

The Donager Saga: Beginnings
by Nancy Eddy

Episode 3
Answered Prayers

"Doesn't seem like very ago that we were worried about crossing a rain-swollen river," Charles said as he helped check the canvas ties, "and now we're trying to get ready for a sandstorm that Mr. Jennings says is headed this way."

"I can already taste the dust in the air," Artie nodded. "My folks have all of the rest of the kids ready with kerchiefs to tie around their faces."

"I think we all have those ready." He checked the last tie. "Okay, this one's secure. Why don't you go that way and I'll go this way, so we'll be closer to our wagons as we go?"

"Good idea. See you after the storm."

Charles waved, going on to the Longdon wagon, checking the ties all around. "Everything secure in there?" he called out, feeling the wind beginning to pick up. Olivia's head appeared around the back of the canvas cover, but disappeared almost immediately, and he heard her start coughing. So he went to the back of the wagon - the protected side - and ducked under the cover. "You okay?" he asked.

"She's fine," Anna assured him as Olivia sat with a cup of water. "She got a mouthful of dust and wasn't expecting it."

"Silly," he said to the girl, grinning. "I just asked if everything was secure."

"It will be once you get that flap closed," she told him, then coughed again.

"Drink some more water. See you later."

"Why aren't you in your wagon with John and Margaret?" Anna asked.

"Artie and I got volunteered to double-check the wagons before the storm really hits," he explained. The wagon rocked under the sudden gust of wind. "I better get going," he told them.

By the time he got back to the second wagon in the line - they had parked facing into the wind instead of in a circle - the sand hitting the exposed skin on his face stung badly. Climbing inside, he secured the flap, scanning for any sign that the sand and dust was getting inside the wagon.

"I double checked it all before I got inside," John told him, holding out a cup of water. "Here. You probably need this."

Charles removed the kerchief and took a drink. "Thanks. I feel like I swallowed a handful of dirt."

Margaret, sitting beside her husband, nodded, speaking through the covering over her mouth and nose. "I feel that way, and I've been inside for the last two hours."

He handed her the cup. "You might as well finish this -" He put the kerchief back over his face, lowering his head to rest on his forearms as they listened to the wind blowing hard enough to scatter

sand against the canvas. The wagon rocked, the canvas stretched to its limit.

There was a fine sheen of dust on the interior of the wagon as the strong wind pushed fine sand through the canvas and inside via cracks in the wood. Margaret started to cough again, and John wrapped her inside of his arms, letting her bury her face inside of his coat for more protection.

Charles was sitting, head still down, dozing, when he heard the silence. Lifting his head, he said, "Listen."

"I don't hear anything," John replied.

"I know. It's over."

"Thank God," Margaret sighed, looking around. "Can we go outside now?"

Charles led the way, untying the back flap and lowering the tailgate as he got out. He helped Margaret down, then finally turned to survey the damage.

Others were exiting their wagons as well, some dismayed by the high drifts of sand under the wagon wheels. Matthew escorted Rebecca out of their wagon, and removed his hat. That was a signal to everyone, and they all moved to join the minister, joining hands as he said a prayer thanking God for seeing them through the sandstorm, and asking for His providence in cleaning things up so that they could continue their journey.

After the "Amen"s were said, Overton's voice called out. "Okay! Let's get started digging out. We'll have to leave early tomorrow morning if we're going to make that watering hole before dark!"

"I'll go make sure the stock are all okay," John announced, and several others followed him as he told Margaret, "You find a place to sit down, Meg."

"I'm fine," she insisted, but accepted the chair that Rebecca brought out of their wagon. Chairs also appeared for the other expectant mothers as well.

The stock had been sheltered - as much as possible - in a blind canyon. The opening now had almost two feet of sand across it - but all of the animals appeared to be well. "They're going to need some water," John said.

"Some of us are getting a little low on that commodity, John," Gerald reminded him.

"Then those of us who don't have as many using the water can share to help out," Slim Baker suggested. "I have more than I'll need. And we only have to last until we get to that lake that Mr. Overton was talkin' about."

"If there's water there," Niles pointed out. "I heard Mr. Overton tell Jennings that as dry as it's been lately, there may not be any. Said that we'd have to go on short rations if that's the case."

"We can discuss a plan for that later," was John's reply. "Right now, let's get these animals some water."

=====

Word went out the next day to conserve the available water, with every family taking inventory as to how much they had left in water barrels and canteens. The cloudless sky seemed to taunt them, as the sun beat down on the sand beneath the wheels and hooves, leeching the water from their bodies, putting a fine sheen of sweat on the horses and other animals.

"It's so hot," Margaret sighed, fanning herself with a handkerchief.

Charles glanced at her. "Take a drink of water from my canteen," he offered.

"No, I'm not thirsty," she said quickly, licking her dry lips.

"Big sisters should never lie to their little brothers. Take a drink." Before she could refuse again, he took the reins in one hand and grabbed the round canteen from under the seat. "Here."

"Maybe - just a small sip," she nodded, opening the cap.

Seeing her take only one small sip before closing it again, Charles shook his head. "Where you this stubborn when we were growing up?"

"If I wasn't, I wouldn't be here now," she told him. "I'd be back in New York, married to someone like Todd Blankenship." She shuddered at the thought.

Charles laughed. "That sawed-off little guy. Only reason any woman even looked at him once was because his father was on the board of directors of fifteen companies and owned two banks."

"He was sweet," Margaret insisted. "But he refused to stand up to his father and tell him that he wanted to paint pictures instead of go into the banking business."

"I never knew that about old Todd. But I can understand him not wanting to tell his father that. I mean, Mr. Blankenship was worse than *our* father. And that's saying something."

John rode up on the horse. "How's it going?" he asked, looking at Margaret.

"I'm fine," she assured him, showing him the canteen that she was still holding. "I just had a drink of water."

"A sip," Charles corrected, earning a glare from his sister.

"We shouldn't be too far from the lake now -" he rose up in the saddle. "Jennings is back," he said, kicking the horse forward to join Overton as the scout returned.

"It's almost dry," Jennings was saying as he rode up. "Might be enough for the animals, but that's it." Overton turned to look at John. "Well, Donager, I warned you this might happen, remember. We go on short water rations starting now."

"We started this morning," John informed the wagon-master.

"What?"

"We got together and discussed it - and we've agreed to share any water we have. Some of us, like Slim Baker and the Lees and Doc and his wife don't need as much as the larger families." John saw the grin on Jennings' face, quickly gone before Overton looked in his direction.

"Okay. We'll have a camp meeting when we stop to make camp beside what's left of the lake."

====

By the time the wagons rolled into a circle, word had spread from the first wagon to the last. While the women went about the task of preparing a meal - with "only as much water as necessary", per Overton's orders - the men gathered across the camp to discuss the situation.

Charles, Artie, and the older boys unhitched and unsaddled the animals, leading them to the remnants of the lake to drink their fill. Charles kept looking back toward the camp. "Let's get 'em tied up," he told the others.

"You in a hurry or something?" Artie asked.

"I'm just curious about what's going on back in the camp," he explained.

====

"How long before we find another place to get water, Mr. Overton?" Doc asked.

"I can't be sure, Doctor," was the response. "I've been through here all my life - in all that time, I've seen every other hole dry up - but never this one." His eyes narrowed as he continued. "But I've always been here earlier than this." He looked directly at John as he spoke. Looking up, he said, "I warned you that any delays could end this way, if you'll remember."

"We remember," John confirmed.

"I trust that you remember as well what we said at the time, Mr. Overton," Reverend Lee said. When Overton frowned, he smiled. "That we trust our God to provide. He's brought us this far, He won't desert us now."

Overton rolled his eyes, shaking his head. "As for the water that we have now -"

"Everyone will get a cup of water in the morning, and another when we make camp," Doc told him.

"The women who are with child will get two cups - if they want it."

"And everyone will ride in the wagons," John explained, " - with the horses tied to the back - except for a couple of outriders."

"Why in the wagons?" Overton asked.

"They'll get hot and thirsty if they walk," Doc answered.

Niles took up the conversation. "The livestock will be given a hatful of water morning and night -"

unless they start looking like they need more, and a decision will be made at that time."

"What about the Springs?"

Overton turned to glare at Jennings' question. "It's a legend. No one's ever found it."

"What springs is he talking about?" Slim asked.

"There's an old legend that the Indians in the area had an underground spring that they used during the dry season," the scout explained. "For years, various people have searched for Indian Wells, but no one's ever found it."

"And this wagon train is **not** going to waste our time looking for something that most likely never existed," Overton proclaimed, standing up as he spoke. "We leave at first light tomorrow morning." With that, he stalked away, turning just long enough to call, "Jennings! Now!"

"Sounds like he's not happy," John said, and Jennings grinned.

"Is he ever? Later." He caught up with Overton at the wagon.

"Are you crazy?" Overton wanted to know. "Why on earth would you tell those people about Indian Wells? We're already behind schedule. If they decide to go on a wild goose chase for a mythical spring _"

"They're all too sensible to go off like that, boss," Jennings said. "But it never hurts to have eyes looking out for anything that **might** be Indian Wells. And it will give 'em something more to think about other than how thirsty they are," he added in a quiet voice. "Right?"

"Well, you can look yourself - while you're earning your pay to scout ahead. I don't want you to start back here until your canteen's half-empty."

"Yes sir," Jennings said, watching Overton stomp away.

Sean Hanrahan's high-pitched laugh sounded as he held out a strip of jerky. "Here's your supper, lad."

"Guess it'll be the same tomorrow for breakfast," Jennings sighed, taking a bite of the tough strip of beef.

The Irishman looked across the camp to where the women were huddled around the cooking fire.

"Well, now, I'm hearin' that they brought some jars of beans, an' that's what they're havin'. Sure'n they'd be only too happy for ya to join them."

"I would, but I think the boss would have my head," Jennings told him, taking another bite.

"Tomorrow's gonna be a long day."

=====

"All I know is that while we're ridin' through," Slim told the others, "I'm gonna be looking for any sign of water."

"What signs, Mr. Baker?" Charles asked. He had returned just in time to hear Mr. Jennings tell the others about Indian Wells.

"Green, boy. Grass, trees, that kind of thing. Anything that needs a good source of water."

Artie pointed to a tree nearby. "That's a tree. And it's green."

Slim laughed. "That ain't no tree, boy. It's a mesquite. A bush. Their roots go way down and find the water. It's usually too far below the surface to dig to."

"How do you know so much about it, Slim?" someone asked.

"I listen," Slim answered. "An' I read as much as I could before I left to come out here. Findin' water's like findin' gold or silver. Gotta keep your eyes open and look."

"Hard to do that if you're inside the wagon," Artie noted, frowning.

George Bradford chuckled. "You do know that you can look through the back of the cover - or the front, depending on where you're riding."

"Not the same as if you're on a horse or outside walking," Artie pointed out, looking at Charles. "Right?"

"I don't know about you, but I'm going to try and convince John to let me ride the horse today."

"He'll say no," Drew Garnett said.

"We'll see."

====

"Not today," John told Charles the next morning as the wagon train was about to pull out.

"But John -"

"Maybe tomorrow. We've all agreed that Gerald Collins and Sandy Crane will ride today. The rest of the horses will rest. The longer someone rides them, the more water they'll need."

"Who agreed?"

"The men in charge of every wagon," John explained.

"So I guess us kids don't count, unless it's for gathering water or washing dishes or -"
John turned to look at the younger man. "Tomorrow," he said, then smiled. "And then you'll be able to look for signs of that spring that Mr. Jennings was talking about."

Charles' eyes grew wide with surprise. "How did you know that was why I wanted to ride?"

"Because I want to look, too, but it's not my turn. Now, get in the wagon. Time to go."

Charles barely had time to jump into the back of the wagon before Overton's voice rang out.

"Wagons, ho-o!"

====

The metal ladle clattered to the bottom of the wooden water barrel. Arthur Hall sighed, shaking his head. "That's it for our water," he announced. It had been almost two weeks since they had all gone on short rations. Mr. Jennings had yet to find a new source for drinkable water, and no one on the wagon train had seen any sign of the still-mythical Indian Wells.

"I have a small barrel in the wagon," Artie told him. "I'll put it in this one - but it will only last for another few days."

"Thank you, son," Arthur said, still concerned.

"We knew this could happen, Art," Slim said. "Tell you what, you all can use my water, and I'll use your boy's smaller barrel. That work?"

"Are you sure, Slim?"

"As long as my mules and donkey get some water when they need it, we'll be fine," Slim assured him.

"Thank you. Artie, take that barrel over to Mr. Baker's wagon and get some help to bring his barrel over here while I move this empty one."

====

Charles was out looking for a deer or something that would mean he wouldn't have to eat soup or beans again when he saw Olivia sitting on a fallen tree. Her head was down, and she sighed heavily from time to time. Walking quietly through the sand, he asked, "What are you doing out here alone?"

She gasped, looking up at him. "You scared me," she said.

Sitting next to her, he apologized. "I'm sorry. Something wrong?"

"I'm just worried about how no one's found any water. What are we going to do once it's all gone?"

"It won't come to that," he told her. "Don't you remember what Reverend Lee said on Sunday morning?"

Olivia sighed again. "I know, I know. 'God will provide'. I just wish I believed that."

"Why don't you?"

Another sigh. "Well, if God is so good, why did he -" she shook her head again. "Never mind."

"Tell me."

"Why did he let my dad die?" she asked in a soft, barely audible voice.

"You know, I asked my sister that question about our mother awhile back - she and I were close, and losing her was pretty hard for a six year old little boy. She told me that we can't know the answer for certain - but that God *did* have a reason for it. Then she pointed out that if Mother had lived, neither she nor I would possibly be out here headed west. Were Sam and Anna going to come West before your father died?"

"I don't think so. At least, I never heard them talking about it. So you're saying that God arranged it so we'd leave Washington and be on this wagon train. And about to die of thirst because there's no water," she added.

"You wouldn't have met me," he reminded her with a grin, and was rewarded by her giggle.

"I guess you're right," she agreed.

"You *guess*?" he questioned. "And here I thought we were friends," he told her, shaking his head.

"We are!" she insisted.

"Good. Now, as for finding water - when He's ready, we'll find it. Not before. God's timing is different than ours. All we need to do is trust Him. And pray."

Charles still couldn't believe he'd said these things. Before coming out here, he would never had considered relying on God. But the last few months, listening to Reverend Lee's sermons and prayers, as well as the prayers of his sister and John, he had come to realize that there might just be more to life than he'd believed there was back in New York.

"Will you pray with me? Now?" Olivia asked, looking up at him.

"Of course I will," he assured her, taking her out-stretched hands in his.

====

Another week went by, and water was becoming scarce. There was talk about the rations being cut by half. With nothing better to do, Olivia was sitting with the canvas lifted enough for her to see outside, repeating Reverend Lee's prayer for water over and over. Her eyes opened and lifted to survey the view from her side of the wagon, scanning it for any sign of green that might be - Olivia gasped and rose to her feet, going to the front of the wagon. "We need to stop!" she told her brother.

Sam looked at her. "Why? Are you sick?"

"No!" She pointed toward what she'd seen. "There's some green - over there -"

Sam and Anna both looked in that direction. "I don't see anything, honey. Are you sure -"

"Yes! I'm sure!" she insisted, but saw the disbelief on her brother's face. Seeing Charles riding a few

wagons ahead, she called, "Charles!"

He turned his horse and came back to the wagon, riding alongside. "Did you call, Olivia?"

"Yes!" she declared. "I saw something green back a little way - out that direction. Sam and Anna don't believe me -"

"We didn't say that, Livvy," Anna began, but Olivia shook her head.

"You didn't have to. Will you go check it out, Charles? Please?"

"I'll head out that way and look around," he told her.

"Thank you." She watched him ride away, and scrambled through the wagon to look out of the back, watching as he disappeared into the mesquite trees that sporadically lined the trail. She heard Mr. Overton's voice calling out.

"Davis! Where are you going?" She continued to watch out the back of the wagon as she heard the wagon-master ask Sam, "Where is that fool young man going in such a hurry? Riding that horse on short water rations -"

"My sister asked him to go check out something she saw back on the trail," Sam replied.

"What?"

"Olivia told us that she saw something green," Anna said. "She thought it might be water."

"Jennings was through here yesterday," he pointed out. "He didn't find any water! Sorry, but I think your little sister's seeing things, Mr. Longdon." He glanced back in the direction that Charles had gone. "He'll just have to catch up as best he can. We're not stopping!"

"Didn't expect that we would, Mr. Overton!" Sam called out as Overton rode back toward the front of the wagons, pausing to say something to the Donagers before returning to his usual position in the front of the lead wagon.

Olivia remained where she was, her gaze locked on the area where she was certain she'd seen a flash of green, beginning to pray again, for Charles' safety and that he would find the water.

=====

Olivia was still watching when the wagons circled for the night and the precious water was doled out. She refused her portion, and Anna sighed. "Livvy, you need some water."

"Give it to someone else," Olivia said. "I'll wait for Charles to get back."

"You don't know that he'll bring any water -" John Donager began, but Olivia turned to look at him.

"I believe that he will," she said in a quiet voice. "I've been praying all day. First, I prayed the prayer that Reverend Lee said at the service. And when I opened my eyes and looked, I saw that flash of

green. After Charles left, I started praying that he would be safe - and that he would find the water that God was pointing us to. He'll be back. And he'll have water."

John stood up, looking at Matthew. "You want to try to talk to her?"

"No," the minister said, smiling as he put his hand on the girl's shoulder, "but I will pray with her." He smiled at Olivia, who bowed her head and brought her hands up under her chin, while those around them joined hands. "Thank you, Lord, for your servant Olivia and her belief in your promises to us. We thank you for any water found, and pray for the safe return of Charles. In your name -"

"He's back!" someone called out, and the group turned as one to look back down the trail, where Charles was returning at a gallop. Olivia stood watching as the young man barely let the horse come to a stop before jumping out of the saddle, grabbing the canteen from where it was hanging around the horn. The horse, even though he had been ridden hard, looked refreshed and much better than he had earlier that day.

Pushing through the crowd, he went to where Olivia was standing, and knelt before her, holding out the canteen. "It was there, Olivia. Right where you said it was." He opened the canteen for her. "Here."

She took a sip of the water, then another one, smiling, her eyes shining. "That tastes good," she declared.

A cheer went up from the crowd, with Hanrahan breaking out in a little jig of celebration. Overton stood there, shaking his head. "So you found water. How much and how far back?"

"Three - maybe four miles off the trail. I marked the trees by the turn off so we could find it again. As for how much water there is, I can't be sure. But it's more than enough for the livestock to drink their fill, and to refill several barrels." He grinned. "And it wasn't me that found it," he told them. He went over to the horse. "It was him."

"The horse?" Olivia asked, moving over to touch the animal's neck.

"Short rations this morning left him a little thirsty, I guess. I was riding around, looking for that spot of green that you told me about, but the horse kept trying to turn in another direction. I was getting more and more dry - and frustrated with the horse." He looked over at his brother in law. "That's when I remembered something that John told me one time." John smiled and nodded, but remained silent. "He said that a horse will sometimes smell water - especially if he's thirsty enough. So I just gave the beast his head and told him to go find the water if he was so sure about where it was." The crowd laughed. "Next thing I knew, he was tapping on a pile of rocks at the base of a rise. So I got down and lifted a few rocks away - and there it was. I dug out a small trench for him to drink from and took a drink myself before filling the canteen. I figure we can lengthen that trench for the livestock, at least."

"You said that God would provide, Reverend," Olivia said, a broad smile on her face. "He did."

"Yes, He did indeed," Matthew confirmed. "What now, Mr. Overton?" he asked, turning everyone's attention toward the wagon-master.

He looked at Charles. "Is there room enough near the spring to park the wagons?" he asked the younger man.

"Sure. And the trail in is just scrub, the wagons should make it fine."

"Okay. We have enough daylight left, let's turn the wagons and go back down the trail, then across to near the spring. That way we won't have to transport the water barrels as far." Turning back toward his own wagon, he tied his own horse to the back, and climbed up into the seat. "Let's go! These animals need water!" Everyone scrambled for their wagons as Overton called again. "Davis! Lead us in!"

=====

Jennings rode down the trail, frowning as he realized that he'd somehow missed the wagons - he could see where they had been on the trail, and had circled to make camp, but after that, there was no sign of tracks. He finally picked up what looked to be wagon wheel tracks leading off of the trail, and followed them a few miles in before he saw the circle of covered wagons.

Artie Hall saw him and waved, a huge smile on his face. His *clean* face, Jennings couldn't help but notice. "Hi, Mr. Jennings. Mr. Overton was just talking about sending someone out to the main trail to find you."

"What's going on?" Jennings asked, hearing the laughter and sounds of singing. "Why are you all over here?"

"Jennings!"

"Excuse me," Artie said as they saw Overton stomping in their direction. "I - uh - I think I hear my mom calling me," he finished as he turned and half-ran half-walked back toward the circle of wagons.

"Where have you been?" Overton asked.

"I was out scouting. That *is* my job, isn't it?" He smiled, taking his canteen off of his horse. "And I think I earned my pay today. Guess what I found?" he asked, lifting the canteen. "Water. A whole, beautiful lake, just waiting for us to get there."

"How far?"

"For the wagons- about a day, maybe a little less. I thought you'd be more excited by the news -" He looked around. "What's going on?"

"Come with me," Overton replied, leading him around the circle to where the livestock was lined up at a long water-filled trench while a bucket brigade moved to refill water barrels.

"You found the Springs?!" In his surprise, he dropped his horse's reins, leaving the animal free to join the rest of the livestock.

"No, I didn't," Overton admitted. "It was the Longdon girl and Charles Davis - but I'll let you ask him about it. You won't believe his story."

"I've heard a few of his stories. Do you believe this one?"

"Not sure it matters *what* I believe," Overton said. "What matters is that we have water." He nodded toward the line of men. "I need to talk to Donager."

John was at the head of the bucket line, letting a bucket fill up from the underground stream that had been partially uncovered before sending it back toward camp, where it would eventually be poured into one of the water barrels. One of the children would bring the empty bucket back to him to be refilled.

This time, it was Olivia who was handing off the bucket, and she smiled when she saw the scout. "Mr. Donager, Mrs. Lee and your wife asked me to let you know that supper is almost ready. Hello, Mr. Jennings."

"Hello, Olivia," he said. "I hear you were partially responsible for this water."

"It wasn't me," she insisted, her face and tone of voice very serious. "It was God," the girl said before running back to the camp.

Jennings smiled - until he saw Gene Overton roll his eyes in response to the girl's declaration. He shook his head. He still didn't understand how the wagon-master continued to ignore how important their belief in God was to these people.

"How many barrels do you have filled now?" Overton asked John.

"Charles!" John called out, and a moment later, the younger man appeared near the wagons.

"Yes sir?"

"How many barrels have we filled?"

"Four and a half," was the answer.

"We'll have more tomorrow evening," Overton told him. "Jennings found a lake a day away. So if you think that those five barrels will get us through -"

John smiled. "They should. Is it a big lake, Mr. Jennings?"

"Big enough for us to be able to completely replenish our water."

Turning to his fellow travelers, John asked, "Okay, you all heard the news. Take whatever is in the bucket that you have and put it into your wagon's barrel." The sound of the dinner bell reached their ears. "Excuse me. I'm going to eat my supper."

=====

After supper was finished, John found Jennings as he relaxed in front of the small fire beside Overton's wagon. "I figured you'd still be over there celebrating," Jennings said as John, a cup of coffee in his hands, sat down nearby.

"I think you should have been over there, too," John told him. "After all, *you* found water, too."

Jennings chuckled softly, shaking his head. "But I wasn't led there by a higher power."

"Are you sure about that? What was found here will see us through to what you found. I'm not sure some of the livestock would have lasted another day without this water."

"When you put it that way -" Jennings picked up a stick and tossed it into the fire. "Never thought that that God of yours would use me."

"Why not? He can use anyone to accomplish His will." He paused before continuing. "Even a doubting wagon-train scout." Deciding that he'd given the scout enough to think about, he asked, "Exactly how big is this lake that you found?"

"Oh, about ten wagons wide. Coolest, clearest water I've ever seen - Well, except for that spring over there. And then it won't be long before we're out of this desert - for a little while, anyway."

John smiled. "I think I'll miss it," he confided. "Except for the water problem, of course."

"You **like** this sand and mesquite?"

"I think so. It would be a challenge to raise cattle - always looking for sources of water, but there's something about it - I haven't even told Meg any of this. I think she'd run the other way if she knew it."

"I doubt that. That woman would follow you to the gates of hell. Of course, some would say that's where we've been the last few weeks. Still - she loves you." He smiled. "I still think you're crazy, though. Tell you what - if you've liked this, there's some land we'll be going through that you'll like as well. There's a problem with it, though."

"What's that?"

"Indians. And not the Plains Indians that we dealt with - Apache. And they hate the 'white eyes' twice as much as the Pawnee do."

"Could be that they've never talked to the **right** 'white-eye'," was John's comment as he stared into his empty cup. Then he looked up and smiled.

"You **are** crazy," Jennings said again, shaking his head. "But if there's anyone who can do it - my money's on you."

=====

The next evening, after the water barrels were all refilled and supper was finished, Reverend Lee held an impromptu service to give thanks for God's provision of water. As the group sang praises and prayed, Gene Overton stood on the shore of the lake, shaking his head and muttering. "Fools."

"Why, Boss?" Hanrahan asked.

"They're acting like this trip is finished. We still have a long way to go to get to California."

"And, now, why can't they just be grateful for His having gotten them this far and ask His blessing on the rest of the trip?" the Irishman questioned. Overton didn't respond, just continued to stare across the

water. "On th' other hand, at least they're content now and you shouldn't have any problems with them."

"It won't last. You know as well as I do that as soon as we see the first Apache, John Donager's going to be there, insisting that he can 'negotiate' with them."

"And who's t'say that he won't be able t'do just that?"

"You're as bad as the rest of them. John Donager -"

"Saved your life," Hanrahan said, standing up to the man, which would have been amusing in most circumstances, considering the difference in their heights. "And you can't *quite* forget that, now, can you? Nor can you forgive him for bein' th' one who did it."

Overton's eyes narrowed into dangerous slits before he turned and stomped back toward the wagon.

"Ya keep doin' that, Sean, lad, and you'll end up without a job," the Irishman muttered to himself, watching Overton go. Finally, Hanrahan shook his head and followed.

=====

The attitude for the next week was upbeat, with everyone happy and smiling. But that began to change when Bonnie Smith asked Doc to come to their wagon while they were setting up camp. "What's the problem, Mrs. Smith?" he asked as he grabbed his medical bag.

"Well, Joan wasn't feeling well when we woke up, and she's worse now. I'm sure she's running a fever. But Lou is the same. Fever, chills, a headache, and he's so weak. I had to drive the wagon for most of the afternoon because he went into the wagon and fell asleep."

"He's probably just overtired," Doc told her. "We've been keeping a quick pace. I'll take a look at both of them," he assured her as he climbed up into the wagon. "I'm sure it's nothing."

She followed him up to sit on the bench, turning so that she could watch and listen while the doctor conducted his examination. "I tried to wake Joan when we stopped, but she didn't really respond," she told him.

"She's - six?"

"Seven. Jenny just turned six."

He looked around. "Where is Jenny?"

"I sent her out to play with the other children. She seems fine. She ate some jerky for lunch - Joan and Lou said they weren't hungry." She managed a wan smile. "You know Lou. He's always hungry. Never gains an ounce, but if it's offered, he eats it."

Doc nodded, only half listening as he listened to Lou's rapidly beating heart. "Has either of them complained about feeling nauseous?"

"Joan mentioned something about it," she confirmed. "I had her sit at the back of the wagon in case she got sick, but I don't think she did. Jenny would have told me if she had." She chewed on her lower lip

as he continued to work. "What's wrong with them, Dr. Hawkins?"

He sighed, shaking his head. "Hard to say. They could have eaten something that made them sick -"

"We've all eaten the same food," she insisted. "And we're all drinking out of the same water barrel. But they're sick, and Jenny and I aren't."

Doc looked up at her. "You feel okay, then?"

"Except for being worried about my husband and my daughter, I'm fine."

Closing his black bag, Doc told her, "For right now, all I can tell you is to keep them both warm and try to get them to take sips of water."

"That's all?"

"Until other symptoms appear, yes."

"What symptoms?"

"A rash. Swollen glands - I think I felt one in Joan's neck, but I'm not sure. I'll come back to check on them later. Cold compresses on their foreheads will help with the fevers. I'll send Alice over in a bit to help you, if you'd like."

"I think I can handle it."

"If you'd like, Jenny can stay with us tonight."

"I'll let you know later."

"That's fine." He placed his hand on her arm. "And try not to worry. I'm sure they'll be fine."

He had no more than gone halfway back to his wagon when Olaf Norton appeared. "Doctor! I need you to come take a look at my Mary."

"What's wrong with her?" Doc asked.

"She's running a fever, and has been sleeping most of the afternoon. When I tried to wake her up just now... "

====

By the time supper was finished, there had been two more cases of the mysterious illness, bringing the total to five. As he was going back to his wagon, Doc found his path blocked by Gene Overton. "Would you mind coming to take a look at the Irishman, Doc?"

"Let me guess: he's running a fever, isn't hungry, and sleeps all the time, right?"

"Yes."

"I'll look at him," Doc said as the wagon-master turned to join him, "but there's not much I can do for whatever this is."

"It has all the earmarks of what some call 'trail fever'," Overton told him.

"I've never heard of it."

"It happens every now and then to wagon trains and cattle drives. People just start getting sick."

"Is it contagious?"

"I don't know. But what I do know is that it appears suddenly. And it disappears just as suddenly, but it always leaves a few bodies behind." He nodded at the wagon as they stopped. "He's inside."

"I thought I saw him preparing supper for you and Mr. Jennings?"

"He did, but he didn't eat, and his teeth started chattering as if he were cold. He said he was going to lie down in the wagon for a little while, but I wasn't able to wake him when I checked on him."

Doc climbed into the wagon, finding the little man wrapped in a quilt, his knees drawn up to his chest as he shivered. "Mr. Hanrahan, it's Dr. Hawkins. Can you hear me?" As with the others there was no response, so Doc carefully rolled him onto his back to check his heart and breathing. He was clearly running a fever, and Doc felt a small swollen gland in his neck.

From outside the wagon, he heard John speaking to Mr. Overton. "Is something wrong, Mr. Overton?"

"The Irishman's not feeling well. The doc's in there with him."

"Same thing as the others have?"

"Probably. How many others are there?" Overton wanted to know as Doc began to climb out of the wagon.

"Six, with Mr. Hanrahan," Doc answered. "I'll tell you what I told the rest, Mr. Overton. Keep him warm, and use cold compresses on his forehead to try and bring down the fever. If any other symptoms appear, send Mr. Jennings to get me."

"This will slow us up a little," Overton said, "but we'll leave tomorrow once you've examined -"

"I can't treat my patients while the wagon train is moving, Mr. Overton. You said you've seen this 'trail fever', for want of a better name, before. How long does it usually take to run its course?"

"Depends on how many get it."

"How long until a person starts to recover once they become ill?"

"Three, four days. If they start to cough, it means that they -"

"Have pneumonia," Doc finished.

"Look, Mr. Overton," John began, but the bigger man lifted a hand to cut him off.

"Don't say it, Mr. Donager. You want us to stay here until everyone that's going to recover recovers. We're about to hit the southern range of the Rocky Mountains. The pass we're going to use sometimes gets an early snow. If that happens, we'll be sitting ducks for the Apache as they are going *up* the mountains for the winter. Add to that the fact that before the snow begins, there's sometimes fall rains to contend with. Now, knowing all of that, go ahead and say what you want to say."

"We're not moving until whatever this is has run its course, Mr. Overton. You're welcome to leave us here - but we're not going anywhere."

The two men stood there, staring at each other, waiting for one of them to blink. Finally Overton turned away, yelling, "Jennings! Where are you?"

Doc stood there, watching John. "Looks like you won that round," he told the younger man. "Come on, we need to talk to Matthew." Turning, he realized that John hadn't done the same, so Doc grabbed his arm. "John?"

"Huh?"

"Are you okay?"

"Uh, yeah. I guess I was just shocked that he didn't argue with me." He finally turned and walked across the circle with Doc, only to find several people sitting before Matthew Lee. "Looks like he's ahead of us, Doc."

"Brothers and sister, with so many ill, I think we should pray. For their healing, and for God's will to be done." He bowed his head and the others followed his lead...

====

By the time the sun rose the next morning, two more had fallen ill. Jack Cooper had come to Doc's wagon near four a.m. to tell him that his wife Corine was running a fever and that he couldn't wake her up. Artie was with Charles, feeding the livestock, when he collapsed and had to be half-carried back to his family's wagon.

But his father blocked the way to the wagon, a worried expression on his face. "Look, Doc, I know this is going to sound harsh, but I have four other children. If this is contagious -"

"We don't know for certain that it *is* contagious, Art," Doc said quickly, examining the boy where they had laid him on the ground. "Lou and Joan Smith are ill, but his wife and other daughter aren't. Mary Norton is ill, but Olaf isn't. I could go on, but I think you get my point."

"There's no room in the wagon for Artie to sleep. He's been sleeping under the wagon or in camp around the fire with his brother and some of the other boys."

"You can put him in my wagon," Slim offered. "I got plenty of room, Doc, if you'd like to use it. Easy enough for me to put my shovels and picks outside til this is over."

"Thank you, Slim," Doc said, turning to Charles. "Put him in Slim's wagon." Turning back to Art, who looked relieved that he didn't have to keep arguing about the situation. "Do you have any quilts or blankets to spare?"

"I'll get them," Mrs. Hall said, going to their wagon. "And I'll go with him to take care of him. Lillian, would you keep an eye on your sisters, please?"

"Yes, Mama," Lillian said in a quite, subdued voice, taking Mandy and Elizabeth's hands. Feeling Mandy's hand, she said, "Doc!"

He turned to look at her. "Yes, Lillian?"

Releasing Mandy's hand, she placed a hand to the girl's forehead. "She's hot."

Doc quickly moved to replace her hand with his, and nodded. "You're right. She's running a fever." Lifting the girl into his arms, he waited for her mother to come out of the wagon. "I'll do an examination once we're in the wagon, Mrs. Hall."

"You think she might have it as well?"

"Quite possibly."

"Oh dear," she sighed, reaching over to smooth her youngest daughter's dark hair.

"Mrs. Hall?" She paused as young Constance Lawrence joined her as they walked.

"Yes, Constance?"

"If you need - any - help, I'd be glad to -"

Knowing that the girl was sweet on Artie, Mirabelle nodded and managed a smile. "Thank you."

====

Even before breakfast was over, the prayer meeting began again. After seeing to all of his patients, Doc sat down at the back of those gathered, closing his eyes and praying as well, until the crowd when quiet and gave a collective gasp. He opened his eyes to see Rebecca Lee slumped in a chair. Alice, who had been sitting closer to her, was already standing over the woman, feeling her forehead.

She glanced up and nodded as Doc approached. "She's burning up."

"Didn't she eat breakfast?"

"No, she said that she was going to start cleaning up so we could start the meeting," Matthew explained. "She often goes without a meal when she's got things on her mind, but she seemed fine -"

"Can you help me get her into the wagon, Matthew?" Doc asked.

"Of course." He lifted her into his arms and waited for Doc to lower the wagon's tailgate before putting her onto a quilt that Doc laid out for that purpose. Doc pulled the quilt into wagon, conducting his examination. "Did she complain of a headache?"

"No, but she wouldn't. Rebecca doesn't complain about any aches or pains. She says that she prays to God when they happen, and she leaves them with Him."

"Alice, would you get some water and start compresses? I'll make sure she's wrapped up in blankets. Alice will stay here and watch over her, Reverend, so that you can continue to minister to the flock."

Matthew reached out to touch his wife's hand. "Lord God, I ask that you be with your servant. Give her your strength, heal her body, if it be Thy will. Calm the minds and hearts of those who love her. In Your name, Amen." Taking a deep breath, Matthew straightened his shoulders and returned to the prayer meeting, assuring his 'flock' that Rebecca was resting.

Doc was leaving the Lee's wagon when Clara Lansing came over to him. "I think George is sick, Doctor," she said. "Would you mind -?"

=====

"So how many does that make now, Doc?" Overton asked the next morning.

"Ten. George Lansing was at the meeting and moved away. Luckily his wife followed him and was able to get him to their wagon before he collapsed. But he's like all the others: fever, lethargic, chills, the earlier cases have swollen glands. And there's no pattern. Ten cases. Four are from two different families. The rest have been in a wagon with someone else and the others are fine."

"So far," Overton said. "We have someone sick from ten of the wagons."

"Doctor!" Doc turned upon hearing a woman's voice. "Dr. Hawkins! Where is -" Bonnie Smith ran up to him, tugging at his arm. "You have to come, Doc. Now!"

"I am, Mrs. Smith," he assured her, letting her half-pull him toward her wagon. "What's wrong?"

"Joan. She's coughing something terrible. Wheezing and - it's like she can't get her breath. You have to help her!"

Doc began to run toward the wagon, jumping up and inside with little effort. Joan was indeed coughing - and there was blood in the sputum. He closed his eyes for a moment as Mrs. Smith joined them, her shaking hand resting on her little girl's head.

Before he knew it, the gasping for air stopped, and Joan lay there, still and lifeless. "Mrs. Smith lifted her eyes to him. "Doctor?"

He made a show of checking the child's pulse and breathing before placing a hand on her arm. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Smith," he whispered, certain that if he spoke in a normal voice, he would break down. "She's gone."

"Oh no," she said, tears spilling from her eyes to roll down her face. "No. Oh, Joanie." Even through

her own sorrow, she seemed to sense his own loss. "You did what you could, Doc," she told him. "Don't blame yourself." She touched Joan's face. "God just called her home. I know she's there, Doc, and that we'll see her again." Her gaze moved to the other person in the wagon. "What about - my husband? Is he going to -"

Needing to keep busy, to keep his emotions at bay, Doc moved over to look at Lou. He gave a tight smile. "I think his fever is breaking. He's sweating, and his face isn't as warm as it has been." He checked for swollen glands, but found none. "I think he's on the way to recovery."

"Thank you, God," she sighed.

"Let me know when he wakes up. I'll send Reverend Lee and one of the women over here," he told her, making as fast a retreat as he could. The crowd had gathered, having heard Mrs. Smith's urgent summons, and he took a deep breath. "Joan just passed," he announced. "Reverend, would you and one of the women go sit with her and help her with plans for the burying?" He didn't wait for the response to his request as he quickly walked away from the camp.

As soon as he thought it was safe, he dropped to his knees, bowing his head as the tears came. His shoulders shook as he sobbed in silence, asking, "Why God? Why did you take her? She's just a child. She had her whole life ahead of her!" He knelt there, crying silently for what seemed like an eternity.

Feeling a hand on his shoulder, he looked up into Alice's warm brown eyes, rising to his feet as he accepted her sympathetic embrace. "This isn't the first patient that you've lost, Mark," she told him. "I know of at least two back east when you were finishing your schooling."

"Those were both older. I've never lost a child. She was so young, Alice! And I keep thinking about what her mother said, that it wasn't my fault because I'd done what I could."

"You did."

He shook his head, pulling away from her. "No! I didn't do *anything* because I didn't know how to cure her! All those years of studying and learning and treating patients - and I was helpless." He looked at her, "Alice, what if - what if the rest of them die, too?"

"Mrs. Smith said that her husband is better."

"I've seen patients seem to get better just before they -" he broke off. "So have you."

She grabbed his hand with both of hers. "You stop it, Mark Hawkins. You're the best doctor I've ever seen, and I won't let you doubt yourself like this. I love you. Now, come back to the camp with me."

"I need a few minutes," he told her. "I'll be along -"

"We have two more patients," she said.

He froze. "Who?"

"Howard Grover," she said. Howard was the younger boy, nearly a man at nineteen, a year younger than his brother Edward. "His mother found him in the wagon just after you left the camp."

"And who's the second?"

She took his hand again as she answered. "John Donager."

====

"What happened?" Doc asked Margaret as he climbed into the wagon.

"He's been upset for the last few days," she said, levering herself toward the back of the wagon to give him room to examine his patient. "He blames himself for all of these people being here."

"Nonsense. He didn't force any of us to take this journey."

"I know. And so does he - I realize now that he was irritable because he was getting sick himself. He had been keeping to himself since it started, more than once I heard him praying, asking - actually begging - God to keep those in his care - John's care - safe. We were having a discussion about him wanting me to stay in the wagon instead of going out to the meeting. He was afraid that I'd get sick. I reminded him that none of the women who are expecting have gotten sick so far, and that if I wanted to go to the meeting I would. I called Charles to help me out of the wagon, and left John in here. When I came back to tell him about Joan Smith's passing, I found him. He had covered himself with a quilt, and at first I thought he was asleep, but I realized that even Mrs. Smith's calling for you hadn't roused him. That's when I sent Charles to find you."

"You're not going to stay here and take care of him -"

"But -"

Doc looked up at her. "Margaret, what do you think John would say to me once he's well if I let that happen?"

"He's my husband, the father of this child that I'm carrying, and I'm not letting anyone else take care of him. As for what he'll say, when he starts getting better, I'll let someone else in here to take my place, and then won't have to know."

"You're asking me to participate in a lie," he told her.

"A white lie, perhaps," she acknowledged.

"You sound confident that he *will* recover," Doc said, tucking the quilt around John.

"He will." Her firm tone brooked no argument. "God's plans for John won't end here, anymore than they did when he went to talk to those Indians."

Doc took his time before closing his medical bag. "I'll have Charles get you some cool water - Alice has some clean rags you can use for compresses. If he starts to cough, send Charles for me at once."

"I will." As he went to move past her, Margaret grabbed his arm. "Doc -" she waited for him to look at her before speaking again. "Don't be too hard on yourself. It's all in God's hands. He had a reason for

what happened to Joan Smith - and any others that He chooses to call home."

Doc covered her hand with his before giving her a half-smile and leaving the wagon. "Charles!"

The young man looked worried as he appeared. "Right here, Doc. How is he?"

"Sleeping for want of a better word. I need you to go get some of the cloths that my wife has ready, then take a bowl of cool water in for your sister to use."

"You're gonna let her stay in there? John's not going to be happy -"

"Well, at the moment, John can't say anything, can he? Let's get him well, first, then we'll deal with whether he's happy or not. Now go do what I told you do."

"Mr. Grover asked me to send you right over to their wagon," Charles said before turning to run toward Doc's wagon.

Fifteen minutes later, as he climbed out of the Grover wagon, Doc found Matthew Lee standing there. "Same as the others," he confirmed, moving away from the wagon before continuing. "But I'm pretty sure he's been ill longer than it appears - he already has some rattling in his chest - I'm not sure -"

"None of this is your fault, Mark," the minister said.

"Alice said something to you, didn't she?"

"She did. But I was already aware that you're having doubts about your abilities to fight this -"

"Fight? What am I supposed to fight? I still don't have any idea about what's causing this - so how can I fight it?"

"You've been doing a good job -"

"And there's a seven year old little girl who's dead -" Mark blinked, trying to keep the tears at bay.

"A part of being a doctor is helping family members deal with what's happening, isn't it?" Mark nodded, a sharp, jerky movement. "You've been doing that. None of the families affected will blame you for anything that happens, because they all know that you're doing everything you know to do - and they also know that if the worst happens, they'll see their loved one again." He bowed his head, placing a hand on the doctor's shoulder. "Lord God, I ask for your blessings on this man as he ministers to us. Give him your strength and knowledge. Help him, Lord, to do what is necessary, and remind him that he is Your hands and feet. Remind him that ultimately You are the one in control, and give him peace. In Your name we pray, Amen." He stepped back. "I'm going back to the meeting. We'll be having the funeral for young Joan as soon as they finish digging the grave. We don't have a coffin, but Mrs. Smith told them that they could wrap the quilt around her as a shroud - it was her favorite quilt."

"I'm sure Alice will fill me in," Doc assured him. "Thank you, Matthew. I'm heading over to check on Rebecca now."

=====

Doc stood toward the back of the mourners as Joan Smith was laid to rest in a small plot of land in a place she'd never been until a few days ago. Several people were missing - those who were ill, of course, and the people taking care of them. Reverend Lee stood at the head of the grave, reading from his Bible.

"As was written in 1 Thessalonian's Chapter 4, 'But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words.'" He looked around at the faces gathered around. "We shall see Joan again one day, either when we also die or when our Lord returns. We are blessed in our certainty that Joan knew her Lord. The Lord Himself said, 'Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.' Mourn, yes. But retain your hope in Him."

As rocks were piled on top of the grave, someone else hammered a makeshift cross into the ground, with the child's name with her year of birth and death inscribed in the wood with a knife.

Doc lingered as Mrs. Smith stood beside the grave, clearly distraught. "Mrs. Smith," he began, wanting to try again to apologize - or to assuage the guilt that he felt, he wasn't sure which.

She looked at him, shaking her head. "There's no need for you to apologize, Doc," she said. "I meant what I said earlier - you did nothing wrong. It was simply - Joan's time. God's will, I suppose you could say. I'll miss her - she was such a sweet child. I do have a favor to ask of you, however," she said, taking his arm as she turned toward the circle of wagons.

"Anything," he promised.

"I believe that my husband is going to wake soon - I'd like for you to be there when I tell him about -" she glanced at the grave behind them on a small rise.

"Of course. Why don't we go now and see how he's doing?"

====

"Livvy?"

Olivia heard her sister-in-law calling for her, and tried to get away from the wagon, but she wasn't quite fast enough. Just as she went to cross under the wagon, Anna's hand grabbed her arm. "There you are. You know that Sam doesn't want you out of the wagon. He'll be back from taking care of the livestock any minute now, so get back in -"

Olivia pulled free and shook her head. "No, I won't! Sam doesn't trust that God will protect us -"

"It's not that, Livvy," Anna said.

"He's afraid. He's always afraid. Well, I'm not going to let *his* fear run my life. I need to be with the others. I need to pray for my friends who are sick. I need to pray *with* their families. And I want to see if I can help any of them. I thought we should have offered to watch Jenny Smith, or maybe even gone to Joan's burying." She lifted a hand to wipe away the tears that had started to fall. "Sam can fuss all he wants to, but I'm going to do what I *should* be doing, and that's *not* hiding in that wagon!" Seeing that Anna was shocked by her outburst, the girl made her escape, running along the outside of the circle until she reached Mr. Overton's wagon. Lifting a hand, she said a quick prayer for Mr. Hanrahan, then moved to the Donager wagon. She placed her hand on the side and began to pray a similar prayer for Mr. Donager's recovery.

"Who's out there?"

Olivia's eyes widened slightly and she pulled herself up to look over the tailgate. "It's only me, ma'am," she said. "I was - saying a prayer for Mr. Donager. How is he?"

"Sleeping, I suppose. Thank you for the prayer."

"Is there anything I can do to help you?"

"Yes," Margaret said, lifting a bowl that she had been using for the rags. "I need more water - if you can get it."

"If I can't, I'll find someone who can," Olivia said, taking the empty bowl and jumping down. Standing beside the water barrel, she sighed and looked around. The only person close was her brother, returning from where the stock was tied, and she moved around the wagon again.

"Hey, what're you doing?" Charles asked as he approached from behind her.

The question startled Olivia, and she nearly dropped the bowl. "Charles. You scared me, sneaking up on me like that. Your sister needs more water, but I can't reach the barrel."

"Well, to start with, the water barrel's on the other side of the wagon - and no, you're not tall enough to dip out of it. Com'on, I'll help you," he said, leading her around the wagon. Seeing her look around, he noted, "You were hiding from someone."

"Sam," she confessed, holding the bowl out as he used a metal dipper to put some water into it. "He's been making us stay in that wagon because he's afraid we'll get sick. I took advantage of his having gone to check the stock and snuck out."

"I see. Here," he said, reaching for the bowl. "I'll -"

But Olivia shook her head and pulled the bowl away. "I told Mrs. Donager that I was going to get it, so I'll give it to her."

He backed off, watching as she tried to figure out how to climb onto the back of the wagon with both hands full. Finally, she turned to look at him. "Would you mind lifting me up?"

Charles placed a hand on each side of her waist and effortlessly lifted her until she could hand the

water over. "Thank you," Margaret said. "There you are, Charles. I was wondering where you'd gotten off to."

"I was just checking on Artie and Howard," he told her.

"How are they?" Olivia asked.

"Artie's about the same. Howard was coughing a little when I was there."

"Oh dear," Margaret sighed, putting one of the rags into the water and then wringing it out before placing it on John's forehead.

"I'm going to go finish my prayers," Olivia said. "If you need anything, just call out."

"I'll do that. And thank you again, Olivia."

"You're welcome." She jumped back down.

"You going to the meeting?" Charles asked, but Olivia shook her head again.

"No. I'm saying a prayer at each wagon, specifically for the people inside. Protection for those free from the illness, and recovery if it be God's Will for the others."

"Would you mind some company?" Charles asked.

"Sure."

"Margaret, I'm going with Olivia while she prays."

=====

"You sure you want to stop at the next one?" Charles asked her, nodding toward the wagon she shared with her brother and his wife.

"Of course I do. Sam really needs prayers." Squaring her shoulders, she stepped over to the wagon and lifted her hand to touch it as she began to pray. "Dear Lord, I ask for Your peace for those in this wagon, that they would know that You are in control. Calm their fears, and if it be Your will, keep them well. Amen."

As they started past the wagon, Sam Longdon appeared. "There you are. I've been worried -"

"Didn't Anna tell you what I said?" Olivia asked, her calm expression clearly surprising her brother. "I refuse to be afraid because I know that God will protect me."

"He didn't protect the little Smith girl," he reminded her.

"She's with God now, singing hymns just as she loved to do. She told me that it was her favorite part of the services - singing those songs."

"What about Father? Why -"

She touched his arm. "Don't you understand, Sam? God took Father so that we would be here now, at this time, to help the others - to do His will. Can you honestly say that we would have left to come West if he hadn't been killed?"

"No," he admitted. "No, I can't. He had been born in the city. I don't think he would have been happy anywhere else. As long as Father was alive -" His voice trailed off.

Olivia smiled. "You see?"

Sam nodded as he smiled at her. "You're growing up, little sister."

"Come on, Charles, we have a lot of wagons to pray over."

As they approached the Grover wagon, Olivia and Charles could both hear the sound of a deep, hacking cough from inside. "Doctor, please help him," Mrs. Grover begged.

Olivia touched the wagon, reaching out for Charles' hand. In a soft, quiet voice, she began to pray.

=====

Inside the wagon, Doc worked feverishly, but the young man's coughing continued to worsen. It seemed that what he was coughing up was mostly blood. Finally, Howard's coughing stopped, and Doc quickly tried to clear his throat as best he could. But with another gasp of air, the man's cough began again. His body went rigid, then relaxed.

"Doctor?" Frances Grover questioned, then fell forward. "Howard. Oh, Howard," she cried.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Grover," Doc told her, trying his best to clean the area around the body before going outside, where Paul Grover and his older son were waiting. "I did what I could," Doc told them, rolling his shirt sleeve down. "I've never seen *anything* like it. He was awake and talking just yesterday, and now -" he shook his head. "I'll send Rev. Lee over."

"Thank you, Doc," Paul nodded as he followed Edward into the wagon to comfort the grieving woman.

"Doc?" Slim Baker said, touching his arm. "Mrs. Smith's looking for you. Says that Lou's stirring like he's about to wake up."

"Thank you, Slim. Would you mind going over to let the Reverend know he's needed here?"

"Not at all," the man assured him as Doc turned toward Lou and Bonnie Smith's wagon.

The idea of helping one of his patients as they recovered appealed to him at the moment.

=====

"His fever's gone, I think," Bonnie told him as he climbed into the wagon. "He keeps pushing the quilt off, and he was muttering just a minute ago, when I sent Slim to find you."

Doc confirmed her observation about the fever, nodding. "Looks like he's a getting better."

"Doc?" she asked, studying his face as he looked up at her. "What's happened?"

"Howard Grover - he just -"

"Oh my," she sighed, closing her eyes for a few moments - only to open them as her husband spoke.

"Doc? What are you doing here?"

"Welcome back, Lou," Doc said, smiling. "How do you feel?"

"A little weak - and hungry. I could use some water." Bonnie held out a cup that she had been using. "Thank you, honey." He emptied the cup. "More?" he asked, holding it out to her.

"I'll get you more in a few minutes," she assured him.

"Have I been sick?"

"What's the last thing you remember, Lou?" Doc wanted to know.

He lifted a hand to his head. "I had a headache. A bad one. Made me a little sick to my stomach - and I thought maybe if I slept it off, I'd be okay, so I came back here and lay down -. Joanie wasn't feeling well, either. She was at the back of the wagon -" he looked in that direction. "Guess she's okay and out playing -" He saw the tears on his wife's cheeks. "Bonnie? What's wrong? Joan's okay, isn't she?" He looked at Doc. "Doc?"

"You and Joan were the first to fall victim to what Mr. Overton calls 'trail fever', Lou. That was three days ago now. Since then, ten more have fallen ill. You're the first one to recover."

"And Joan?" He sat up. "Joan!" he called out, but Doc and Bonnie grabbed his arms.

"God took her home early for a reason. I doubt we'll ever know what that reason was until we see her in Heaven - and by then, the reason won't really matter, will it?"

"Jenny. What about -" he asked, looking around the wagon.

"She's with Mr. and Mrs. Collins," she told him. "Neither she nor I were ill." She looked at Doc. "Dr. Hawkins did everything he knew to do, but he, like the rest of us, was dealing with something he'd never seen before. He's still dealing with it, even now."

Lou frowned, turning to look at the doctor. "How many are sick?" he asked.

"As of today, twelve have become ill. Two of those have passed," he continued. "Your daughter - and Howard Grover."

Lou squeezed his eyes shut and reached over to clasp his wife's hand. Opening his eyes, he drew a deep breath. "Has anyone else recovered?"

"Just you, so far."

"Who else is still sick?"

Mrs. Lee. Artie and Mandy Hall. George Lansing, Mrs. Baker and Mrs. Cooper. Then there's Mary Norton and Mr. Hanrahan."

"You said ten. Who -?"

"The tenth - and the last one to fall ill - is John Donager."

====

Margaret placed another cool cloth on John's forehead, returning the one she removed to the water. His fever was still too high. Bowing her head, she said a silent prayer, then turned as she heard someone at the back of the wagon. "Charles? Is that -" she broke off as Mr. Overton appeared. "Oh. Mr. Overton. I'm sorry. I was hoping that my brother had come back."

"Where is he?"

"He went down to see how Artie Hall is doing," she told him.

Overton nodded, glancing in that direction before putting his arms on the top of the tailgate. "How is Mr. Donager?"

"He still has a fever, and hasn't woken at all. I'm worried that he's not drinking or eating -" she switched the rags out again. "All I can do is keep trying to lower his temperature with these cold rags -"

"When's the last time you were out of this wagon, Mrs. Donager?" he asked.

"Since John fell ill," she told him. "I was hoping that you were my brother earlier because I wanted him to stay here and watch John while I go ask Alice Hawkins something and to look in on Mrs. Lee."

"I'll stay while you go do that," he offered.

Margaret turned to stare at him, aware that he and her husband were usually at odds. "Are you sure that - well, that it wouldn't be any trouble?"

"Very sure. Jennings is taking his turn watching Hanrahan, so I'd be glad to help," he told her, reaching over to unfasten the chains that kept the tailgate up, lowering it. "I'll help you out -"

Slowly, she moved her legs, aware that they were aching because she had spent too long sitting on the hard floor of the wagon. She must have winced, because Mr. Overton's expression changed to one of concern.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I haven't really moved from that spot," she explained, moving to the back of the wagon so that he

could lift her out, placing her feet on the ground. "Thank you," she said, smoothing her skirt as he moved away. "You might want to get some fresh water for the bowl," she told him.

"I'll do that." He reached into the wagon, stretching far enough to grab the bowl.

"I'll try not to be too long."

"Take your time." He watched as the woman turned and moved away from the wagon before he went to refill the bowl. Getting into the wagon, he half-crawled over to where the owner of the wagon lay, wrapped in two quilts. Removing the rag from his forehead, Overton replaced it with a cooler, fresh one from the bowl. Glancing at the back of the wagon, then the front, before he said, "You'd better get well, Donager," he growled in a low, quiet voice. "I don't get along with most people -" he gave a soft laugh. "In case you haven't noticed, you were a surprise. I've never met a man who would argue with me and not back down. But you - you never back down. I'll never admit it other than right now, but I respect that. It's aggravating as hell, but it's also a good thing. Keeps me on my toes. I know that I owe you a huge debt for sticking by me back down the trail - but until this trip is over, I can't afford to say thank you. Maybe I'll never be able to say those words, but I **am** grateful. So you need to get better so that we can see how this plays out."

=====

As the sun neared the horizon three days later, there were three graves on that hill. Joan Smith and Howard Grover had been joined by Corinne Cooper and Mary Norton. Even Hanrahan had sweated out his fever and was almost back to normal. Of the remaining patients, only one was still unconscious: John.

"He's so thin, Doc," Margaret fretted. "He hasn't eaten in almost week, and I've barely been able to get him to swallow any water -"

"Have **you** been eating and drinking since he became ill?"

"Here and there -" When Doc gave her a chiding look, she shrugged. "Charles brought me soup, and insisted that I eat it, but most of the time I - poured it out," she confessed.

"Margaret," he sighed, shaking his head.

"I don't care. If John's not alive, I don't care if I -"

"Charles!" Doc called out, and waited for the young man's head to appear over the tailgate.

"Yes, sir?"

"Go and get your sister a bowl of that stew that was served for supper tonight, please. And a slice of bread."

"Right away!" he promised, running toward the campfire.

"I'm going to have a long talk with that boy about why he didn't tell me that you haven't been eating."

"He didn't know," she insisted. "I told you: he would bring it to me, and I would pour it out when it got cold. Don't blame Charles."

"As for what you were saying - you know very well that's *not* what John would want. He'd likely want you to have that child and fulfill his dream of a ranch out here."

"I'm not as strong as he is, Doc," she said. "If he hadn't been there, I would have never been able to stand up to Father the way I did when I decided to marry John and leave New York."

Doc removed the cool rag on John's forehead. "Margaret -"

"He's everything to me. Don't you understand?"

"Margaret," he said again.

"I can't live without him. I just -"

"It looks as though you won't have to," he interrupted. "His fever's broken."

She looked at John, reaching out to touch his face. "He's sweating." She began to smile. "That's good, isn't it?"

"Very good," Doc confirmed. "His skin's cooler - I need a dry rag -"

"Thank God," she said. "Thank you, Lord." Margaret twisted around and found the dry cloth, handing it to him as Charles returned with the soup. "Here you go, sis," he said, holding the bowl toward her.

"His fever's broken, Charles!" she exclaimed. "He's going to be all right!"

"Is that right, Doc?" Charles questioned.

"I'd say yes. Now give that soup to Margaret, then get some fresh water before you go and start spreading the news."

"Yes, sir!"

"He's going to blame himself for those four deaths," Margaret said.

"No more than I blame *myself*," Doc told her as he wiped the sweat away. When Charles brought the water, he used a second rag, dipping it into that water and holding it to John's lips. "He needs water."

Outside, they could hear Charles yelling out, "John's fever broke! He's going to be okay!"

Margaret lifted a spoon from nearby. "I've gotten him to take a little by using a spoon. I had to sit him up so that he wouldn't choke -"

Doc lifted the younger man's shoulders and used the spoon that Margaret gave him to put water into John's mouth. Slowly, he began to open his mouth to take it. "That's it," Doc said. "I should have had Charles bring another bowl of that stew. He's going to be hungry when he wakes up enough to realize

it." He lowered John's shoulders back onto the quilt. "This bedding needs changed -" As Margaret began to open her mouth, he held up his hand. "No. *You* are going to finish that stew and drink that water. I'll find someone to get what I need." He moved to the front of the wagon, looking out. "Overton!"

The wagon master came over from his own smaller fire. "Did I hear the boy right, Doc? Is Donager going to be okay?"

"His fever's broken," Doc confirmed. "When he wakes up, he'll need food and a canteen of water. Would you go and get both, please?"

The smile of relief on Overton's craggy face was gone so quickly that Doc thought he might have imagined seeing it. "Anything as long as it means we can get moving again."

"If he wakes up soon, we'll be able to break camp tomorrow."

"Tomorrow's Sunday," both Overton and Margaret said the words at the same time.

Doc nodded. "Then we'll get a late start, after services."

"Bout time," Overton muttered. "I'll go get that stew and a canteen of water."

"Thank you, Mr. Overton," Margaret said.

====

It was well after sunset when John's eyes opened. He opened his mouth to speak, but his voice didn't seem to want to work, so he cleared it. The sound must have awakened someone, who leaned over him. "John? Can you hear me?"

He nodded, trying again to speak. "Y-Yes." It was more of a croak than speech, so he cleared his throat again. "Dry."

"I don't doubt it," Doc said, helping John to sit up enough to drink from a cup that Margaret had placed some water into. "It's been a week - and while we did what we could, you weren't very responsive."

John gulped the water down, reaching up to try to get more as the cup emptied. "More," he said.

"You need water, but you'll make yourself sick if you take too much. You know that. There's some soup here. It'll help you regain your strength."

"Where's - where's Meg?"

"I'm right here," she said, finally coming closer, reaching out her hand to touch his face. "And you were worried about my getting sick," she told him.

The words seemed to remind him about what had been happening before he fell ill. Lifting a shaking hand, he grabbed hers, then look at Doc. "How many?" he asked.

"Including you - there were twelve who were sick."

"How many?" he asked again, but Doc pretended to misunderstand the question once more.

"All of them except you are on the way to full recovery - in one way or the other."

"Doc!"

Doc exchanged a look with Margaret before answering. "Four. Joan Smith, Edward Grover, Corinne Cooper and Mary Norton."

John closed his eyes tight, and his head dropped back. "Four. And you say the rest are all recovering?"

"Yes. You're the one we've all been so worried about," Margaret told him. "It's been almost a week."

"No wonder I feel so weak," he mused, smiling as Margaret lifted a spoonful of the soup for him. He swallowed it. "I'm hungry. I don't know how I'm going to face those families who lost someone. And Mr. Norton - Olaf's alone now. He and Mary had no children -"

"You were right, Margaret," Doc sighed. "He's going to start blaming himself."

"I told you that he would," she replied, dipping the spoon into the bowl again.

"Of course I blame myself! It's my fault that they're out here!" He opened his mouth for more soup, shaking his head as he swallowed again.

"And would say that they're dead because I'm a bad doctor?" Doc asked.

"Of course not! Who said that? I'll - I'll break their jaw!" he tried to get up, but realized that he was too weak. "As soon as I'm stronger, I mean."

"I said it," Doc told him, and John sank back, confused.

"You?"

"I felt that I hadn't done enough. I still feel that way, honestly. Eat. You need your strength, remember?" He waited until John opened his mouth for another spoonful. "I was facing something I'd never dealt with - I had no idea how to treat it, beyond trying to keep the fever down and getting what moisture into the body that I could, there *was* no treatment. I did what I could, but that amounted to just trying to keep things on an even keel. The congestion came at different times with each patient - then the coughing -" Doc stared at his hands. "I felt useless. All of my training, all of my studying, and there was essentially nothing that I could do to save them."

"Mark, it wasn't your fault," John insisted, sitting up.

"And it wasn't yours, either, John." Doc smiled. "All of these people are here because they believe in a dream - in an idea of a better life out here. Now, you be a good patient and finish that soup. Mr. Overton said that we're moving out tomorrow after church, and you need some rest. I'll try to keep everyone from coming at you this evening. But I can't promise about tomorrow."

"Thank you, Doc."

"I'll look in on you tomorrow morning - if you need me during the night -"

John smiled. "I think we'll be all right. You get some rest yourself."

"I fully intend to do just that. Night." He closed his bag and moved toward the back of the wagon. As he got out, he heard John's voice.

"Where did you stay while I sick?"

"Right where I belonged," was Margaret's answer. "Here, with you. Who do you think took care of you? And kept you clean shaven, John Donager?"

"You -? DOC!"

"You're too weak to get up, John. Besides, I'm sure he's already halfway back to his own wagon."

"Humph! I might just decide to break his jaw after all!"

"Be quiet, John, and finish this soup."

Doc laughed softly, stepping quickly away from the wagon. The last thing he wanted was to get waylaid by an angry husband. Tomorrow would be time enough for John to take him to task.

====

"How are you feeling this morning?" Doc asked John before dawn.

"A lot better. Still weak, but not as much as last night. Look, Doc, we need to talk."

"After I finish my examination," Doc said in an even tone. "But if I were you, I wouldn't be considering breaking the jaw of your doctor anytime soon. You'd be more likely to break your hand."

"How could you possibly have let Meg take care of me, Mark? She's -"

"Expecting a child," Doc finished. "I pointed that out to her. She's stubborn. I considered physically removing her from the wagon, but I was worried that she might be injured. And then there was the fact that she would have spent the last week fretting and worrying about your condition. That wouldn't have been good for her either, now, would it?"

"No, I suppose not, but, still -"

"She had already been exposed to whatever it was before you collapsed. Removing her from your side wasn't going to keep her from becoming ill herself at that point. Now, if I let you out of this wagon to attend the service this morning, do you promise to let Charles drive the wagon until I decide that you're strong enough to do it?"

"Attend the service? Doc, I -"

"Fine," Doc began, closing his medical bag with a firm hand. "I'll just tell everyone that you're too scared -"

"Okay, okay. I'll go." Doc gave him a long look. "And I won't drive the wagon until you give me the go-ahead."

"Thank you."

Since Margaret had already helped him in changing his clothes that morning - just in case some of the others had stopped by, all John had to do was get to the back of the wagon, where Charles was waiting. Putting his arm around the young man's shoulders, John allowed himself to be lifted from the wagon. Once his feet touched the ground, he felt his legs shaking as he stood there. Doc reached out a hand to steady him. "John?"

He very nearly told Charles to help him back into the wagon - until he looked up and saw faces lined up before him - a line of people leading to the chairs set up for the service. A closer look confirmed that the first four families were the Coopers, the Smiths, the Grovers, and Olaf Norton. A hand wrapped around his other arm, and he looked down to see Margaret.

Taking a deep breath, John, supported by Charles and Margaret, took a step, pausing before those families. "I'm sorry," he said, unsure of what else he could say.

"You have no reason to apologize, John," Lou told him, and the others agreed, reaching out to touch his shoulders and arms.

"God Bless you," Frances Grover said.

"Need to get church started!" Overton called out from nearby. "We have a lot of traveling to do today!"

"The man has no heart," Charles muttered as the group began almost as one to move toward the area set up for the service.

But John turned his head to see a quickly hidden half smile on the wagon-master's face. In response, he smiled back, but Overton shook his head and turned back toward the lead wagon. "Don't be too sure about that, Charles," John said, continuing to smile as Rebecca Lee led the congregation in singing a hymn to begin the church service.

====

After a sermon on loss and the hope of the Resurrection, they sang another song and Reverend Lee dismissed them with a prayer. Several people gathered around John as he rose from his chair with Charles' assistance. Most of the men began returning the chairs to their various wagons, and others went to make sure the harnesses were tight and ready for the day's travel. "Excuse us, John," Olaf said as he and the others began to move away. "We're going to visit the graves before we go."

"Where are they buried?" John asked.

"Over there," Paul Grover told him, pointing to the four crosses sitting on the nearby hill.

"I'd like to -" John began, but Doc spoke up.

"You're still too weak to walk up there, John."

"But -"

It was Bonnie who told him, "The doctor is right, Mr. Donager. You need to regain your strength so you'll be able to help your wife when she has that baby."

"Mrs. Smith, I -"

"Take care of him, Margaret."

"I will," she promised. "Come on, John. Charles?"

Doc stopped by the wagon just before they left. "You both need to ride in the back today. I think Charles can handle things on his own."

"I'm not going to argue with you, Mark," John assured him, laying down on the quilt again. "I feel like I've run a race."

"Get some rest. I'll see you when we stop for the night."

"Everyone ready?!"

Overton's voice sent Doc scurrying back to his wagon. "Give me a moment!" he yelled back, jumping up onto the bench and taking the reins from Alice. "Ready!"

"Wagons, Ho-oh!!!"

The End