee, Illinois. When the orphanage made plans to allow a farmer to adopt Jed, but not Mandy, the lonely young people had run away to find refuge with their Uncle John. Upon reaching St. Louis, they had learned that Uncle John had died. Homeless and desperate, they had been taken in and adopted by the wealthy Jake and Deborah Cartwright. Jed and Mandy had now been members of the Cartwright family for over two months, and Jed had received the Lord as his Savior shortly after coming to live with the Cartwrights.

“Let’s ride straight into town and tell Sheriff Bates what happened,” Jed told Nathan. “Then we can ride home and tell Pa.”

“Comanches?” Pa echoed, when the brothers had finished telling the story of their adventure. “That’s impossible!” He paced back and forth on the front porch of the Cartwright mansion and then descended the steps to stand beside Champ. “Are you sure, boys? Comanches?”

Jake Cartwright, a wealthy trader in cattle and stocks, was a giant of a man, standing six foot ten, with the huge arms and shoulders of a Hercules. He was known throughout St. Louis for his tremendous strength and his ability to bend an iron horseshoe with his bare hands. Even more important, he was known as a Christian, a man of integrity that always kept his word.

“We’re not sure, Pa,” Nathan answered, “but Mr. Slade thinks they were. Mrs. Skyles said they had snake tattoos, and John Phillip said that was a Comanche symbol.”

The big man frowned and scratched his blond head. “Comanches! Now what would they be doing this far east?”

“That’s what Mr. Slade said,” Jed told him. “He said he guessed maybe they were scouting for buffalo, maybe looking for new hunting grounds.”

“Comanches!” Pa shook his head as he said the word again. “I just can’t believe it. I never thought I’d see the day that Comanches would come near St. Louis.”

“What if they come here, Pa?” Nathan asked timidly. “Meadow Green wouldn’t be any safer than Mr. Skyles’ homestead, would it?”

“I don’t think they’d come here, son,” Pa said reassuringly. “Injuns won’t show themselves in a heavily populated area like this. We have neighbors on both sides within a half mile. I imagine they raided the Skyles homestead because it was in an isolated location.”

Reaching up, he gave both boys an affectionate thump on the knee. “Why don’t you take care of Champ and then come into the house? I believe that Mabel has dinner just about ready.”

“Yes, sir,” both boys chorused. Nathan lifted the reins to turn Champ from the porch.

“Boys, don’t say anything about this to your Ma, understand? There’s no sense in getting her all worked up about nothing.”

At that moment the creak of carriage wheels arrested their attention, and all three turned to see an elaborate Concord coach turn into the driveway of the estate. Jed stared at the coach for a moment and then glanced at Pa just in time to see a mysterious twinkle in his eyes. Pa looked away quickly as if he were attempting to hide something. “Why is that coach here, Pa?” Jed demanded. “Who’s coming?”

A secretive smile played at the corner of Pa’s lips. “It’s a little surprise I have planned,” he replied coyly, “though I didn’t know that she would arrive today.”

Jed glanced back at the coach and then looked at his father. “What is it, Pa?”

Pa laughed. “I guess you’ll have to wait another minute, Jed. The coach is almost here.”

Jed turned. The coach was making its way down the lane toward the mansion, moving at a pace that was agonizingly slow. Jed watched impatiently. The seconds ticked by like minutes. Why must the coachman drive so slowly?

Jed’s heart seemed to stop as he spotted a handsome chestnut mare trotting proudly at the rear of the vehicle. *A horse! Pa’s gotten me a horse of my own!* He laughed in

delight. *A horse of my very own. And what a beauty.* As the coach turned in front of the mansion, Jed could see that the lovely chestnut had a long, white mane and tail, and four matching white stockings.

“She’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen, Pa!” Jed exclaimed. “Thank you.”

“Huh?” Pa turned and stared at him with a puzzled expression. “What are you talking about, son?”

The wooden brake shoe squealed as the driver pulled back on the brake lever. Almost before the Concord had come to a complete stop, he had scrambled down and opened the door. A tiny figure in a faded blue dress and matching bonnet stepped nimbly from the vehicle and then walked toward the mansion, carrying a big, gray cat in her arms.

Jed stared in astonishment as he recognized the tiny woman. Pa’s surprise was the Widow Jarkey!

### Chapter 3 – GRANNY

A huge red sun was dropping behind the hills to the west. Jed and the Widow Jarkey sat side by side on a marble bench in the reflection garden behind the mansion. A small, tranquil pond lay before them like a polished mirror, reflecting the image of the setting sun and the pair of elegant white swans gliding gracefully across the surface. Stately weeping willows surrounded the pond, contributing to the atmosphere of seclusion and serenity. A narrow footpath paved with white gravel followed the western edge of the pool and crossed a white, Venice-style footbridge to a tiny island in the center of the pond.

“This place is beautiful,” the old woman exclaimed, gazing in wonder at the elegant grounds of the estate. “In all my born days I’ve never seen anything half as purty as this place.”

“I can’t believe you’re really here,” Jed said happily, reaching over to hug the old woman for the tenth time. “It’s like a dream come true.”

“It *is* a dream come true for me, Jed,” the widow said joyfully. “I never thought I’d see you and Mandy again!” She reached down and petted the huge gray dog that lay contentedly at her feet. “And it’s so good to see Wolf again.”

The big dog jumped up and placed his front paws on the bench and then licked the old woman’s face. “Wolf!” Jed scolded. “Down, boy.”

The tiny woman laughed, obviously not the least bit intimidated by the huge dog. “He’s all right, Jed. I’m delighted that he still remembers me.” She took off her bonnet, exposing a mass of silver hair that always made Jed think of a dandelion gone to seed. Placing the bonnet in her lap, she wrapped her thin arms around the dog’s massive neck. “I love you, too, Wolf.”

Jed and Mandy had met the kind old woman months before when they were traveling to St. Louis in their search for Uncle John. The widow, recognizing Jed and Mandy as two lonely, desperate souls, had taken the boy and girl in and

befriended them both. Her gentleness had instantly won their hearts. They would have been content to stay with her forever, substituting for the grandchildren that she had never had, but Jed’s desperate fear of being returned to the orphanage had driven them on to St. Louis.

The widow leaned her head against his shoulder. “It’s like being in heaven,” she whispered softly. “Seeing you and Mandy and Wolf again...” Her voice trailed off.

They sat in silence for several minutes, watching the setting sun disappear behind the trees. A fiery red path blazed across the mirror surface of the pond. The swans glided quietly closer. The widow seemed fascinated by the beautiful water fowl. “Right purty critters, ain’t they?” she remarked. “Jed, this place is right splendid.”

“I like to come here to think and carve,” he told her. “But wait till you see the creek. It’s the prettiest place on all of Meadow Green.” He reached over and tenderly stroked the old woman’s hand. “I’m glad you’re here, Miz Jarkey. How long are you planning to stay?”

She looked at him in surprise. “Didn’t yore Pa tell you? I’m going to live here. I’m the new nanny.”

The back door of the mansion slammed shut and Jed turned to see his eight-year-old sister dash across the veranda with her long, blond braids flying behind her. Panting in an attempt to catch her breath, Mandy dropped to a seat beside the widow. "Here you are!" she exclaimed. "I've been looking everywhere for you." She reached over and took the old lady's wrinkled hand, drawing it into her own lap and stroking it gently. "Miz Jarkey, can we call you 'Granny'?"

The old woman seemed pleased by the request. "I'd like that," she said softly, giving Mandy a hug. "I never did have any grandchildren of my own, and I'd be tickled if you and Jed would like to call me 'Granny'."

"Do you like it here at Meadow Green, Granny?" the little girl asked.

Granny laughed. "Well, I jest got here," she replied, "but so far, I like it fine. It's the purtiest place I ever seen."

"Jed and I love you a lot," Mandy confided. "You're the kindest lady we ever met. You took good care of us and Wolf when we were traveling to St. Louis, and we will never forget. We never woulda left your house, you know, 'cept that we

were afraid the sheriff would catch us and send us back to that horrid orphanage."

"Those days that you and Jed stayed at my house were the best days of my life," Granny replied. She bit her lip. "When you left, I thought my heart would break. Yore Pa contacted me and asked if I'd take a job as nanny, and I said yes. I sold the farm in no time, and here I am."

"I'm glad you're here!" Mandy declared. "And Jed is too."

Jed was pleased that his sister and the Widow Jarkey were getting along so well. He stood to his feet and walked around behind the bench, placing his hands on both of their shoulders. "Granny, it's good to have you here," he said earnestly. "I'll leave you two to visit for awhile. I have to finish some chores for Pa."

As he stepped onto the veranda, Pa met him at the steps. "How are Miz Jarkey and Mandy getting along?"

"They're both delighted to see each other," Jed replied, with a satisfied sigh. "Pa, thanks for bringing Granny to St. Louis."

Pa chuckled. "'Granny', is it?"

Jed shrugged. “Mandy asked her if we could call her that, and she seemed pleased. It fits her, Pa. She’s the gentlest, kindest person you ever met in your life, and I couldn’t ask for a better granny.”

“I tried to get Miz Jarkey to come here several weeks ago,” Pa explained to Jed, “but she insisted that she wouldn’t take charity.”

“That sounds just like her,” Jed agreed.

“So I created the position of nanny just to give her something to do to make her feel useful. She finally sold her farm, and here she is.”

“What does a nanny do?” Jed asked.

Pa grinned. “Not much,” he answered. “But it sounds important. She’ll help some with Sarah, and she might help a little around the house. It was the only thing I could think of to get her here.”

The setting sun was painting the clouds with brilliant hues of pink and orange as Jed turned and looked at the reflection garden. Granny and Mandy were sitting close on the bench at the water’s edge, chattering away like two little school girls.

Jed smiled. Life at Meadow Green would be even happier now with Granny around.

“Don’t say anything about this to the womenfolk,” Pa said, dropping his voice so that it was hardly more than a whisper, “but the coach driver brought some bad news when he dropped off Miz, uh, Granny.”

Jed detected a note of apprehension in his father’s voice and he stared up at him in alarm. “What kind of bad news, Pa?”

“The Injun raid this afternoon on the Skyles homestead wasn’t the only one. An Injun war party raided the Pony Express station at St. Joseph three days ago. They killed the stationmaster, stole the stock, and burned the station to the ground!”

A cold premonition of danger swept over Jed like a chilling wind out of the north. “Were they Comanches, Pa?”

Pa nodded soberly. “They were Comanches. There was no doubt about that.”

“Mr. Slade says that the Injuns this afternoon were Comanches, Pa. Maybe it’s the same ones.”

“Well, some of the same ones, anyway.”

“What do you mean, Pa?”

“There were ten or twelve Injuns in the party that raided the Pony Express station. They raided several farms along the way, too. So there’s more than just the three who struck the Skyles’ place this afternoon.”

“Why are they doing this, Pa?”

“No one knows, Jed. The coach driver told me that there’s speculation that the Comanches are looking for new hunting grounds. Other people are saying that the tribe is looking for revenge on white settlers. But no one really knows why they have attacked, or what they are going to do next.”

“I thought there weren’t any Injuns left in Missouri.”

“The last of them were driven out of the state over twenty years ago, that’s true,” Pa replied. “But apparently, some of them have returned, or else a new tribe is scouting the area.”

“Are we safe, Pa?”

“We have to trust the Lord, Jed. He’s our protection. And I think we’re close enough to St. Louis that the Injuns wouldn’t come here.” Pa turned toward the mansion, so Jed followed him. “Again, son, I don’t want you to anything about this to the womenfolk. It would just upset them needlessly.” He sighed. “I

just hope this doesn’t become a topic of conversation at church tomorrow.”

“But you don’t think the Comanches will come here, do you?” Jed persisted. “We’re safe, aren’t we?”

Pa paused with his hand on the doorknob. “Jed, the only thing that I can say for sure is that we’re in God’s hands. I don’t think the Injuns will bother anybody in St. Louis, but I can’t say that for sure.”

He frowned. “To be honest, I’m afraid there may be trouble ahead.”

## Chapter 4 – A SECOND SURPRISE

The next morning the wind howled mournfully around the eaves of the Cartwright mansion as the Cartwright family stepped out on the porch dressed in their Sunday best. Silas, the handsome black butler, had the family brougham coach standing at the bottom step and was waiting patiently in the driver's seat, reins in hand.

“It sure turned cold in a hurry, didn't it, Silas?” Pa greeted him as the family ran down the steps toward the waiting carriage. Jed opened the carriage door for his mother, who was carrying two-year-old Sarah.

“That it did, suh,” Silas agreed, slapping his gloved hands together. “Winter's just around the corner. I don't reckon either of the boys wants to ride up here with me today, do they?”

Pa laughed and glanced forward to where the household servants were climbing aboard two buckboard wagons. “I don't suppose they do, Silas.”

Jed waited while Nathan helped Granny up into the carriage. He turned at the sound of an approaching coach and saw a dark-colored brougham similar to the Cartwright coach making its way down the lane toward the mansion. “Pa,” he called, “who's that?”

Pa turned and stared at the approaching brougham. “I have no idea. I don't recognize the carriage.”

Jed watched silently as the strange carriage made its way down the lane. His attention was drawn to the rear of the coach, where a powerful black stallion pranced smartly along. Watching the beautiful horse, Jed could tell immediately that it was young and spirited. He sighed with longing. “Lord, please give me a horse of my own some day,” he breathed.

The strange carriage pulled up directly behind the Cartwright vehicle and stopped. The door opened, and a thin man climbed out. Jed stared in amazement. “Mr. Watkins!”

The Watkins family lived on the farm adjacent to Meadow Green, but the two families had never been on good terms.

Mean-spirited and intensely jealous of Jake Cartwright's wealth, Mr. Watkins had always looked for opportunities to cause trouble for the Cartwright family. Merle Watkins, two years older than Jed, had followed his father's example and bullied Jed, Nathan and Mandy. But now that had all changed. Just over a month earlier, Jed had been hunting in the woods and had saved Mr. Watkins from an attack by a rabid wolf. Ashamed by Jed's willingness to risk his own life, the neighbor had apologized for his past behavior and vowed that he would make amends.

"Mind if we join you?" the man called out. "We figured we'd just follow you to church, if it's all right."

Mr. Cartwright hurried down the steps and walked over to the Watkins' carriage. He shook Mr. Watkins' hand warmly. "We'll be glad to have you, Luke," he said sincerely. "I think you'll enjoy the service. I know you'll like Parson Moore."

Merle poked his head out the door of the brougham. "Jed, why don't you ride with us?" he suggested.

Jed looked at Pa. "May I?"

"Go ahead, son." Pa glanced toward the rear of the carriage and noticed the spirited black horse. "What did you do, Luke, bring a spare in case a horse throws a shoe?"

The neighbor laughed. "Actually," he said, "this horse is a gift for Jed. He's an Arabian, and his name is Midnight. You won't find a finer horse in the whole state of Missouri!"

Pa gave Mr. Watkins a puzzled look. "What's this all about, Luke?"

The man smiled. "I picked this four-year-old up at an auction in Manchester yesterday. Got him at a good price. The saddle was thrown in as part of the deal. I knew that Jed was wanting a horse, so I'd like to give him Midnight as a gift."

Pa shook his head. "You can't do that, Luke," he protested. "A horse like this would cost a fortune!"

"The boy saved my life, Jake," Mr. Watkins reminded him. "The horse is a token of appreciation from my family to yours." A contrite look crossed his features. "And, in a way, I suppose it's also my way of trying to make up for all the trouble we've caused you folks these past few years."

He stuck out his hand, and Pa took it. "Please let the boy accept the horse, Jake," Mr. Watkins urged. "It's the least I can do."

Jed held his breath as he waited to see what Pa would say. At last, Pa nodded agreeably. "You're being very generous, Luke. Jed will be thrilled to own a horse of this caliber."

"Thanks, Mr. Watkins!" Jed said breathlessly, still unable to believe what was happening. He felt dizzy with excitement. A horse of his own. And what a horse. "Thank you, sir, thank you! You don't know what this means to me."

The man smiled. "I hope you enjoy him, Jed." He stepped to the rear of the carriage to untie the horse.

Pa laughed and shook his head in disbelief. "Well, Jed, it looks like you had better get that new horse of yours to the barn and get him settled so that we can get on to church."

"May I ride him to church, Pa? May I? Please?"

Pa laughed. "This might be a little too early for that, son. Take Midnight to the barn. There will be plenty of time to ride him later."

Jed felt a thrill of exhilaration as he swung into the saddle. With the barest flick of the reins, Midnight moved easily

around the carriages and broke into a trot. Jed was delighted. *He's such a grand horse*, he told himself proudly, *but he responds to the gentlest commands*. He stood in the stirrups and shouted with glee, then broke into a full gallop around the side of the mansion.

Mr. Watkins watched with a critical eye. "The boy rides well, Jake."

Moments later Jed hurried to the front of the mansion to find the carriages still waiting for him. "How was the ride?" Pa asked, with an understanding smile.

"Too short," Jed replied. "Pa, he's magnificent!"

"Did you put him away properly?"

"I unsaddled him and put him in the second stall. There's grain in the feed box and he has plenty of water."

Jed climbed into the Watkins' carriage, noting that it was older and not in as good condition as the Cartwright vehicle, but he said nothing. He took a seat on the faded velvet cushions beside Merle. Mrs. Watkins and her twins were seated across from them. "Good morning, Jed," the woman said shyly.

"Good morning, Mrs. Watkins," Jed replied.

Mr. Watkins climbed in and the carriages started for church. “Thank you, Mr. Watkins,” Jed said again. “He’s a magnificent horse. Probably the finest in St. Louis! Thank you.”

The man smiled. “I’m glad you like him, son. All I ask is that you take good care of him.”

Jed nodded happily. “I will, sir.”

Jed and Merle talked and laughed on the trip, but Jed remembered to pray for Merle and his family. As far as Jed knew, the family was not in the habit of going to church, and he realized that they might not know the Lord.

The drivers pulled the vehicles to the church door and unloaded the families, then drove to a hitching post. Mrs. Cartwright turned to Mrs. Watkins. “Why don’t you folks sit with us?” she suggested. “There’s plenty of room in our pew!”

During the service Jed watched their visitors out of the corner of his eye. Mr. and Mrs. Watkins seemed ill at ease during the song service, and suddenly Jed realized why. *They don’t know any of the hymns. Haven’t they ever been to church before?*

Parson Moore preached a simple salvation message that morning. Jed prayed for Merle and his family as the sermon progressed. He glanced over at his friend. Merle was listening intently, almost spellbound, as though the Gospel was completely new to him. Jed remembered his own experience as he heard the Gospel for the first time, and he knew what Merle was feeling.

His attention wandered for a moment as he thought about the fabulous black stallion waiting for him at home. *I can’t wait to ride Midnight. What a horse! And he’s actually mine!* What a delight it would be to race the powerful horse across the hills and down the lanes, jumping creeks and ditches as if he had wings. Wouldn’t the people of St. Louis be impressed! *Wait till I race Midnight against Champ*, he thought proudly. *Midnight will leave Champ in the dust. Thank you, Lord, for giving me such a beautiful horse.*

“So you see,” Parson Moore said, closing his Bible and drawing Jed’s attention back to the message, “the Bible teaches that none of us deserve heaven. We’re all sinners! But that’s why Jesus died—to pay for our sins. Salvation is simply a matter of repenting of one’s sins, believing that Jesus Christ died for

you and rose again, and then asking Him to be your Savior. The Good Book says, 'For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.' That's a promise from God. Neighbor, that promise is for you."

Jed looked over at Merle's parents. Mrs. Watkins had a serious look on her face, and Jed couldn't tell what she was thinking. But Mr. Watkins was nodding in agreement with nearly everything the parson said. Jed was surprised.

"I'd like to ask you folks to bow your heads," Parson Moore continued. He waited a few seconds as the congregation complied. "I'd like to invite you to receive Jesus as your Savior today. He died for you, and He offers you salvation as a free gift. Neighbor, if you'd like to receive Jesus as your Savior, would you simply come forward and meet me at the altar? In just a few moments' time I can show you how to have your sins forgiven and become a child of God. Would you come to Jesus today, right now?"

Jed began to pray for the Watkins family. Seconds later he felt movement in the pew as someone slipped past him. He opened one eyelid just a crack and peeked. Mr. Watkins had left the pew and was walking down the aisle toward the altar.

Jed was delighted. Seconds later, Merle followed his father down the aisle.

The congregation waited quietly as Parson Moore knelt at the altar with Mr. Watkins and his son. The pedals on the pump organ squeaked as the old instrument played softly.

Several minutes later, the three stood and faced the rest of the worshipers. "I have a glorious announcement to make," the parson said, lifting his voice. "Luke Watkins and his son Merle have just trusted Jesus as their Savior. We rejoice as we welcome them into the family of God." A chorus of Amens filled the little church house.

When the service was over, Parson Moore stood at the door and shook hands with his parishioners. He greeted the Watkins family warmly. "Glad to have you folks today," he said to Mr. Watkins. "I hope you can come again next week. And I'm delighted that you got saved today."

The man nodded at the preacher's invitation. "We'll be here," he replied with a smile. "Thank you, Parson, for telling us how to receive forgiveness."

Jed's heart was overflowing.

That afternoon, when the Cartwright family was seated around the big mahogany dinner table, Pa asked Granny to lead in prayer. “Thank you, Lord, for thy many blessings,” the old woman prayed, “and especially for bringing me to be with this fine family. Thank you for the way you have watched over Jedediah and Mandy, and for thy blessings on them. And Lord, thank you for giving Jedediah such a fine horse today. We thank you, Lord, for this food, and for our bountiful blessings. Amen.”

That evening, Jed picked two apples from the orchard and hurried to the barn for a final check on Midnight. The new horse was in the stall next to Champ. Jed climbed up on the gate of the stall, and the horse quietly approached the bars. The boy held out an apple, and the big horse stretched his neck out and took it.

Jed sat on the gate, watching Midnight crunch the apple. “We’re gonna be good friends, aren’t we, Midnight?” he said to the horse. “You and I will go lots of places together. You’re the most beautiful horse in all the world.” He handed the second apple to the big stallion. “I can’t believe that you’re really mine.”

The barn door creaked open just then and Jed looked over to see Mandy slip furtively into the barn. Jed turned back to the horse and watched his sister out of the corner of his eye. Crouching low, Mandy crept behind a hogshead barrel, peered over the top, and then crept quietly around behind him. Jed realized that she was trying to sneak up on him to scare him. He waited.

Pretending to be absorbed in watching the horse, Jed listened intently. At last he heard the faintest of sounds in the straw littering the floor, and he knew that Mandy was just a few feet from him. He whirled, leaping forward and yelling at the top of his lungs. “Yee-Haw!”

Mandy gave a little shriek. “Jed! You scared me!”

Jed laughed. “That’s what you were trying to do to me, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, but it didn’t work.” She smiled impishly. “Just wait. I’ll get you next time.”

“You’ll have to be a lot quieter than that, Sis. You couldn’t sneak up on a deaf turtle.”

The girl climbed up on the gate to Midnight's stall and looked at the coal black horse. "Jed, he sure is beautiful. Are you going to let me ride him?"

Jed lifted a foot and rested it on the lowest bar of the gate. "Sure. Just give me a few days until he gets used to me first, all right?"

Mandy scooted over beside Jed and rested her forearm on his shoulder. "Wasn't it great that Mr. Watkins got saved? Parson Moore was ready to close in prayer, and Mr. Watkins just walked down front and told him that he wanted to be saved. And then Merle went down to get saved, too." She hugged Jed in delight.

Jed's heart was singing as he thought about the neighbor's salvation. A mental picture of Mr. Watkins in the woods threatening him and Nathan with the shotgun suddenly came to mind, and he shook his head in amazement. What a change had taken place in the last two months.

Playfully he pulled Mandy's braids. "I hope Mrs. Watkins will get saved soon, but that may take a while."

Mandy nodded. "I know. I saw her when she left the church, and it looked like she was mad."

Jed smiled. "Well," he said, "we'll just have to pray for her, won't we?"

Mandy climbed down from the gate and stood beside him. "We need to pray for Granny, too. She's not saved."

Jed frowned. "Why do you say that, Sis?"

"I asked her about it on the way home from church, and she got angry. She said that she was just as good as anybody in St. Louis, and that her chances of going to heaven were just as good as anybody else's."

Jed was surprised. "I never asked her about it, but I just kinda figured that she was saved."

He took a deep breath, hesitated, and then asked, "What about you, Mandy? We've been talking about other people being saved, but when are you going to ask Jesus to save you?"

Mandy looked uncomfortable, but said nothing.

"He died for you, Mandy, but you have to make the decision to receive him as your own Savior. Ever since I got saved, I've been praying for you."

Mandy reached up and gave Jed a hug as if to change the subject. "Good night, Jed. See you tomorrow." She ran from the

barn. Jed watched her for a moment and then turned his attention back to Midnight.

Pa entered the barn moments later and laughed when he saw Jed. "I knew I'd find you here," he said. "That's a mighty fine horse, isn't he?"

Jed nodded. "He's beautiful. And he responds well to commands. I can't believe he's really mine! It's like a dream."

Pa put an arm around Jed's shoulder. "Better head into the house, son. He'll be here tomorrow for you to ride." He ran an appreciative eye over the magnificent horse. "Betcha that horse could outrun any Injun pony, don't you?"

Jed grinned. "I'm sure he could, Pa, but I hope he never has to."

## Chapter 5 – KIDNAPPED

Monday morning, Jed and Nathan waited anxiously on the porch for Mandy. Nathan pulled his watch from his pocket and looked at it. "If she doesn't hurry, we're gonna be late for school," he complained.

They heard the clatter of hooves and looked up to see a buggy coming down the road. The vehicle turned into the Cartwright driveway. The boys watched it for a moment, and Nathan cried, "It's Uncle Willard!"

Jed turned to him. "Who?"

"Uncle Willard," Nathan repeated. "He's Pa's brother. He and Aunt Maggie live about fifteen or twenty miles from here, out past Parson's Creek. You'll like Uncle Willard; he's a lot like Pa."

The buggy stopped and a tall man climbed out. He walked toward the boys. "Hello, Nathan," the big, friendly man boomed.

“How’s my favorite nephew?” He grabbed the boy in a bear hug, and then turned to Jed. “Who’s this?”

“This is my brother, Jed,” Nathan answered. “Pa told you about him.”

“Put it there, Jed,” the man said with a grin, extending a big hand. “I’ve heard an awful lot of good things about you. I’m glad you’re part of the Cartwright clan.”

Jed shook hands with the big man. Nathan was right. Pa’s brother was a lot like Pa. Jed liked the man immediately.

“Is your Pa home?” Uncle Willard asked the boys. “I need to ask him some questions about my business.”

Both boys nodded. “He’s leaving for town in just a few minutes,” Nathan answered.

“Now that’s what I call timing,” the big man said with a laugh. His voice reminded Jed of Pa. As the three headed into the mansion, Jed noticed that Uncle Willard carried a huge red book.

They found Pa in the kitchen, giving Mabel instructions concerning an upcoming dinner for some local businessmen. Uncle Willard quietly set the big red book on a table, then

walked up behind Pa and grabbed him in a rib-cracking bear hug.

Pa spun around. “Willard, you old troublemaker,” he said with a laugh. “What are you doing here?” Jed could tell that the two brothers were delighted to see each other.

“I just stopped by to ask you a few questions,” Uncle Willard answered, picking up the big red book. “I need some help with my bookkeeping.” Pa took the ledger from his brother, and the two men sat down and began to study it. Jed and Nathan went back out to wait for Mandy.

Moments later, the front door opened, and the two men stepped out on the porch. “Sure you won’t stay around today, Willard?” Pa asked.

The other man shook his head. “I wish I could, Jake,” he said, “but I had better get going. I’ve gotta head back into town and attend to some other business.”

Pa had the red ledger in his hand. “I’ll go over your bookkeeping this evening,” he told his brother, “and see if you need to make any changes. I can send the ledger out to your place Saturday with the boys.”

“No need to do that,” Uncle Willard protested. “I can send someone by to pick it up next week.”

Pa shook his head. “It’s all right,” he insisted. “The boys will be happy to bring it. I’m sure they’d enjoy the chance for the ride, anyway. Jed has a new stallion that is the most magnificent specimen of horseflesh that I’ve ever seen.”

Willard shrugged. “All right, Saturday it is.” He walked down the porch steps and then turned. “See you soon, Jake.”

“Thanks for stopping by, Willard.” Carrying the ledger, Pa stepped back into the mansion.

Uncle Willard said good-bye to the boys and then drove away. Jed turned to Nathan. “You can sure tell that they’re brothers, can’t you?” he observed. “He talks and acts just like Pa. He even looks like Pa, blond hair and everything.”

Nathan nodded. “He’s not as big as Pa, but he does look a lot like him,” he agreed. “He’s older than Pa, but Pa was always bigger than him. Pa says it used to really aggravate Uncle Willard when they were kids.”

Mandy came rushing out on the porch just then. “Are you guys ready?”

“We’ve been ready for five minutes,” Nathan snorted. “We’ve been waiting for you. Come on, let’s go, or we’re going to be late.”

Jed had a hard time concentrating on schoolwork that day. His mind was on the big, black horse waiting for him in the barn. He did his best to focus his attention on his studies, but his heart wasn’t in it. He could hardly wait for school to dismiss so that he could go riding.

The weather turned warm again, and Jed and Nathan rode every afternoon that week, spending hours and hours in the saddle. Jed and Midnight quickly came to know and trust each other. Jed was delighted at the way the powerful horse responded so quickly to every command, and he came to the conclusion that Midnight just had to be the most magnificent horse in the whole world.

Saturday morning after breakfast, Pa found Jed and Nathan in the barn saddling Champ and Midnight in preparation for a

ride to Merle's. "I'd like to have you lads do something for me," Pa said.

Jed looked up from the saddle girth he was tightening.

"Sure, Pa," he answered cheerfully. "What is it?"

The big man held out Uncle Willard's ledger. "I need someone to run this back out to Willard's place. Nathan knows how to get there, but I think it would be best if you both went."

Pa spotted the disappointment in the boys' eyes. "You were planning to go riding with Merle again, weren't you?"

They nodded slowly.

"I'm sorry, boys, but I really need you to do this for me. It's important."

Jed took the big ledger. "It's OK, Pa," he said as cheerfully as he could. "We'll be glad to do it for you, won't we, Nathan?"

"I'll tell you what I'll do," Pa offered. "You can make the trip out there and back in four hours, if you hurry. I think your horses are up to it. I'll have Silas cover your chores this evening, and that will give you the rest of the day free. How's that?"

"Thanks, Pa," both boys chorused. Jed looked at Nathan. "We'd better ride over and tell Merle that we can't come this morning," he mentioned.

"I'll send a servant over with the message," Pa told them. "Go ahead and start for Uncle Willard's. Tell Aunt Maggie that I said to feed you lunch."

"Pa?" Jed said hesitantly, "you don't think we'll see any Injuns, do you?"

The huge man laughed. "That was a week ago, son. There hasn't been a single report of any Injun sightings since. I think those Comanches, or whoever they were, are long gone."

Mandy came into the barn at just that moment. "Where are they going?" she asked Pa. When she learned that her brothers were riding to Uncle Willard's, she begged to go along.

Pa looked at the boys, then back to Mandy. "It's up to them," he told his daughter.

"She can go," Jed volunteered. He handed the big red ledger to Nathan. "She can double with me for a while, then trade off and ride with Nathan."

"Thanks, Jed," Mandy giggled as Pa lifted her up behind her brother.

An object fell into the straw, and Pa stooped and picked it up. The item was a little bean bag doll. He handed it up to Mandy. "Thanks, Pa," Mandy said. "That's Betsy Beans. Mary

gave her to me at school yesterday. Betsy wants to go see Uncle Willard, too.”

“Dumb girls,” Nathan said under his breath, but his comment went unheard by the others.

“Tell Aunt Maggie and the cousins that I said ‘hello’,” Pa called. The young people waved and then rode down the driveway.

The sunshine was bright, and the weather was unusually warm for a November morning. Before long, all three had taken off their jackets and tied the sleeves around their waists. “I don’t know why Ma made me wear this jacket, anyway,” Mandy complained. “It’s hot today.”

“It is warm,” Jed agreed, “but you may be glad you have it before the day’s over.”

The ride was fun, and the young people sang as they rode along. A rabbit dashed across the road in front of them, and Nathan stood up in the stirrups. “I wish we had brought the rifles,” he said, watching the furry, bouncing creature.

After riding several miles, Nathan rode Champ close to Midnight and handed Jed the ledger. The boys stopped the horses while Mandy scrambled across to Nathan’s saddle. They

rode for several more miles, and then Mandy traded horses again.

The day grew hotter, and Mandy began to complain. “I’m thirsty,” she said. “Let’s find some place to get a drink.”

“We’ll be there in half an hour,” Nathan answered. “Let’s just wait till we get there.”

“But I’m thirsty now,” Mandy whined.

“You’ll just have to wait,” Nathan retorted.

A few minutes later, Mandy brought up the subject again. “I’m still thirsty,” she said. “How much farther?”

“About a mile,” her brother answered. “We’ll be there in just a few minutes.”

“Let’s hurry,” Mandy begged. “I’m gonna die of thirst.” At that moment, she spotted a little stream flowing parallel to the road they were traveling. The stream was about thirty yards from the road, barely visible through the woods. Before Jed realized what was happening, Mandy slid down from Midnight’s back and ran back through the trees. “Wait for me,” she called as she ran. “I’m gonna get a drink.”

The boys drew their horses to a stop. “What did she do that for?” Nathan complained. “We’re almost to Uncle Willard’s.”

“We’ll have to wait for her,” Jed said calmly. “I’m sure she’ll just be a minute.”

“I’m not gonna wait,” Nathan retorted impatiently. “I say we leave her. Let her walk the rest of the way to Uncle Willard’s. That’ll teach her to take off without telling us.”

“I’ll stay and wait for her,” Jed answered his brother. “You ride on ahead, and we’ll catch up.”

Nathan turned Champ toward Uncle Willard’s and urged him to a trot. Jed sat patiently waiting for Mandy. He watched Nathan ride away.

Jed tried to peer through the trees in the direction that Mandy had taken. What was taking her so long? He rode Midnight to the side of the road, dismounted, and then flipped the reins over a branch. He would have to go and find her.

As he entered the woods, a blood-curdling scream pierced the air. Mandy was in trouble!

Jed dashed through the trees, tearing his hands and arms on the brambles as he ran. He reached the little creek, but Mandy was not there! A bright spot of pink on the creek bank caught his attention. Mandy’s little beanbag doll was lying face down at the water’s edge.

Jed heard Mandy scream again, and he looked up in time to see a flash of movement in the trees on the hillside above the creek. Three men on horses rode hurriedly up the hill. One of them had the struggling Mandy across the front of his saddle!

Fear tore at Jed’s heart. He had seen just a brief glimpse, but the copper skin and strange dress of Mandy’s captors told the terrified boy that his sister was in the hands of Indians. In an instant, Jed realized the awful truth. Mandy had been snatched by a Comanche war party!

## Chapter 6 – PURSUIT

Jed turned and dashed back through the trees to the road where Midnight waited patiently. His heart pounded with fear. Mandy had been captured by the Comanches! Jed snatched the reins from the bush and looked up the road for his brother. But Nathan was already out of sight.

The terrified boy stood still for an instant, his racing mind trying desperately to choose the best course of action. “Help us, God,” he prayed fervently. “Mandy has been taken by the Injuns!”

*I have to get help, he thought. But by the time I get to Uncle Willard's and return with a posse, the Injuns will be miles away with Mandy. There just isn't time!*

He swung into the saddle and turned his horse into the brush. Ducking low against Midnight's neck, he urged the big horse into a full gallop. They dashed through the trees and

brambles, leaped over the little creek, and rode furiously up the steep slope on the other side. “Come on, Midnight, you can do it!” Jed encouraged. “We've gotta catch them!”

The Indians had only a slight head start on Jed, but the boy knew that he would have to ride hard to catch up. The Comanches would not waste any time getting out of the area. Jed also had the disadvantage of having to try to read their trail while he rode along at breakneck speed.

But as Jed galloped over the top of the ridge, he spotted the three horses crossing the wide valley below, just a few hundred yards ahead. The Indians were riding side by side at full gallop. The horse in the center carried his sister. Mandy was now sitting up, clutching the mane of the running horse, with her Indian captor seated behind her. One of the redskins turned and caught sight of Jed, and then shouted to his companions.

“Come on, Midnight!” Jed called softly. “Let's see if you can outrace those Injun ponies!”

*Midnight is fast, the worried boy thought, but I don't know if he'll be able to outrun a Comanche war party. We're in for a fierce ride, if the men who have Mandy really are Comanches. The Comanches are the best horsemen ever to ride the plains.*

The Indians entered the woods on the other side of the valley and disappeared from Jed's view, but the boy did not slacken his speed. Leaning against Midnight's neck, he urged the powerful horse forward. He had already cut the Indians' lead in half and was rapidly gaining on them.

Jed had no idea what he was going to do when he caught up with the riders. Everything had happened so quickly; there was no time to form a plan of action. But he bravely pressed on. The Indians had his sister.

Midnight darted into the woods, but Jed did not slow down. A narrow game trail led through the trees, and he was sure the Indians had followed it. The big horse and his young rider dashed down the trail, dodging trees and bushes. "Come on, Midnight, you can do it!" The trees seemed to reach for Jed; their leafy branches clutched at his arms and legs as he sped past.

The trail curved around behind a large outcropping of rock, and Jed slowed to make the turn. Midnight was breathing hard. Out of the corner of his eye Jed saw a sudden flash of movement. He tried to duck, but he was too late. A heavy body struck him and knocked him from the saddle.

Jed tumbled head over heels and landed in a thick carpet of leaves and pine needles. He tried to scramble to his feet, but his assailant was on him again in an instant. Jed fought bravely. He was no match for the agile Indian, and the warrior soon had Jed in a vicious chokehold.

"Leave my brother alone!" a shrill voice screamed, and Jed suddenly realized that Mandy and the other two Indians were nearby.

The sound of her voice gave him added determination. He stomped the moccasined foot of the redskin behind him, then reached over his shoulder and grasped the man by the hair. Jed bent his knees and flipped his attacker over his shoulder. The man landed heavily on his back.

Jed turned to run, but the Indian was on his feet in an instant with a knife flashing in his hand. The boy knew he would never catch the warrior off guard a second time. At the sight of the knife, he raised his hands over his head, hoping desperately that the Indian would recognize the move as a sign of surrender.

But the man sprang at the boy, knife raised for the kill. One of the other Indians suddenly called out, and the warrior withheld the fatal blow. He lowered the knife, placed it in his

belt, and then seized Jed's arms fiercely. The Indian threw Jed to the ground, pulled his arms behind him, and tightly bound his wrists with a rawhide thong. Jed lay where he had fallen, trying to catch his breath.

Two Indian warriors suddenly appeared from behind the rocky ledge, leading the three horses. Mandy was seated on one of the horses. Her hair was disheveled, her dress was torn and dirty, and her face was pale with fear.

"Did he hurt you, Jed?" the little girl called. In spite of her own difficult situation, her concern was for her brother. She scrambled down from the horse and ran toward him.

Jed struggled to his feet. "No, I'm all right," he reassured Mandy. "Are you all right?"

Mandy nodded, then suddenly, the tears spilled down her cheeks. "Oh, Jed!" she cried as she threw her arms around him, "What are they gonna do to us?"

"I don't know," Jed answered. *Help us, Lord*, he cried silently. *Help us!*

One of the warriors stepped forward and thrust the brother and sister apart. He grabbed Mandy's slender arms and quickly bound her hands in front of her with a piece of rawhide. Mandy

cried out as he did so, and Jed realized that the rawhide was biting painfully into her wrists.

"You leave my sister alone!" Jed protested.

The Indian didn't understand Jed's words, but he understood the tone of voice. He stepped over and elbowed Jed sharply in the stomach. The three warriors laughed as the boy bent double, trying painfully to catch his breath. Mandy stamped her feet and kicked furiously at one of the warriors, and the three savages laughed again. Tears streamed down Mandy's cheeks.

Jed studied his Indian captors as they led him and Mandy to the horses. The warriors wore their dark hair in long queues on the back of their heads. Jed thought to himself that the hair resembled the tail of a horse. The men wore buckskin leggings and moccasins, and breechclouts of dark buffalo hide. Open, loose-fitting shirt-type garments made of thin animal skins covered their upper bodies, and necklaces of elk's teeth completed their costumes. Two of the warriors had brightly-colored feathers in their hair. The symbol of a crawling snake and other various designs had been tattooed on the arms and faces of all three men.

One of the Indians had a second necklace of stones interspersed with long, dark, wrinkled objects. Jed stared at the necklace, and realized in horror that the strange objects were human fingers. Suddenly he felt sick and very much afraid, and he hoped that Mandy wouldn't notice the necklace. The gruesome sight would terrify her.

When their captors reached the horses, an argument ensued. Jed could not understand a single word of what was spoken, but he quickly realized from the Indians' gestures that they were fighting over the privilege of riding Midnight. The smallest of the warriors gestured with his lance toward the splendid horse and then shook the lance in the faces of his companions. His voice was low and angry as he chattered away in the Comanche tongue.

The other two warriors responded by laughing and jeering at him. The warrior with the gruesome necklace snatched the lance from the smaller man's hands and held it over his head, taunting him. When the owner of the lance reached for it, the other warrior suddenly brought the weapon down and slammed the shaft across the other's chest, knocking him backwards several paces. Thrusting the lance relentlessly before him, he drove his

opponent between the trees to where the other horses waited patiently. Jed could tell from his tone of voice that he was ridiculing and mocking the smaller man.

Satisfied that he had won the altercation, the necklace wearer turned and strode confidently toward Midnight. Still clutching the lance, he turned his head and threw an insult over his shoulder at the vanquished combatant.

The third Comanche snarled with anger, leaping forward to interrupt him and grab the lance with both hands. Straining with the effort, he pushed against the lance in an attempt to throw his opponent off balance. The warrior with the gruesome necklace responded by jerking the lance downward and to one side, causing the other to stumble forward and release the lance as he attempted to regain his balance. The shaft of the lance made a whooshing sound as it cut through the air, striking the warrior on the shoulder and knocking him face down in the leaves.

The winner tossed the lance on the ground for its owner to retrieve and then mounted the beautiful black stallion with a satisfied smirk on his bronze face. Jed felt a surge of resentment as he watched the Indian sitting astride his beloved horse.

One of the other braves lifted Mandy into the small, lightweight saddle of the horse belonging to the winning warrior, then assisted Jed in climbing up behind her. Jed felt very uneasy sitting atop the horse with his hands tied behind him, but he knew better than to protest. The little party rode off with Midnight's rider leading the way, one warrior riding alongside Mandy and Jed, and one warrior bringing up the rear.

They paused for a moment at the edge of the woods as the three Indians surveyed the open plains beyond them. A lone hawk rode the air currents high overhead, wings motionless as he soared above the silent prairie. Satisfied that all was safe, the Comanches and their captives began the trek across the flat lands.

Mandy's body shook with sobs. Jed leaned forward with his chin touching the top of her silky blond head, and spoke softly. "Be brave, Mandy," he said gently. "This is one time that we have to trust the Lord."

"But I'm scared," his sister whimpered. "What are they going to do to us? Pa won't even know where to find us!"

"God knows where we are," Jed reminded her. "And He cares even more for us than Pa does."

"Aren't you afraid?" the little girl asked.

"Yes, I am," her brother admitted freely. "I've never been so scared in all my life. But we've got to trust the Lord to take care of us. This is one of those times when even Pa can't help us."

The warrior riding beside them pulled a lance from his saddle and made a threatening gesture toward Jed with it. Jed whispered, "Don't talk any more right now," and sat back, away from Mandy. The Indian relaxed and returned the weapon to his saddle.

A short while later, the party came to the banks of a broad river. Jed realized that it was the Missouri. To his astonishment, the Indian leader rode Midnight right into the water, and the others followed.

The water grew deeper and deeper, and suddenly, the horses were swimming. Jed was terrified. He realized that if he or Mandy were to fall from the horse, swimming would be an impossibility with their hands tied. *Help us, Lord!* he cried out silently. His fear began to subside, and a strange peace filled his soul.

The water rose above Jed's knees, soaking his pants legs and filling his boots. Mandy clutched the horse's mane tightly

and raised her feet to keep them from getting wet. The horses were swimming now, angling across the current as they struggled to reach the opposite bank. Panic seized Jed again and he gripped the saddle cantle with his legs to keep from falling into the water. "Lord, help us!" he cried desperately. Finally, the horses found firm footing on the other side and walked out on solid ground. Jed breathed a sigh of relief. His feet were soaked, but the dangerous river crossing was over.

They rode for nearly an hour more, traversing desolate, empty territory. Jed glanced at the sun and knew that they were traveling northwest. He had not seen a farm, village, or settlement since the Indians had grabbed them. The riders entered a series of small, rolling hills, and there, on the banks of a small stream, the Comanche camp suddenly appeared.

Four small buffalo skin tepees were clustered around a small fire. Jed noticed to his amazement that the fire gave off absolutely no smoke. White men riding through these hills could pass within two hundred yards of the Indian camp hidden away in this tiny valley and never suspect that it was there. A number of horses were confined in a small corral built entirely of brush.

Several warriors gathered around the returning braves, chattering and gesturing toward the two white captives as they rode in.

The leader dismounted Midnight and walked back to Jed and Mandy. He gestured to Jed to dismount. The boy leaned to one side, swung his right leg backwards over the rump of the horse, and lost his balance. The warrior caught him as he fell, and then dropped him to the ground on his side. The other redskins laughed when he hit.

The Indian reached for Mandy, and suddenly she let out a scream. The terrified girl became as wild as a bobcat, thrashing and struggling. She kicked the warrior in the face, and Jed groaned when he saw it. "Mandy... Mandy, don't!"

Two warriors stepped up to the horse and jerked Mandy from the saddle. They untied her hands and then stripped the clothing from her body. One of them picked up the sobbing, struggling girl, carried her down to the creek, and threw her in. Mandy screamed with rage. The warrior waded out into the water and held her head under.

Jed was furious. He leaped to his feet and raced toward the creek, his hands still bound behind him. These Indians weren't going to mistreat his sister!

A warrior standing near the creek suddenly brandished a tomahawk, and as Jed reached him, swung the vicious weapon at Jed's head. The flat side of the stone head struck Jed's temple, and suddenly, everything went dark.

Jed slowly regained consciousness. He was lying on his back with his arms underneath him. In the dim light, he could make out Mandy's blond head lying against his chest. "Oh-h!" he moaned. "Where are we?"

Mandy's head popped up when he spoke. "Jed," she sobbed, "are you all right?"

"My head hurts awful," Jed groaned. "What happened?"

"That terrible Injun hit you with his tomahawk!" the girl replied fiercely. "I thought he was going to kill you!"

And then, it all came back to Jed, like some horrible nightmare. He and Mandy had been captured by Indians! Apparently, they were now inside one of the tepees he had seen earlier. "Did they hurt you?" he asked gently.

"No," she whispered, and then the tears started again. "Oh, Jed, what are they gonna do? Are they gonna kill us?"

"I don't know," her brother replied, "but I don't think so. I think they would have killed us already if they were going to."

"What are we gonna do?" she asked fearfully.

"There's nothing we can do," Jed answered, "but just wait and trust the Lord."

"I'm afraid, Jed."

"So am I," he replied. He rubbed the side of his face gently against the top of her head. "What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee," he quoted. The throbbing pain in his head intensified, and he drifted back into unconsciousness.

## Chapter 7 – THE SEARCH

Nathan rode ahead to Uncle Willard's, totally unaware of the desperate plight of his brother and sister. He approached the porch of the farmhouse, dismounted, and threw the reins over the porch railing.

His cousin Elsie came to the door. Her eyes widened when she saw him. "Nathan!" she said in surprise. "Are you alone?" She stepped out onto the porch.

Nathan shook his head. "Jed and Mandy are right behind me," he answered. "They'll be here in a minute. Mandy had to stop and get a drink. Couldn't wait another five minutes!"

"Don't be so hard on her," Elsie scolded. "She is your little sister."

Nathan was hot, tired, and cross. "Sometimes I wish she wasn't," he blurted. "She can be such a bother."

"Well, she is pretty young to take such a long ride," Elsie defended her little cousin. "She's not used to it."

Uncle Willard came out on the porch just then and Nathan handed him the ledger. The man sat down in a rocking chair and laid the big book across his knees. "Thanks, Nathan," he said, "I appreciate you bringing this out to me." He glanced up at Nathan with a thoughtful look. He had known the boy since he was a toddler, and had always known his nephew to be just a bit timid. "I'm surprised that you rode out here alone."

Nathan shook his head. "I didn't," he explained. "Jed and Mandy came with me. They'll be here in just a minute."

"Where are they?" Uncle Willard asked, puzzled.

"They had to stop at the creek so Mandy could get a drink," the boy replied. "I told her we were almost here, but she had to get a drink right then." He was still a little put out with his sister.

His uncle nodded. "Sit down a spell while you wait for them," he said as he gestured toward a porch swing with the whitewash peeling off in huge snowy flakes. "You ain't in a hurry, anyhow, are you? Matter of fact, I'll have your Aunt Maggie put dinner on for the three of you. This is a special occasion."

He turned to Elsie. “Run and tell your Ma to put on a spread. Tell her we got company. Have her put on three extra places, cause it’s not just Nathan. Jed and Mandy are coming, too.”

The girl nodded and headed into the house. Uncle Willard leafed through the ledger, noticing where his brother Jake had reorganized some of the entries. “Your Pa’s good at everything he does, isn’t he?” the man remarked to Nathan. “Look at this ledger. Jake has it for a day or two, and he’s got it totally reworked. This is beautiful! I think now I can actually tell whether or not I’m making money.”

He glanced up the road. From the porch, half a mile of roadway was visible, and Willard saw that that stretch was empty. “Hey,” he said, “where’s your brother and sister?”

Nathan shrugged. “They were right behind me. They should be here soon.”

The man went back to studying the big red ledger and the boy took out a pocketknife and began to whittle at a stick. Ten or fifteen minutes went by, and now Nathan was growing worried. He glanced up from the piece of wood.

“They shoulda been here by now,” he observed. “I’ve been here nearly twenty minutes. I wonder if somethin’ coulda happened?”

Uncle Willard looked up from the ledger, glanced up the road, and then turned back to his nephew. “Where did you leave them?” he asked.

“Just by the creek,” Nathan replied. “Mandy wanted to get a drink.”

“How far back?”

“Oh, a little over a mile, I suppose. You know where the road swings close to the woods, just before you get to the old mill?”

The man nodded.

“Mandy jumped down from Midnight there,” Nathan explained, “and ran through the woods to the creek. When I left, Jed was sitting on Midnight, waiting for Mandy. Do you think something coulda happened?”

Uncle Willard opened his mouth to reply, changed his mind, and shook his head. “I don’t think so, Nathan,” he finally answered. “They probably got to fooling around by the water, or

something. But if they don't hurry, they're gonna miss lunch. Let's go take a look."

He stood up and stuck his head in through the front door. "Maggie? Nathan and I will be back in ten, fifteen minutes. We're gonna ride down to Parson's Creek."

Uncle Willard hurried to the barn to saddle a horse, and Nathan noticed the worried look on his face. *Does Uncle Willard sense that something is wrong, too? He isn't saying anything, but he looks pretty worried.*

Nathan mounted Champ as his uncle rode into the front yard. "How did it get the name of Parson's Creek?" he asked, trying to take his own mind off his fears.

The big man laughed. "There used to be a little Baptist church just down the road a ways," he answered. "They baptized so many converts that folks began to talk about it. 'Nobody uses that creek as much as the parson,' one lady commented one day, and folks has called it Parson's Creek ever since. I don't suppose I can even recollect what we used to call it afore that."

They both fell silent, and the boy again noticed the worried look on his uncle's face. *What if something has happened to Jed or Mandy?* Nathan thought. *I should have stayed with them!*

The midday sun blazed brightly in a cloudless sky as the man and the boy rode hurriedly down the deserted road. Nathan scanned the brush along the side of the road, watching closely for the spot where Mandy had jumped from the back of Jed's horse, but fearful that he would not recognize it. *Why, oh why didn't I wait for them?* he chastised himself. *I should have been more patient.*

"This is the place," he said moments later, halting his horse. "But I don't see Jed or Midnight. I hope nothing's wrong."

Uncle Willard stopped his horse in the middle of the dusty road. Cupping his hands to his mouth, he shouted, "Jed! Mandy! Where are you?"

"You?" his voice echoed back, but there was no reply. He tried again. "Jed! Can you hear me? Mandy! This is Uncle Willard!" There was still no answer.

The man dismounted and tied his horse to a branch at the side of the road. Nathan did the same. "Come on, Nathan, let's go take a look," his uncle said, trying to hide the fear growing within him.

They pushed through the brambles and trees and stood on the clay bank of the little creek. “L-look!” Nathan stammered, pointing.

Uncle Willard walked over and picked up a small pink object. “That’s Betsy Beans!” Nathan nearly shouted. “Mandy had that doll with her just a few minutes ago. Uncle Willard, something terrible has happened!”

The man handed the little beanbag doll to Nathan and swallowed hard, trying to quell the fear that was rising in his heart. Something was wrong here. Desperately wrong. He could sense it.

He knelt, studying the ground. “What is it, Uncle Willard?” Nathan called.

But the big man just shook his head. “Don’t know yet.”

Willard Cartwright crossed the creek by leaping from one rock to another. He knelt again on the opposite bank, and then walked into the woods, studying the ground. Nathan could tell by his face that something was wrong. He stood beside a willow, biting his lip, watching for his uncle’s return.

Uncle Willard stepped from the woods and recrossed the creek. His face was ashen, and his lips were trembling. Nathan ran to him.

“Something’s wrong, Uncle Willard!” he cried. “I can tell it! What happened?”

The man ran a trembling hand across his face before answering. “There’s tracks all over this spot,” he answered slowly. “A man could read them like he reads a newspaper. Your sister came down here for a drink, and three men were waiting. They were on horseback, just across the creek in the woods there. When they grabbed your sister, your brother came to her rescue, and rode up that hill after them. That’s all I can tell here.”

Tears sprang into Nathan’s eyes at the thought of someone hurting Mandy. “Three men?” he echoed.

Uncle Willard nodded. “Injuns,” he said. “Unless I miss my guess, they were Comanches!”

“No!” Nathan exploded. He threw himself at his uncle, and the man wrapped his long arms around the boy and held him close.

“How do you know it was Injuns?” Nathan countered, hoping desperately that his uncle was wrong. “How do you know they took Mandy?”

“There’s signs all over,” the tall man said gently. “A man would have to be blind to not read what happened here.”

“Maybe they weren’t Injuns!” Nathan shouted. “How do you know?”

“Nathan, a white man generally shoes his horses to protect their hooves from hard surfaces,” his uncle answered. “Injuns seldom do. Three men waited in the woods on horses that were unshod. A fourth horse, with shoes, chased them a few moments later. You can tell by the tracks that they were riding fast.”

He handed the boy a small piece of wood. “One of them dropped this, probably afore they grabbed Mandy.”

Nathan looked at the object in his hand, a short ash stick. Carved into the bark was the emblem of a crawling snake.

“That wasn’t done with a steel knife, Nathan,” the man pointed out. “It was done with a piece of flint, or maybe obsidian. That snake is the sacred symbol of the Comanche Injuns.”

He put a gentle hand on Nathan’s shoulder. “Come on, son, we’ve got some riding to do! We’ve gotta sound the alarm!”

An hour later at Meadow Green, Jake Cartwright sat on the edge of the maroon velvet sofa in his parlor, his arm around his wife. The two listened in disbelief as Willard and Nathan told them what had happened by the creek.

“Dear God, no!” Mrs. Cartwright sobbed out. “Please God, watch over my Mandy and Jed.” She threw her hands into the air and let out a wail. “Not my little Mandy! Dear God, don’t let them take Mandy!” The distraught woman began to cry hysterically, rocking from side to side, and Mr. Cartwright held her closer.

“Pa,” Nathan sobbed, “it’s all my fault. I should have stopped with Mandy when she wanted to get a drink. Then this wouldn’t have happened.”

The big man placed huge hands on his son’s shoulders. “Nathan,” he said gently, “don’t try to take the responsibility for this—please. God knows where Jed and Mandy are, and they’re

in His hands.” Still sobbing, Nathan dropped to a seat on the davenport.

“Lem Barclay is already rounding up a posse out my way,” Willard told his brother. “I knew you and your men would want to ride, so I hurried here as fast as I could. Lem and his men should already be on the Injuns’ trail.”

Jake Cartwright turned to a servant standing nearby. “Silas, alert the men,” he ordered. “Saddle up the horses. I want every man on the place, and I want them armed! We ride in five minutes.”

Silas hurried from the room and Jake Cartwright looked back at his brother. “Give Deborah and me just a minute or two alone,” he said. “I’ll be right with you.”

Uncle Willard and the servants withdrew from the room. Silas closed the louvered doors behind them. Pa Cartwright turned to his wife with tears streaming down his strong, handsome face. “We’ve got to trust God, Sweetheart,” he said, his voice quavering. “At a time like this, He’s all we have.”

Mrs. Cartwright let out another wail. “Why did God let those savages snatch two of my precious children?” she sobbed. “Doesn’t He care?”

Pa held her close. Both were overwhelmed with grief. But the only thing they could do was to commend Mandy and Jed to God’s care.

Mr. Cartwright called Granny to help Mrs. Cartwright. The tiny old woman shook her head sadly with a tear glistening on her cheek as she looked at Mr. Cartwright. “Poor Jedediah,” she whispered. “He’s such a tender-hearted boy. Such a good boy!” Pa nodded, and the little woman went into the parlor to attend to Mrs. Cartwright.

Silas entered the house just then. “The horses are ready, sir. The men are bringing them around front just now.”

Pa nodded. “We’ll ride in two minutes.” Nathan followed him out onto the front porch of the mansion.

Pa and the men rode swiftly toward Parson’s Creek. The big man was overcome with grief and worry. “Why, God?” he questioned as he rode. “Why Jed and Mandy? You can take anything I have, but please, don’t take my children!”

Nathan rode Champ at the rear of the posse. Pa’s words had done little to quell the tremendous load of guilt he carried. If only he had been more patient with his little sister! “Forgive me,

Mandy,” he sobbed repeatedly. “I’m sorry for the way that I treated you.”

The men dismounted at the edge of the woods and tied the horses. They pulled weapons from their saddles while the two Cartwright brothers hurried through the brambles. Jake Cartwright knelt beside his brother and examined the creek bank, then crossed the creek into the woods. Moments later, he emerged from the shadows of the woods, his face tight.

“It’s Injuns, all right!” he told his men a moment later. “Mount up, men, and we’ll follow their trail. They’ve got more than a three-hour lead on us, but maybe we can somehow catch up to them.”

Pa and the posse rode hard on the Indians’ trail. Both the Cartwright men were expert trackers, but the red men had done their best to cover their trail. The men discovered that wherever possible, the Comanches had forded streams and ridden along rocky ledges so as to leave no tracks. At one point, the Indians had ridden for nearly half a mile down the rocky bed of a little stream before cutting back into the brush. It took the white men nearly two hours to find their trail again.

“I’ve never seen Injuns go to this much trouble to cover their tracks,” Willard commented as the men swung back into the saddle. “I’ve never had this hard a time reading sign.”

Pa nodded. “Me neither.” He hesitated. “Willard? It’s Comanches, isn’t it?”

His brother nodded sadly. “There’s no doubt about it, Jake.” He threw a sympathetic glance in Pa’s direction. “I’m sorry, brother.”

Pa dropped his head in despair. He put his heels to his horse and rode slowly up the steep bank. Watching the men, Nathan’s emotions overwhelmed him. *Pa and Uncle Willard say it’s Comanches*, he told himself ruefully. *That means that Jed and Mandy don’t have a chance!* He swallowed hard. “Lord, help them,” he whispered. “Please help my brother and sister.” He choked back a sob. Tears stung his eyes and he turned his horse to follow the men.

Silas reined in alongside him. “They’re in God’s hands, son,” he softly told the boy. “He knows where they’re at.”

Nathan nodded.

“I mean it, Nathan,” the black man said insistently. “Our God is Almighty, and he can take care of yore brother and sister. Now, trust Him for it.”

Nathan shrugged. In the midst of his grief, Silas’ words made little impression. The big man squeezed Nathan’s elbow, gave him a gentle, compassionate look, and then rode ahead to give Nathan a moment of privacy.

Finally, out in the middle of a wide, grassy plain, the search party lost the trail entirely. The men rode in huge circles, trying desperately to pick up some sign of the Comanches’ passing, but found nothing. The sun was dropping fast behind the western hills, and darkness was descending upon the searchers like a cloak wrapped around a baby.

Willard rode over to Jake, who was down on his knees in the grass, searching for a track. “It’s no use, Jake,” he solemnly told his brother. “It’s gettin’ too dark to see a thing. We’d better head back.”

Jake Cartwright stood up and stretched. “How can we quit?” he asked. “My kids are out here somewhere, in the hands of those savage Comanches! We can’t just walk away and leave them!”

Willard put a gentle hand on his brother’s shoulder. “There’s nothing more we can do at this point, Jake,” he said gently. “We have to leave the young’uns in God’s hands tonight.”

“Please, Willard, let’s keep looking. We have to!”

The men continued to search until it was so dark they could scarcely see each other. Finally, even Pa was ready to admit defeat. They still had not picked up the Comanches’ trail. Heart-broken, the big man climbed back into the saddle and turned his horse eastward.

“Lord, help us,” he sobbed quietly. “I don’t know where my children are, Lord, and I can’t do anything to help them! Please, Father, watch over my children. Keep them from harm. Help Willard and me know what to do. Father, I don’t even know where they are...” Sobbing, he lowered his head, feeling utterly helpless and alone, and overcome with a diversity of conflicting emotions.

Less than a mile away, two young people lay huddled together on the floor of a Comanche tepee, frightened and helpless. No one knew their whereabouts but God and eleven savage Comanche warriors.

## Chapter 8 – LITTLE DEER

Jed awoke to the sudden pain of a kick in the ribs. He opened his eyes and then immediately closed them again at the brightness of the early morning sunlight. He sat up and tried to rub his eyes, but could not, as his hands were still bound behind him. Squinting against the glare of the morning sun, he looked about, and his eyes popped wide open in astonishment. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. "What in the world..."

The tepee was gone, and Jed found himself sitting on the ground staring up at the open sky above his head. He looked around in utter amazement. There was absolutely no sign that the Comanche camp had ever existed. The fire was out, with no trace of any ashes or charred wood. The four tepees that he had seen the night before had vanished without a trace, and even the brush corral was gone. The horses were saddled and ready to ride. The Indians had been busy.

The redskin standing over Jed turned to Mandy and offered something to her. She struck it from his hands. "I don't want it!"

Jed's heart leaped into his throat at the boldness of his sister's defiance. "Mandy, be careful. Don't make them mad."

"I don't care! They can't make me eat that...that rubbish."

The Indian shrugged and picked the item up from the dust. He turned to Jed, making strange hand motions. Jed stared at him. The man repeated the sequence of hand motions and Jed suddenly caught on that the brave was telling him he was going to be untied. Jed nodded that he understood.

The man then made other motions that the boy finally realized was a warning not to try anything. Jed nodded again, smiling and doing his best to look compliant so that his captor would know that he didn't intend to cause trouble. The warrior untied his hands. Jed sat rubbing his wrists, trying to soothe the bruised skin.

The Indian then offered the same item that Mandy had refused, and Jed took it. It was a flat, hard piece of dried meat. The boy bit into it hungrily. The meat was tough and chewy, but it was food. "Better take some, Mandy," he said. "I think this is the only breakfast we're gonna get."

Mandy stuck out her lip. "I'm not gonna eat that stuff!"

The warrior then offered Jed a gourd filled with water from the little stream, and he drank greedily. He emptied the gourd, and to his surprise, the redskin brought more. Jed passed the water to Mandy, and she finished it.

Jed stood up and then realized that his feet had been tied together with a short rawhide. The rawhide allowed his feet to move six or eight inches apart, so that he could shuffle slowly, but he found it impossible to move quickly.

Jed offered the dried meat again to Mandy, but she turned up her nose in disgust. "I won't ever eat their food!" she declared.

Her brother shrugged. "You're gonna get hungry."

Mandy wrinkled her nose. "I don't care. I won't *ever* eat their food!"

The Indians were preparing to ride. Jed counted eleven braves, including the three that had captured Mandy and him. The man that had brought the food retied Jed's hands, in front this time, and then untied his feet. He led the boy over to the horse they had ridden the day before. When Jed was safely in the saddle, the warrior lifted Mandy up.

Jed noticed that four of the horses were each dragging a travois. Wooden poles extended back from each side of the packsaddle, resting on the ground several feet behind the horse. Buffalo hides spanned the space between the poles, forming a platform on which the gear from camp was piled. Jed guessed correctly that the poles forming the travois were the same poles that had supported the tepees.

The Indian that had claimed Midnight the day before was still in possession of Jed's beautiful horse. Apparently, he was the leader of the entire expedition. He grunted, made a motion with his hand, and rode out of camp. The other braves urged their horses forward and followed him.

They rode hard all day, stopping occasionally for a brief rest and drink whenever they crossed a stream. When the sun was directly overhead, they stopped on the banks of a small river. The captives' hands were untied, but the rawhides were used to secure their feet.

Jed and Mandy sat among the redskins on a rocky ridge, and one of the warriors offered them the flat strips of jerked meat, as well as a handful of manzanita berries. This time, Mandy did not

refuse to eat, but hungrily devoured everything that was offered. “You’re eating,” Jed observed quietly.

Mandy shrugged. “I’m hungry.”

Jed glanced at the braves around him and then dropped his voice to a whisper. He figured that none of their captors spoke English, but he would take no chances. “Do what they tell us,” he urged his sister. “Don’t cause trouble. It may give us a chance to escape later.”

Mandy looked at him defiantly and tossed her head. Jed wasn’t sure what she was thinking. Noticing that one of the braves was watching them closely, he sat back away from Mandy and took another bite of the tough, chewy meat.

They traveled in this manner for several days. St. Louis was soon many miles behind. The Cartwright youngsters had gotten over their initial terror at being captured by these wild men, but deep inside, a haunting question nagged at both of them. Would they ever see Ma and Pa again?

On the fifth evening of their captivity, Jed lay on the ground inside the tepee, shivering with cold. He wriggled his shoulders, trying to find a more comfortable position. “Button my jacket,

would you Mandy?” he asked. “I can’t reach the buttons with my hands tied like this.”

Mandy lifted her head from his chest and began to grope around in the dark for the buttons. As she buttoned his jacket, she gave a little giggle. Jed sat up. It was the first time since they had been captured that the girl had even smiled. “What’s so funny?” he asked softly.

“Remember what you said when we were riding for Uncle Willard’s?” she replied. “You told me that I would be glad Ma had made me bring a jacket. Well, tonight I’m glad we brought it.”

Jed smiled and lay back down. He was relieved to hear the sound of Mandy’s laughter. For the past several days he had been very concerned for her. She had been slowly withdrawing from everything, refusing to talk, even to him. But tonight, she seemed more like her normal self.

“What do you think Ma and Pa are doing right now?” she asked as she laid her head against him.

Jed lay quietly. “I don’t know,” he said at last. “I’m sure this has been hard on them, too. One thing for sure—they’re praying.

And I betcha that Pa and the sheriff have a posse out looking for us.”

“Will we ever see them again?” Mandy asked quietly, and then, Jed could hear her sobbing in the darkness.

He held her close and squeezed her tight as well as he could with his hands tied the way they were. His own eyes brimmed with tears as he thought of the agony that his little sister must be going through, and well as the torment that the ordeal must be causing Ma and Pa.

“We’re in God’s hands, now,” he gently reminded Mandy again. “We have to trust Him to get us out of this and take us safely home again.”

“But will He?” the girl quavered. “What if He lets the Injuns kill us?”

“I don’t think He’ll let them do that,” Jed calmly reassured her. “I don’t know why, but I just have this conviction that God is going to bring us safely home again.” Mandy drifted off to sleep, with her little blond head nestled close against the strong arm of her big brother. If Jed could trust God, then so could she. Within minutes, both young people were sound asleep.

The next evening, the war party forded a shallow, slow-moving river, rode over a small hill, and entered a wide ravine. Just ahead, Jed saw a cluster of buffalo hide tepees similar to the ones the warriors were traveling with, but larger. They had reached the Comanche camp.

There were some fifty or sixty of the tepees, positioned in straight rows. A large number of horses were corralled in a small, steep ravine to one side of the camp. Jed studied the Comanche horses as the war party passed the makeshift corral. Most of the horses were small pintos similar to the one he was riding. Naked children appeared and stared curiously at the two white captives.

The war party rode into the center of camp, horses in single file. The occupants of the camp called greetings in the Comanche tongue to the returning warriors, who rode stiffly, staring straight ahead, as though they were deaf to the calls of their wives and friends.

A tall, stern-looking Comanche with a single feather in his dark hair stood waiting for the arrival of the riders. The warriors brought their horses to a halt in front of him, dismounted, and

stood silently before him. Noticing the respectful way the braves stood before the older man, Jed guessed immediately that he was the chief.

The tall Indian raised his hand, smiled, and spoke a single word of greeting. The warriors returned a similar greeting and then turned and led their individual mounts away. Jed and Mandy sat quietly, not quite sure what to do. Jed's heart pounded, and trickles of sweat ran down his back. What would the Comanche chief do with them? Realizing that Mandy was experiencing the same feelings of apprehension, Jed leaned against her to reassure her with his presence.

A brave who had not ridden in the raid approached the horse and indicated that the young people were to dismount. Jed climbed down and then helped Mandy down as well as he could. The Indian had no interest in them; he simply wanted the horse. When the saddle was empty, he led the horse away and left Jed and his sister standing alone.

The chief approached, looked the Cartwrights over, and then grunted as he turned away. Jed was surprised at the chief's lack of interest. A young Indian with a pronounced limp walked over and looked at the pair with a kind, sorrowful expression on his

thin face. Nearly a full minute passed as he studied them with large, curious eyes, looking them over thoroughly from head to toe. Motioning for the captives to follow him, he turned and limped away.

Jed studied the young Indian man as he led them across the Comanche camp. Slender of limb and shorter than the other braves, he appeared to be the same age as some of the younger warriors. But Jed had immediately sensed that the crippled young Indian did not hold the same status as the other braves; they had ignored him as if he simply did not exist, and he had waited meekly until the others were gone before stepping in to take charge of the captives. He wore the same buckskin leggings and moccasins as the others, but his hair was cut shorter than the other men's and he wore no ornaments of elk's teeth on his clothing.

When Jed and Mandy were out of earshot of the others, the young brave turned to Jed and said, "My name Little Deer. What is yours?"

Jed stared at him in astonishment. "You speak English!" he blurted.

Little Deer laughed. "So do you."

Jed gestured toward his sister. "This is my sister Mandy," he said, "and I'm Jed."

"Happy know you, Jed. Happy know you, Mandy," the young Comanche said.

"Where did you learn to speak English?" Jed questioned as they walked toward the far end of the compound.

Little Deer glanced behind him as though to be certain that no one was listening. "I was slave for white man for several moons," he said simply. "I learn speak and hear white man's tongue."

He looked at them both carefully. "My people not know I speak with white man's tongue," he said. "It is my, uh..."

"Secret," Jed finished for him.

Little Deer nodded. "It is my secret," he agreed. "You keep silent?"

Jed nodded. "We won't tell anyone. Will we, Mandy?"

The youthful brave led his captives inside a tepee. He untied their hands and then fastened a thick rawhide hobble between their ankles. The hobble allowed them to walk, but not quickly or gracefully.

"Never try pull off!" he warned, pointing to the hobble, his dark eyes suddenly filled with apprehension. "Understand?"

Jed nodded. "We understand."

Little Deer seemed almost friendly, so Jed ventured a question. "What are they going to do with us?"

The Indian stepped back suddenly, as if the question could somehow bring him harm. His eyes narrowed and the friendly expression disappeared from his face. "That for Chief Howaka to say," he answered flatly, then turned and limped quickly out of the tepee, moving as if he couldn't get out quickly enough.

Jed glanced around the tepee. Thin wooden poles supported the buffalo hide structure, meeting at the top to form an opening nearly a foot across. The rough prairie grass formed the floor of the dwelling. The afternoon sunshine illuminated the interior with a pale orange light.

An hour or two later, Little Deer entered the tepee. "Come," he said simply.

Jed and Mandy struggled to their feet and followed the young Comanche outside the tepee. He indicated that they were to sit in the dying grass just outside the door. A delicious smell

filled the air, and Jed glanced up to see an old squaw roasting meat over a fire.

The woman wore the long buckskin garment common to all Comanche women. Her hair, like that of the other women, was cut shorter than the men's and pulled back into tight braids. Dark tattoos of crawling snakes entwined themselves around her right wrist; the back of her left hand displayed a tattoo of a running buffalo. A necklace of animal bones hung around her neck, and fringes of elk's teeth decorated her garments. The design of a crawling snake was etched in dark color on the buckskin of her skirt.

Jed watched her, intrigued by the strange snake design in the woman's tattoos and clothing. *There's that snake again*, he told himself. *I wonder if these people worship snakes?* He sighed. *I wish there was some way to tell them about the Lord Jesus and how He died for them.*

The woman caught Jed's gaze upon her and quickly turned away. She was roasting strips of buffalo meat on long sticks over the fire. The young people watched hungrily as the roasting meat browned. Drops of fat fell into the flames, and the fire crackled and sizzled.

When the meat was done to the old woman's satisfaction, she hobbled over and stood beside Jed. Stooping over, she extended a thin little bird claw hand and laid one of the sticks on the grass beside Jed. Jed noticed that she turned her head away from him as she did, as though she were afraid to look him in the eye. Stooping again, she placed a meat stick beside Mandy, again carefully averting her gaze. The old squaw's head bobbed in rhythm with her steps as she shuffled quickly away, leaving the cooking fire burning. Little Deer handed each of them a gourd of water, as well as a couple of small, dark red fruits.

"What are these?" Jed asked.

Little Deer looked over at the old squaw as she disappeared between the rows of tepees, and then whispered, "Fruit. Good eat. From cactus."

Jed and Mandy bowed their heads while Jed gave thanks for the food. The young Comanche watched curiously. Jed bit into the hot meat, and found it delicious. Mandy started in just as eagerly as her brother, and in no time, the buffalo meat and cactus fruit had disappeared. Little Deer seemed pleased by the enthusiasm with which they ate. After the meal, he checked the

rawhide hobbles around their ankles and then returned them to their tepee prison.

When darkness fell, everything seemed quiet, and Jed began to wonder if their Indian captors had even posted a guard. He ventured to stick his head out the door of the tepee. A loud whack sounded just above his head as an object slapped the side of the tepee, and the boy quickly withdrew his head. *Well, that answers that question*, Jed thought. *We are being watched.*

He dropped to his knees and drew Mandy close. “Father, watch over us,” he prayed aloud. “Protect us and keep the Injuns from hurting us. Pa doesn’t know where we are, so please help us get back home again safe.” Mandy squeezed his hand tightly as he poured out his heart to God. Just as Jed finished praying, a wolf howled mournfully.

Mandy shivered in fear and clutched Jed’s arm. “I’m afraid, Jed.”

Jed hugged her. “The wolf won’t come into camp,” he promised her. “The smell of people is too strong. Anyway, God is watching over us.” Huddled together on the prickly grass floor of the tepee, he and Mandy fell asleep.

The next morning, a brilliant beam of sunlight blinded the young people as a pair of copper-skinned hands opened the doorway of the tepee. Little Deer thrust his head into the opening. “Come,” he said. “Eat.” He stood stiffly upright and hobbled a few feet from the side of the tepee. Jed and Mandy rose slowly to their feet, stretched, and followed him from the tepee.

Little Deer handed Jed and Mandy a cold piece of the now familiar buffalo meat, a handful of bright-red manzanita berries, and a chunk of a pale, yellow bread-like substance. He glanced around to ascertain that none of his people were within earshot and then spoke in a low voice. “Eat.”

“What is this stuff?” Mandy asked, examining the unfamiliar food. “It isn’t cornbread.”

“Bean bread,” Little Deer answered Mandy’s question. “From tree.”

Mandy and Jed dropped to a sitting position in the grass, bowed their heads, and prayed. Jed took a bite of the bean bread and chewed it slowly, carefully. “Not bad.” He took another bite.

The young warrior squatted beside them as they ate. Mandy turned and observed him for a moment with questioning eyes. “Are you a brave?” she asked.

Little Deer sadly shook his head. “Not a brave,” he said slowly. “Born with crooked leg. Not run fast like warriors, leap high like warriors. Must do brave deed to become warrior.” He shrugged, his eyes cast upon the ground. “No brave deed, not warrior.” He seemed downcast, and Jed felt a pang of sympathy for him.

“Your people are Comanches, aren’t they?” Jed asked.

The crippled young Comanche looked at him strangely, and a dark expression crossed his features. “Comanche white man’s word,” he answered stiffly. He lifted his chin. “My people Nemena.”

“What does that mean?”

“Nemena,” Little Deer said, “means The True People. We not call our people Comanche.”

Jed hesitated, afraid to ask the next question. “Why did your warriors take us?”

The young Comanche sucked in his breath sharply, took a quick look around him, then leaned forward and lowered his voice. “I not tell you that,” he said firmly. “You not ask me.”

“Who will decide what happens to us?” Jed asked cautiously.

Little Deer’s eyes scanned the area carefully. “Chief Howaka,” he answered. “White man call him ‘Chief Soaring Eagle’.”

“Chief Soaring Eagle is your chief?” Jed asked.

Little Deer nodded. “The Great Spirits will tell Chief Howaka what do with you at Feast of Full Moon. Chief tell Nemena people.”

“What is the Feast of the Full Moon?” Jed asked, but he never got an answer. At that moment, two Comanche men came walking by the tepee. Little Deer became aware of their presence, and suddenly began to chatter in the Comanche language. He snatched the remaining scraps of food from his captives’ hands and sternly gestured that they were to return to the tepee.

Jed and Mandy obediently crept inside the structure. Jed watched the young Comanche as he limped away. “He acts like

he wants to be our friend,” Jed remarked, “but he’s afraid of his own people.”

He sat down on the ground, and Mandy joined him, resting her head against his shoulder. “I wonder what he meant by the ‘Feast of the Full Moon’.”

## Chapter 9 – BUFFALO HUNT

Time passed slowly for the two young captives. The tepee, so cold at night, grew unbearably hot by the middle of each afternoon. Jed and Mandy were allowed outside their buffalo hide prison only at mealtimes. Their only visitor was Little Deer, who seemed to have been charged with both their care and the security of their confinement. The rest of the Comanche camp almost seemed unaware of the presence of the two young white captives. Even the naked little Indian children who passed the tepee on various errands paid them no attention.

“Will we ever see Ma and Pa again?” Mandy asked on the second morning as she and Jed finished breakfast. “Jed, I’m afraid.” She burst into tears, and Jed held her close. Little Deer appeared just then and looked at her strangely as he led them back into the tepee. Mandy sat on the ground with her chin on her knees, tears streaming down her cheeks. Jed’s heart went out

to her. He dropped to the grass beside her, drawing her close to him. She leaned her head against his shoulder. "Pa doesn't even know where to find us!" Mandy sobbed.

"Don't you think God knows where we are?" Jed asked, praying for the right words to say. She nodded, her big blue eyes gazing deeply into his. "And don't you think that He cares about us, at least as much as Pa does? Don't you think He can take care of us?" Mandy nodded again.

"Then I think that we should trust Him," Jed continued. "What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee."

Mandy thought about his words for a moment, and then she smiled. "Remember when we first came to Meadow Green?"

Jed nodded.

"Pa taught us that verse the first week we came to stay at Meadow Green. Remember?"

Jed nodded again and smiled at the memory. When he and Mandy had first come to St. Louis and stayed at the Cartwright mansion, they had felt ill at ease in such lavish surroundings. Keenly aware that their threadbare, homespun clothes were sadly out of place among the silks and satins to which this wealthy family were accustomed, they had expected the Cartwrights to

look down upon him. But to their amazement and relief, the entire family had accepted them immediately.

Her innocent blue eyes studied him carefully. "Are you afraid now?"

Jed hesitated. How could he answer her question truthfully without adding to her fears? "I am some," he acknowledged, "but I'm asking God to help me learn to trust Him and not be afraid." He squeezed her hand.

"I'm afraid, Jed. What if we never see Ma and Pa again? What if the Injuns decide to kill us?"

Jed swallowed hard. "Mandy, I'm ready to go to heaven to be with Jesus, but you're not ready because you've never asked Him to save you." He choked on the words. "Why not ask Him to be your Savior right now?"

Mandy looked as if she were ready to cry. "I—I'm not ready yet, Jed. I—" She fell silent and lapsed into tears.

They sat in silence for several minutes, holding hands and thinking about home, each comforted by the presence of the other. Jed reached up and stroked one of Mandy's long, blond braids, unaware that he was even doing so. *Help me to trust you, Lord. And help my sister to trust you for her salvation.*

“You know something?” Mandy said, interrupting his silent prayer. “That day in church when Merle and Mr. Watkins got saved, I wanted to go down and get saved, too. But I didn’t.”

Jed squeezed her hand. “Why not do it now, Mandy?” He turned his head and looked at her tenderly. “I want so badly to see you saved, Mandy.” His voice faltered. “If the Injuns do kill us and you’re not saved, we’ll never see each other again.”

Mandy looked up at him with tear-filled eyes. “I will, Jed. But not now.”

Jed sighed. “Please don’t wait too long, Sis. We don’t know what’s going to happen.”

“I love you, Jed.”

Jed playfully pulled her braid. “I love you, Sis.”

In the days that followed, Jed and Mandy became very close. They talked through the long hours of each day of captivity, grateful for each other’s company. Jed did his best to reassure his sister continually that there was no need to fear—that God was watching over them. At first, he was just trying to keep up a brave front for Mandy’s sake, but as time went by, his trust in the Lord became real. He was discovering that his Savior

was also his Protector. He continued to pray for his sister’s salvation.

One morning, Little Deer brought the usual fare for breakfast. “Can’t we have pork sausage with eggs?” Jed joked. “And I’d also like some biscuits and gravy.”

The Indian looked at him strangely. “I no understand,” he said.

Jed laughed. “Don’t pay any attention to me, Little Deer,” he said. “I was just having some fun. Please pass the buffalo meat.”

Little Deer suddenly looked serious. “Today,” he said, “Big buffalo hunt. You will test.”

“Me?” Jed asked. “They want me to go?”

The Indian nodded.

“Is this some sort of a test?” Jed asked. “To see if I am worthy, or something?”

The crippled Comanche nodded again. “Do not show afraid,” he warned. “They kill you!”

“So if I show fear,” Jed repeated, “your warriors will kill me?” Mandy laid a hand on his arm.

“Yes,” Little Deer answered, “and little Yellow Hair.” Suddenly, Jed realized the seriousness of the situation. Apparently, the buffalo hunt would be dangerous. But if he showed any sign of fear, the Comanches would deem him unworthy, and would kill both him and Mandy. He felt a cold fear, and he trembled just a little.

Mandy slipped a small hand into his. “What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee,” she quoted.

Jed looked down at her tenderly. “Thanks, Sis,” he said softly. “I needed that.”

“If you pass buffalo test,” Little Deer said slowly, searching for the correct words, “then you come to Feast of Full Moon. Chief Howaka decide your life or death.” Jed shuddered as he realized what the next few days could hold for him, and for Mandy.

Mandy looked searchingly at Little Deer. “Would they really kill us?” she asked fearfully. “Would they?”

Little Deer turned away without answering.

After the meal, Little Deer returned Mandy to the tepee and a warrior led Jed to the corral where the hunting party was assembling. Chief Howaka himself was present, and apparently

was going to lead the hunt. The tall Indian grunted in satisfaction when he saw the white boy.

Jed stood still as one of the hunters removed the shackles from his feet. When the rawhide was gone, he walked over to Midnight who stood quietly with the Indian horses, saddled with a new Comanche saddle. The boy reached up and stroked the big horse’s neck.

“I’ve missed you, old boy,” he said softly. A thrill of excitement shot through him as he touched the magnificent horse. “Maybe some day I’ll get the chance to ride you again.” Midnight dropped his head and nuzzled against Jed’s shoulder as if to demonstrate his full agreement with the idea.

A strong, brown hand suddenly seized Jed’s arm and jerked his hand from the horse. Jed turned to find himself face to face with the warrior that had claimed Midnight as his own on the day of the capture. The Comanche glared at Jed, raised his lance with both hands, and then struck Jed across the chest with the shaft of the weapon, knocking him back a few steps. Snarling angrily, the brave slowly advanced toward Jed, holding the lance menacingly in front of him. Jed’s heart pounded with fear. Would the Comanche warrior kill him right here?

A sudden yell echoed across the shallow ravine, and heads turned as a brave leaped forward with a lance in his hands. Jed stepped back quickly. Apparently the second brave was challenging the other for ownership of Jed's magnificent horse. Younger and shorter than the first brave, the challenger had smooth, hard muscles that rippled impressively beneath his bronze skin.

A ring of eager spectators formed around the two combatants to witness the upcoming fight. Jed glanced over at Chief Howaka, expecting him to stop the altercation, but the tall Indian stood with his arms crossed, a trace of a smile on his dark-skinned face. Apparently, the fight would have his approval.

The two warriors circled warily, each looking for an opening, but neither willing to make the first move. The ring of Comanche warriors began to shuffle restlessly, and then began to chant, urging the two to do battle. Jed held his breath.

The challenger suddenly sidestepped, then leaped in with his lance. The older brave met the thrust of the lance with an upward thrust of his own weapon, and the blow was repelled. The

challenger stepped back quickly, and both men resumed their original stances, circling and feinting.

The spectators grew impatient, and the chants grew louder, more insistent. Jed could not understand a single word of the Comanche language but he could tell that the warriors were urging the two combatants to get on with the fight. Jed watched anxiously. Would this be a fight to the death? He expelled his breath slowly.

Jed's thoughts suddenly turned to Mandy. She was alone in the tepee! He wasn't there to protect her. "Watch over her, Lord Jesus," he prayed quietly. "Please, don't let anyone hurt her while I'm gone."

The younger Indian again leaped at his opponent with a vicious thrust of the wicked-looking lance. The older Indian again made a defensive move with his weapon, catching the shaft of the challenger's lance with the edge of the sharp flint head of his own and throwing the other warrior off balance.

He quickly followed through with his slight advantage. Leaping forward, he knocked the younger man backward to the ground. Raising his lance over the man on the ground, he thrust the sharp end of the spear into the body of his opponent.

Jed caught his breath, certain he was about to witness a brutal killing, but the lance had struck the downed man in the shoulder. Apparently, this was not intended to be a fight to the death, but only to disable the opponent to the point of being unable to fight. Blood poured from the wounded man's shoulder, and he slowly raised his lance, handing it to the victor. He had had enough.

The winning Comanche raised both lances above his head and gave a cry of victory. He then turned back to Midnight, allowing the wounded man to rise to his feet. The challenger walked quickly back toward camp to the jeers of his comrades. He would not ride in the buffalo hunt today.

Another warrior led a pinto pony to Jed and indicated that he was to mount, which the boy did. "Help me, Lord," he prayed, "whatever happens today."

The hunting party rode swiftly westward for nearly an hour. As they approached a steep hill, a scout rode forward and called to Chief Howaka, who was in the lead. The chief reined in his horse and conferred with the scout for a moment, then raised one hand and barked orders, gesturing with both hands as he explained the strategy of the hunt.

The warriors immediately divided into three groups, one group riding around the hill to the left, another circling to the right. Jed was not sure what to do, so he stayed with the group in the middle, remaining with Chief Howaka.

The chief and his group of hunters sat where they were for nearly half an hour. Jed wondered what the other hunters were doing. The warriors around him sat their horses silently, impassively, their faces rigid and showing no emotion. They paid no attention whatever to Jed. Finally, the chief rode up the incline and the other Comanches fell in behind him. Jed's pinto was last in line.

As they rode up the hill, the thought occurred to Jed to make a break for camp, snatch Mandy, and ride for the hills. The warriors weren't watching him; if he left quietly, he could be long gone before they even missed him. But it was broad daylight—even if he could somehow make it back to camp and snatch Mandy successfully from the tepee, the Comanches would have no trouble following his tracks. An escape attempt would bring swift retribution from Chief Howaka. Jed quickly dismissed the idea of escape—for the moment. Better to wait

until he had time to plan properly and increase his chances of success.

When his horse reached the crest of the hill, Jed stared at the scene before him. He and the rest of Chief Howaka's group were at the head of a large, gentle valley, nearly two miles wide and several miles long, carpeted with patches of yellow-brown grass. Jed saw a huge dust cloud coming across the valley in their direction, and he suddenly realized what it was.

Hundreds of buffalo were stampeding toward them, being driven in their direction by the other two divisions of their hunting party. The warriors were riding at full gallop behind the herd, screaming shrill war cries. Chief Howaka rode his mount down the steep slope toward the approaching animals, and the rest of the Comanches followed. The hunt was on!

Jed took a deep breath. Little Deer's words rang in his mind. "Do not show afraid!" he had said. "They kill you!"

Jed's Indian mount plunged down the steep slope, following the others. Jed held on fiercely. There was no turning back now. "Help me not to show fear, Lord," he prayed anxiously, "cause I sure feel afraid." And then, a strange peace filled his soul and the fear subsided.

The thundering herd of buffalo saw the approaching riders and turned in a large circle to the left. The chief's group closed the gap, and suddenly, Jed's entire world was a huge sea of shaggy dark bodies and pounding hooves. His horse was completely surrounded by the buffalo herd. The thunder of the heavy hooves was overwhelming, frightening, blotting out all other sensations. Jed gripped the reins tightly.

He was amazed at the horsemanship of the Comanches. They rode, weapons in hand, steering their mounts by the pressure of their knees. The hunters yelled and cheered, almost seeming to enjoy the danger they were in. To the Indians, the thundering hooves and huge, shaggy bodies swaying and jostling around the hunting party presented the possibility of food, rather than the peril of instant death.

Jed saw a horse go down, thrown off balance by an unseen badger hole. The Comanche rider leaped from the saddle even before the horse was down, ran furiously for a few paces, and then leaped up behind another hunter, safe and unhurt. Jed was amazed. *I hope I don't need to change horses like that*, he thought to himself.

When his initial uneasiness at being surrounded by the huge animals had subsided, Jed noticed the way the hunters and their amazing horses worked together. An Indian would ride close to a galloping buffalo, slightly behind and to one side. He would pull his bow to full draw, and then hold for just an instant. The horse would sprint into position for the best possible shot, and then suddenly veer sharply away at the twang of the bowstring. The second time he saw it happen, Jed realized what the horses were doing. They had been trained to turn out suddenly when the arrow was released, just in case a wounded animal tried to turn on the hunter.

One hunter had made a good shot, but the buffalo continued running with an arrow hanging from his side. The Comanche urged his horse into position again and launched another arrow. The second shot hit a vital spot. The buffalo bellowed in pain and rage. It was obvious that he was severely wounded.

The redskin who had made the shots called out sharply and gestured toward the wounded animal. Immediately, several other hunters rode close and put arrows into the stricken beast.

The huge animal fell to the ground, staggered to his feet again, and then sank slowly to his knees. He bellowed in fear,

and the pathetic sound resonated above the thunder of the pounding hooves of his companions. He gave one final snort and toppled over, dead. Jed saw some of the action as he rode past, and actually felt sympathy for the big, shaggy creature. The buffalo, so invincible and powerful when charging across the plains, now seemed so helpless and pitiful.

Four buffalo were now down. Chief Howaka gave a signal, and the hunters split into two groups. One group rode quickly away from the herd at full gallop for several minutes, and then stopped at the side of the valley, nearly a mile away. The second group of hunters stayed with the herd, worrying them and shouting until the first group was some distance away. Then the second group rode quickly in the opposite direction. Once they were left to themselves, the buffalo, exhausted, soon came to a halt and began milling about uncertainly.

The Comanches rested their horses for a few minutes and then raised the attack again. The group farthest from the herd had quietly ridden closer, then suddenly came riding full speed across the valley floor, screaming their war cries. The herd, confused, turned toward the remaining hunters who were now speeding toward them, Jed among them.

Chief Howaka wanted one more buffalo. The hunters moved in on an animal as a group, surrounded him with their dashing horses, and prepared their arrows. The kill was certain; the buffalo would not escape.

And then, without warning, it happened. Jed's horse stumbled and went down. Before he had time to realize what was happening, the boy found himself catapulted through the air. He landed, to his amazement, on the shoulders of one of the galloping buffalo!

Jed's arms flailed and then his fingers clutched the mane of the huge creature. He grabbed two good handfuls of the coarse hair and hung on for dear life. And then he realized the spot he was in. *I'm on the back of a buffalo! A live buffalo! A real, live, buffalo, racing madly across the valley!*

One of the hunters spotted Jed's predicament, stared in astonishment for a moment, and then called to the others. Expressions of amazement registered on the bronze faces of the Comanche warriors when they saw the white boy doing the unthinkable—actually riding a bull buffalo! Shrieking with excitement, they turned their galloping horses, forgetting all about the animal they had selected as their prey. They urged

their horses forward, trying desperately to catch up with Jed and watch the fascinating spectacle.

Jed had a good grip on the shaggy mane of the huge beast he was riding and he was able to sit up. He had ridden horses all his life, but the rhythm of the galloping buffalo was strangely different from the cadence of a speeding horse. Jed's body was in the air more than on the back of the animal.

And then, of all times, Little Deer's words came back to him. "Do not show afraid!"

*These Injuns aren't gonna see any fear in me!* Jed thought savagely. In the excitement and confusion of the moment, he threw caution aside. Letting go of the shaggy mane with one hand momentarily, he raised a fist in the air. "Yee-haw!" he shouted. The buffalo's stride threw his body forward and he immediately grabbed on again with both hands.

The Comanches loved it. Here was a boy, a white boy, doing something that was unheard of. He was riding a buffalo—actually riding a buffalo, and apparently enjoying it. The hunters cheered and laughed at the strange sight. Experienced riders that they were, they had never before seen anyone ride a buffalo.

Calling to each other, they shouted and raised their fists in the air to show their approval.

A lone rider kicked his horse and sped forward, skillfully guiding his mount through the vast throng of galloping buffalo around him. Ignoring the danger, he cut in and out of the buffalo herd, dodging hooves and horns and working his way closer and closer to Jed. Finally, he managed to come alongside Jed's furious buffalo mount, moving so close that the flank of his horse was almost touching the flank of the huge animal. The Indian shouted and gestured for Jed to leap across to his mount.

Jed needed only one invitation. Releasing his desperate grip on the shaggy mane of the buffalo, he leaned across and grabbed the shoulders of the warrior and then swung his body across to the back of the horse. The Comanche immediately turned his horse aside and rode out of the thundering herd.

The frightened boy tried to catch his breath. He had actually ridden a buffalo! His heart pounded madly as he clung to his Indian rescuer.

The Comanches cheered Jed as the warrior brought his horse to a stop, well away from the stampeding herd. The huge animals galloped across the valley, but the hunters let them go.

As Jed swung down from the horse, he glanced up and suddenly realized which rider had come to his aid. Chief Howaka! Jed was stunned. He had actually ridden the sacred horse of Chief Howaka!

The hunters leaped from their horses and gathered around the panting boy, laughing and pounding him on the back. They cheered and shouted. Never before had they witnessed a ride like the white boy had taken. Jed had become a hero.

When Jed had caught his breath, he turned and looked across the valley. The herd of stampeding buffalo was already more than two miles in the distance. In the middle of the grassy plain, four dark mounds of shaggy fur lay in sharp contrast against the yellow grass, silent testimonials to the success of the hunt. A warrior brought the little pinto pony unhurt to Jed, and he remounted. The hunting party rode toward the four fallen buffalo to prepare to transport them back to camp.

After the hides of the slain buffalo were removed, the carcasses cut up, and the meat divided, the hunting party prepared to ride across the plain. Jed was surprised to note that the Comanches had taken every part of the slain animals, leaving nothing behind. Apparently, they intended to use it all.

Chief Howaka raised one hand and uttered a single word, and the hunting party rode eastward across the wide valley. The hunters laughed and chattered to each other during most of the trip. Jed could not understand a word of what was said, but he knew exactly what they were talking about. His dramatic buffalo ride would be the subject of many a campfire tale for years to come.

Jed watched the Comanche hunters during the return trip to camp, gratefully noting the new respect he had apparently won from the men by his unplanned ride of the buffalo. Before the hunt had taken place, the Comanche people had acted almost as if he and Mandy did not even exist. The only one to acknowledge their presence was Little Deer, who had been charged with their security and care. But now the warriors rode on both sides of Jed, gazing at him with undisguised admiration. *Perhaps this will make a difference in how Mandy and I are treated,* Jed told himself happily. *Maybe Chief Howaka will even let us go free.*

The Comanche women were ready with an exuberant welcome when the hunting party returned to camp. Chief Howaka and the warriors rode solemnly between the rows of

tepees. The women surrounded them, running alongside the horses and uttering cries of approval at the sight of the buffalo hides and meat. Their reception was so overwhelming that Jed wondered if the enthusiasm of the women was genuine, or if this were simply a ritual that concluded every buffalo hunt.

The warriors dismounted and led their horses to the corral. Jed followed their example, leaving the pinto pony at the entrance. Suddenly finding himself alone, he walked across the camp to the tepee where he and Mandy had been imprisoned, expecting at any minute to be stopped.

As he reached the tepee, a squaw led Mandy outside and then freed her feet of the hated rawhide. "Oh, Jed," his sister cried when she saw him. "Are you all right? I was so worried!" She ran and hugged him as he approached.

Jed grinned. "It went great!" he said with a laugh. "It was fun!"

"What happened?" Mandy begged.

Jed laughed again. "You won't believe it when you hear it," he declared. He dropped to the grass beside the tepee. "Sit down and I'll tell you all about it." He plucked a blade of grass and

began picking it into little pieces as he launched into a brief account of the memorable buffalo hunt.

Mandy's eyes grew wide when he came to the part where he had ridden the buffalo. "Jed," she scolded. "You might have been killed!"

He laughed at her reaction. "I didn't plan it, Mandy," he retorted. "It just happened. The horse went down, and I was thrown onto the back of the buffalo." He laughed again. "Did you think I did it to impress the Comanche warriors?"

"No, but—"

He squeezed her hand when he saw the worried look in her eyes. "The Lord was with me, Sis. When my horse went down, I could have very easily been killed. But He kept me from even getting a scratch." He grinned. "And the braves *were* impressed. Maybe the Lord will use this to keep them from killing us at the Feast of the Full Moon."

The treatment of the two young captives was far different after the buffalo hunt. Jed and his sister were left untied throughout the rest of the day. Jed decided to experiment with his newly won freedom and convinced Mandy that it was now permissible to roam freely about the compound. He took her on

an exploratory tour of the village, and to his delight, no one challenged them. Jed's display of courage during the buffalo hunt had made a tremendous impression upon the Comanche people. The story had traveled throughout the village within half an hour of the return of the hunting party, and braves, squaws and children alike now waved and smiled when Jed and his sister passed by.

That evening, Little Deer brought their meal to the tepee. He placed a buffalo skin on the grass, set food on it, and then glanced behind him. "You ride buffalo in hunt," he said to Jed.

Jed laughed. "You heard about it."

"Chief Howaka laugh," the young Comanche continued. "Warriors like. Say you ride like Nemena! You one of our people."

Jed was pleased. "Thanks, Little Deer," he said with a grin. "Does that mean we won't have to go through with the Feast of the Full Moon?"

The Indian shook his head. "No," he answered. "You still stand before Chief Howaka at Feast of Full Moon."

"Do you think he will let us go free?" the white boy asked.

Again, the Comanche shook his head. “Nemena tribe never let go free prisoners,” he said ominously. “Never! Chief Howaka kill first!” Little Deer stood to his feet and walked away.

“That’s just great,” Jed said bitterly. “I’m like one of their people now, but we still have to die. What good did the buffalo hunt do us?”

Mandy placed a small hand on his shoulder. “What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee,” she quoted.

## Chapter 10 – FEAST OF THE FULL MOON

The Comanches broke camp the next day and prepared to move to another location. Scouts had brought the news that the buffalo herds were migrating, and Chief Howaka had decreed that the Comanches would follow the herds.

After a hurried breakfast, Jed and Mandy roamed throughout the camp, watching the Indians as they prepared to move their homes. The two young people were amazed at the speed with which each tepee was dismantled and converted into a travois. The Comanche village bustled with activity as the men prepared their travois and hitched up the horses while the women scurried around packing and loading their meager household goods. The children helped where they could.

Mandy had noticed that nearly every dwelling had a picture of a snake painted with a dark brown paint. “Why do they put a

picture of a snake on their tepees?" she asked. "Yecch! Why not draw a deer, or a buffalo?"

"The crawling snake is the sacred symbol for the Comanche tribe," Jed explained. "That's why you see so many of the braves and squaws with snake tattoos on their faces or arms. They also put the snake on their war shields, and on their saddles. Maybe you didn't notice, but some of the squaws even have it in the design on their clothing." Mandy wrinkled her nose in disgust.

One of the men saw Jed watching him dismantle his tepee, and came over to him. He pounded Jed on the back as if he were an old friend, laughing and chattering excitedly. "What's he saying?" Mandy wanted to know.

"How should I know?" Jed replied. "I don't speak the Comanche language."

The warrior slapped Jed on the back once or twice more, smiled at Mandy, and went back to his work. The Cartwrights sauntered along between the various tepees, and Little Deer joined them.

"What did that warrior say?" Jed asked the Indian youth when they were out of earshot of the others.

Little Deer laughed. "He say can he catch buffalo for you ride."

Jed laughed. "No thanks," he replied. "One buffalo ride was enough."

"Why is everyone moving?" Mandy questioned. "Your people have only been here a few days."

"Nemena follow the buffalo," the young Comanche explained. "When scout say buffalo go, Nemena go." He turned away, and Jed and Mandy walked on.

"Everything they have comes from the buffalo," Jed pointed out. "Their tepees, their clothing, their food, even most of their tools and weapons. When the buffalo migrate, the tribe follows. They depend on the buffalo herd for their life."

Each Comanche brave was responsible for his own tepee. Some of the wealthier men of the tribe had more than one wife, and therefore, more than one tepee. Jed and his sister watched in fascination as the last of the tepees quickly made a transformation and became a travois. The entire tribe was packed and ready to travel.

The Comanches have always been a nomadic people, traveling constantly from place to place as they follow the

wanderings of the buffalo. Their homes, their tools, and even their clothing had adapted to their lifestyle of wandering.

“Oh look, Jed, a papoose!” Mandy cried, and ran over to one of the squaws who was holding a little baby. The little Indian baby had a small piece of buffalo hide wrapped around her shoulders, but other than that, was quite naked. Mandy held out her hands to the squaw, and to her surprise, the woman handed her the baby.

“Look, Jed, isn’t she cute?” Mandy crooned, and Jed nodded.

“Sarah’s cuter, though,” he said, and suddenly, both he and Mandy became quiet. Each knew immediately what the other was thinking. After a few minutes, Mandy handed the baby back to the mother, who put the infant into the cradleboard on her back.

Chief Howaka mounted his horse and called to his people. A scout rode forward, and the entire camp began to move. Jed and Mandy rode together on one of the Indian horses. Jed turned and looked behind him toward the site where the little village had been situated. The prairie grass was beaten down and trampled, but other than that, there was nothing to even suggest that an

entire village of Comanches had lived there for a number of days.

The tribe traveled for two days. The first night, the Comanches set up camp beside a shallow river with their tepees pitched against the foot of a small mountain. As each Indian family unloaded their travois and changed it into a tepee again, Jed and Mandy ran about the camp, helping where they could. “It’s almost like we’re part of the tribe, now,” the girl chattered happily.

Jed looked about to make sure that Little Deer wasn’t close by, then said, “Yeah, but don’t forget—these people are Comanches. They’ll kill us in a moment if they take a notion to. And remember, the Feast of the Full Moon is coming up.” He turned away. “Come on, let’s go look at the river.”

Moments later, the brother and sister stood side by side on the river bank watching the shallow, fast-moving water. Mandy moved close to Jed and slipped her hand into his. “What do you think the Comanches are going to do to us, Jed?” she asked in a small voice.

Jed glanced around. “I don’t know, Mandy,” he answered quietly. “I really don’t know.”

“Will they kill us?”

Jed hesitated. “They might. The Comanches have already killed quite a few white settlers. We have to trust God to get us out of this.” He squeezed her hand.

Her eyes were big as she looked up at him with a pleading expression. “Can’t we escape, Jed? Maybe at night?”

“I’ve been thinking and praying about it; believe me, I have. But they’re watching us constantly. I know it doesn’t seem like they are, but I’ve noticed that they’re watching us much more closely than it seemed at first.” He frowned. “We’d have to have a horse, of course, and even then, they’d be able to track us down before we got very far.” He sighed. “Our chances aren’t very good, Mandy. The way things are now, if we tried to escape we just wouldn’t make it.”

“What are we going to do?”

“I don’t know, Mandy, I really don’t know.” Jed picked up a stick, broke off a piece, and tossed it into the water. He watched it float downstream and disappear around the bend in the river before he spoke again. “The only thing I know to do right now is pray.”

A hand grabbed his elbow, startling him and causing him to drop the stick. He turned to see the somber face of Little Deer. “Come,” the crippled Comanche said simply. Jed and Mandy followed him obediently to the center of the new camp. “Up tepee,” Little Deer instructed, and Jed and Mandy were busy for the next several minutes helping him set up their tepee prison.

“I come with food,” the young Comanche told them and then disappeared into the gathering darkness.

“Did you notice that our tepee is situated right in the middle of the camp, just like before?” Jed observed. “They’re doing that to make escape more difficult, I’m sure.”

The Comanches traveled again the next day, dismantling their tepees early in the morning and obliterating any signs of their camp, then traveling hard with a brief pause for a noonday meal. As before, Jed and Mandy rode together on the back of a little pinto pony.

Late that afternoon the tribe came to a halt and a scout suddenly rode forward and conferred with Chief Howaka. The chief turned his horse about in a full circle, surveying the land. He nodded and then pointed toward a series of gently rolling hills three miles to the north. The caravan began to move again,

and less than an hour later entered the hills. Chief Howaka raised one hand, and the tribe stopped once more.

While the Comanches stood silently, the chief rode forward thirty paces, and then rode his mount in a circle three times to the right. He then circled three times to the left.

“What’s he doing?” Mandy wanted to know.

“I don’t know,” her brother whispered. He grinned. “I think he’s just trying to make the horse dizzy.”

Chief Howaka then dismounted and circled three times to the right on foot, then made three circles to the left. When he had finished, the tribe began to set up camp. Their new home was situated right on the banks of a creek, at the edge of a picturesque forest. The Cartwrights looked around. The new location for the village was beautiful.

While the men started setting up the tepees, the women scattered and began to search for firewood. After Jed and Mandy helped Little Deer set up their tepee—again in the center of the new camp—Jed helped the men set up other tepees while Mandy gathered sticks with the women.

Jed watched as an old brave knelt on the ground beside a little wigwam-shaped pile of sticks. The man placed a short

piece of wood on the ground, and the boy noticed that it had a round, smooth hole in the center. The old Comanche picked up a small bow about two feet long. It looked like a miniature hunting bow, complete with rawhide string. The brave looped the rawhide around a short, perfectly straight stick, and then inserted the lower end of the stick into the smooth hole in the block on the ground.

From a rawhide pouch, the old man took a pinch of pale yellow powder and sprinkled it around the hole. He glanced up and saw Jed watching him intently. He smiled and then went back to his work.

The women of the village had finished gathering firewood, but none of them had yet started a cooking fire. They began to gather around the old man kneeling on the ground. Each woman held a few small sticks in her hands.

Jed noticed that the old Comanche had a small pile of dead grass beside his foot. The man began to move the bow back and forth quickly, holding the upper end of the stick with his free hand. The stick spun rapidly in the hole in the wood, moved by the rawhide string. From time to time, the old Indian leaned over and blew gently on the hole.

*It must be some sort of incantation,* Jed thought to himself. *Maybe some sort of blessing on the new campsite.*

The bow moved faster and faster, and the little stick whirled rapidly. The brave leaned over and blew on the wood again, and Jed saw a faint orange-red glow. *That's stick's getting hot,* Jed said to himself. And suddenly, it hit him. The man was starting a fire!

The stick glowed brighter and brighter as the old brave blew gently. There was a little wisp of smoke, and suddenly, a spark of fire. The fire-maker reached over and grabbed the handful of grass, touching it to the bottom of the stick. The grass burst into flame, and Jed gasped.

The brave blew on the tiny fire to encourage it, and then stuffed the burning grass under his little wigwam of sticks. In no time at all he had a roaring fire. The whole process had taken less than a minute. The women gathered around the little fire, ignited the brands that they were carrying, then carefully carried the orange tongues of flame back to their tepees to build their own fires.

Jed was impressed with the whole operation. *He didn't even use matches or a flint,* he thought. *I'll have to try that some time.*

*I wonder if Pa knows how to build a fire that way?* The old fire-maker laughed at the expression of awe on the boy's face.

Mandy came into camp lugging an armload of wood that was much too big for her. Several pieces shifted sideways and Mandy was in danger of losing the whole load. "Help me, Jed!" Jed hurried over to her and took most of the wood. He walked over to the nearest cook fire, and began to drop the branches one by one across the fire.

The squaw whose fire Jed was building looked up and nodded approvingly when she saw that he was helping. But then she suddenly gasped in horror and ran toward Jed and the fire. Chattering angrily, she pushed the bewildered boy away from the fire. She didn't let go of him until he was out of the vicinity of her tepee.

*Now what did I do wrong?* the puzzled boy said to himself. *One minute, she's delighted that I'm helping her, and the next minute, she's running me out of the place. I can't figure these people out.*

Little Deer had seen what had transpired between Jed and the squaw, and he came over to the white boy. "Never lay wood

across fire,” he said disapprovingly. “Nemena not do that way. Lay wood on ground, push end into fire. That the Nemena way.”

Suddenly, Jed understood. He had broken a Comanche custom. That explained why the squaw had been so angry with him, and so fearful.

The other women were building their cooking fires, and Jed sat on the end of a fallen tree and watched. Mandy came over and sat beside him. It was nearly dark, but the Indians made no effort to conceal the fires. A fat squaw dropped an armload of wood beside her fire and shoved the end of one of the short logs into the fire. Some of the burning wood collapsed as the new wood was added, and the young people watched a shower of sparks fly upward.

“It looks like a thousand fireflies, doesn’t it?” Jed remarked.

“Look what I found,” Mandy said, and Jed turned and tried to make out the object in the dying light.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know,” the girl answered, “I guess it’s just a sharp rock. I thought it was pretty, so I kept it to show to you.” She handed the object to Jed.

“It’s an arrowhead,” he said. “One of the edges is broken, so a warrior must have thrown it away. Where did you get it?”

“Oh, just by one of the tepees,” Mandy answered.

Jed stuck it in his pocket. “What are you going to do with it?” his sister asked.

“I’ll just keep it for a while,” he answered. “The Injuns took my knife the day they captured us, so I don’t have anything to cut stuff with. This is almost as sharp as my knife was.”

Little Deer found them a few minutes later. “Come,” he said. “Eat.”

The meal that evening consisted of roasted buffalo meat, manzanita berries, and a strange-looking root that had been roasted until it was soft. Mandy turned up her nose at the last item. “Yecch!” she said. “I’m not gonna eat that!”

“Fine,” Jed said, taking it from her. “I’ll eat yours.”

While they were eating, Mandy watched as a squaw close by prepared to cook some chunks of meat. Earlier, the woman had scooped out a shallow depression in the earth and filled it with large, round stones. She had built her fire over the stones.

As the girl watched, the squaw dug another shallow hole in the ground, and then laid a large piece of rawhide in the hole.

The material had been liberally greased with bear fat. The woman made a trip to the creek, then returned with a rawhide jug of water and poured it into the rawhide-lined cavity in the ground.

She raked several of the stones out of the fire with a long branch. The stones were now red-hot. Picking them up between two sticks, she dropped them one at a time into the water. Each time a stone hit the water, Mandy heard a sizzling noise and saw a puff of steam.

The water began to boil, and the woman added the chunks of buffalo meat. From time to time, she added more of the heated stones to the water.

Mandy looked at Jed. "Did you see that?" she whispered. "That woman is boiling the food, just as if she had a real stove."

The next morning, Jed awoke and heard noises outside the tepee. He opened the flap of the tent. It was still dark outside. He pulled on his boots and slipped out into the darkness. Most of the braves of the tribe were mounted, preparing to ride out of camp. Chief Howaka was at the head of the column.

Jed spotted Little Deer, and walked over to him. "What's going on?" he asked the Indian boy quietly.

"Hunt buffalo," the Comanche replied. "Prepare Feast of Full Moon."

"Do they want me to go with them?" Jed asked.

The other youth shook his head. "This hunt sacred," he answered. "Nemena only!" Jed shrugged, and went back to bed.

Late that afternoon, the warriors returned from the hunt. They had been successful, and the horses were loaded with hides and meat. The camp buzzed with the excitement of a successful hunt. There would be plenty to eat at the Feast of the Full Moon.

That evening, when Little Deer brought their dinner, he also brought the hated rawhide shackles. "I must tie," he said simply.

As the Comanche youth tied his ankles, Jed asked, "Why are you doing this again?"

Little Deer looked up. "Chief Howaka," he said. "Feast of Full Moon start on new day."

"Tomorrow?" Jed asked.

The other boy nodded. "Tomorrow," he repeated.

Jed studied his face. "Tell us about the Feast of the Full Moon," he said. "There is a full moon every month. Do you do this every month?"

The Indian shook his head. "This feast sacred," he replied. "One time each year. Three days."

"Tell us about it," Jed urged again.

Little Deer looked around carefully before he answered, just to be certain no other Comanches were within hearing distance. "Tomorrow," he said slowly, "Day for races, and for—" he paused, searching for the right English word.

"Games?" Jed guessed.

The Comanche nodded. "All day, horse race, arrow shoot, games," he said. "Night come, peyote," he explained, referring to the narcotic taken from the peyote plant. "Braves take peyote, no squaw, no little ones. Next night come, all Nemena take. Three night, Chief Howaka take. You see chief."

Jed and Mandy listened intently to the young Indian's explanation of the Feast of the Full Moon and the peyote ceremonies. Jed tried to sort out the information the boy was volunteering so freely.

"So tomorrow night," he said, "just the braves take the peyote, right?"

Little Deer nodded.

"Then the next night, everyone in the whole village takes it."

Little Deer nodded again.

Mandy interrupted. "Do the papooses take it, too?" she asked.

Little Deer shook his head. "For Nemena who walk," he answered. "Little ones walk, they take."

"And then the third night," Jed continued, "only Chief Howaka takes it?"

The Indian nodded. "You stand to Chief," he said, "at council fire."

"Will he let us go free?" Mandy asked.

Little Deer shook his head vehemently. "Nemena tribe never let prisoners go," he said, repeating the message he had given them a few days earlier. "Warriors kill after Feast of Full Moon."

Jed drew in his breath sharply, and Mandy scooted over close to him. The three sat silently for several minutes.

“What does the peyote do to people?” Jed asked.

Little Deer stood to his feet. “Brave take peyote,” he answered, “brave see strange things. Brave feel strange things. Spirits talk with brave, give him courage and...and strength. After spirits go, sleep long.” He turned to leave.

“Will they make us take it?” Mandy asked fearfully.

The Comanche youth faced her. “For Nemena!” he said forcefully. “Never white man. Never white squaw.” He turned away and hurried into the darkness.

Jed turned to Mandy. “Do you see what this means?” he said, his voice husky with excitement. “This is our chance! If the Comanches are all drugged up for this ceremony, it’ll give us the chance to escape!”

“How would we get away?” Mandy questioned. “He tied our feet again.”

“It’ll take a few minutes, but we can untie them,” Jed insisted. He sat quietly for a few minutes as he began to plan their escape. “Lord help us,” he prayed quietly. “This may be our only chance!”

“We should go on the second night,” he told Mandy finally. “The whole camp will be taking the peyote, and that’s our best

opportunity.” He turned and faced Mandy. “Let’s pray,” he told her, “that God will make everything go right for us to escape. I don’t want to stand before the chief on the third night.”

## Chapter 11 – COMANCHE FESTIVITIES

The Cartwrights had given up all hope that Jed and Mandy would ever be found, and were now resigned to the grim fact that their children were still in the hands of the dreaded Comanches, or had already been killed by them. The posse had searched for several days but could find no trace of the young people or their captors. The trail seemed to come to an end on the grassy plain where Pa had finally given up searching that first night.

Jake Cartwright was known and loved across much of St. Louis, and dozens of men volunteered their time and help, but it was no use. The best trackers in the country could not pick up the Comanches' trail. It was as though the Indians had simply vanished like the steam from the spout of a whistling teakettle.

After several days of searching, the men returned to their farms and jobs. Prayer was offered at church for Jed and Mandy,

but very few expected to ever see them again. The Comanches were known for their brutality. Everyone realized that there was little hope of the captives being freed.

At first Pa refused to give up hope. He and Willard rode nearly halfway to St. Joseph, hoping to run across the savages by chance. They crossed and recrossed the prairies, but saw no signs of the red men. Finally, even Pa and Willard returned home.

The Cartwright mansion was strangely quiet during those trying days. The servants talked in whispers. Laughter was a thing of the past. The Cartwright household, the very model of happiness, was now in mourning.

Nathan stayed home from school. He couldn't face the questions and comments of the other students. He didn't want to see any of his friends, not even Merle Watkins, as the very presence of the neighbor boy reminded him of Jed. Nathan was blaming the entire ordeal on himself. *If only I had stayed with them*, he told himself a thousand times during those difficult days, *this wouldn't have happened*. He was trying to carry the blame for the disappearance of Mandy and Jed, and his young shoulders just weren't strong enough to bear that heavy burden.

Even Wolf knew that something was wrong. His master was gone. The huge dog lay on the veranda during the day, and on the floor of Jed's room at night, his head on his paws as though he also was in deep sorrow. He refused to eat, and even Nathan noticed and was worried.

"It almost would have been better," Mrs. Cartwright commented after the first week of sleepless nights had passed, "to have been told that they were killed. This uncertainty is the worst thing of all. And perhaps we'll never know!"

The Cartwright family was in deep sorrow, and there was only one place to turn in their grief. They cried out to their heavenly Father, and asked Him to help them bear the burden of their loss.

The Comanche camp buzzed with excitement. The day had come for the Feast of the Full Moon. Little Deer led Jed and Mandy outside the tepee, frowning as he did so. He growled at Jed as they ate, "You and Yellow Hair not leave camp! Go any place, not leave camp."

"Can you take these hobbles off our legs today?" Jed asked.

The crippled Comanche shook his head. "Chief Howaka not want," he answered curtly. "Spirits come tonight. Spirits see you not Nemena. Much trouble!" He turned abruptly and walked away.

"What's wrong with him today?" Mandy said, staring after Little Deer. She took a bite of dried cactus fruit. "I've never seen him so unfriendly. He acts like he got up on the wrong side of his buffalo skin."

Jed nodded. "He's afraid of something, Mandy," he answered. "I think it probably has something to do with the Feast of the Full Moon ceremonies tonight. I sure wish that I knew what was going to happen."

"What do you think the Feast of the Full Moon is, Jed?"

Jed paused with a strip of buffalo meat halfway to his mouth. "I'm not sure, but I do know this: it's some kind of religious ceremony. The Comanche religion stresses visionary experiences, and that's why they use the peyote plant. It makes them see things that aren't really there and experience things that aren't real. I think they see strange colors and hear voices and that kind of thing. But the Injuns are deceived into thinking that the peyote is bringing them closer to the spirits."

“They’re not Christians, are they?” Mandy asked innocently, her eyes wide. “Do they know about Jesus?”

“Oh, no.” Jed shook his head. “They’re not Christians. The Comanche people believe that there are helpful spirits in the rocks and in the thunder, and they try to somehow get in touch with them. They believe that there are animal spirits that help certain people, if a person can win their favor.”

A troubled look crossed Mandy’s face. “So they really don’t know about Jesus, do they?”

Jed shook his head. “No, they really don’t, Mandy. Someone needs to take the Gospel to them and tell them that Jesus died for them and wants to be their Savior.” He was thoughtful for a moment. “The white people seem concerned about protecting ourselves from the Injuns, and we certainly need to, but no one seems to remember that these people have eternal souls. We’re not doing anything to reach them with the Gospel.”

Tears glistened in Mandy’s eyes. “If Little Deer dies trusting in the Comanche spirits, will God take him to heaven?”

Jed sadly shook his head. “No one goes to heaven unless they have trusted Jesus as their Savior, Mandy,” he replied gently. “You know that the Bible teaches that.”

“But what if Little Deer doesn’t know about Jesus?” she persisted. “Wouldn’t God take him to heaven anyway?”

“Some people think so, but that’s not what the Bible teaches. The only people who will go to heaven are those who have received Jesus as Savior. Little Deer needs Jesus.”

“Can’t *we* tell him, Jed? Can’t we? I don’t want him to go to hell, Jed, because he...” Her voice trailed off. She blinked back the tears and looked away across the rows of tepees.

Jed was silent.

A few minutes later, the young people heard shouting and cheering coming from the south end of the village. They shuffled awkwardly along, their rawhide shackles making walking difficult. The tepees were empty and quiet; the village seemed deserted.

“Hurry, Jed,” Mandy called impatiently, “I wanna see what’s going on!”

A crowd of spectators was gathered along the edge of the village, facing a grassy plain. Out on the field, a group of young

braves was playing a popular Comanche game. Each player had a curved stick about three feet long. One player was rolling a small wooden hoop along the ground by nudging it with his stick. Players on the opposing team were trying their best to get possession of the hoop.

The youth gave a flip of his stick and the hoop suddenly passed to another player, who continued to keep it rolling. An opposing team member was able to seize possession of the hoop and sent it rolling in the opposite direction, toward the other end of the field. The little hoop traveled back and forth repeatedly across the playing field as possession of the hoop changed hands rapidly.

One player was finally able to roll the hoop across a line marked at his team's end of the field, and the spectators went wild, some cheering their approval, others stamping the ground to show their disgust. Jed and Mandy had chosen to root for the other team and they both groaned when the opposing team scored.

The hoop was brought back into play and the fast-paced action resumed. The participants raced back and forth across the playing field again and again as control of the hoop kept

changing hands. Jed marveled at the stamina of the young Comanche men as they ran and ran without seeming to grow tired. "These braves are strong," he told Mandy. "They've been running full speed for at least five minutes and they don't seem at all out of breath."

One of the players on the team Jed and Mandy had chosen gave the hoop a sharp whack with his stick and the hoop left the ground, sailing over the heads of the participants to land, still rolling, just a few yards from the goal line. A tall Comanche sprinted forward and guided the hoop across the line for a goal. "We scored!" Mandy cheered. "Our team made one!"

Jed saw a brave standing to one side with a short pine stick in his hand. From time to time, he would cut a notch in the bark with a flint knife. Jed realized that the man was keeping score. He slipped over to stand within a few yards of the brave and saw that one end of the stick had three notches, and the other end had seven. When Jed and Mandy's team scored again, Jed watched closely. The scorekeeper marked a notch in the end with three, and Jed was disappointed.

He walked over to stand beside Mandy. “The score’s seven to four,” he told her. “Our team’s losing.” Just then, the opposing team scored another goal.

After a time, Mandy noticed a circle of young Indians kneeling on the ground at one end of the crowd. She tugged at Jed’s elbow. “Come on, Jed,” she begged, “let’s go see what those children are doing.”

The Indian youngsters were playing another favorite game of the Comanches. A girl was shaking her hand rapidly up and down as Jed and Mandy approached. She cast something on the ground, and the circle of children leaned forward to see it.

Several polished plum stones lay on the ground. The stones each had one side stained darker than the other. The girl that had cast the stones observed them for a moment, and then said a single Comanche word. The children in the circle nodded, and she gathered the stones in her hand again.

Another girl cast her stones on the ground, looked at them for a moment, then scowled in frustration and handed one of her plum stones to the other player. The first girl smiled and then cast her stones on the ground again.

It took Jed a moment or two to figure out the game. Each player would cast her stones on the ground, and then count the number of pits that were dark-side-up. If a player had more dark than light, she had to give one of her stones to her opponent. If there were an equal number of light and dark, or if there were more light than dark, no stones changed hands.

One of the players was clearly losing. She had only four stones left, while her opponent had about a dozen. The girl cast the four stones to the ground, and got three dark, one light. She picked up the stones, threw them in anger at the feet of the winning girl, and then walked away. A boy quickly knelt in her place and the winner began to divide the plum stones for the next game.

Jed and Mandy shuffled back to the playing field. The hoop game was over, and two lines of squaws were on the field, facing each other. One of the women showed a small bone, and then concealed it in her hands. She passed the bone to the next player in line, doing her best to keep the members of the other team from seeing the bone as it was passed. She then continued to hold her hands cupped together in front of her.

The next woman pretended to pass the bone to the player beside her, then turned and passed it back to the player that had given it to her. The women passed the bone back and forth along the line, sometimes passing it, other times merely pretending. After a few passes, Jed was not sure who had the bone.

Finally, the women stood still, their hands cupped together in front of them. One squaw from the other team stepped forward and pointed to one player. The woman chosen opened her hands, revealing the bone.

“How did she know where it was?” Mandy asked.

Jed shrugged. “I have no idea,” he replied. “I certainly didn’t know who had it.”

The other team then took possession of the little bone, passing it from one player to another as the first team had done. A woman from the first team stepped forward and pointed to a player, who opened her hands to show them empty. The squaw then chose another player, again with the same result. After the third failure to find the bone, the woman who had it opened her hands.

Just as in the hoop game, a man was keeping score by cutting notches in a short stick with a flint knife. Jed watched

closely. When a player guessed correctly the bone’s location, a point was scored. For each incorrect guess, a point was given to the opposing team.

The games and competition continued for much of the day, with a short break for the mid-day meal. The atmosphere in the camp was one of festivity and excitement. Jed and Mandy wandered from one unusual activity to another, fascinated by the strange Comanche games. The villagers seemed friendly, pausing to smile and gesture each time they saw the white young people, but they never invited them to participate in any of the games.

“I wonder if white men have ever seen these games that the Injuns play,” Jed commented. “I’ve never seen anything like them.”

“They are unusual, aren’t they?” Mandy agreed. She laughed suddenly. “Can you imagine what the other kids at school will think when get back? We’ll have a lot of new games for recess.”

Jed chuckled at the idea. He noticed that Mandy had said ‘when we get back’ rather than ‘if we get back’, and he was pleased. *Lord, help us to trust You*, he prayed silently as he

slipped an arm around Mandy's slender shoulders. *Keep Mandy safe from harm. Help us to get back to Ma and Pa safely.* He paused. *Lord, please let it be soon!*

Late in the afternoon, the playing field was cleared, and nearly every brave in the tribe disappeared for a short time. The crowd of spectators grew restless with anticipation, and Jed realized that something important was about to take place. There was a feeling of expectancy in the air, and Jed figured that the upcoming competition, whatever it was, must be the most important event of the day.

Two braves drove a post about five feet long into a hole in the ground in the center of the playing field. When the post was in place, the men secured a small gourd to the top, about eight inches in diameter. A hush swept across the crowd of spectators, and the atmosphere of tense expectancy increased.

Moments later, Mandy jumped as a shrill war cry echoed across the plain. The braves of the village, dressed out in their feathered war bonnets and colorful war paint, came riding out from behind the rows of tepees at each end of the field. Some of the braves wore impressive battle helmets, which consisted of buffalo scalps complete with horns. Each warrior was armed for

battle. The spectators cheered when the braves made their stunning appearance.

Jed sucked in his breath sharply as he realized that one of the warriors was riding Midnight. The man had his horse! The boy clenched his teeth in anger, but there was nothing he could do.

The two lines of mounted warriors galloped at full speed across the field, the lines crossing and recrossing. The exhibition was colorful and breathtaking, and Jed realized that the timing of every single rider was crucial.

"Do you realize what would happen," he said to Mandy, "if just one of these riders is a split-second late in crossing? Somebody's gonna get hurt!"

But the demonstration of horsemanship continued without a flaw. The riders rode faster and faster, now in a figure eight pattern, each line of warriors riding across the path of the other line when they crossed in the center of the figure. To Jed's amazement, no horses collided. Finally, the two groups separated and rode to the opposite ends of the field. They came to a halt, their horses lined up on the lines that had served as goals for the hoop game.

A drum began to beat, and Jed's pulse quickened. Something was about to happen! Two warriors, one at each end of the field, rode their horses forward two or three yards. The drum gave one loud boom, and the riders spurred their horses forward.

Jed held his breath as the two riders galloped toward each other at full speed. Faster and faster they rode, straight toward each other! Mandy covered her eyes. At the last possible second, the riders turned their horses slightly, and the animals passed within inches of each other. "I hope that brave doesn't try that with Midnight," Jed muttered to himself.

The next thing he saw took his breath away. The two riders continued to the ends of the field. Each warrior turned his horse in a wide circle, then came dashing back across the field. There would be several feet between the horses as they passed this time.

Jed glanced from one speeding warrior to the other. Each man produced an arrow and proceeded to place it in position on the string of the bow he carried. The horses never slackened their pace.

As Jed watched, a warrior suddenly dropped over the side of his horse. The boy thought that the man had fallen. But then, a bow and arrow appeared beneath the horse's neck, followed by the man's head! In amazement, Jed realized that the Indian was preparing to shoot his weapon from underneath the galloping horse!

He glanced across the field at the other Comanche, and the other rider was in the same position. The second man was on the side of the horse facing the audience, and Jed could see that he had one foot hooked over the top of the small Comanche saddle.

The horses flashed past the post in the center of the field. There was a sudden flicker of movement, and two arrows flew. Jed's eyes jumped back to the post in the center. To his astonishment, both arrows had struck the target!

The crowd cheered, and Jed shook his head in amazement. "Did you see what they did?" he exclaimed to Mandy. "There's not a white man in the world that could shoot like that."

The drum began to beat again. A young boy ran out to the center of the field, stood on tiptoe, and pulled the arrows from the gourd. Another rider at each end of the field was preparing to ride.

The drum boomed, and the performance was repeated. The two new riders dashed toward each other at top speed, swerving to the side at the last possible moment. They rode to the end of the field, turned their mounts around and dashed past the post, shooting from underneath the horse as they passed. Again, the results were the same. Both arrows struck the gourd. Jed was impressed.

After several pairs of warriors had ridden, the gourd target was replaced. The old one was riddled with arrow holes. Jed realized that not a single warrior had missed his shot.

He turned toward the waiting riders. His heart pounded as he saw that one of the horses was Midnight! “Be careful, mister,” he silently instructed the Comanche rider.

The boy held his breath as his beautiful horse was ridden at breakneck speed toward the other horse. “Turn! Turn!” he wanted to call, but he remained silent. To his immense relief, the two horses flashed past each other without touching. When the warriors shot, the arrows struck the target.

When all the Comanche warriors had ridden, there was one lone arrow imbedded in the post, just an inch from the top. All the other shots had hit the target. Two braves ran out to the

center of the field and removed the post, carrying it to the side of the field.

The drum began to beat again, and Jed realized that the exhibition was not over. The warriors were preparing to ride again. The boy noticed that each warrior now wore a round war shield on one forearm, approximately two feet in diameter.

When the drum boomed, two riders dashed their mounts toward each other. Each man pulled an arrow and fitted it to his bow, then dropped beneath his horse in the same spectacular firing position. Jed was puzzled. This time, there was no target in the center of the field.

Jed saw the one brave draw back the bowstring. The shield was still in place on the arm that held the bow. In shock, the boy realized that the warriors were now going to shoot at each other!

The horses flashed past each other at full gallop, perhaps twenty-five feet apart. An arrow shot from each bow, but neither man fell from his speeding horse. Jed frowned. What had happened to the arrows?

As the warriors straightened up in the saddles at the end of their run, Jed blinked in astonishment. He couldn’t believe his eyes. Each man’s shield had an arrow imbedded in the center!

“You won’t catch me volunteering to try that,” Jed said to Mandy. “Can you imagine being able to shoot like that?”

Two more pairs of warriors repeated the performance, and then the horsemen rode triumphantly from the field. The crowd leaped to their feet, cheering their braves. Jed knew that he and Mandy had just witnessed some of the best horsemanship in the world.

## Chapter 12 – PEYOTE CEREMONY

A hush settled over the Comanche village as the women prepared the evening meal. The braves sat around outside the tepees, chatting quietly about the events of the day. Jed and Mandy were ushered back to their tepee by Little Deer.

“That was some riding and shooting!” Jed remarked to the Indian youth when they were well away from the others.

The young Comanche just nodded. “Stay here,” he ordered, when they had reached the tepee. “I bring food.”

When he returned with the meal, Little Deer placed the food on the ground and then turned to the two young captives with a stern look on his bronze countenance. “Do not leave tepee for all night,” he instructed them gruffly. “White men not to see peyote—” He paused, searching for the right word. “Not to see peyote—”

“Ceremony,” Jed finished helpfully.

The young Comanche nodded. "Not see peyote ceremony."

"Why not?" Jed asked.

Little Deer acted as if Jed should have been intelligent enough to figure it out by himself. "Peyote ceremony sacred," he replied impatiently. "Spirits angry if see white boy and girl in ceremony."

He turned to go, but Jed grabbed his arm. "Little Deer, wait."

The crippled youth stared at Jed impatiently.

Jed's heart was pounding furiously. "Little Deer, do you know who Jesus is?"

Little Deer shook his head. "No," he said slowly, and then his eyes lit up as an idea occurred to him. "He your friend?"

"Yes, but He's more than just my friend. He's God."

"God?" Apparently, Little Deer had never heard the word.

"God," Jed repeated. "He's..." Jed stopped, confused. How could he explain God to a savage who had never heard of Him? "He's the Great Spirit who made the earth. He made the trees and the buffalo and the rivers and...and people. He made you and me."

A strange look crossed Little Deer's face. "You know Great Spirit who made earth? He your friend?"

Jed nodded.

"No!" The word was uttered forcefully. "You not know Great Spirit! You not tell me truth."

"But I do, Little Deer!" Jed protested. "His name is Jesus. And He died for you and me, Little Deer. Jesus died to pay for our sins."

Little Deer looked confused. "I not know that word," he said. "Sinz."

"God is the Great Spirit who made the earth. Sin is anything that we do that God says is wrong," Jed told him, searching for the right explanation. "Look, if you have a—a knife that I like and I take it from you, God says that is wrong. That is sin."

"If you take knife from me, you are stronger," Little Deer replied, as if that justified the theft.

"But if I take it, I have done wrong," Jed reasoned. "God says so. It doesn't matter if I am stronger; it is still wrong." The look on Little Deer's face told Jed that he was not convinced.

Jed prayed for wisdom as he continued. "Last week you told me that one of the braves in the village had killed another man and taken his wife. Was it right for the brave to do that?"

"Right?"

"Was it good? Would God say it was good?"

"I not know," Little Deer replied. "I not know God."

Jed dropped to his knees in the grass beside the tepee, and Little Deer did the same. Jed did his best to present God's way of salvation to the young Indian, explaining what sin is, and that sin had a penalty. He told how Jesus, God's Son, had died on the cross for the sins of all people, both Indian and white. He did his best to explain the resurrection, and knew from the puzzled expression on Little Deer's face that the young Comanche was having trouble understanding how Jesus could have risen from the dead.

"So God offers us salvation as a free gift," Jed finished, praying fervently but realizing that Little Deer was not understanding much of what he was telling him. The young Comanche's English was not very good, and the Gospel had never before been presented to him. "He loves us, and wants to

forgive us for our sins so that He can take us to heaven. All we have to do is repent of our sins and ask Him to save us."

Little Deer stood to his feet. "This white man's spirit talk," he said stiffly. "Not for Nemena."

"But this is the truth!" Jed protested. "It's in the Bible. Jesus died for you, and wants to forgive your sins."

Little Deer turned his back and walked away.

Later that evening, as darkness crept across the valley, Jed and Mandy opened the door of their tepee prison slightly and saw the men of the village making their way toward two large tepees on the south side of the compound. A short while later the sound of chanting floated across the camp and Jed wondered what strange ritual was taking place. The chanting was replaced by a strange, mournful wailing, interspersed with discordant singing.

Mandy snuggled close to Jed. "I'm afraid, Jed," she whimpered, squeezing his arm so tightly that Jed cringed. "This is so...so strange. It's terrible."

Jed peeled her fingers from his arm and then wrapped his arm around her shoulders, drawing her close. She was trembling. "The Lord is with us, Mandy."

“But this is so strange.”

“I have an idea that this ceremony may involve demon worship,” Jed said softly, shivering involuntarily as he said the words. “The peyote may cause the Comanche people to see demons.”

“Demons? Like in the Bible?”

Jed nodded. “Yes. Like in the Bible.”

The eerie wailing increased in volume, and then suddenly stopped. All was quiet for several minutes, and then war drums began to beat, with a slow, steady rhythm that possessed a military precision. Jed could almost imagine the Comanche braves marching in rigid columns past a reviewing stand, much as white soldiers would do. The sound of the drums was quiet, subdued, barely audible above the noises of the night.

The drums stopped, and the night noises prevailed. An owl hooted close by. “What do you think they’re doing now?” Mandy whispered.

Jed shook his head. “I really don’t know, Mandy.”

The drums sounded again, this time with a pounding, irregular rhythm that reverberated across the night air. The drums grew louder and louder. The noise swelled in volume,

loud, irritating, insistent. The hypnotic rhythm set Jed’s nerves on edge and made him feel weak and nauseous. A strange, unfamiliar feeling of fear and confusion swept over him.

Mandy covered her ears with her hands. “What are they doing?” she cried. Her eyes were wide with fright.

“I don’t know,” Jed answered, unaware that he was shouting to be heard above the cacophony of the drums. “I have no idea what they’re doing, but it somehow makes me think that maybe they’re calling up evil spirits.”

Mandy sprang across the tepee and leaped into his arms. “Are they really?”

“I don’t know, but the rhythm makes me feel fearful and uneasy, almost as if some great evil is lurking nearby. You can almost feel the power of Satan at work tonight.”

Mandy cried out in fear. “What are we going to do?”

Jed held her close, suddenly aware that his own heart was pounding with terror. “I don’t know, but the Lord is able to watch over us. Remember our verse? What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee.” Mandy said the verse aloud with him.

The sound of the drums increased in tempo and volume. Faster and faster, louder and louder. The Comanche camp

echoed with the throbbing, pulsing beat. Mandy's face was contorted with terror. Jed reached out and covered Mandy's ears with his hands, trying to blot out the fearsome sound, and Mandy reached up and did the same for him. Jed prayed silently, fervently.

The pounding rhythm stopped as abruptly as it had started. Jed lowered his hands from his sister's ears and pulled her smaller hands down from his own. The camp was strangely silent. The young people waited anxiously.

A wolf howled mournfully, sounding as if the wild creature was just yards away. Mandy shivered in Jed's arms. "That sounded like he was right outside our tepee!"

"The night air carries sound and makes it sound like things are closer than they really are," Jed replied, trying to reassure her. "I'm sure that the wolf isn't in our camp. A wolf wouldn't come this close."

Just then, a second wolf answered, sounding as if he was sitting just outside the door of the tepee. Jed tilted his head, trying to determine where the sound was coming from. "That wasn't a wolf," he whispered. "The Injuns are doing that! They're making animal calls."

A chorus of wolf calls sounded across the village, and then the night air came alive with a confusion of yapping, howling, barking wild animals. Jed heard the screech of a bobcat, the growl of an angry bear, and even the shriek of a wounded rabbit. Wild turkeys gobbled and called; mountain lions screeched and snarled; wild javelina pigs snorted angrily. It was as though the village was being overrun by a stampede of wild animals.

"Where are all the animals coming from?" Mandy cried. In the dim moonlight that filtered through the opening in the top of the tepee, Jed could see that her eyes were wide with fright.

"Why are they coming here?"

"They're not real animals," Jed replied. "Unless I'm mistaken, the Injuns are making those sounds."

"But they sound so real!"

"It sounds like half the animals in the whole country are right outside our tepee, doesn't it? But they're not real; the Injuns are making the sounds."

"Is the peyote making them do this?"

Jed wasn't sure. "Maybe the peyote is making them do this, or maybe they're doing this before they even take the peyote. I don't know."

The strange animal cries continued for nearly half an hour. Jed and Mandy could hear animal fights taking place; they could hear packs of wolves hunting together. They both realized that the sounds were of human origin; somehow the Comanches were imitating the various animals perfectly.

The animal noises died away and all was quiet. Mandy held up one hand. "Listen!"

Jed listened intently for several seconds, and then he heard it. A flock of geese was flying somewhere in the distance to the south of the camp; he could faintly hear their honking in the darkness. The sound steadily grew louder and more distinct. "They're coming closer," Mandy observed.

The unseen flock of geese passed close to the village, honking the entire time. As they reached the edge of the first row of tepees, the sound was almost deafening. Mandy cautiously opened the door of the tepee and peeked skyward. "I don't see them, Jed. The moon is bright, but I don't see a single goose." The vigorous honking continued for another half a minute and then gradually subsided as the flock swept toward the east and left the village behind.

"I couldn't see any of them, Jed! There must have been hundreds and hundreds, but I didn't see a one. How come?"

Jed drew a deep breath. "There weren't any geese, Mandy. Geese don't migrate at night like that."

Mandy was puzzled. "Then what were they?"

"The Injuns were making the sounds, Mandy. There wasn't a single goose anywhere near this village."

"But I heard them!" the girl protested. "There were hundreds of them! They came from somewhere in the west, flew along the lower edge of the camp, and disappeared to the east. I heard them. Didn't you?"

"Yes, I heard them," Jed admitted, "but it wasn't really a flock of geese. It was the Comanches."

"But how could they do that? I know that I heard the geese. People couldn't make noises that sounded like that. And there were hundreds of them!"

Jed hesitated, and finally decided to tell her the entire story. "I think it was demons. The spirits that these people worship are actually demons. Either the demons are making the noises, or they're enabling the Comanches to somehow make the noises."

"How many Injuns are in this village?"

Jed stopped and thought for a moment. "I'm not sure," he said finally. "Around two hundred, I guess."

"How many braves?"

"Forty or fifty, maybe."

"Then how could forty or fifty men make that much noise? I heard hundreds and hundreds of geese!"

"Maybe there are several hundred demons here tonight."

Mandy threw herself against him and clutched him tightly.

"That's scary!"

"We need to pray," Jed told her. "The Bible says that God is more powerful than Satan. The Lord can protect us."

Jed and Mandy dropped to their knees on the grassy floor of the tepee, holding hands for the reassurance of the other's presence. Mandy's head suddenly shot up. "Listen!"

A low rumble sounded across the stillness of the village, and Jed recognized the fearsome sound immediately. Thousands of buffalo were stampeding across the plains toward the village! The staccato beat of their pounding hooves filled the air, echoing through the night. As the herd swept closer to the village, Jed could actually hear the snorts and bellows of some of the bull buffalo.

Mandy clutched his arm. "What is it? Horses?"

"Buffalo," Jed answered quietly.

She sprang to her feet in alarm. "There must be thousands of them! They'll run right over the camp!"

Jed dropped to the ground and lay flat, spreading his arms wide against the earth. "There aren't any buffalo, Mandy," he said calmly. "I can't feel any vibrations from the ground. It's another trick of the spirits."

And then, suddenly, all was quiet. The phantom herd of buffalo had disappeared into the realm of darkness from which they had come. The drums were silent; the wild animals had gone. An eerie silence stole across the village.

"Lord, we don't really know what's happening tonight, but we ask that You would be with us," Jed prayed softly. "Keep us safe tonight, Lord. We believe that there are demons here tonight, but we ask You to keep us safe in Your hands. We know that You are more powerful than Satan. Help us to get home soon, Lord. And please, help Ma and Pa not to worry about us. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen."

Mandy squeezed his hand. "Jed," she said softly in a timid voice, "I want to ask Jesus to save me. I want to do it now."

Jed's heart leaped. "Now, Mandy?"

"If there are demons here tonight, then these people belong to the devil. I want to belong to Jesus."

Jed rejoiced as his sister bowed her head and quietly asked Jesus to forgive her sins and become her Savior. She ended her prayer with the words, "Thank you, Lord Jesus. Now I belong to You."

Jed hugged her.

Mandy and Jed continued kneeling side by side on the grass floor of their tepee prison, holding hands and listening intently. All was quiet. Their eyelids became heavy, and the captives fell asleep.

Some time later a sharp noise awakened Jed, and he crawled over and stuck his head out the door. Two braves were wandering down the path between the rows of tepees, staggering as if they were drunk. Jed saw another Comanche lying on the ground, completely overpowered by the peyote. As Jed's eyes grew accustomed to the moonlight, he could make out the forms of other Indians incapacitated by the drug.

Mandy stirred. "Whash happening, Jed?" she slurred sleepily without opening her eyes.

"Everything's all right, Mandy," he replied softly. "Go back to sleep." He lay back down and was asleep almost instantly.

The next morning, Jed and Mandy shuffled through the village. Some of the braves were sleeping on the ground, still under the effects of the peyote ceremony of the night before. The village was fairly quiet.

Little Deer didn't make an appearance until the sun was directly overhead. His face was hard and his eyes held a glazed look as he knelt and dropped two cold pieces of buffalo meat in the grass, along with a handful of manzanita berries. Mandy opened her mouth to speak, but Jed caught her eye and shook his head, warning her to be silent. She nodded to show that she understood. The camp was quiet as they ate their meal.

By early afternoon, the Comanche villagers had begun to reappear and the festivities had resumed. Games and competition took place on the grassy field, but there was less participation than the day before. Many of the men of the village walked about as if they were in a daze. Mandy and Jed stayed fairly close to their tepee and did their best to simply stay out of the way.

Late in the afternoon, Little Deer brought a second meal to the tepee for Jed and Mandy, as well as instructions not to leave the tepee for the rest of the night. He left abruptly.

As they ate the familiar buffalo meat, Jed looked around to make sure that no one was nearby, and then turned to Mandy. “Tonight’s the night!” he said excitedly. “Tonight we make our escape! The whole village will be under the influence of the peyote. You saw what it did to the braves last night.” He grinned in anticipation. “When these Comanches wake up tomorrow, there will be two less people and one less horse.”

“How will we get loose?” the girl asked. “Our feet are always tied.”

“It’s no problem,” her brother said confidently. “I’ve been studying these things for several days. I can untie them, even in the dark. It will take a few minutes, but we’ll have all night to get away.”

The sun dropped low in the west, and darkness stole across the valley. The Comanche people—braves, squaws, and children, began to make their way to the south side of the village for the peyote ceremony. Jed’s heart pounded rapidly as he realized what was going to take place that night.

He could hardly wait. A few days of hard riding were ahead, but soon he and Mandy would see Ma and Pa again!

But it was not to be that easy. Two braves suddenly appeared beside the tepee with several lengths of rawhide in their hands. They thrust Jed and Mandy into the tepee, then bound their hands tightly behind their backs, looping the rawhide around and around and knotting it tightly.

As the two Comanche men slipped from the tepee, Jed gave a groan of dismay. He was tied so tightly that he could hardly move. There was no way he could untie these bonds. His hopes for escape were shattered.

## Chapter 13 – ESCAPE ATTEMPT

Jed's heart sank as he realized that his plans for escape had been foiled. Apparently the Comanches had anticipated the possibility of just such an attempt, and had now made sure that it would not happen. And tomorrow night was the third night of the Feast of the Full Moon, the night that he and Mandy would stand before Chief Howaka for the decision as to whether they would live or die.

"This rope is hurting my hands," Mandy whimpered. "We'll never get loose."

"There goes our escape plan," Jed said, bitter with disappointment. "And tomorrow night is the Council of the Full Moon!"

Jed knew better than to expect any mercy from the Comanche chief. The Comanches had always been known for

their cruelty, even to women and children. Tomorrow night would be no different.

The boy had tried to find out from Little Deer why the hunting party had kidnapped them in the first place, but the crippled Indian either didn't know, or wouldn't say. Jed had finally decided that perhaps he and Mandy had been taken by the warriors to be killed by the chief as an act of revenge against white settlers who had taken the Comanches' hunting grounds.

Strange chanting floated across the stillness of the night air, similar to what they had heard the night before, and Jed knew that the peyote ceremony was in progress. Unlike last night, he could now hear the voices of women and children chanting along with the men. The chorus of chanting voices rose and fell in unison. Jed was amazed. More than two hundred voices were blended in perfect harmony, flawless in their timing. The entire tribe was chanting together as one man. A short while later, the chants turned to a mournful, wailing song.

Jed and Mandy were both lying down, as it was very uncomfortable to sit up with their hands tied behind them. Jed rolled over on his side and struggled against the bonds, trying desperately to loosen them. He pulled and twisted so savagely

that he chafed the skin on his wrists, but it was of no use. The rawhide thongs were as tight as ever.

The boy lay panting from his exertions. He had tried with all his strength, but had accomplished nothing. “We’ll never get loose from these!” he told Mandy. “These braves knew what they were doing.”

In the darkness, Mandy began to sob. Jed had raised her hopes somewhat with his talk of escape, and now it was obvious that escape was impossible. The girl too had heard stories of the savagery of the Comanches, and how that even women and children were sometimes tortured before they were finally killed.

The boom of a drum cut through the night air like a rifle shot, and the discordant singing abruptly gave way to the pounding beat of a number of drums. The tempo increased and the hypnotic rhythm from the night before echoed across the village. Jed felt a strange fear rising within him. He tried to pray, but felt as if he could not. The power of Satan was so very real tonight; evil seemed to lurk in the air. Bewildered and afraid, Jed simply waited.

After several minutes, the drums fell silent. As if on cue, the village suddenly resounded with the growls, shrieks and calls of

numerous wild animals. Coyotes howled; cougars roared; frogs sang; buffalo bellowed. The animal noises of the night before were now multiplied, as the women and children of the village had now joined the warriors. The resulting chaos of sound was both deafening and terrifying.

Mandy sobbed aloud. “They’re gonna kill us, Jed.”

“T-the c-can’t,” Jed stammered. “W-we’re in God’s hands.”

The terrifying animal calls ceased as abruptly as they had started, and an uneasy silence prevailed. Overwhelmed with fear, Jed struggled to draw a breath, and he knew that Mandy was terrified. He tried again to pray, but still could not.

“W-what is that?” Mandy asked in a sobbing voice.

Jed listened. The animal noises had given way to a soft, whispering sound, like the gentle rustle of dry leaves being stirred by an autumn breeze. Jed was puzzled. The sound was strangely familiar; he had it somewhere before. The unusual noise increased in volume to become a dry, buzzing sound and Jed sucked in his breath sharply as he recognized the noise. This was the deadly warning of a rattlesnake about to strike! The Comanche people were imitating the vibrations of the venomous

serpent's rattle, giving the effect that the camp was infested with hundreds of the reptiles. The result was terrifying.

"What is that sound?" Mandy sobbed. "It's-it's scaring me!"

"It's the sound of rattlesnakes," Jed replied. "The villagers are imitating rattlesnakes. Remember the snake symbols on the tepees? The snake is sacred to the Comanches, and I suppose it plays a part in the peyote ceremony."

At that moment, the rattlesnake imitations made an abrupt and startling change. Instead of numerous snakes sounding their death warning, it now sounded as if there were one gigantic rattler preparing to strike. In some unexplained way, the Comanche people were producing their rattlesnake noises in such perfect synchronization that the resulting sound blended to create the effect of one huge, powerful snake. Listening to the mysterious sound, Jed could visualize a coiled rattlesnake sixty feet tall, towering over the village and ready to strike.

Mandy's sobs became louder, and Jed winced. The thought of his little sister suffering filled the boy with rage at their Indian captors, and he thrashed and twisted again, trying frantically to loosen the bonds. They had to escape tonight! They just had to!

Again his struggles accomplished nothing. His wrists were chafed and bleeding from his struggles, but the rawhide was as tight as ever. Jed rolled over on his stomach, and uttered an exclamation of pain as he did so. "Ow!"

"What happened?" Mandy asked immediately, concern evident in her frightened little voice. "Did you hurt yourself?"

"It's this stupid arrowhead!" Jed snapped in frustration. "I still have it in my pocket, and it stuck my leg when I rolled over. I should have thrown it away when you gave—"

Jed stopped, as a sudden thought struck him like an arrow from a Comanche bow. The arrowhead! Maybe it wouldn't work, but it was worth a try. He had to try!

He rolled over and tried to reach into his pocket, but could not even get his hands close to the pocket. Hardly daring to have his hopes raised again, he called to Mandy, trying to keep the excitement out of his voice, lest she end up disappointed too.

"Mandy!"

She turned toward him, unable to see him in the darkness. "What?"

"Crawl over to me and see if you can find my right front pocket."

“What?”

“See if you can find my right front pocket. The arrowhead’s in it.”

“What do you want that for?”

“Just see if you can get it out for me.”

Mandy crawled over to him and rolled over with her face away from him, her hands feeling for his pocket. She grabbed his leg.

“That’s my knee. Try again.”

The girl located his pocket and dug her hand into it. “Ow! It’s sharp.”

Jed grinned in the darkness. She had found it. “Take it out,” he told her.

She pulled the object from his pocket. “I’ll try to flip it over against the tepee wall, out of our way,” she said.

“No!” The word exploded from his lips. “Don’t throw it! I want it.”

“What for?”

Jed had given up trying to keep the excitement out of his voice. “Mandy, have you got the arrowhead?”

“I’m holding it, Jed.”

“Mandy, I’m going to roll over with my back to you,” he told her. “See if you can cut the rawhide thongs around my wrists. That arrowhead is sharp enough to do it.”

Jed felt the vibrations as the flint rubbed against his bonds. He held his breath, waiting for the rawhide to go slack. Mandy grunted. “It keeps slipping, Jed. And it hurts my hands.”

“Let me have it,” he answered. “Maybe I can cut the rawhide from your hands. That will make it easier for you to do mine.”

He took the arrowhead from her fingers, dropped it, and spent several minutes feeling around for it in the darkness. When his probing fingers located the stone object, he picked it up carefully, gripping it as though his life depended on it.

Jed scooted down slightly until his fingers found the rawhide that bound Mandy’s hands. He discovered that the thongs that bound her were pulled so tight he could not even get a finger under them. Straining with the effort, he struggled to push his fingers between the strands, but found that he could not do so. The rawhide was simply too tight.

“Pull your hands apart, Mandy,” he instructed. “As hard as you can. I need to get my finger in between your hands.”

She obeyed, grunting as she strained. “All right, let off,” Jed whispered. “I got one finger in.”

He pulled the rawhide strip up slightly and began to saw at it with the sharp edge of the arrowhead. The rawhide was tough, but the stone instrument was sharp, and the boy was determined. The strap gave slightly, and then snapped as the sharp blade cut through it.

“I got it!” he whispered excitedly.

Mandy began to whimper.

“What’s the matter?” Jed asked.

“You cut me.”

“I’m sorry,” Jed said. Holding the precious arrowhead in one hand, he started unwrapping the rawhide with the other. Finally, the whole piece pulled free. Jed discovered that Mandy was still tied. The Comanches had bound her with two separate thongs. He repeated the process again, and in minutes, had her hands free.

“Here—don’t drop it,” Jed said. He handed the arrowhead to Mandy. “See if you can cut mine, now that your hands are free.”

The girl sawed at his bonds for several minutes. “I can’t do it, Jed! It hurts my fingers.” She lowered the sharp instrument.

Jed twisted his hands violently, desperately. The pain was fierce, but he gritted his teeth and tried again. This time, he felt something pop loose. But his hands were still tied.

“Feel my hands, Mandy. I think you cut one of the rawhides!”

Mandy laughed softly as she unwrapped the thong from her brother’s hands. “You must have two ropes, too.” Determined and encouraged by their success, she tackled the other thong with the arrowhead, and had the satisfaction of cutting completely through it. “There,” she said happily. “It’s done. You’re free!”

Jed sat up and rubbed his wrists. “Praise the Lord,” he said softly. “Let me have the arrowhead, and we’ll be out of here in no time!”

A few seconds later, Jed and Mandy popped their heads out the door of the tepee. All was quiet in the Comanche camp. Jed was relieved that the unearthly snake noises had ceased. “Let’s go,” he whispered. “Hang onto my sleeve. We need to hurry!”

Shadowy figures in the bright moonlight, Jed and Mandy stepped outside and then crept quietly between the rows of tepees. Holding hands, they slipped from the shadow of one

tepee to the next. They stepped over the inert form of a drugged Comanche.

“Wait here!” Jed whispered suddenly. He pulled his hand free of his sister’s, and then slipped away into the darkness. One of the larger tepees loomed directly ahead, pale and ghostly in the moonlight. Holding his breath, he cautiously pulled back the door flap. The dwelling was deserted. He crept inside and hurriedly scanned the interior. “Thank you, Lord.” The tepee contained the exact items for which he was looking.

When he returned to Mandy, he found her crouching in the shadows, whimpering in fear. He took her hand. “It’s all right,” he whispered. “Come on!”

A loud moan came from right beside them, and Mandy gave a little squeal of fright. She dashed to the shadow of the next tepee, and then looked behind her. There was no one in sight.

Jed spotted an Indian child lying beside the other tepee, motionless under the spell of the peyote. The child moaned again, and relief flooded over Jed and Mandy as they realized that the sound was no threat to them.

“What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee,” Mandy quoted, trying to quiet her troubled mind. “What time I am afraid, I will

trust in thee. What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee.” She repeated the words softly, finding comfort and assurance in the Scripture verse.

Moments later, Jed stooped over and retrieved two objects that he had cached in the shadows. He turned and handed the objects to Mandy. “Here, take these,” he said.

Mandy held out her hands, and Jed handed her a hollow gourd and a sack-like container of woven grasses. “What’s this?” she asked.

Jed laughed softly. “Food for the trip,” he whispered. “And something to carry water in. I raided a tepee. I got a saddle and two blankets, too.” He bent over again and then shouldered a light Comanche saddle and the blankets.

Mandy was shocked at her brother’s boldness. “What if they find out?” she worried.

“What are they going to do,” he whispered, “come to St. Louis?”

Jed led the way to the Comanches’ corral. Some of the horses whinnied nervously as the brother and sister approached and the boy called to them softly. He broke his way through the brush enclosure and then carried the light Comanche saddle into

the corral. The moon was huge and appeared to be sitting atop one of the nearby mountains as its brilliant beams flooded the valley with a shimmering, silvery-white light. Jed's shadow was enormous, rippling across the ground like a colossal black giant when he moved.

"Which horse are you gonna take?" Mandy called softly.

Jed turned to her. "There's only one horse here that I want," he answered. "Midnight!"

He walked cautiously through the cluster of nervous horses, calling Midnight's name in a quiet voice. The big horse came to him and gently nuzzled his shoulder. "I've missed you, Midnight. But we're going home now, and then we'll always be together. We're going home, Midnight!"

Jed stroked the neck of the beautiful horse for a moment, and then placed the saddle on his back. When the saddle girth was fastened, he swung into the saddle, and a thrill of excitement surged through him. He was riding Midnight again!

Jed rode through the opening in the enclosure and stopped to let Mandy mount. "Shouldn't we close the corral?" she suggested, standing still instead of scrambling up behind the saddle as Jed had expected. "The other horses might get out."

Jed laughed softly. "Good idea!" he said, swinging down from the saddle. While Mandy watched in astonishment, her brother seized the end of the tangled brush forming the corral fence and pulled it back, making the opening far larger. "I'm glad you thought of that," he whispered to Mandy.

Jed and Mandy mounted Midnight and then rode back into the corral. The boy rode his beloved horse to the far end, then turned and galloped back toward the center of the enclosure, waving his arms and screaming as he rode through the center of the group of nervous horses. The entire herd of Comanche horses headed for the opening in the brush fence and galloped across the plains.

The herd headed south and Jed let Midnight follow them. He urged the big horse forward, passed some of the stragglers, and rode along in the center of the herd. "This will help cover our tracks," he told Mandy, grinning, "when the Injuns try to follow us. We're gonna make it as hard for them as we can."

"But they won't have their horses," Mandy said.

"Exactly," Jed replied with a laugh. "That's the idea! This will slow them down for at least a little while. We need as big a head start as we can possibly get."

“Was it right for us to take the saddle?” the little girl worried. “And we’re running their horses off, too.”

Jed snorted, surprised at his sister’s reaction. “Mandy, we wouldn’t even be here if the Injuns hadn’t captured us and brought us here,” he explained. “I’m just trying to make sure that we can get back to Ma and Pa alive.”

They followed the herd of galloping horses for several miles. Whenever the horses began to slow down, Jed yelled at the top of his voice and slashed some of the leaders across the rump with a piece of rawhide, doing his best to stampede them again. He had to keep the horses moving. To his relief, the horses stayed bunched together in a tight herd, and they seemed almost as anxious to escape as he was. Finally, he turned Midnight out of the thundering herd and headed east.

They rode all night, stopping occasionally to allow Midnight to rest or drink from one of the streams they crossed. Jed was thankful for the bright light of the full moon. He came to a shallow river and splashed for nearly a mile up its rocky bed just to make it difficult for the Comanches to follow their trail. He guided Midnight out of the water but continued to ride along

the rocky banks for another mile, knowing that their trail would be hard to track across such a hard surface.

The sky was brightening in the east as Jed reined in on the banks of a small river at the edge of a forest. “Time for breakfast,” he announced. “Then we had better rest for a few hours.”

He dismounted and then helped his sister down. Mandy still clutched the woven bag tightly. She opened the bag and pulled out several flat slabs of dried buffalo meat, wrinkling her nose in disgust. “I thought you said you got food,” she complained. “I’m so tired of this stuff. It’s horrible.”

Jed laughed and reached for the sack. “It’s not my favorite either,” he admitted, “but at least it will keep us alive until we get home to Mabel’s hot cakes.”

Jed bowed his head, and his prayer came from his heart. “Thank you, Lord,” he prayed fervently, “for helping us get free from the Injuns. Thank you for making sure that the arrowhead was right where Mandy would see it. And thank you that you made me keep it, when I probably would have just thrown it away.

“Lord, we’ve got a long way to go to reach safety. Please help us to know the best way to go. And please keep the Injuns from finding our trail and catching us again. Be with Ma and Pa, and help them to know that we’re all right.

“Thank you, Lord, for this food. Help us to have grateful hearts. Amen.”

They ate in silence, washing the dried meat down with drinks of water from the gourd. When they had finished Jed led the way into the woods. They tied Midnight securely and then huddled together beside a fallen log. They were asleep in minutes.

Jed awakened several hours later. He sat up, rubbing his eyes, then looked up through the tree branches overhead to check the position of the sun. He estimated that they had been asleep for about five hours.

He looked down at Mandy as she lay sleeping in the leaves. She looked so peaceful that Jed hated to disturb her. He sat and watched her for a moment. “Please God,” he prayed quietly, “help me to get her home safely.”

He shook her gently. “Mandy,” he said softly, “time to get up.”

She sat up suddenly and looked at him. “Pa!” she said.

Jed laughed. “Sorry, I’m not Pa,” he said, “but we’ll be home in a few days, and then you’ll see him.”

He began to untie Midnight. “We’d better get riding again,” he said. “We need to put some miles between us and the Injuns.”

## Chapter 14 – THE CABIN

Midnight nickered softly and lowered his head to drink from the shallow stream. Mandy shook the excess water from her hands, wiped her chin on the sleeve of her jacket, and then sank to her knees in the thick carpet of fallen leaves beside the little creek. “Can we stay here and rest, Jed?” She dropped back to a reclining position and stretched out in the dry leaves, enjoying the pleasant crunching sound they made. “Please, Jed? Can we rest for a little bit?”

Jed dipped up a double handful of the crystal-clear water and drank it gratefully before answering. “We’ve got to keep moving, Mandy,” he said gently. “You know that. We have no way of knowing if the Injuns are on our trail.” He paused, wincing at the pleading look that appeared in her eyes. “We just can’t take a chance on them catching up with us, Sis. You know what would happen.”

The girl lifted her head and eyed the horse as he drank from the brook. “Look at Midnight, Jed. He’s tired too.”

Jed smiled, amused at his sister’s tactics. She knew as well as he that they could never hope to make it home to St. Louis without the powerful black stallion. “Midnight’s gonna be all right. I’ve been watching him closely. Tell you what—we’ll rest here for half an hour, all right? I’ll stand guard while you get some sleep.”

Mandy nodded and rolled over on her side, cradling her face in her arms. Jed watched her for a moment. He fetched one of the Indian blankets from the saddle and gently placed it over her, then quietly began to climb a nearby cottonwood to check their back trail for Comanche trackers.

Jed and Mandy had ridden hard for several days. Jed had insisted that they travel as fast as possible. Even though he had stampeded their horses and done his best to cover Midnight’s trail, he was deathly afraid that the Comanches would follow them. He allowed brief rest periods when it seemed that he or Mandy or Midnight just couldn’t go on any further, but they rode for long periods of time each day.

They traveled through desolate country, not seeing a cabin or settlement anywhere. Jed planned to ride to St. Joseph if they had to, and figured they could catch a stage from there to St. Louis. But they had angled too far south, and missed St. Joseph by more than twenty miles.

He had insisted on rationing the dried buffalo meat, reasoning that they would need food for as long as seven days. They supplemented the meat with occasional finds of manzanita berries, nuts, and even edible roots. Mandy wasn't excited about the menu, but at least they were eating.

Twenty feet above the ground, Jed shielded his eyes from the afternoon sun as he carefully scanned the ridges to the west. Now that the leaves were fallen, the forest was bare and visibility was good. His heart skipped a beat. Less than a quarter of a mile away, on the very crest of a rocky ridge, sat a lone rider! Jed knew instinctively from the silhouette against the afternoon sky that the horseman was not a white settler or trapper, but an Indian. The Comanches were on their trail after all!

Doing his best to remain calm and think through the situation, Jed turned his head slowly and surveyed the creek

bottom, searching desperately for a hiding place. There wasn't time to run. Midnight was a powerful horse and could undoubtedly outrun any of the Comanche ponies, but he had already been traveling for days with two riders and was not up to peak performance. And with Mandy's additional weight, Jed knew that they couldn't hope to outpace the Indian pursuers indefinitely. Their best chance would be to hole up in some quick hiding place and hope that the Comanche trackers would pass without spotting their trail. Once the Indians realized that they had lost the track they would undoubtedly double back on their trail, but the additional time would increase the Cartwrights' chances of successfully eluding them.

"Help us, Lord!" he prayed as he looked around desperately. Twenty yards from the cottonwood, three thick evergreens hugged a vertical clay bank, nearly obscuring it from view. The perfect hiding place.

Moving slowly so as to not attract the attention of the unidentified rider, Jed crept around to the east side of the tree trunk and then hurriedly climbed down. His heart pounded. "Please, Lord Jesus," he begged, "let him pass without seeing

our tracks or finding us. Please, Lord!” Crouching low, he dashed across to Mandy’s resting place.

“Mandy, wake up!” he called urgently, quietly. “The Injuns are here!”

Mandy’s eyes flew open. “What?” She sat up, but Jed could see in an instant that she was not fully awake.

“The Injuns are coming! I saw one on the ridge! We have to hide. Follow me!” Jed grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet. “Quick, Mandy! Follow me!” Pulling his sister frantically by the hand, he raced for the hiding place behind the evergreens. “Quick! In there! I’ll get Midnight.”

Despair swept over him as he dashed across the creek bank toward the beautiful black horse. *We’ve made it nearly two hundred fifty miles without being caught*, he thought wearily, *but how are we gonna elude them now? Help us, Lord!* Seizing the reins, he hurriedly led Midnight up the bank toward the evergreen trees where his sister waited.

“Take him,” he ordered, leading the horse into the narrow space behind the thick trees. “Mount him and be ready to ride, but keep him quiet! I’m gonna try to brush out any tracks we made.” Mandy took the reins and Jed darted back to the creek.

His heart sank. At the water’s edge where Midnight had stopped to drink, a number of distinct hoof prints were clearly visible in the soft mud. *There isn’t time to erase those!* he thought in panic. *The Injuns will see them for sure!* He dashed into the woods and snatched up a huge armful of fallen leaves. Rushing back to the creek bank, he hastily scattered them over Midnight’s hoof prints. *Unless they ride by at a full gallop, they’re gonna see those tracks for sure. And then we’re goners! But there’s nothing else I can do.* He ran for the evergreens.

“Are they coming?” Mandy quavered tearfully. She sat astride Midnight, tightly clutching the reins.

“Sh-h! Keep quiet!” Jed whispered. His heart pounded. A gust of wind howled through the creek bottom, swirling the fallen leaves around in tight little circles and causing the evergreens to sway back and forth like Comanche spirit dancers. Jed slipped into the hiding place and stood beside his horse, placing one hand on Midnight’s neck and the other on Mandy’s knee. “Stay still,” he urged quietly.

They waited in tense silence for more than an hour. Jed listened intently for the sound of crunching leaves beneath a moccasined foot, the snap of a twig or even an animal call signal

that would tell him that their pursuers were entering the little glen beside the creek. All was quiet. The wind sang occasionally in the bare branches overhead, but there was no movement on the ridge across the creek, no sounds of pursuit.

Jed glanced up at Mandy, and laughed silently when he saw that she was asleep in the saddle. He carefully scanned the area as best he could from behind the evergreens. All was quiet. Moving slowly, noiselessly, he carefully lifted Mandy from the saddle and placed her gently in the leaves against the base of the cliff, wincing at the crunching sound that resulted. He held his breath. All was still quiet.

A twisted sapling grew in the narrow space between the cliff and the third evergreen, and Jed climbed it cautiously, moving slowly and keeping a sharp eye out for movement in the woods around him. He paused uncertainly when he reached the top of the evergreen. *If I go higher, he realized, I'll be visible to anyone watching from the hillside across the creek.* His heart pounded as he crept upwards another foot, moving as slowly as he possibly could.

He could now see the hillsides and ridges to the west, and he scanned the woods anxiously. Spotting movement above the

trees, he glanced up quickly. A red-tailed hawk circled above the hillside. Ignoring the hawk, Jed studied the terrain anxiously, holding his breath as he watched for any sign of his Comanche pursuers. Moving only his eyes, he waited and watched. He must not be in a hurry. The Injuns would take their time, and if he was patient enough, he would spot the telltale movement that would give away their position.

Half an hour later, his feet were cramping and he changed position slowly, with as little movement as possible. Only his head was visible above the evergreen, but he wasn't taking any chances.

He glanced toward the ridge on which he had first seen the Comanche rider and then stared in amazement. The man was still there! Hardly daring to breathe, Jed stared at the warrior and studied the situation, puzzled as to why the Indian would stay in such an exposed position rather than seek a place of concealment. Silhouetted against the background of blue sky, the horse and rider would be visible from more than a mile away. Jed watched the warrior closely. The man sat rigid, unmoving, as motionless as a boulder of granite.

Jed laughed out loud. The “Comanche warrior” was simply an outcropping of stone, a rock formation that resembled a mounted rider! In the hour and half that Jed had waited, the lighting had changed enough that he could now see that the “Comanche” was nothing more than a pile of boulders! He sagged against the trunk of the sapling and let out his breath in a long, grateful sigh of relief. Suddenly seeing the humor in the situation, he laughed quietly as he slid from his lofty perch in the sapling.

He touched Mandy on the shoulder. “Get up, Mandy. We need to get riding.”

His sister jerked upright to a sitting position, her eyes wide with fright. “Where are the Injuns, Jed?”

“Sh-h, keep quiet,” he cautioned her. “Everything’s gonna be all right.”

She looked around wildly. “Did the Injuns come?”

Jed laughed. “There were no Injuns, Sis. It was just my imagination.” Slightly embarrassed, he told her about the rock formation.

Mandy laughed with him and hugged him in delight. “Thank you, Jesus!” she cried softly.

“Well, you and Midnight got the rest you needed,” he told her, “but now it’s time to start riding again. The next Injun just may not be made of rock.” Still laughing, they mounted and rode from the glen.

The next afternoon, sixty miles further east, they rode along the top of a rocky ridge. Jed knew that they could be spotted easily by anyone within a few miles, silhouetted against the sky as they were, but he had chosen to travel the ridge so they would leave no tracks. As they rode along, he began to feel dizzy. The landscape seemed to dip and undulate before them, and it was difficult just to stay in the saddle. He began to feel nauseated.

“I hate to say this, Mandy,” he told his sister, “but I think I’m getting sick. I think I have to throw up.”

Jed reined to a stop, and Mandy scrambled from the saddle. She reached up to try to help him down. The whole world suddenly seemed to sway and dance. He clutched at the saddle horn to try to keep his balance, then half slid, half fell to the ground. Mandy did her best to break his fall.

Jed knelt beside a bush, leaned over, and began to vomit violently. His stomach heaved and churned, and he felt like he

was going to die. Finally, the vomiting stopped. He tried to stand to his feet, but began to vomit again.

“I’m sick, Mandy,” he admitted. “We can’t travel like this! I can’t even stay in the saddle.”

The girl helped him crawl into the shade of an overhanging ledge and then brought Midnight up close and tied him securely. She took off her jacket—the afternoon was warm, anyway—rolled it up, and placed it under Jed’s head for a pillow. She gathered dead branches, leaned them up against the side of the rock ledge, and covered them with small bushes and branches to make a shelter.

“I tied Midnight in a thick grove of evergreens,” she told Jed, “so you can’t see him unless you get real close. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Jed nodded weakly and then drifted off to sleep. When he awoke, Mandy was sitting beside him with a gourd full of water in her lap. “Here, drink this,” she encouraged. “I found a little spring.” She helped him sit up and handed him the gourd.

Jed took a deep drink of the cool water. It tasted good. “I gave Midnight plenty of water, too,” Mandy informed him. “There was a big, flat hole in the rock ledge, and I used it for a

watering trough.” Jed nodded, handed her the gourd, and then lay down. He was asleep almost instantly.

After a couple of hours he awoke and sat up. “Oh no!” he exclaimed. “Mandy! We’ve got to keep riding!” He tried to rise to his feet, swayed dizzily, and then sank back to the ground. “Oh, my head,” he moaned.

His little sister cradled his head in her lap. “Here,” she encouraged, “drink this.”

Jed took the gourd and drank thirstily. The cool spring water tasted good. But then, as he handed the water back to Mandy, another attack of vomiting set in.

They stayed hidden on the ridge for three days. Mandy did her best to take care of Jed, as well as look after Midnight. She rode the horse twice each day to make sure he got exercise, always on the lookout for any approaching riders. Finally, on the afternoon of the fourth day, Jed decided that he was well enough to ride a few miles.

The boy and his sister had only ridden a few hundred yards when Mandy called out, “Look, Jed! Down there. It’s a cabin!”

Jed looked down at the base of the ridge, and sure enough, a little cabin was nestled in a small stand of scrubby pines. Nearby

was a small, weather-beaten barn. “How will we get down there?” Mandy asked. “That’s way too steep for Midnight.”

Jed nodded. Mandy was right. “Let’s go back to the little grove where you had Midnight,” he suggested. “We can hide him there until we find out who lives in the cabin. One of us will have to ride him all the way to the end of this ridge to get down there.”

They rode quickly back to the grove, tied Midnight to the same tree, and then hiked back to the cabin on foot. The rocky trail down to the little shack was extremely steep and covered with loose shale, but they took their time and made it safely.

“Maybe they can help us!” Jed said excitedly as they approached the door. “I wish we had known while I was sick that we were this close to help.”

But as they got close their hopes were dashed. The little cabin was deserted. The windows were gone and the door was standing ajar, hanging precariously by one hinge. Weeds and brambles nearly covered the lower half of the little building. Alert and watching for snakes, Jed cautiously fought his way through the weeds. He knocked on the door and then pushed it

open the rest of the way, jumping as the one remaining hinge screamed in protest.

He and Mandy crept cautiously through the old cabin. The floors were rotting. Sunlight streamed in through huge holes in the roof. The stonework of the tiny fireplace was crumbling and the rubble littered the floor. Cobwebs adorned the empty windows like bizarre, filmy curtains, billowing slightly inward in the breeze. A shutter flapped and banged against the side of the cabin. There were only two tiny rooms, and they were both empty.

Suddenly Mandy gave a little scream. Startled, Jed spun around in time to see a rat race across the floor. Mandy grabbed his hand. “Let’s get out of here,” she pleaded. “I don’t like this place.”

“Let’s look in the barn,” Jed suggested.

They walked around back and discovered a little outhouse. “I’m first!” Mandy giggled as she ran in and closed the door.

“That’s all right,” Jed called. “I’ve been waiting for three or four weeks for a bathroom. Two more minutes won’t matter.”

When Jed came out of the little outhouse, Mandy was nowhere in sight. Jed headed for the barn. As he stepped through

the door, he spotted his sister climbing up toward a tiny hayloft. “There’s a little window up here,” she called. She poked her head out the opening. Jed climbed the rickety ladder.

“Jed!” Mandy screamed, “there’s Injuns coming!”

Jed’s heart pounded with fear. He dashed up the ladder. Mandy moved quickly to one side, and he thrust his head out.

His heart sank. Riding across the valley toward them was a war party of Indians! Jed saw more than a dozen riders. Trembling, he turned from the window. He had no gun, and beside, they were hopelessly outnumbered! There was no way to make it back up to Midnight in time, even if they could outride the redskins. The only thing to do was hide.

He looked around quickly. Where should they go? Then it occurred to him that they were already in the best possible hiding place. They could cover themselves in the hay!

He ran to the edge of the tiny loft and looked down. “Help me, Mandy,” he said urgently. “Let’s pull this ladder up and cover it with hay. Maybe they won’t come up here if there’s no ladder.”

Together they dragged the ladder up over the edge and laid it in the hay, then began to cover it. As they finished hiding the ladder Jed heard the Indians ride into the yard.

“They’re here!” he whispered. “Quick! Over against the back wall! I’ll cover you and then try to dig in myself.”

Frantically, they scooped two hollows in the musty hay. Mandy lay down in the smallest hole, and Jed quickly covered her. He sat down in the other, hurriedly raked the hay over his legs, and then lay down. As he gathered hay to cover his arms and head, he heard the barn door creak open wider.

Hardly daring to breathe, Jed slowly, slowly, slowly raked the hay over his face. Footsteps crossed the little barn, and he knew that several Indians were standing below him, just a few feet away. His heart pounded as he slowly, slowly, slowly, pulled his arms beneath the hay.

*Dear God, he prayed silently, don’t let them find us!*

## Chapter 15 – INJUN WAR PARTY

Jed peered through the hay at the spot where Mandy was hidden. She was completely covered, and he could barely make out the telltale mound that marked the spot where she lay quietly. Good. And then, he sucked in his breath sharply. A large rat was making his way across the loft toward Mandy! The rodent stopped, perched atop the little mound made by her body.

Jed held his breath. His sister was terrified of rats and mice. If she saw the creature, her screams would alert the savages below. “Dear Lord,” he prayed in a whisper that was not even audible, “keep her from seeing the rat! Please, God!”

Loud voices from down below startled him and he jerked his foot. His boot scraped against the side of one of the posts supporting the roof, and the voices suddenly stopped. The Indians had heard!

Jed heard a soft thumping noise as one of the warriors climbed one wall of the barn. A face appeared, peering over the edge of the loft into the hay where they were hidden. Jed lay perfectly still, holding his breath. Through the hay across his face, he could see the face of the red man less than six feet away. *Help us, Lord!* he prayed silently.

A huge scar ran diagonally across the brave’s face, crossing the bridge of his nose and continuing across the top of his cheekbone just beneath his left eye. A headband of dark animal hide encircled his forehead. Jed studied the bronze face. *I don’t remember seeing him in the Comanche village*, he thought. *I wonder who he is.*

The Indian warrior remained motionless as his keen eyes roamed across the dimly lit hayloft. His face wore a questioning look as his eyes darted back and forth, quickly scanning the mounds of musty hay. Jed held his breath.

The Indian spotted the rat still perched on top of the little pile of hay covering Mandy. He turned and called down to his companions, and they all laughed. The brave grabbed a handful of hay and tossed it at the rat, then dropped from the loft. Several

moments later, Jed heard the men leave the barn. They stood talking and laughing just outside the barn door.

Jed slowly let out his breath. That was close! He lay quietly, hoping that Mandy would know to do the same. The voices of the Indians faded away as they crossed the yard and entered the cabin. Jed waited anxiously. Had he and Mandy left footprints on the rough timbers of the dirty cabin floor? He hadn't noticed any, but if there were, they would be a dead giveaway.

Moments later, he heard the war party mount up and ride from the yard. Mandy sat up, brushing the hay from her face. Jed quickly sat up and held a finger to his lips. Mandy nodded and then lay back down.

They waited quietly for what Jed estimated was another twenty minutes. Not a sound came from the cabin or from the yard outside. Motioning for Mandy to remain where she was, Jed quietly climbed down the wall. He peeked out the door, but could see no one. The Indians were gone. He slipped from the barn, circled the little cabin, and then slipped inside. But there was no trace of the riders.

Jed entered the barn and called softly, "It's all right, Mandy. They're gone."

He re climbed the wall of the barn, using the cracks between the planks for handholds and footholds. Mandy was brushing the hay from her hair and clothes as he scrambled into the loft.

"Look at you," she laughed. "You look like a scarecrow."

Jed grinned and grabbed her in a big hug, happy to be alive. "Help me slide the ladder back down," he said. "I'm kinda weak, since I've been sick."

Moments later they hurried back up the steep ridge. Jed noticed that the temperature was dropping. A chilling wind rattled the limbs on the trees and drove blast after blast of dry leaves across the ridge like a bombardment from a cannon. As they climbed, Jed told Mandy about the rat. "He was sitting right on top of you!" he exclaimed. "If you had seen—"

"I know," she interrupted, "I was shaking like a leaf!"

He stared at her in amazement. "You saw it?"

She nodded. "Uh-huh. It was right on top of me."

"And you didn't scream?"

"Of course not!" she answered. "The Injuns woulda heard me."

Still shaking his head, Jed reached the grove where Midnight was waiting. He walked into the trees and then stopped, stunned. The horse was gone!

In panic, Jed turned and looked about him. Who could have taken Midnight? Without the horse, their chances of making it back to St. Louis were very slim.

Mandy saw the consternation on his face and knew immediately that something dreadful had happened. She hurried up the slope. "What's wrong?" she asked. Her mouth fell open when she saw the empty space between the evergreens where the horse had been tied.

"Oh, no!" she cried, "someone stole Midnight!" She burst into tears.

Jed nodded. "I'm afraid so," he said grimly. "I'm afraid it was that war party of Injuns."

He held his little sister close, stroking her hair tenderly, trying to comfort her. "It'll be all right," he sighed. "God has taken care of us this far. We'll have to trust Him now."

The tears flowed down Mandy's face, and Jed saw that she was trembling. "What are we gonna do, Jed?"

"What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee," he answered. "That's the only thing we can do! We have to trust God."

"But Midnight was a special horse," Mandy sobbed. "I know you loved him. And we'll never make it back to St. Louis without him."

The boy nodded, choking back his own emotions for her sake. He tried to swallow the lump in his throat.

Jed and Mandy knelt in the little evergreen grove and prayed together. They asked God again for His wisdom and protection, and that He would get them safely back to St. Louis. "Please show us what to do," Jed finished. "We can't make it without our horse."

They stood up and walked from the clump of evergreens holding hands. For some unknown reason, Jed felt strangely drawn toward the little valley to the west. "Let's go back this way," he said, turning to retrace their steps across the barren ridge.

"But we need to go this direction!" Mandy protested. "You're taking us back the way we came."

Jed nodded. "I know," he said, "but I just feel that God wants us to go this way. We asked Him to show us the way, so

we need to follow when He shows us. For some reason, I feel that we should go to the end of this ridge and then walk through the valley down below.”

Mandy shrugged, but followed him without protest. “What are we going to do without Midnight? Jed, we’ll never make it back to St. Louis without a horse. The Injuns will catch up with us for sure. And we couldn’t make it back alive even if they didn’t. We’ll die out here. Ma and Pa will never even know what happened to us.” She began to sob.

Jed squeezed her hand. “Quit worrying, Sis,” he scolded gently. “God knows where we are, and He can get us home safely.”

“But our blankets are gone. And the food and water, too!”

“God can still take care of us.”

She gave a mournful sniff and looked at him searchingly, accusingly. “You’re just trying to act brave for my sake, aren’t you?”

He let go of her hand and squeezed through a narrow passage between two rocks. “No. It’s just that we have to trust God now. He’s our only hope. And it doesn’t help to worry about things.”

“Can you honestly tell me that you’re not worried? Not even a little bit? Be honest.”

“I am worried,” he admitted. “I don’t see any way in the world that we can make it back to St. Louis alive. And if the Injuns are on our trail, there’s no way that we can hope to stay ahead of them without a horse. But I’m just saying that God wants us to trust Him. He’s the only One Who can get us back to Meadow Green alive.”

Mandy and Jed had walked just over half a mile when Mandy suddenly pointed and began to shriek with laughter. “Look!” she cried. “There’s Midnight!”

Jed’s head snapped up, and he looked toward the top of the ridge where his sister was pointing. Sure enough, to his great joy, the horse was standing in a laurel thicket, eating the leaves from the bushes. “Hallelujah!” Jed shouted. He hugged Mandy in his excitement. “Thank you, Lord!”

Minutes later, Midnight was galloping across the ridge with two thankful young people on his back. Mandy was crying quietly.

Early the next afternoon, the two Cartwrights rode up a steep hill under a slate gray sky. The wind gusted and howled, snatching at their hair and clothing and driving tiny flakes of snow into their faces. Mandy clutched her blanket and pulled it more tightly about herself. "It's turning colder."

Jed just nodded.

"Jed, we're gonna freeze to death!"

Jed gave voice to a fear that had been nagging at him for some time. "I hate to mention this," he said, "but we ate the last of the buffalo meat for lunch."

Mandy nodded soberly. "I know," she replied. "The tote is empty." She turned and looked over her shoulder at him. "So what are we gonna do, Jed?"

"We'll have to make it on whatever berries and roots we can find," he said. "I really thought we'd be home by now."

"You were sick for three days," she reminded him. "We couldn't travel at all during that time. But what are gonna do about the cold? We need to find shelter."

"I don't know, Sis. We'll just have to keep riding for now."

They both fell silent, slightly worried about their predicament. Midnight trudged wearily to the top of the hill and

Jed pulled back gently on the reins. He decided to give the horse a brief rest.

"Look!" Mandy suddenly shouted, pointing to the valley below. "There's a road!"

Jed leaned toward her, eagerly searching the landscape. "You're right," he agreed. "I think that is a road. It looks like it heads southeast, so we'll follow it. Maybe we're close to a settlement."

They climbed down from the saddle for a few minutes to give Midnight a break. Jed was excited. "If that really is a road," he told Mandy, "then we may be close to a town! We can find food and a place to spend the night."

He stomped his boots to warm his feet. The wind screeched angrily at the two young travelers, picking up fistfuls of dry leaves and hurling them in their faces. Icy snowflakes suddenly filled the air and pelted their faces and hands. Jed and Mandy stood downwind of Midnight and wrapped their blankets over their heads in an effort to shield their faces from the wind and cold. Minutes later the snowfall stopped as abruptly as it had started, but the angry wind continued to shriek and howl at them.

Mandy knelt on the ground and hunched over in an attempt to stay warm. “Can we build a fire, Jed?”

“I don’t have matches, Sis.” He knelt upwind of her to shield her from the icy blast and opened his own blanket to her. She snuggled close to him and he closed the blanket around her. “The road will lead us to town. We need to keep riding.”

They remounted and rode down the hill eagerly. When they reached the road, they found that it was rutted and bumpy, hardly any better than riding across the open plains, but it was obviously well traveled. The travelers turned their weary horse and began to follow it.

Two hours later, Jed suddenly pointed. “Look!” he said to Mandy, “there’s a stagecoach!”

The stagecoach was stopped at the side of the road beside a roaring fire. A man in a dark green greatcoat sat atop the driver’s seat. As the young people rode toward the coach, one man was climbing into the vehicle and another man was right behind him. “Wait!” Jed called, urging the tired Midnight into a gallop. “Please, wait!”

The second man looked up suddenly, spotted them, and then climbed quickly into the coach. The door closed and the vehicle took off hurriedly.

Jed did his best to catch up. Midnight sprinted hard, but he was tired, and the coach soon outdistanced them. The horse with its two young riders fell farther and farther behind. Finally, Jed reined Midnight to a slow walk. “Why didn’t they wait for us?” he groaned. “We need their help!”

## Chapter 16 – MARSHAL DIXON

Jed and Mandy sat motionless on Midnight, watching in dismay as the stagecoach disappeared in a cloud of dust. Jed's shoulders sagged in discouragement. He sighed. "Why couldn't they have stopped to help?" he complained. "Couldn't they see that we needed them?"

"Maybe they didn't see us," Mandy volunteered.

"That one man saw us," Jed argued. "I know he did! He looked up at us and when he saw us, he jumped into the coach that much faster." In frustration, he pounded his own leg with his fist. "Couldn't they see that we needed help? We'll never make it now! We're out of food and the weather's turning cold and—"

"Look, they're turning around!" Mandy exclaimed.

"They're coming back! The coach is coming back!"

Jed's heart leaped. It was true. The stagecoach left the roadway and turned around, and then came speeding back

toward them. Jed and Mandy watched eagerly. The vehicle rumbled to a stop just a few yards away. Jed reined Midnight to a halt. The driver of the coach, a thin man with a rifle in his hands, turned and hollered down to the occupants of the vehicle. "I told you, Marshal," he called, "it's just a couple of kids!"

The door of the coach opened and a red-haired man with a silver star on his leather vest stepped out. He had a revolver in each hand, which he holstered when he saw Jed and Mandy.

Jed dismounted and then helped Mandy down from the saddle. The man with the badge walked over to them. "Whar ya headin', youngsters?" he drawled. "Kinda fur from home, ain't ya?"

Jed resisted the urge to hug the man. These were the first white faces he and Mandy had seen for what seemed like years. "We escaped from the Comanches several days ago," he told the surprised lawman. "We're trying to make it back to St. Louis."

Astonishment was written all over the man's face. "You must be the Cartwright youngsters!" he exclaimed.

It was Jed's turn to be surprised. "How did you know who we are?" he queried.

“Yore Pa’s had folks all over this state searching for ya,” the man told them. He suddenly held out his hand. “I’m Marshal Dixon,” he said, “I’m taking a prisoner to Boonville to stand trial. We’re only twenty mile or so from there now.”

The man’s eyes widened as a thought suddenly occurred to him. “How did ya get away from the Comanches?” he asked. “That jest don’t happen!”

Jed grinned. “The Lord was with us,” he said. “It’s a long story.”

“Why don’t ya tell it to me in the stage,” the man suggested. “Come on, I’ll give ya a ride into Boonville. We’ll tie that fine horse of yours to the back of the stage.” He turned to the man with the rifle, who was standing guard at the door of the stagecoach. “We’re taking on a couple of passengers, Al.”

Jed and Mandy climbed gratefully into the coach. A rough-looking man wearing shiny handcuffs and leg irons sat looking at the floor. He did not even glance up as they entered.

“Sorry we ran off from y’all a while ago,” the marshal apologized. “When I saw that two riders were chasing us down on horseback, I ordered Al to hustle outta there. I thought some friends of Jesse here were planning to try to spring him! Al

obeyed and took off outta there, but he finally got through to me that y’all were just a couple of kids. Sorry ‘bout that.”

Al stuck his head in the door. “Got the horse tied to the back of the coach,” he reported. “We need to head back and extinguish the fire, and we’ll be on our way.” The door closed.

“We were taking a rest break when you caught up with us,” the lawman told Jed and Mandy.

The coach rolled forward for a few seconds and then came to a stop. The door opened and the driver appeared with two large, smooth stones in his gloved hands. “Put these hot rocks under yore feet,” he instructed his passengers. “They’ll warm you up in no time.” Seconds later he was back with two more. In two or three minutes he had extinguished the fire, turned the coach around once more, and resumed the journey toward Boonville.

Jed put his boots on the large heated rock at his feet. The warmth felt good. “How long will it take to get town?” he asked.

Marshal Dixon chuckled. “Sit back and relax, son. We’ll be there in two shakes of a lamb’s tail.” He leaned forward eagerly in his seat. “Tell me ‘bout the Comanches,” he begged. “How on earth did ya git away?”

Jed leaned back in the cushions. The stagecoach was mighty comfortable after all those hours in the saddle. He took a deep breath and launched into the story of the incredible ordeal. “The Comanches snatched us when we were on our way to our Uncle Willard’s house,” he began. “Mandy wanted a drink of water, so she jumped down from my horse and ran through the woods toward a little creek she had seen...”

As he finished the account of the incredible adventure, Jed glanced over at Mandy, who had been unusually quiet. She was sound asleep. *Thank you Lord, for taking care of Mandy*, he breathed silently. *Thank you, Lord*.

“That’s quite a story, lad. The most amazin’ thing I ever heard tell! I can’t believe that ya jest rode away like that.”

Jed nodded. “The Lord was with us, sir.”

“I’ll tell ya what I’m gonna do,” the marshal decided. “I’d like the honor of taking ya to St. Louis myself. We’ll drop off Jesse here at the jail, then git a hotel room for the night. I can have y’all home in two days.”

Jed grinned. “Sounds good to me!”

Late in the afternoon of the second day, the stagecoach rattled past Mississippi Valley School. Jed and Mandy leaned out the windows, eager for the first glimpse of home. The coach finally reached Meadow Green and turned into the Cartwright driveway. “Right fancy place here,” Marshal Dixon observed.

Jed spotted Nathan sitting on the porch of the mansion, his head down, staring at one of Jed’s woodcarvings. His eyes slowly lifted at the sound of the coach, and he cocked his head, puzzled. His eyes widened in astonishment as he recognized Midnight proudly trotting at the rear of the coach, and he leaped to his feet. The look on his face was a mixture of hope and uncertainty.

Jed opened the door of the stagecoach but Mandy pushed past him and scrambled out first. Jed leaped from the coach and raced across the driveway after her, reaching the porch of the mansion just as she did. Side by side they dashed up the steps, eager for the reunion with their family.

Nathan stood at the top of the steps, staring at them with a puzzled expression. His eyes were strangely cold and impassive. Jed grabbed him and hugged him. “I bet you never thought you’d see us again, did you, Nathan?” he cried joyfully. Nathan

was unresponsive and did not return the hug. He stood rigid and unmoving.

Jed drew back and looked at him, noticing for the first time the glazed look in his brother's eyes. "Nathan, it's me!" he cried. "Don't you know me? It's Jed! Mandy and I are home again!"

Nathan slowly turned and stared at him with dull, empty eyes. "You're dead," he said in a lifeless, hollow voice. "It's my fault."

Mandy grabbed Nathan's hand and tugged at it in an effort to get his attention. "We're not dead, silly! We're alive, and we're home again!"

"You're dead," the boy repeated in the same flat, lifeless voice. "The Comanches got you. And it's all my fault."

Jed realized that Nathan was in shock. He grabbed his brother by the shoulders and shook him. "Nathan, we're alive! We're alive! The Lord kept the Comanches from killing us. We're alive!"

Just then a light seemed to come on in Nathan's eyes. He stared at Jed and Mandy in astonishment, and his mouth dropped open. "J-Jed," he stammered. "M-Mandy! It really is y-you! You're alive!" He burst into tears.

"That's what we've been trying to tell you, silly," Mandy said indignantly, not understanding the trauma that Nathan had been through. "We wouldn't be here if we weren't alive, would we?"

Nathan turned and dashed into the mansion, leaving his brother and sister standing on the steps. "Pa!" he screamed, "Pa! Jed and Mandy are here! They're alive! They're alive! Ma! Jed and Mandy are alive!"

Pa Cartwright stepped out onto the porch, took one look, and then dashed across the porch. Ma was close on his heels. Jed grinned at Mandy, and then threw himself into Pa's huge outstretched arms. He felt secure and safe as the strong arms drew him close to Pa's massive chest, squeezing the breath out of him.

"Darling!" Ma exclaimed, grabbing Mandy and hugging her tightly. "Sweetheart! Oh, Mandy!" Her tears mingled with those of the happy little girl.

"Careful, Pa, you're gonna break my ribs!" Jed exclaimed with a laugh as the big man hugged him fiercely. Jed looked up into the strong, handsome face, and was surprised to see tears in Pa's eyes.

“Son, I never thought I’d see you again this side of heaven,” Pa said hoarsely. His lips trembled. “When we heard that the Comanches—” His voice faltered and he broke into sobs. He stood weeping silently for several moments as he held Jed close. Finally, Pa released Jed and wiped the tears from his eyes. “Mandy, darling, come here!” He broke down and began to cry again as his daughter leaped into his huge arms.

“Jed! Oh, Jed!” The tears flowed freely as Jed and Ma hugged each other. She tenderly stroked his hair. “I should have known that you’d take care of Mandy.”

Jed pulled away and looked deep into her tear-filled eyes. “I didn’t, Ma,” he protested. “The Lord did. He was our Protector.”

Ma nodded in agreement, sobbing as she hugged him again. “It’s so good to have you home.”

“It’s good to be home, Ma. Believe me; it’s good to be home.” He slipped free from his mother’s embrace and looked across to see Nathan standing nearby. “Have I got some stories to tell you,” Jed told him with a laugh.

Servants began to slip from the front door of the mansion to stand staring with open mouths at Jed and Mandy. “Let’s thank God for your safe return, shall we?” Pa boomed. He dropped to

his knees on the porch and bowed his head, and the rest of the family followed his example. “Father, I thank you for the safe return of my children,” Pa prayed, his deep bass voice resonating and echoing off the brick wall of the mansion. “Thank you, Thank you! You have been gracious to us, Lord, and we are deeply grateful. I thought I’d never see my children again, Father, and here they are. We praise Your name...”

Kneeling on the cold marble of the front porch as his father prayed, Jed felt a warm contentment flood across his soul. It was good to be home.

When Pa finished praying, the servants swarmed around Mandy and Jed, chattering excitedly and peppering the two with questions. “Hold it,” Pa said with a laugh, holding up both hands. “Let’s get these two prodigals inside the house and let them get some rest, shall we? There will plenty of time later to hear their story.”

Wolf bounded down the driveway with a joyful bark and leaped up on the porch. Jed grabbed him and hugged him fiercely. “I missed you, old boy,” he told the dog. “You woulda made short work of those old Comanches, wouldn’t you?” The

big dog whined and wagged his tail furiously, delighted to see his master.

Granny appeared on the porch just then, took one look at Jed and Mandy, and promptly fainted. Servants gathered around her as Mabel administered the smelling salts. “Is she going be all right?” Mandy asked.

“She’ll be fine, child,” Mabel replied. “She got quite a shock when she saw y’all, that’s all.”

Moments later Granny sat up and opened her eyes. “Jedediah!” She burst into tears.

Pa leaned close to Jed and whispered, “She got saved last week. I’m sure she’ll tell you about it later.”

Jed hugged the old woman tenderly. “We thought we’d never see you again, Granny!”

The old woman’s eyes brimmed with tears. Her lips trembled. She opened her mouth to speak, but found that she could not. She grabbed Jed and hugged him fiercely.

Jed turned to thank Marshal Dixon. He was surprised to see the lawman wiping his eyes. Seeing Jed’s eyes upon him, the marshal turned away and cleared his throat.

“Well, let’s go inside, shall we?” Pa boomed. He opened the front door of the mansion. “Marshal, won’t you come in?”

The lawman shook his head. “I’d best be moseyin’ along,” he muttered. “Got a busy schedule, ya know.”

Pa extended a huge hand. “I thank you for bringing my children home, sir. We are forever grateful.”

“Glad to do it, Mr. Cartwright. It was my privilege.” He shook Pa’s hand, said his good-byes, and turned to leave.

“Marshal, you must stay for dinner,” Ma told him. “You really must! We insist.”

Marshal Dixon took off his hat, exposing his red hair. He flashed a wide grin. “If you insist, ma’am. A hot meal would fit in mighty nice before the long trip home.”

Pa turned to one of the servants. “Take the coach and care for the horses, please. The men are staying for dinner.”

Chattering happily, the Cartwright family entered the mansion. Jed went to his room and dropped to his knees beside the bed. “Father, thank you,” he prayed, “for watching over us. Thank you for taking care of Mandy, and not allowing the Injuns to hurt her. Thank you for helping us get away, and for showing

us the way home. Thank you for protecting...” His prayer went unfinished as he fell asleep on his knees.

At the dinner table that evening, Jed told the story of the ordeal, with a little help from Mandy. The kitchen was filled with servants, their ears pressed to the dining room doors, listening breathlessly to the account.

When Jed finally came to the part about hiding in the little barn from the Indians, Pa held up a hand to interrupt him. “How many were there?” he asked. “Describe them.”

Jed looked thoughtful. “There were about fifteen or sixteen, I guess,” he said. “Come to think of it, they didn’t look like the Comanches at all. They were dressed different. They wore headbands, and they didn’t have tattoos. And they wore their hair different.”

He described them as best he could, and Pa clapped a big hand to his forehead. He turned to Marshal Dixon. “It sounds like the Cheyenne,” he told the lawman. “I hired them to try to track the Comanches and get Jed and Mandy back.”

Jed was amazed. “You sent them?”

Pa nodded. “They’ve been friendly to the white settlers, and they’re some of the best trackers in the country. Even Uncle Willard can’t hold a candle to them. I thought that perhaps they could negotiate with the Comanches for your return. It was our only hope.”

Mrs. Cartwright reached over and took her husband’s hand. “Our only hope was the Lord, dear,” she reminded him.

Jed and Mandy looked at each other. The same thought flashed through both their minds. “What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee,” they chorused.

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