

AFTER THE FALL

By Monette Bebow-Reinhard

2020 edition

This starts with the episode Triangle but with some alterations. I simply could not figure out how they got Adam up those stairs after his accident, so I put him in the guest room. There are other changes, too, as I worked more specifically on what happened between the scenes we saw on the show. And then I continue on to his healing, because for me, he did love Laura and his heart was broken seeing her leave with Will.

These editing changes to this original version will make it easier to follow.

This is an important one to read to understand better the last story in Cartwright Saga, which is an anthology novel you can download FREE at www.grimm2etc.com

Adam looked skyward from his precarious position on a roof beam of the house he was building. The sky, clear and blue, showed clouds out on the western horizon. He hoped the weather would hold out just a few days longer. He wanted to have the house framed in before the weekend. He knew he needed to spend more time with Laura. But the work, the lack of sleep, the time that this project had taken from them ... it'll all be worth the secrecy when she sees the home he wanted her and Peggy to have.

The sound of a buggy caught him off guard. His right foot slipped as he looked up, squinting into the sun.

Will...with Laura! He turned his back, as though by hiding his face they will think him a stranger and move on, a foolish impulsive thought. His right foot slipped off the beam. He threw his body sideways to compensate, but overly so, and flailed helplessly through the air to the ground.

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"Oh my God!" Laura whispered as Adam fell.

"Hyah! Come on!" Will shouted. He rode them down to the construction and they jumped out. Don't let him be dead, Will prayed silently. This accident was his fault, all his fault. Adam was doing this for Laura, and now he's not only stolen Laura, but he may have taken Adam's life in the process.

He jumped out of the buckboard. "We better not try to move him," Will said, leaning down.

"Maybe you're right." Laura knelt at Adam's head, her hand hesitating. "That might hurt him even more. You better go for a doctor."

Still alive. Will jumped in the buggy. He was still alive.

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Ben wiped his mouth with a slightly soiled red-checked napkin and pushed away from the dinner table. Hop Sing truly outdid himself on that lunch. Perhaps in his secretive way he was telling Ben his vacation was due. He always worked extra hard to put Ben in a good mood just before asking for time off to visit his family in San Francisco.

Hoss and Joe should be finishing that fencing if they had enough lumber. Ben decided to swing their way and check their lumber supply before going on to the sawmill. He could always have Stan and a few of the boys haul down whatever else they needed, and finish up the job today, tomorrow at the latest. In only another week or so a herd was going to have to be rounded up and tallied before the fall cattle drive. Adam was putting a bit of extra strain on them with his own requests for lumber -- but for a good cause, Ben reminded himself, a very good cause.

Just before Ben reached the door, a red-faced, breathless Will burst in.

"Ben! Adam's been hurt! We need to send someone for the doctor."

"What? Slow down, Will, tell me what's going on?"

"He fell off the house. The roof. I was going to go for the doctor, but maybe we better bring him back here while someone else runs to Virginia City for the doctor, to save time."

"Off the roof?" Ben turned, nerves taut. "Hop Sing! Run to Virginia City and bring Dr. Evans back! Hurry! Adam's been hurt!" Ben heard the soft-shoed thudding of the houseservant reacting to the demand. "Come on, we'll get it loaded with some long timbers and blankets to move him. You did say ... he's still alive?"

"He was when I left Laura with him."

As Will drove the buckboard over lumpy ground and around narrow curved trails, Ben hoped that moving Adam wasn't going to make him worse. But Will was right, they couldn't leave him out there for the five or more hours getting a doctor was going to take.

Laura was next to him, dabbing at the sweat on his face. He didn't look conscious. "Ben, I'm sorry. I'm afraid we startled him."

"Adam? Son? We're going to try to move you."

Will brought the wide plank over.

"We're going to ease this under you."

"Pa." Adam didn't open his eyes. "Feel so foolish."

"Can you move your legs, son? Can you lift them?"

Adam groaned and with a grunt, shuddered. "There's no pain. Just let me rest."

"All right. I've got his legs. Laura, take his shoulders. Will, his hips. When I give the word, go as slow and easy as I do."

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Going back to the ranch with Adam stretched prone in the back was slow as Will took care to avoid bumps and sharp turns. Ben sat in the back to keep Adam from pitching with every turn. His nerves were seized with fear. Suppose they made him worse? Suppose he doesn't make the trip back alive? His face was pale and sweating, every few minutes he stirred lightly and groaned. He denied hurting at all just before they moved him. He was hurting plenty. Hurting was a good sign, Ben reassured himself. Heart wrenching to listen to, but a good sign.

Laura and Will sat in front, stiff, staring straight, exchanging no words. They had been riding together when they came upon Adam building the house, and according to Will, their presence startled Adam. They probably blamed themselves for the accident. He would have to calm Laura down. She didn't need this kind of guilt to carry into their marriage.

But Will ... what was he thinking?

Hop Sing was not back yet with the doctor. When they settled Adam into the downstairs guest room Ben discovered they had only been gone 1-1/2 hours. There would be quite a time yet before a doctor could be expected, and that's if Hop Sing finds him right away.

With one doctor to every 100 miles, the search would likely take all night, but Hop Sing would take whatever time was needed to bring the doctor back. The doctor would let them know when to take him upstairs. For now, this seemed best.

Laura sat down in the chair next to the bed. She seemed close to tears when she looked up at him.

"I'm so sorry, Ben. If Will and I hadn't stumbled upon him like that ... I didn't know ..."

"Please, don't blame yourself. I warned Adam about keeping secrets from you."

She touched Adam's hand. "He is so sweet. He was building a house for us. I don't deserve him."

Biting a sob, she fled from the room.

Ben waited to see if she would control herself and return. She'll get over it, she'll have to. Everything will fall into place, Ben felt, watching the slow rise and fall of Adam's chest. They deserved a home of their own. He should have told Laura, privately. He should have done something.

"Pa?"

Adam was awake, eyes blinking against the pain etched on his face. Ben took out a handkerchief and wiped Adam's forehead dry. "You'll be all right, son. Just rest. The doctor's coming."

He shifted slightly and a heavy sigh escaped. "You were right. Secrets are never smart. Surprise comes with ... the thought."

"Quiet now. Don't talk or worry over what's past. Try to sleep."

"Tell her ... it's all right. We're all right." He drifted off again.

Ben walked to the window. Life can change so quickly. Hoss and Joe probably wondered where he was right now. He looked over at the bed where Adam was lying so still. The ice Ben put under him numbed the back pain, the whiskey helping him sleep. They had weathered so many storms together, he and

Adam. Adam had the will of many and refused to stay down long. Because of Adam's cool thinking, Ben escaped the hangman's noose when his life was being held in trade for Farmer Perkins. Adam's logic saved Hoss from two unhappy marriages. He accidentally shot Joe once but stayed cool and kept Joe alive.

Now he was to be married, and except for this, would have had a house for his new wife and daughter. Laura will see that he recovered quickly. She had that way about her. Why were Will and Laura looking for him? Or did they find him by accident?

Ben heard the clicking of hooves and saw the doctor's buggy pull into the yard. With a heavy sigh of relief he turned back to his son. "It's going to be fine now, Adam. Just fine."

Hop Sing led the doctor into the room. "Doctor, he hard man to find."

Ben held out his hand to Dr. Evans. "Doctor, thank you so much for coming. My son took a fall. He's hurt his back, or his chest," Ben felt his stomach turned over, "or worse."

Dr. Evans nodded and pulled back Adam's covers. "Has he been awake at all?"

"Some."

"I need to see the extent of damage. We'll need to undress him, carefully now."

Ben and Hop Sing did as instructed. Ben felt a tide of alarm rush through him when the movements didn't seem to wake his son. The doctor checked his ribs carefully. "Hmm, a couple ribs feel cracked, nothing serious." He ran a hand down Adam's back, peering close at the bruising without moving him. "Hop Sing, more ice please."

Dr. Evans checked his head. "No head trauma." He checked Adam's heart and pulse rate. "Seems strong enough. Means no internal bleeding. But the extent of bruising and swelling to his back and hips means there could be more damage. To the nervous system as well."

"I'm sorry we moved him, but I didn't want him laying out there."

"He had to be moved soon as late at any rate. I'm sure you did the best you could."

Ben placed his cool palm on Adam's warm forehead. "Son, wake up. The doctor's here, he needs to talk to you."

"Hmmm, yeah." Adam didn't open his eyes.

Dr. Evans put a hand on Adam's arm. "You took a bit of a spill, son."

"Oh. I'm fine. Will be back at work ... tomorrow." He picked his head off the pillow as though getting ready to stand but winced and laid back down. "Or maybe take the week off."

Dr. Evans sat on the bed and instructed Ben to help him turn Adam on his side, ever so carefully. "Knowing you, Adam, not long at all," Dr. Evans said with a wink. "I'm going to touch parts of your back and you tell me when you feel any pain. Okay?"

After a pause to catch his breath, Adam nodded.

As the doctor touched each part, Adam lay quiet as though expecting the doctor to get started. Evans straightened up. "Did you feel me touching any part of your lower back?"

"No."

Dr. Evans helped Adam to lie back again. He uncovered Adam's feet. "All right, I want you to wiggle your left foot."

"No."

Ben was startled. "Adam, what are you saying?"

"I can't feel them."

"Did you try your right one?" When Adam gritted his teeth in frustration, Dr. Evans nodded. "Adam, can you move your arms, your fingers?"

Adam nodded, and demonstrated. Ben's breath caught in his throat as he understood the implications.

"Well, I would venture to say that until your back has time to heal, you're going to take life easy, young man." He gently eased Adam into a more comfortable position and covered him up.

Ben pulled Dr. Evans to the window, an eye on Adam drifting back to sleep, and lowered his voice.

"Doctor, he ... will get better, won't he? It's not permanent?"

"It's too soon to tell. Once the swelling is gone down, Ben, we'll know more. But right now I'd say he's paralyzed. For a while, anyway, he'll be unable to walk. I'll let you know when to begin exercises to keep those muscles from weakening."

Ben felt his nerves shaking. He squeezed Adam's hand briefly. "Adam, did you hear him?"

"I heard."

"Ben, I need a few minutes more with him." Dr. Evans guided Ben to the door. "I think Adam would be more comfortable without an audience."

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Laura and Will watched as Ben walked down the stairs. "What does the doctor say?" Will asked, almost afraid to hear the answer.

Ben faced them. "He says there's serious damage to his back muscles and nerve system."

"Ben?" Will's voice caught in his throat, yet his question was clear.

"The doctor didn't know. But I do know. He'll recover. And he'll walk."

"He's going to need constant looking after. You'll have to make room for Peggy and me." Laura looked up at the stairs.

"We'll have room. Will, I'm going to need your help too. I know you were planning to leave for San Francisco but we're going to be a bit short handed."

Will nodded. "San Francisco can wait."

"Thank you, Will." Ben looked down at the floor, as though about to add something, but as though there were no words available, he turned away.

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Laura found herself alone in the huge house she once pictured as being full of noise and laughter. She sat back on the settee. Was she being punished? Adam loved her. He was building her a house! And now that house could have ruined his life -- she could have ruined his life. "No!" She pounded her fist on her lap. "I won't let him be crippled. I won't!"

The front door opened and Hoss and Joe strode in. They'd already heard about the accident and ran to her. "Laura, what happened?" Joe asked. "Adam's hurt?"

She turned away. "He fell. His back ... the doctor's up there."

Joe turned her around. "How bad?"

"His legs ... he can't walk."

Joe and Hoss left Laura visibly shaken at uttering the words aloud and bounded up the stairs. "He's not up there. He's in the guest room."

She couldn't watch them. She could feel Joe's eyes on her as they walked past again. When they find out it's her fault, she'll never be able to look at either of them again. She could barely look into Ben's eyes now. She could tell Ben sensed there was more to the story. She hoped he'd never ask. What on earth could she say?

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Hoss and Joe exchanged glances outside the door. They could hear voices inside. "Reckon why they didn't just take him to his own room.?"

"Ole Adam probably got ornery on them."

"Do you think we should just walk in?" Hoss asked.

Joe shook his head and rapped lightly. The voices stopped, and as he held his breath heard footsteps, slow, uncertain. Finally the door opened, and the doctor, looking considerably worn, stood facing them. "Hi, ah, can we see him?"

Dr. Evans didn't answer right away. Finally he stepped outside the room and shut the door. Whenever one of them was hurt the others always gave their strength to aid in healing. But this time the whole feeling of pain was different.

"Hey, doc, you saying we can't see 'em?" Hoss took his hat off and tossed it on the settee.

Ben came in through the kitchen and joined his sons with the doctor. "Joe, Hoss. He's had a bad fall, and now he can't feel his legs.

"Can't feel his legs?" Hoss scratched his head. "Does that mean ..."

"Ben, I'm going to see old Higgins widow. She might still have a wheelchair you can use. Keep using that ice on his back, but only 15 minutes of every half hour. Pain medicine will help because he's going to start feeling the ache soon." He grabbed his hat and coat. "He won't be using the wheelchair for at least two weeks, but I'll see how soon I can get it here." He shook Ben's hand. "You're in charge. Let him rest."

"Thanks for coming, doctor."

"I'll be back tomorrow to check on him."

"Can we ... just say hi?" Joe asked with a sick grin. "I promise not to upset him or nothing."

"A few minutes. Don't wear him out." Ben and the boys walked in.

As they walked to his bedside Adam's eyes squinted open. "Shirking your chores again? Just because I'm not there to keep you in line?"

"Hah! Joe's a mite tired of doing your work." Hoss's smile faded. "How you doing, Adam?"

"I'll be fine once I'm out there busting horses again."

Ben looked up sharply. Hoss could tell what that look meant. Even if Adam did walk again, busting horses was definitely out of the question. Adam's smile faded and he sank back into the bed, looking small and tired, lost to the world.

"Oh-ho, Adam, you ain't knowing when you got a good thing. If you got a good excuse not to go setting yourself on one of them blowhard mustangs, why, dadgumit, you oughta take it."

"Just sleep life away, that's all, huh?"

Hoss caught a glimpse of his Pa's face, and realized that maybe, this time, there was no right thing to say. "Aw, dadburnit, Adam, you know I—."

"There are other things to do, other places to go." Adam's eyes were sharp, his eyes pinched with pain.

"I don't need to be a rancher, live my life on a horse. There are cities, and books. I could teach ... in a wheelchair." He closed his eyes.

"All right, let's leave him be awhile." Ben herded them back out of the room and shut the door.

Joe found his own lack of words frustrating. He'd never seen such helpless despair, even when Adam tried to make light of pain. "Hoss, what's going on? That wasn't like Adam. He sounded ... beaten."

"Yeah."

"He looks normal, almost. But somehow, like he doesn't fit anymore."

"And there ain't a thing we can do to help. Not one dadblasted thing."

"Hoss, do you think we should tell Pa what happened to the Hendersons?"

Hoss looked back at the door. "I reckon there'll be time later."

"Yeah, but Hoss, he might want to know about the posse vigilantes going after those Indians."

"You think he could leave now?" Hoss walked down the stairs. "All we'd be doing is giving him another fret. The vigilantes will just ... do what they do."

"Well, one of us should go," Joe said over his shoulder as they reached the stairs. "I know I'd be doing more good out there than here."

"Adam needs us, too. I know he won't admit it." Hoss looked back at the guest room and sighed. "But I reckon we'll wait just a bit, before telling Pa."

"And Adam. He won't like it if we shut him out."

"That's true, little brother. Good thinking."

Neither of them paid any attention to Laura and Will, sitting so quiet no one saw fit to include them in the conversation. Hoss and Joe exchanged glances, as though both thinking of them at the same time.

"You reckon we should ask."

"You go ahead, big brother."

Laura stood in front of them. "How is he?"

"Not as good as he could be, Miss Dayton. I think you oughta prod him about a honeymoon so he stops dawdling." Hoss nudged Joe. "Come on, let's tend our horses."

"Yeah. Hey, don't worry, he's gonna be fine. How'd this happen anyway?"

Will stood in front of her. "It's my fault. Don't blame Laura."

"Hey, I wasn't gonna blame anyone," Joe said as he scratched his head under his hat. "Just wanted to know what kind of dumb trouble my normally smart brother got himself into."

"Excuse me. I'm going to see how he's feeling."

After she closed the door behind her, Joe gave Will a shove. "Okay, what's this all about? Why were you and Laura sneaking up on him like that?"

"Look, I don't know what you heard."

"Oh, we heard plenty. Including how you and Laura were looking awful cozy together."

Will turned and strode to the door, grabbing his hat on the way. "I'm going to leave before you say something you regret. Just remember this. Laura belongs with Adam and that's where she's going to stay. I'm going to go and get her daughter."

"Laura! Come on in." Ben pulled her to Adam's side.

Adam reached for her hand. "Sorry about the secret. All those late nights, all the neglect. All led to this."

"You have no reason to apologize. Will and I ... we shouldn't have rode up on you that way. It's a wonderful surprise."

"Well, it should have been." He grunted. "Won't get to finish now. Pa, it's starting to hurt. Did the doc leave something?"

"Yeah, and I'll get Hop Sing to bring in some more ice, too." He patted Adam's leg.

"I wish I could feel that." He turned to Laura, staring out the window, after Ben left. "You know, lots of times one of us has been hurt, but we always knew what to expect. This time ... what I'm trying to say. Laura, I still want to marry you. But I'll understand if you want to postpone. Or to maybe tell me ..."

"Oh, no, Adam. I think we should get married. Right away. And then I'll move in here and be here every day to help you and everything and before you know it—."

"Hey, hey, come on. Slow down."

Laura leaned over and kissed him. "I'm sorry. I'm just ... sorry."

Adam frowned, puzzled. "What aren't you telling me? Something about why you and Will were coming to see me?"

"Do you think ... we could hire some men to finish it up? Perhaps that will encourage you to get on your feet faster."

"I don't think we need to rush that. There's plenty of room for you and Peggy here."

"And Will?"

"What?"

"Doesn't he live here, too?"

"What difference does that make?"

"Adam, I'm so sorry. I know your father blames me."

"Now, he does no such thing."

"If we hadn't come along when we did"

"Why did you?"

Laura took a step back. "Why did we?"

"Something important brought you out. No one knew where I was, except Pa."

"We ... we heard a pounding and wanted to see who ... what it was. I thought I was going to come across some new neighbors and instead we found you."

"Ah..." Adam caressed her small cool hand with his two large callused ones. "I apologize for what's been going through my mind since I saw you with Will. I know I left you alone a lot to work on that house and you spent a lot of time with Will. I cursed my foul luck for missing our engagement party, and when I tried to give you the ring you were hesitant. Laura, when I saw you with him ..." Adam cleared his throat. "I started to think I had thrown us away for something so unimportant."

Laura touched his hands to her lips and sat next to him on the bed. "Adam, don't. It's as I told you, that's all."

When Ben and Hop Sing came in with the ice she left the room again. She was shaking so bad she had to leave before he guessed something was wrong. Lying felt so easy, so natural.

"Mommy!" Peggy had been sitting with Hoss and Joe and ran into her mother's arms. "How is Uncle Adam? Can I go see him?"

"Settle down, young lady. Adam's had a bad fall and is not up to your antics right now. Perhaps later." She caught Will's eye. He was by the door again, ready to leave again. He had questions, too, questions she couldn't answer. Hop Sing came out of the guest room with the bucket. "Why don't you ask Hop Sing if you can help him make some donuts. Tell him ... tell him they're just the things to cheer Adam up. And then you can take him one. How does that sound?"

"Yes, Mommy. Hop Sing!" She followed him into the kitchen.

Laura took a deep trembling breath and sat in the settee.

Hoss stood. "Come on, Joe, let's see if there's some work we can do in the barn."

Joe looked between Will and Laura and nodded. "Yeah. Getting a little too warm in here for me anyhow."

Will, after they shut the door behind them, sat next to her. "Laura, this isn't the best place to talk."

"There's ... nothing to talk about."

"Nothing? You can't mean that. Laura...."

"Adam needs me, and we're to be married." She could meet his hurt-filled eyes only briefly. "Will, that's the way it has to be."

Will got to his feet. He stared at her but she did not look up. He strode for the door.

Ben open the guest room down and came out. "Will, I'm glad to see you're still here. Laura, you've been a great comfort to Adam. His spirits have picked up already, although the pain could likely knock him down for a few days. Will, tomorrow is tallying, can you handle it? I don't know if you ever have before."

"No problem, Ben. Just tell me where and give me something to write on."

"Thank you." Ben looked impatiently around the room. "Now if only Hoss and Joe would stick around."

"I think they're in the barn. I'll get them."

After Will left Ben collapsed onto the settee next to Laura. "This is the hard part, trying to think straight, keep things running even when I feel like shutting everything else away." He placed a concerned hand on Laura's shoulder. "Don't worry, Laura, Adam will recover. It's just a matter of time. At least there's no internal bleeding. His life's not in danger."

Laura turned to him, her hands rubbing nervously together. "You don't blame me, do you? I don't know what possessed us to go riding down by him like that."

"Well, it's probably not the wisest decision you could have made, but certainly understandable. If Adam had told you about the house, none of this would have happened. We all make bad choices from time to time." When Laura only sighed he took her hands. "Is there something else? Laura, you know you can talk to me. If you're changing your mind about marrying him you have to let him know."

Laura jerked her hands away. "No, Ben! Don't even think such a thing." She crossed the fire, rubbing her arms as though cold. "I love Adam."

Ben smiled. "I know you do." He turned as the front door opened behind him.

"Pa!" Joe hesitated and Hoss knocked into him, sending him sailing toward Ben on the settee before catching himself again. "Hoss, you overgrown ox. Why don't you watch yourself?"

"I was watching myself," Hoss said with a sheepish grin. "I just wasn't watching you."

"Boys," Ben nodded briefly at Laura before turning back to them.

Laura recognized the gesture. "Excuse me, I'm going to see if Peggy is causing any mischief with your poor unsuspecting cook."

Ben watched her leave. "Boys, we've got to start roundup tomorrow to have the herd ready to drive. Now the drovers are all scheduled, but we're short handed on the tallying. I've got Will agreed to stay on, so that will help."

"Pa, Will done told us." Hoss shoved his fingers in his pockets and looked at the floor as he walked to his father. "Pa, Joe and I are thinking maybe a couple of the drovers could be paid some wages to help with the roundup in me and Joe's place."

"Why? What for?"

"Because ... there's something we gotta do."

Ben looked surprised and chuckled. "Boys, I appreciate the offer, and I'm sure Adam would too, but I think his house can wait at least until he can be out there supervising you. If you were to get one beam out of place, why..."

"That ain't it, Pa."

Ben looked at Joe. "Can you be a little clearer than your brother?"

"There's trouble brewing in town, Pa. They say the Hendersons have been murdered by a band of Indians on the run from the Cavalry, Bannocks maybe or even..."

Hoss interrupted Joe's need for detail. "A posse of vigilantes is getting together in town to run them down and kill them. Pa, me and Joe think we oughta ride along with them."

Ben crossed his arms and turned back to the fire. "No. We have enough trouble."

Hoss and Joe exchanged glances. "But Pa," Joe started.

"I need you boys here. So does Adam. Chances are whichever tribe might be responsible, they are long gone and the posse will come up empty. So let it go."

Hoss frowned. "Pa, I know you're worried about Adam. But him getting better doesn't depend on you or me. If you and Hop Sing are here, and Will's in charge of the round-up ... Pa, we could stop a massacre. The Hendersons were good friends of ours."

"Hoss, your brother may never walk again! He's going to need us here when that thought sinks in. He needs daily exercising of his legs so they don't weaken. Mostly, he needs reassurance that he's not losing Laura or his entire future. Hoss, the Hendersons are dead. We can't bring them back." He strode up the stairs without a backward glance.

"Not sure when I've seen him so tired. Well, Hoss, what now?"

Hoss shrugged his big shoulders. "Let's go see if Hop Sing is making lunch. I'm hungry."

"Yeah."

**

Life on the Ponderosa settled into a routine of sorts. Ben and Laura learned the exercises that Dr. Evans prescribed to keep Adam's leg muscles strong. Hoss and Joe jovially gripped about the extra chores and teased their brother that if he stayed down too long, they might find the Ponderosa ran smoothly without his help. Twice Ben forced the truth out of them about things that had gone wrong to give them all a chuckle.

Ben found that most times Adam's spirits were good. But there were times he caught Adam looking at Laura with a puzzled expression. The times he was in the room with them they didn't exchange many words. He never once heard them discuss wedding plans, but they probably agreed he needed to recover first. Adam would be more insistent about this than Laura, and indeed showed impatience at times with lack of progress. The swelling in his back lessened daily and disappeared but his legs remained numb.

Over a week after the incident Adam still showed no sign of getting any feeling back in his legs. When Ben heard a furtive knock at the door he turned the exercises over to Joe and went to the door.

Charlie Mills stood at his door and behind him still mounted were six men Ben mostly recognized by sight, a few by name and one a close acquaintance, Val Saldino.

"Charlie, would you like to step in a minute?" Ben waited, but none of the riders made a move to alight.

"No, Ben, this will only take a moment. Please step out here."

Ben noticed an amazing amount of weaponry, two or three rifles per saddle, and holstered guns. "This a posse? Or a vigilante?"

"Ben, we're after those Indians that killed the Hendersons. Didn't ya hear about it?"

"Oh yes, that's right, I'm sorry. Since my son's accident, I've been pretty involved."

"Yeah, sorry to hear about Adam. But we need your help, Ben. Can you pack some gear and come out with us?"

"Now?" Ben remembered all the times the Hendersons had been there for him. Helping with lost cattle in the rain, and digging out in snow drifts. But he can't help them anymore. "As much as the Hendersons meant to me as neighbors and friends, I can't leave right now."

"Ben, word is them Indians is hiding out on the Ponderosa. We don't know every nook and cranny to dig into, like you do. We could be diggin' for the better part of a month, the way those savages are when they hide. With you along."

Ben held up a hand. "You do not have my permission to search the Ponderosa. And do not condemn men as savages without all the facts."

"What? Are you telling me you'd rather hide those savages that killed your friends?"

"You do not have proof who killed them. That's what Hoss told me, a time ago. I had hoped that Sheriff Coffee was proceeding long those lines. So no, you do not have my permission to search on my land unless you have either me, one of my boys or Sheriff Coffee along. Get Roy Coffee to go along with you and we'll talk. Until then, take your posse and search elsewhere."

Charlie exchanged glances with one man Ben did not know. He nodded at Ben curtly and mounted. "We'll get Coffee. Good day, Ben."

As Ben watched them ride off he realized he was going to have to send someone to town tomorrow to make sure they've talked to Roy. He got the distinct feeling they weren't going to leave the Ponderosa at all. Savages, indeed.

Ben went back inside, debating how to talk to Adam about this. He would have some ideas, but he would also be more frustrated than ever. When he stepped inside he saw Laura bending over Adam sitting in a chair next to the bed.

"Adam! Laura, how did you..."

Adam's head was back and his eyes were closed. He did not appear comfortable.

Laura's smile was uneven. "He's been getting into a chair for awhile every day for three days now, Ben. Uses his strong arms to pull himself up and into it. Sits up longer each time."

"Who was that in the yard, Pa?"

Ben went to the window as though he couldn't remember and looked out into the now empty yard. "Are you sure you're up to sitting in a chair, Adam?"

"It's easier today than yesterday. What did they want? I didn't think I'd ever see Stan on the Ponderosa again."

"Oh, that's right. He's the one we had to fire ... Adam, the Hendersons were killed. By a band of Crow Indians, I guess. At least, that's the story."

"Joe told me no one knows why the Crows are out of their territory or why they would kill the Hendersons. They might not have done it, Pa."

"It's not our concern right now, son."

"What is our concern, huh? Me? Getting me to walk again? Is that all that's important anymore?"

Ben exchanged glances with Laura as Adam, his anger without a proper release, looked back out the window.

"I'll go see about lunch." Laura kissed Adam's cheek lightly. He squeezed her hand and she left the room.

Ben stared at the door a moment before turning back. "Adam, Hoss and Joe ... and Will ... are out with the cattle right now, along with all our hands and Hop Sing. You need me here. Laura can't help you by herself. Another few weeks and you'll be fine, I'm sure."

"They want you to ride with them?"

"They think the Crows are hiding on the Ponderosa, yes. I told them they didn't have the right to search without Roy or one of us along. They said they'd get Roy."

"Hmmm. Let's see if they do. Men like that can't always be trusted."

"I know." Ben cleared his throat and sat on the bed. "Adam, is everything all right between you and Laura?"

Pain flashed through his eyes. "Help me out of this, will you?" Adam used pride and a steady determination with strong arms to move awkwardly from the chair back into the bed, and only needed help getting his legs back up.

"If you're feeling ready, I'll bring in that wheelchair."

"Yeah. I need to get out of this room. I'll get used to sitting up."

"Hoss and Joe are due back tomorrow. We'll bring it in then."

"And Will?"

"Yes." Ben watched but his son's face betrayed no emotion. "Did you and Laura set a date?"

"No." He laughed suddenly. "She gave me three weeks to be able to hold her on my lap again and if I can't, the engagement's off. I guess that's incentive enough."

"She's been a great help to you."

"I don't know what I'd do without her." Adam put his head back on the pillow. "Pa, I need to rest a bit."

"Yes, you do." Ben patted Adam's knee but his son didn't react to the touch. He went to the door.

"Bring that wheelchair in tomorrow."

Ben closed the door with a smile.

Downstairs Laura was playing checkers with Peggy. When Peggy saw Ben she jumped up, knocking the checkers sideways to the floor. "Mr. Cartwright, can Uncle Adam get up yet?"

"Peggy, I already explained to you."

"It's all right, Laura." Ben crouched down to the blonde nine-year-old with the hopeful smile. "Adam is getting better every day. Tomorrow we'll bring the wheelchair in for him."

"Mr. Cartwright, was Adam really building a house for my mama and me when he fell?"

Ben noticed Laura stiffen. "Yes, it's true. He slipped. Just an accident. He shouldn't have kept the house a secret from you and your mother."

"I wish I could do nice things for Uncle Adam like he's always doing for us."

"Just having you around is enough for Adam. I'll tell you what though, he might like some of Hop Sing's flowers in a vase in his window."

"Ok, Mr. Cartwright!" She ran to the door.

Laura got to her feet and watched Peggy, painfully aware that Ben was watching her.

"Laura, come here and sit on the settee with me."

"Ben, Adam is getting better, isn't he?"

"I think so. But Laura, I want you to be honest with me, and yourself. There is a chance he won't. Will you be able to live with him the way he is?"

"Ben. You don't think I can leave him like this, do you?"

"But will you be able to live with him like this? Is your love strong enough?"

"Ben, I am ready to spend the rest of my life making Adam's life happier and more comfortable, if he'll let me."

"That's the girl. Sometimes this old man just needs a little reassuring. Well," he stood. "I need some fresh air, how about you?"

"No, I've got to bring him his lunch."

Ben patted her shoulder and walked toward the door. When he looked back Laura was staring at the fire.

**

Ben stood on the porch watching Peggy carefully pick flowers of different colors into a bouquet. He would have to tell Laura not to let Peggy wander too far from the ranch as long as the Crows were hiding on the Ponderosa.

He wished he could do something. He didn't want a band of renegades looking to make trouble near his family. Most times he found any Indian could be reasoned with. But renegades in a hot temper were most often stopped only by bullets. He felt a vague sort of relief that Adam wasn't able to go out and hunt for them himself. He tended to put himself between angry men as though only a few well-chosen words were all he needed.

"Mr. Cartwright? How's this?" Peggy shoved a fistful of flowers up at him.

"Oh, that looks just right." He glanced off into the thicket beyond the shed. "Come on, let's get them inside."

The next day became quite the occasion when Dr. Evans stopped in shortly after Joe and Hoss brought in the wheelchair. They had already built a ramp and once Dr. Evans checked Adam's progress, they wheeled him outside.

Adam breathed deep. "Ah, yes. I almost forgot how the lake smelled."

"Yup, Adam, you're doing good. Won't be long now at all until you get your turn at pushing those mangy cows down this mountain."

"Hah! What's the matter, Hoss, you miss me?"

"Ah, well, sure."

"Sure!" Joe laughed. "Every time he gets a face full of dust, he says, sure wish Adam was here!"

Adam looked up, his laughter fading when he saw Will come out of the barn. Will paused a moment before coming forward.

"Adam! Good to see you out again."

"Joe, Hoss, how about checking that loose board on the ramp."

"Loose board?" Joe looked at Adam and back at Hoss. "What loose board?" Hoss grabbed his arm and pulled him to the porch.

Adam turned back to Will and extended his hand. Will gave his back and as they shook, Will's dubious smile spread wide. "Will, I want to apologize."

"For what?"

"I hate to admit that for a while I blamed you for my fall. That was foolish."

"Not so foolish as you think. I blamed myself as well."

"Well, I want you to stop right now. Understand?" Adam winked at him.

"Sure."

"Adam!" Peggy ran out of the barn. "Look what I found. A ball! Will you play ball with me, Adam?"

"You bet we'll play ball, little rascal. Right after lunch. I think Hop Sing's about ready to feed us. Is that right, Hoss?"

Hoss perked up. "He sure 'nuf better be!" They laughed as they followed Peggy inside.

**

Adam sat on the porch in his wheelchair, alone. Hoss and Joe rode out to pay the hands for the drive. Peggy was helping Hop Sing with supper. He didn't know where Laura was. He left Will in the barn preparing to ride to San Francisco. All the talking didn't make a bit of difference.

Laura swore to stay with Adam until he walked. Those were her words. He wasn't sure he could look at her again with that pity in her eyes, the guilt that held her to him. Not love. Did she ever love him? Felt grateful perhaps, for his help after her husband died. She fell for Will so easily, when she was supposed to be planning a wedding!

Now Will thinks he's being noble, giving her up. Noble.

He stared into the yard, at where they played ball just that afternoon. His back was throbbing from the effort, but they had fun, the three of them. Only a short time later he caught Will and Laura kissing in the barn.

He'd never known a deceitful woman, one who could hide her true feelings so well. That she chose Will over him was hard enough. That she was able to lie to him so completely was even worse. He wanted Will to take her. He didn't want her here anymore, where every time he saw her he'd feel the pain of both as one.

He told her to go to him, told her to marry him, that he understood, that he didn't need her, but she believed she and Will had no future together. He was close to saying that they had no future together either, but she ran off on him.

Adam squeezed his eyes shut, concentrating. There was only one thing left to do, to salvage what little bit of pride they've left him. He clamped both hands on his knees and forced the strength of his will down into his toes. He remembered the exercises and forced memory of the feeling the exercises stimulated down into his legs.

He had some movement, feeling was returning, but he hadn't shared this with anyone. Until he was sure himself, he didn't want to get anyone else's hopes up

He'd be pushing it, but the only way Laura would leave him is if he shows her he doesn't need her anymore.

And then Pa forced him to tell the truth, ripping the wound open even further by admitting to his father that she chose Will, that she was only staying with him out of obligation. That they were coming to see him that day to tell him, when he fell.

Will came to give his farewells, and Pa called Laura outside to say good-bye.

Laura watched Will walk away from her, forcing Adam to watch their sacrifice of love and life so she can stay with him and pity him in her guilt-stricken way.

Even though he wasn't sure he was ready to stand he didn't know of a better time to try. He only had to be sure he concentrated hard, harder and know this was the right thing at the right time in the right way to get his own life back, without her. His arms were strong, pushing him up out of the chair and his back throbbed miserably but he used the pain to force strength back down into his legs, standing on the pain caused more by her than his back....

"Laura."

Laura turned. Adam stood in front of her.

"Adam! Oh, Adam!" She reached out to hold on to him, but he stopped her.

"I'm all right. Now you go to him. You see, I don't need you."

"Oh, Adam." She leaned forward carefully and kissed his cheek, in much the same way as she has since the accident. "Thank you."

And she ran off, got in the wagon with Will, and rode out of his life. They'd catch up to Peggy, who went off riding with a neighbor.

Ben followed Adam back inside the house, close but not touching, ready to catch him in case he staggered. Adam leaned against the settee a moment, then crossed to the stairs. He was slow, wobbly, but Ben could see he wasn't about to sit again. Not yet.

"Adam, that was ... I am ... are you sure you're okay?"

"I couldn't let her stay here. Not pitying me and loving someone else. I couldn't allow that." He took a step up cautiously.

Ben grimaced as Adam slowly climbed the stairs, heading for his own room for the first time since the fall. He couldn't remember a time Adam ever admitted how much he was hurting, as he did just now. Without allowing Adam to hear him, he went to the bottom of the stairs to watch him finish his slow climb. He still had some healing to do.

Ben went back to the settee and wept.

**

Breakfast the next morning was unusually quiet. Ben continually glanced at the empty chair across from him. He hoped Adam would be down to join them, but Adam insisted Hop Sing bring his meal to his room.

"Pa. I heard gunshots late last night," Hoss said, bringing him back to the breakfast table.

"The vigilantes?"

"Must be. Want I should ride to town for Sheriff Coffee after chow?"

"Boys, I think this might be a good time for the three of us to join the hunt. Once we help find the Indians and get this whole thing settled, we'll get our land back again."

Joe looked up at the stairs. "Adam won't be ready to ride yet. Will he?"

"Adam can use this time to be alone. I think that's what he wants right now. Hop Sing will be here."

"How could Laura run off that way with Will, Pa? I coulda swore she loved him. And he loved her. He was building her a house."

"That's not for us to say, Hoss. I suspect Adam will come to terms with that question in his own time, and his own way. And maybe he'll share his answers with us."

Joe shook his head. "This is harder on him than the loss of his legs was."

**

Adam heard the silence in the house from his room and took the steps down one at a time. The house was empty.

Even Hop Sing wasn't making his usual after breakfast noise in the kitchen, which could mean he was out running errands.

He walked to the desk and picked up the photograph of his mother. Sometimes happiness happens, even for brief moments in time. His pa found it three times. He couldn't even handle it once. He saw a note laying open, in his father's hurried handwriting.

"Adam, we've packed and rode off to help find the Crows and make sure their side is understood. We'll probably be gone for several days. Take care of yourself. Hop Sing will make sure you have everything you need. Don't push yourself too hard, and we'll see you when we get back. Pa."

"Don't push myself. Huh." Adam looked around at the empty house. Only yesterday Hop Sing chased Peggy trying to get his last egg back. When Hop Sing finally caught up to her she got a case of the giggles -- especially after Hop Sing dropped the egg as soon as he got it from her -- that she needed ten minutes to calm back down again.

Adam sat in the wingback by the fire and picked up the book he had been reading. He turned to his marked page, but the words ran together. He put the book back down and closed his eyes.

The house he worked on was still out there, a skeleton of the love he thought they shared. He even had a tree picked out for a treehouse for his little girl. She was gone now, too. They had her write a farewell letter to him. Even though the thought was painful, he would have preferred a hug.

Now he may as well tear the house framework down. He got to his feet. No -- torch the framework, and today was as good a day as any.

He got as far as the barn when he realized he wasn't going to be able to saddle the horse. He could ride the buckboard out, but hitching the wagon up was even harder than saddling. The house would have to wait. It might be easier to look at a week from now.

**

On the second day of being alone Adam thought he might go mad. He had no physical problems moving around inside the house or barn but saw Laura and Peggy's faces in his mind every minute -- polishing rifles, varnishing wood, waxing saddles or just pacing. He was more tired than he could ever remember being, and yet he felt if he didn't get off the Ponderosa for awhile, he'd be worse off than if he pushed too hard.

After lunch he tried to split wood, but couldn't raise the ax more than waist high. He wandered over to the corral and called his horse. He patted the bay, anxious to be out riding again.

"Sorry, boy, I know you're getting tired of being cooped up as much as me. But if I can't lift an ax, picture me with your saddle, eh?" Adam covered his eyes with a hand briefly, as emotion welled up again. In such a short time to lose so much. He had a hard time stroking his horse, for want of more. "Damn!" He turned and strode to the house, ignored the throbbing in his back.

He had just reached the porch when he heard the pounding of horse hooves. His horse heard them too and reared, prancing inside the corral. The man who rode in was slumped over, an Indian arrow out his back. Adam went over to him and tried to ease him out of the saddle, but the man was near death and fell like a rock to the ground.

"Can you tell me who did this?"

"Posse hunt ... tell them ... I found ... Crow."

"Where? Where did you find them?"

"Up by ... crescent rock." The man's head fell back as he exhaled one final time.

Adam stood. Providence delivered him a horse, already saddled. He took the reins of the gentle animal, the saddle was large and well padded. He pulled the horse to the hitching rail and tied it. Not even an hour later he was back at the horse's side with a saddle bag, bedroll and enough food for two days' ride.

Hop Sing followed him out, clucking like a mother hen.

"Now, Hop Sing, stop fussing. You know you can't stop me if I got my mind made up." He picked up his left foot to put in the stirrup and grimaced, fighting not to show the pain. He got his left foot in the stirrup and stood, but his right leg wouldn't raise up over the saddle, no matter how determined he was.

"Adam need help?" Hop Sing grabbed his leg and gently raised him up the few inches he needed.

Adam settled gratefully into the saddle. "Hop Sing, you amaze me."

"Mr. Adam drive Hop Sing nuts too. Not want you to leave, but you even worse if you stay."

"You are a born philosopher, Hop Sing. Hyah!"

Hop Sing watched Adam ride out of the yard. "I need to be, when your Pa skin me live."

Adam knew where he was headed, but sometimes the trail eluded him. For a while he thought he was on the trail the dead miner was on, but wishful thinking wasn't as strong as clear knowledge

If he was right, the Indians could be hiding near Taylor Creek, where what some of the drovers called Crescent Rock was found. Pa and the posse likely headed east, or they would have found the miner first. Or the miner could have been part of the posse. Which might, or might not, have given the Indians reason to shoot. He may be dealing with real bad natives this time, with practically no defense except one gun and a slow moving hand.

He felt his confidence grow as night drew close and he met no obstacles to his ride. Another few miles and he would be off the Ponderosa, heading to California. He expected to find the Indians holed up soon.

He squinted. Ahead on the path a tree had fallen, blocking his way. In this part of the mountain there was no way to walk the horse around it. Jumping the horse over would be risky because of the protruding branches. He was going to have to alight and chop off those branches.

**

"Pa, do you think we could be going in the wrong direction?" Joe asked. With his father and brother he waited behind the posse as they checked out another blind draw.

"Most likely, Joe, but try telling them that. At least we've satisfied their curiosity by showing them corners they missed before. We should be able to convince them to give up the chase in another day or so."

"Hah!" Hoss nodded over at them. "Did you see Stan's face when I says Indians a lot of times have more brains than most other people? He ain't giving up till they're dead. Or he is."

"I wish we'd find 'em, Pa. I don't like seeing men like this digging through our land."

"I know. Come on, looks like they're moving again."

**

Adam blinked hard. He sensed people standing over him, but his eyes didn't focus. When he realized that the night and not poor vision blinded him, and that he was flat on his back on the ground, he tried to roll to his side but couldn't. He felt paralyzed. Again.

A long feathered stick jabbed his chest. The Crow. Adam tried again but a sharp pain caught him by surprise and he groaned. Two Indians grabbed his arms and pulled him up. They put him on his horse and led him away. He tried to watch where they were taking him but was overwhelmed with exhaustion.

As he nodded off in the saddle despite the throbbing in his back, the idea occurred to him that they might be holding him in exchange for their safe escape. At least he no longer felt useless.

When he awoke again he heard voices talking around him. He rolled on his side and looked over in the direction of the voices.

Around a campfire sat six men and four women. One elder woman doing most of the talking, with several others at times glancing his way.

Adam blinked heavily and tried to sit. His back hurt, and though he could feel his legs, he didn't think they'd support him. With a grunt he sat up and watched as the people around the campfire grew silent looking at him.

One man walked over to him. "You stand?"

Adam listened to the Crow tongue, finding little similarity to the Indian language he was used to. But he could follow the hand gestures. "No, I don't think I better. Not yet." When the Indian frowned, Adam tried again, using sign language. "Back hurt. Legs hard to move. Need rest." He realized confessing all of this meant a good chance they would just kill him and leave him here.

The Crow looked back over his shoulder and shook his head at the others. When he looked back at Adam his expression softened a little. He was not a handsome man but his eyes were bright and intelligent, and his paint accentuating his cheekbones made him look fiercer than his eyes betrayed, a warm, kind brown.

"Why are you here?" While crippled in bed Adam wondered why they were on the run on the Ponderosa. He wanted to hear their reason.

The Crow sat beside him and surprised Adam with English. "Chased. Soldiers make us bad land, no hunt, no water. We run. They shoot, we shoot. They kill, we kill."

Adam nodded. "But there are other ways to handle them. You have an agent. Have you tried standing ground and working it out?"

"We stand ground. Wife shot dead when pick up a small stone. She intend no harm. Now dead." The Indian eyed him with a frown. "You with Army? You deserve to die like they do."

"No. I came to help. You plan to stay here?"

"Good land. Fight here. No more running."

Adam couldn't get his bearings from his position on the ground. He didn't get out to this section of the Ponderosa much but from the look of the trees and the sound of a waterfall not too far away, they were across into California, off Cartwright land.

Swift Foot was called back to the fire and in Crow language another argument ensued. Several were in favor of killing him, while others saw the logic of keeping him alive - for whatever purpose. Swift Foot ordered that Adam be fed and made comfortable for the night.

One particularly fierce one helped Adam to his feet and sharply called out. Two young Indian girls lead him to a peaceful corner to stretch out for the night. A woman came up behind him and helped him to sit. She offered him a soupy mix and he realized he was hungry.

When he finished they helped him to the waterfall to wash up. He discovered he was in a valley of the Sierras not far into California, a prime piece of land the Crow won't be able to hold on to any more than their land in Wyoming.

When Adam was finally left alone to sleep he found he couldn't get comfortable. His body was tired but not his mind. If Pa and his brothers were home, Hop Sing will tell them that Adam seemed fine, and that a man had died in their yard. Hop Sing will tell them his direction.

He hoped Pa would realize not to come this way with the posse. And then there was the Cavalry, gun-happy soldiers who could show up any day now. Adam hoped to have his family's help but knew he would have to be ready to stand with the Crow alone. He may be their only hope.

In the morning Adam realized how little food these people had to live on. Several of the men left early to hunt, and the remainder of them shared bits of eatable fruits and beans found in the wild. That morning he had a small piece of dried meat. He saw no one else eat anything.

"You do not seem like other white men," Swift Foot said after Adam finished eating.

"All men are different in their own way."

"Why white man say one thing, do another?"

"This wide country makes men greedy. They see open land, take it any way they can."

"We befriended white men. Showed them how to live on the land, how to take care of earth and tress. They tell us we not good enough for this land that we protect."

"Not all white men are like that. You must find land to claim as your own, the way other whites are doing. Stop running, stop killing and prove you lived on a piece of land first. If you keep moving, that becomes harder to do. Then the government gives you land it doesn't want." He adjusted his position with a grimace.

"Land without water. Instead, choose this as your land, lay down your weapons, and show them that you will not fight, but you will not move. I will stand with you. If they shoot, they kill us, and they will be blamed. I promise you." Adam hoped his was getting through with his mix of Shoshone and white words. He didn't know much Crow.

"You, Adam Cartwright, be killed with us?"

"I believe that if we stand unarmed, we will win. I believe this enough to stand with you."

Swift Foot took his words back to council. When they finished talking, Swift Foot came back, an angry scowl creasing his face.

He pulled Adam to his feet and took him back to his lean-to. Swift Foot called two women over, one a young women from the night before whose touch was soothing. In her presence he couldn't see Laura's face. The women laid him on his belly on a cool bed of sand and removed his shirt.

"What is your name?" he asked of her as she rubbed a cool wet mixture on his back. She didn't answer but hummed in a low, sensual way as she massaged his back. He found the pleasure drifting him into a light slumber, until she abruptly stopped, jarring him back awake.

She offered him a cup of odd tasting water and gave him roots of some plant to chew on. They were helping him to heal, he suddenly realized, noticing he still suffering some back pain and hesitation walking, so that he could make his stand with them.

Laura's deception made him wonder if there was such a thing as trust anymore. Believing in someone was easy if you had a reason to trust them. Laura never developed that trust in him to understand his absence meant something important to him -- to both of them. If she had that trust, she would never have let Will come between them.

A young boy brought a leather skin that had been tanning on sticks over the fire. He laid the tanning skin on Adam's back, making Adam flinch under the unexpected heat before realizing how good it felt. The boy sat by Adam's head and stuck his finger into a pasty herb mix. He held this mix next to Adam's mouth. Adam looked up at the boy, no older than Peggy, who seemed so seriously intent on having Adam suck the mix off his finger. The mix tasted vaguely of pine needles. Gradually with the odd taste trickling down his throat and the warmth on his back, the throbbing subsided, and he felt comfortably drowsy. The boy remained at Adam's side, whittling a stick taking the shape of an arrow shaft.

Adam remembered braiding a bridal for Peggy ... he felt he had slept, and he and the boy conversed in his dream. When he awoke the boy was still there, fastening the arrowhead to the tip. Adam sat up to face him. He tried communicating with his halting tongue but the boy wasn't as adaptable as his elders.

Adam pointed at the whittling and indicated bow and arrow. The boy nodded, explaining in his own words the significance of what he was doing.

"Good." Adam touched the arrow shaft and nodded.

The boy eyed him. "Good?"

"Arrow." Adam ran his finger down the length of the shaft. "Arrow. Good arrow." He motioned shooting a bow.

The boy nodded. "Arrow good." He described in sign what he would shoot, and Adam understood rabbit. The boy ended with his own version of being hit by an arrow. They laughed, and Adam remembered Peggy, but the pain had lessened.

The boy got to his feet and pulled Adam up. He motioned Adam to follow. Adam didn't know where they were going, but he was ready to make a stand whenever they said. Even against his Pa, if he brought the posse.

**

"Hop Sing!" Ben slapped his hat against his leg. "You can't stand there telling me you let Adam ride out of here."

"Adam unhappy since Miss Laura leave. He stay here another minute, drive Hop Sing away."

"But confound it, Hop Sing, he wasn't healed yet. You oughta seen that." Hoss stared down at the ramp they built for their brother not so long ago.

"Man sometime need more than rest to heal. Man need to take his mind to happier place. He go swim in Tahoe, good for him. He go sit in woods, good for him."

"He go hunt for Indians, bad for him!"

Joe turned to stare off at the trail leading away from the house. "He couldn't have gone far. His horse is still here."

"He take dead man's horse." Hop Sing clamped his hand over his mouth.

Ben grabbed his shirt before he could get far. "Hold on, Hop Sing. What aren't you telling us?"

"Mr. Adam no want you worry. Think you stay away more days. He not able to saddle own horse. Man come in, say he know where Crow is."

"All right, Hop Sing, we won't blame you for not stopping him. We know how hardheaded he is. Just tell us what direction he went."

"You ... take posse?"

"The posse's gone on ahead. Dadgumit, Hop Sing, we gotta go after him." Hoss's uncommon impatience made him sound like an enraged bull. "Where did he ride off to?"

"He ride northwestern trail."

As the three Cartwrights mounted up again, Little Joe put a hand out to Ben. "Pa, that's the posse's direction."

"We'll ride faster. Come on!"

**

In the next two days Adam felt his back pain lessening. The young lady he called Little Deer became his personal friend. Though he did not allow himself any fanciful thoughts of her, their friendship without words was a healing elixir. The boy he called Night Owl became so attached to him, Adam wondered if he would be able to leave the boy behind when he went home. He only hoped the tribe would lay down their weapons and make a stand when the time comes. Swift Foot did not bring up the subject again, though they talked many times about other things.

At the midday campfire Adam sat with the council, Night Owl by his side. They would be hard pressed to leave now, with everything they brought with them fixed into a more permanent settlement. They were staking their very lives to this spot, which soon would be put to the test.

"Have you thought more of standing this ground you call home, laying your weapons at your feet?"

"Adam Cartwright has weapon on horse. Are you willing to use this on your friends?"

Adam frowned. "It may come to that. But it doesn't have to. I will stand with you, but if we put our weapons down they will not shoot."

"Truth?"

"I believe it." Adam saw dubious faces. "I do not want to risk your lives. But I believe it will work." He looked at Night Owl's bright eyes staring up at him. "But I will stand any way you choose. I believe you have a right to your own land."

The first sound of horse hooves came as the Indians were stripping the hide off an elk. Swift Foot heard the rumbling first. He stood listening.

Adam was playing a game of pinecone toss with Night Owl, feeling better than he had in a long time, when he realized the men in camp were distressed and moving. They were gathering knives, arrows, the few guns they had, and forming a line across the eastern section of camp. One elder gathered the women and children and pushed them to safety in the lodges.

Adam pulled Night Owl to his feet. "Go to the waterfall and stay hidden. Go!" Night Owl stomped his foot. He indicated bow and arrow and patted his head. He was a boy, but here in the tribe a boy became a man early. Too early. "All right. Come on. But do what I do."

When Adam saw the Indians standing with weapons ready to defend their camp, his legs weakened for a different reason. If Pa was not with the riders, whether posse or army, they were in for a bad time. But however the Indians made their stand, he promised to stand with them.

He hoped that his presence with the Indians would keep whites from shooting. If it was posse riding in, his presence as friend and neighbor could be a deterrent.

But the sound of the hooves as they drew close was more regimental, and as they came into view his fears were justified.

The Colonel leading Cavalry held up his hand and the horses halted, several officers immediately readying to draw weapons. "Swift Foot, I see you've given up running. Does this mean you're ready to turn yourself over to the Government? If so, I'd advise you to lay down your weapons before your people get hurt."

Swift Foot spoke in clear English, words Adam realized he'd used before. "If I lay down my weapon you will think I surrender. I do not." He looked at Adam. "If using my weapon means my people will be hurt, I do not want that. But here we will live. This I have staked as land on which to live." He saw Adam smile and nodded. "This new Indian land for Crow. We will not leave."

"We have orders not to leave without taking you back. If you resist, one shot from you and all of you will die."

Swift Foot looked at his men ready around him. He placed his weapon on the ground and stood on it. One by one his men followed his example. Adam did the same. Night Owl next to him stiffened, keeping his bow ready. Adam placed a hand on his shoulder, and finally the boy stood on his weapon as well. Swift Foot pointed. "You see white friend? He say put weapons down, army will not shoot. Army will leave. We keep land. We stand ground."

Adam crossed his arms. "I suggest you tell whoever gave you orders to move these people out that the only way you'll do it is through a massacre. Do you want that on your conscience? They will not fight, and they will not move. You have no choice but to leave them in peace."

"No choice?" The Colonel alighted and walked to Adam.

"They don't need a savior. They need someone to tell them what's right for them."

"That's what I'm doing."

"By giving them this land? It's not yours to give."

"It's public land. You took land that used to be theirs. I'd call it an even trade. Do you want to prove you're better people by shooting them down? You'll have to kill me too."

"And who is it I have the pleasure of addressing?"

"My name doesn't matter. My family owns land adjacent to this. Go back to your Army and tell them that the Indians are living in peace and we will help them. Recommend they be left in peace."

The Colonel looked over the tribe. Adam avoided looking down at their weapons, but if the Cavalry decided to start shooting, or a struggle ensues, he would be the first to grab his weapon. "Let's move out, men. We'll let the General decide if there's further action to be taken here." The Colonel turned to his horse.

Adam and Swift Foot exchanged glances.

Adam almost allowed himself to relax when they heard the pounding of other horses behind the Cavalry. The seven men of the posse had been reduced to a wild-eyed and grubby five. Adam saw that

Val was still among them and felt a bitter displeasure toward his former friend. They seemed disappointed the Army was there before them.

"Good afternoon, Colonel." Charlie nudged his horse forward. "I'm glad to see ya. This here band of Indians is wanted for murder. I request your help taking them peaceable." He turned and pointed a finger at Adam. "And don't you get in the way, Adam, with any of your fancy talking."

"Talking is better than shooting, or merciless hanging, for murder they may not have committed," Adam said to the Colonel.

The Colonel looked over the Indians, who remained passively standing on their weapons even at the sight of the bedraggled posse. "Any witnesses of the event?"

"Witnesses? You don't need witnesses to know an Indian killing when you see one!" Charlie sat back in his saddle. "We come to take them in."

"All of them?" When Charlie stammered in response, the Colonel raised a hand. "I suggest you take your vigilante group back the way you came. I will take the matter up with your governor." He looked back at the Crow, "they aren't going anywhere." He stepped toward Adam. "I trust you will act as their temporary agent until we can get this matter resolved. I will need to know your name."

"Adam Cartwright, and yes, I will act on their behalf."

"Cartwright?" The Colonel studied him as they shook hands. "I know Ben Cartwright. That your family?"

"It is."

"That's good enough for me." The Colonel turned to Swift Foot. "I've seen the worst and the best of these people. I prefer the best." He mounted. "Vigilantes, we will follow you. Don't be tempted to come back." He looked back at Swift Foot and smiled before facing Charlie again. "I can guarantee, if you do, you'll be the first arrested by the governor."

The posse and Army slowly moved away. There was quiet discussion among the soldiers and a few livid words expressed by the posse, and then they were gone.

Adam picked up his rifle, at the same time handing Night Owl his proudly made bow and two arrows.

"Good." He patted the boy on the shoulder. "Good."

The boy nodded back. "Good arrow."

"A very good arrow." Adam laughed. "You can use it for hunting."

Swift Foot stood by them as the rest of the tribe went back to cleaning and preparing the elk. "We are happy for today. But tomorrow, they return?"

"I suspect there may come a time when those who killed the Hendersons will have to tell their story. Was it a Crow?"

"Come, sit by fire." They turned to the fire but again heard the pounding of horse hooves coming toward their camp. Swift Foot grabbed his rifle and several others readied their bows.

"Stand with us, Adam Cartwright. Those who say we murdered, if they come back we will kill them."

Adam picked up his rifle and turned to face the approaching riders. As Swift Foot took aim the riders came into view. Adam grabbed his barrel and pointed the weapon to the ground.

"Don't shoot. It's all right. It's my family."

"Adam!" Ben jumped down off his buckskin, followed by Joe and Hoss. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, Pa, thanks to Swift Foot. And this is Night Owl, I'm teaching him some English."

"Good arrow," Night Owl said.

Adam put an arm around the boy's shoulders and gestured. "This is my Pa, and my brothers Hoss and Joe. Swift Foot here is ah ... well, he held off the army and the posse."

"Well, Swift Foot." Ben shook his hand. "I'm glad to meet you and see that my son is all right. We saw the Army riding off with the posse, Adam, and weren't sure what to expect when we found you."

"Why don't you sit with us at the campfire, and you'll hear all about it."

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Hoss broke the silence as the Cartwrights rode back to the ranch. "Think they'll get to keep the land, Pa?"

Ben looked over at Adam. "I think that might be up to their new temporary agent. What about it, Adam? What are their odds of staying there?"

Adam looked skyward as the sun dipped down between Ponderosa pines. "Well, since the killing of the Hendersons was in self-defense, they can't be found guilty of murder, not legally, anyway. But the way I've seen it, there's still more whites who don't believe in Indian rights, than those who do. And would never see anything the Indians do as self-defense."

Hoss nodded. "Yup. About what I was afraid of."

"Will and Laura moved to California. She sold the house after all," Joe said off the cuff.

"Joe," Ben warned.

"It's all right, Pa. I hope they have a good life."

"See, it's like I said, Pa," Joe grinned. "Laura wasn't good enough for older brother here."

"Well, I'll tell you, younger brother, the day I find someone who is good enough, I'll be sure to hide her. From you."

"Yeah, you just do that, Adam."

As they laughed, Adam found his mind wandering back to Crow. He wanted to keep them safe from further white attacks. This time staying peaceful worked. But what about next time?

In the end, he may find protecting natives' rights about as easy as keeping a deceitful woman by his side. He pulled out the arrow Night Owl had given him. This was one fight he wasn't going to walk away from so easily.

And feared it could cause a lot more broken hearts in the future and not only his.