

The Donager Saga: Beginnings  
by  
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Episode 4  
His Shadow on the Land

As the wagon train topped the hill, John almost pulled back on the reins of the team. "Wow," he breathed as his eyes scanned the open land before them, that seemed to flow through a valley, then flattened out again to the south. "Jennings was right," he said, remembering in the nick of time that there was a line of wagons behind his.

Beside him, Margaret asked, "About what?"

"He told me that this was coming up - I was telling him about how much I liked the desert when we were looking for water -"

"You \*liked\* it?"

He grinned. "Don't worry. Jennings said I was crazy. But this -" he waved at the landscape. "There's a strange sort of beauty - I \*think\* that I've found where God's been leading us, Meg."

Margaret winced, placing a hand to her swollen abdomen. "Ouch." The other women had already given birth over the last month - all in the evening or at night, which hadn't impacted the journey, since they had been ready to travel the next morning.

Seeing her, John frowned. "Do we need to stop?" he wanted to know, looking around for Overton.

But she shook her head. "No. We'll be stopping for the night before long. The trail's a little rough -" she winced again as the wagon pitched. "I do think that I'll go and lie down for awhile -"

"It's warmer in there anyway," John nodded, holding her arm as she stood up and stepped up onto the seat, then back down into the interior of the wagon. "You okay?" he asked before letting her go.

"I'm fine."

"Mr. Jennings is riding back in," he called back to her. "I'm sure we'll be stopping soon."

After a brief conversation with this scout, Overton lifted his hand and turned, directing the lead wagon to turn and form their usual circular camp. "Charles!" John called to his brother in law, waiting for him to ride over. "Before you unhitch the team, go and tell Doc that I'd like for him check on your sister, please. I'm going to go talk to Mr. Overton."

"Sure thing!" He turned the horse toward the Hawkins' wagon. "Hey Doc!"

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Overton and Jennings were still talking when John approached, pulling his coat tighter in the north wind. Overton turned to look at him. "I had a feeling you'd be along, Donager," he said, then nodded toward Jennings. "Tell him what you told me."

"I saw about 150 to 200 Apache on the other side of that mountain range. They're heading to their winter hunting grounds. If we get there too soon, and they see us, we'll all be dead."

"And if we stay put or slow down?" John questioned, looking at Overton.

"It's cold, in case you haven't noticed - and getting colder. I've seen snow in this pass this time of year," the wagon-master declared. "The longer we're delayed here, the more of a chance we'll have of being trapped by a snow-storm."

"John!" hearing his name called, John turned to see Charles running toward him.

"Excuse me," he told Jennings and Overton as he went to meet his brother in law. "What is it, Charles?"

"Doc says that Margaret's in labor!"

"What?!" John exclaimed, taking off for the wagon at a run. Doc was climbing out of the wagon and stood in his path. "Doc, is she really-? I mean -"

"She really is getting ready to have that baby, John," he confirmed with a smile, grabbing his arm as John would have continued to the wagon. "The last thing she needs is for you to be hovering around, making a nuisance of yourself."

"A - a \*nuisance\*?!" John questioned. "I'm her husband! That's \*my\* baby -"

"And since this is her first child, it's liable to take a few hours before she has it. Now, what I want you to do is go for a walk - or a ride - find \*something\* to take your mind off of what's going on in that wagon."

"Can't I at least talk to Meg first?" John wanted to know.

"Five minutes, then I don't want to see you until that baby is born."

"But - what if - Suppose something -"

"Margaret's healthy and in good condition. She should have an easy delivery. Now, go on, talk to her, then git."

John didn't have to be told twice. He climbed into the wagon, smiling as Alice Hawkins moved away in an attempt to give husband and wife a modicum of privacy. "Hey there," he said, kneeling beside Margaret.

"Hey there yourself," she replied, pulling the quilt over her up. "It's cold."

"Do you need another quilt?" he offered, but she shook her head.

"Not right now. You're going to be a wonderful father, John."

"I pray that you're right. Doc said that I can't stay long - doesn't want me in the way." He leaned forward and placed a kiss on her lips. "I love you."

"I love you." She reached down to grab his hand, squeezing it tightly as she grimaced in pain.

John saw Alice glance at a pocket watch she held in her hand. "Is everything okay?" he asked.

"Everything's fine," she assured him. "But you should go now. She needs to rest as much as she can."

Nodding, John turned back to give Margaret another kiss. "Next time we see each other, we'll be parents. I love you," he said again, slowly releasing her hand before he rose and moved toward the front of the wagon. She blew him a kiss as he went through the heavy canvas covering the front opening.

He could see Mrs. Lee and Mrs. Collins starting an early supper while Reverend Lee and most of the others gathered around a second campfire, braving the cold as they prayed for the safe arrival of the Donager baby. Doc approached him. "Now, go somewhere. Anywhere. Last thing I need is a soon to be father in camp, fretting over what's happening."

"Charles!" John called out, looking around.

"Right here, John!"

"Where's the horse?"

"Over with the others. Why?"

"I'm going for a ride."

"What? But - but Margaret -"

"Doc ordered me to get out of camp and that's the only way I can get far enough out," John explained.

"I'll get him saddled up for you," Charles offered.

"No, I'll do it," John said, grabbing his saddle from the wagon's tongue. Charles followed him to the rope line they had stretched out. "I'll be riding to the south," he said as he flung the saddle onto the animal's back. Reaching underneath, he grabbed the strap and fastened the cinch.

"Don't get lost. With this wind gusting like it is, I doubt that we'll be able to follow you."

John stepped up into the saddle. "I think you could do it."

"Wish we had another horse right now," Charles sighed. "I'd be going with you."

"One of us needs to be here. Just stay out of Doc's way."

"I will. Be careful."

John kicked the horse to get him moving, intending to at least get to the spot where the valley opened up again.

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But when he reached that spot, he found himself captivated by the view of land from there to the south. He'd seen creeks and small, spring fed lakes along the way, and from here, he could see flashes of green in the distance, meaning that there was likely more water in that direction.

Finally, John pulled up as he saw the small house with a corral and tiny barn sitting in the middle of nowhere, as it were. Nearby, a herd of ten or twenty thin cattle grazed on scrub grass. Smoke from the chimney of the house made it known that someone was there, and as he slowly approached, John saw a man going toward the house from the barn.

The man must have seen his approach, because he stopped between the buildings to wait. John entered the yard and smiled as he slid off the horse. "Hello," he said, finally able to see that the man was most likely Mexican. They had entered Mexico the previous day, and John prayed that the man could understand English.

A woman came from the house to join the man. "My name is John Donager," John said, starting to worry.

The man smiled. "I am Pedro Lopez. This is my wife, Mariana."

"You *do* speak English," John said with relief.

"Si," Pedro nodded, then continued in English, "Yes. I learned from my mother and in a mission school. Would you care to come inside? Mariana has some coffee ready."

"I can't stay long," John told them, but he was ready to get out of the cold. "My wife is having our first child."

"Where is your wife, *senor*?" Pedro asked, looking around as they entered the house.

"Oh, we're with a wagon train north of the valley. The doctor attending my wife ordered me to leave for a few hours so I wouldn't worry."

"Is that working?" Pedro removed his coat as Mariana set out two cups for coffee.

"Well, no, not really. Tell you the truth, I was surprised to find anyone out here. Our scout told us that there were Indians on the other side of the mountains." He took a drink of the coffee, and smiled. "This is very good, Mrs. Lopez."

"Gracias," she replied. "Thank you."

"Mariana is cousin to Cochise," Pedro explained. "Her mother saved his life when he was a child. He told us that we can live here on this land."

John tried to hide his disappointment. "Oh. I was hoping that it hadn't been claimed yet."

"Claimed?" Pedro asked.

"That no one else owned it," John explained.

"The Apache doesn't believe that we 'own' the land," Mariana told him. "It belongs to whoever can keep it and deal with the secret that it holds."

He didn't question what the 'secret' might be as he asked, "So - if someone were to make you an offer -?"

"We cannot sell the land, Mr. Donager," she said.

"Oh. I see. Well, I suppose we'll keep looking, then." Seeing their expressions, John continued. "I know you're going to think this is strange, but when we came to the northern area above the valley, and I saw all of this land, I was sure that God had brought us here - that this was where He wanted us to be."

Mariana and Pedro turned to look at each other, looking like they were silently communicating. Finally Pedro spoke again. "Perhaps you were right, John Donager."

John, who had risen with the intention of leaving to return to the wagon train and Margaret, gave them a questioning look. Pedro indicated the empty chair, and John sat down again as Mariana began to speak.

"A few months ago, I had a dream. I have had it many times since, and it is always the same. I am standing on the land when a man's shadow falls across it. His hands move to the secret of the land and scatters what he finds. Others follow, but all are within his shadow. It covers the land." She smiled. "I spoke to our shaman about the dream. He said that if I ever saw that man of the shadow, the land would be his."

"Even if he were a white man?" John questioned, equally uncertain and hopeful.

"As long as he could hold onto the land, it would be his," she said again.

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After promising to return the next day, John left the Lopez' and turned his horse back to the north. Not far from the house, he saw something reflecting the last of the sunlight, so he rode that way. Getting off of his horse, John knelt to pick up a rock, examining it. Digging down, he found more of the nuggets. Removing his kerchief from his coat pocket, John buried all but a corner of the cotton square, and that he secured with a rock to keep it from blowing away should the wind uncover it. The nuggets went into his pockets, feeling heavy as he climbed back up on the horse, wondering if this was what Mariana Lopez had meant when she spoke about the land's 'secret'.

He kicked the animal forward, determined not to mention finding the gold before he could speak to the couple again. It wouldn't be fair for him to agree to take the land without finding out if they knew about it first.

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Gene Overton was stepping up into the saddle as John rode in. "Where the \*hell\* have you been, Donager?!" he demanded to know. At that instant, a gust of wind blew through the camp, tossing the tin plates Hanrahan had used for supper toward Overton's horse. Already skittish because of the wind, the animal screamed and reared up on his hind legs, tossing his unprepared rider to the ground. John

jumped off his own horse, grabbing the reins to calm the horse, who was still whinnying and snorting in fear.

Several others had come running, calling for the doctor. As soon as the horse stopped pulling away, John turned to look at Overton, who hadn't moved. Doc ran from the Donager wagon, kneeling beside the big man. He lifted his eyes to John and announced, "He's dead. Looks like he broke his neck," he explained.

Jennings and Hanrahan looked on with shocked sadness. "I shoulda put those plates in the box," the cook murmured. "Didn't think he'd go like that."

Realizing that there was nothing that he could do, Doc rose to his feet, turning back toward the second wagon, but paused when John spoke. "He was coming to find me. Doc- how is Margaret?"

"Still in labor. Her pains are much closer. I'd say another few hours should do it. Get yourself something to eat right now. Just -"

"I know. Stay out of your hair."

Doc nodded, his expression still solemn as he glanced again at the deceased wagon-master and then headed toward his patient.

"Anyone want to help me dig a grave?" John called out. Jennings, Charles stepped up to volunteer.

"I hate burying someone at night," Matthew Lee observed.

"We have to do it, Reverend," Jennings insisted. "As cold as it is, we can't just leave his body here wrapped - the coyotes and buzzards will come around to find food. I didn't always agree with the man, but I can't let that happen."

"I know that you're correct, Mr. Jennings. It still troubles me." He looked around. "Someone find me a shovel, please, so that I can help."

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John led the group of men about a mile away, not far from the start of the valley itself, where they quickly dug a grave beside the trail. Due to the cold, and the darkness, the funeral was decidedly brief, with Rev. Lee praying that he hoped that Mr. Overton had made his peace with his Maker before crossing the Great Divide.

As they returned to camp, Charles asked Mr. Jennings what would happen to the wagon train now. "Now that Mr. Overton's not here, I mean," he said. "Will you take his place?"

"Me?!" Jennings yelped, then shook his head. "I'm a scout, not a wagon-master. No, I can't take his place."

"So what are we going to do, John?" Carl Collins wanted to know.

"Well," John began slowly, "before his horse threw him, I was about to tell Mr. Overton that Charles, Meg and I wouldn't be continuing with the rest you."

"What?!"

"John, what are you saying?"

He addressed Charles' single-word exclamation first. "You heard me, Charles, unless you'd like to continue on to California. But Meg and the baby and I are staying here, in this valley." To Gerald Collins, he explained, "We're going to settle here. It's good land - there are some scrub cattle that I think I can turn into a decent herd to sell next year." He didn't want to say too much, not until he had a chance to speak to Mariana and Pedro again. The weight of the gold in his coat pockets reminded him of that. "Look, I haven't even had a chance to tell my wife about this. Once I get that chance, I'll tell you more, okay?"

"Sure thing, John," Gerald Collins agreed.

As they rode back into camp, John and Charles turned toward their wagon as Mark Hawkins was climbing out, drawing on his coat. "I was just coming to find you two," he said with a grin. "It's a boy, John. A fine, healthy boy. And before you ask: Margaret's fine. Tired, but fine." He reached up to help Alice down from the wagon.

"A boy," John repeated, taking his hat off to slap his leg as he yelled, "It's a boy!" Turning back toward Doc, he asked, "Can we go in and see her?"

"By all means, Mr. Donager," Alice Hawkins said. "But only for a few minutes. She really does need to get some rest. It will be dawn soon. We're going to have some coffee and find something to eat, then we'll be back to check on them."

But John didn't hear the last part - he was already climbing into the wagon. Charles went around and ducked under the back flap to rest his arms against the tailgate.

Margaret looked extremely tired, but there was a glow on her face as she looked down at the infant in her arms. She looked up and lifted her free hand toward her husband. "John. Come and meet your son."

"He looks like you, Margaret," Charles said.

"I think he looks like his father," she insisted. "Except for the red hair, anyway. Kevin, meet your father," she said to the baby before looking back to John.

"Kevin?" Charles questioned.

John reached out to take the baby's hand, letting the tiny fingers curl around one of his as Margaret said, "We had an agreement that if the baby was a girl, we'd name her Jessica, after Mother. And if it was a boy, we'd name him Kevin, after John's father."

"I'm not sure I ever knew his name," Charles confessed. "All I ever heard him called was Donager."

"Would you like to hold him?" Margaret asked John.

He grimaced. "I don't know. He's so tiny. I'd be afraid of hurting him -"

"You'll be fine," she insisted. "Hold out your arms. Now, make sure you support his head, but don't squeeze him - there you go." She sat back, smiling as John stared down at their son. "Doc told me that Mr. Overton is dead."

John nodded. "His horse got scared by the wind and some noise and threw him. Probably broke his neck."

"So what's going to happen now?" she wondered. "Will Mr. Jennings be willing to take his place?"

This time, John shook his head. "He says no, that he's a scout, not a wagon-master."

"And he was pretty definite about it, too," Charles confirmed.

"You think that they'll ask you to take over, don't you?" she asked John.

"That would be hard to do, since it looks like we won't be going any further," John said.

"What do you mean?"

"Remember that I told you - yesterday, before we stopped how much I liked this place?"

"Yes," she replied.

"When Doc told me to go for a ride, that's exactly what I did..." He told both Margaret and Charles about Mariana and Pedro Lopez, and about Mariana's dream of a man who could "hold the land and its secret...with his shadow."

"And she thinks that you're that man?"

"Wow," Charles breathed. "What do you think she meant about the 'secret' of the land?"

"I don't know, Charles," was John's answer. "I'm sure they'll tell me about it when I see them later today when I go back down there to their cabin south of the valley. Charles, would you mind going and spreading the word that I'd like to talk to someone from each wagon after sunrise today? We can meet at the main fire."

"Sure!"

John handed Kevin back to his mother, then moved to the rear of the wagon to lift the cover enough to see Charles moving away. "What's wrong, John?" she asked.

"I wasn't entirely honest with the boy," he admitted. "While the Lopez' never said what the secret might be, I think that I might have stumbled on it on the way back to camp after leaving them." He drew out a handful of gold nuggets that glimmered in the lamplight.

"Is that what I \*think\* it is?" she asked, her voice soft, as if sensing that he wanted to keep the discovery quiet.

John nodded, giving her one, and returning the rest to his pocket. "Both pockets are full - and there seemed to be quite a bit more. Now, I don't want to tell anyone else about it until I can talk to Pedro and his wife. I need them to verify that they knew about it before I accept their offer." Margaret smiled and returned the gold to him, closing her fingers over his.

"That still leaves the wagon train and all of our friends with no way to get to California, doesn't it?"

"Not necessarily," he told her. "I have an idea, but I want to talk to you about it before I tell them - to see what you think about it."

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Once breakfast was finished, John found himself standing before twenty-odd people. "Where's Hanrahan?" John asked, looking around for the Irishman. Jennings was lingering on the outer edge of the group, as though he might be curious as to what would happen, but not wanting to seem to be \*too\* curious.

"I'm here, lad," the man said, peeking out from behind Gerald Collins. "And if y'don't mind my sayin' so, get on with it. Tis powerfully cold, even with the sun."

"First off - as I'm sure most of you have heard - Charles, Margaret, our son and I aren't going to be going to California. We'll be staying here, on the land just to the north, down through the valley, and 100 miles south of there."

"Wow," someone said. "That's a lot of land."

"Yes, it is."

"It doesn't belong to anyone else?" Sam Longdon asked.

John smiled. "Well, about that - When I went out for a ride yesterday, I rode in to the south, looking the place over. I'd already told myself that I felt like this was where God had been calling me to. Imagine my surprise when I found a shack and barn along with some thin scrub cattle..." As he had with Charles and Margaret, he recounted his meeting Pedro and Mariana, drawing some concern when he mentioned that the woman was a cousin of the Apache Chief Cochise.

"She's a half-breed and yet willing to sell you land that he gave to her?" Lionel Garrett questioned.

"She can't sell it," John told them. "But she \*can\* give it to me if she thinks I'm the man she saw in her dream."

"Her dream?" Paul Grover asked.

"Well, she said that in her dream, she was on the land and a shadow fell over it. That others came and were also in that shadow. She told me that she spoke to the tribe's shaman about it, and he told her that

it meant that the man with this shadow would be able to hold onto the land and protect those who remained in his shadow."

"This is all good for you, John," Lionel said. "But where does that leave the rest of us? With Mr. Overton dead, and Mr. Jennings unwilling to take his place, how are we going to get to California?"

"Maybe you don't have to," John said. "I have an idea - just hear me out, okay?" There were murmurs and nods as he continued. "We've been together for over six months. We've gone through a lot of things, and I think it's proven that we're stronger together than we ever thought we would be. We're like a little town on wheels. We have everything that most towns have: the Carters plan to open a mercantile; the Collins', a hotel and cafe; Paul, you want to go into the freight business; Arthur Hall - you're a gunsmith; Niles Bradford is going to start a livery stable; Mike Lawrence is a blacksmith - we even have a barber and a doctor, and a preacher."

"What's your point, John?" Niles asked.

"Well, even if I only work the land south of the valley, it would be nice to have a town nearby where I could buy supplies and send freight."

"Named Donager City?"

John wasn't sure who had asked, but he quickly shook his head. "No. It wouldn't be \*my\* town. It would belong to you. Now, we're all stuck here until the Apache have moved on, and the weather clears, but I do ask that you think about it. Think about what you need in a town. A place to buy dry goods, a place to stay until everyone decides what they want to do, a doctor that we trust, and a church to attend on Sunday morning."

"Some of us came out here to farm, John. And maybe raise a few head of cattle, too. What about us?" Sam Longdon asked, and several others nodded in agreement.

"While I can't actually sell the property, I can draw something up that will give those who don't want to live in town land to live on with their families for a few dollars - with the provision that should you ever decide to leave the land for any reason, I would have first chance to take the land back - at fair market value."

"And who would decide which section we got?"

"Each of you would claim the land you want - with the exception of the valley, where the town would be, and the stretch of land to the south of the narrow part of the valley to the southern-most line of the property. That would be the beginnings of Donager Ranch. What I'm asking is that you'll all stay and join me in building a town - and a community of friends."

"And what about the Apaches?" Jennings wanted to know. "Do you really think that they would just - ignore so many white men on this side of that mountain range?"

"Riders comin'!" Charles called out, and John smiled as he saw Pedro and Mariana.

"It's Pedro and Mariana Lopez!" he told everyone. Crossing the circle, he held out his hand to shake Pedro's hand. "Pedro. Welcome. I didn't expect you to come -"

"Mariana was concerned that your friends might not believe your story of meeting us," Pedro said, smiling at the faces around them.

"I also didn't think you should have to leave your wife and new baby so soon," Mariana added with a smile of her own. "The baby - he is here, isn't he?"

"Yes," John confirmed, then frowned. "How did you know that the baby was a boy?"

Mariana smiled. "A man with such a large shadow would have a son."

"Everyone!" John said, turning to his friends. "This is the couple that I was telling you about. Pedro Lopez and his wife, Mariana. I was about to tell them why your cousin would not attack us," he said to the woman. "Perhaps you would -"

"My mother saved the life of Cochise when he was very young. It was out of gratitude for that act that he has allowed Pedro and I to take care of this land. Even if we are not in direct control of it, as long as we live here, he will not attack." More murmurs went through the crowd as her words were considered. "It is good land, but it will require courage to tame it. We believe that John Donager has that courage."

John spoke again. "Go and discuss what we've talked about with your families. Let me know what you decide." He waited until Charles was the last one with them. "Pedro, this is my wife's brother, Charles Davis."

"Mr. Lopez," Charles said, then nodded at Mariana. "Mrs. Lopez."

"Charles, would you go and tell Margaret that they're here and that we'll come to the wagon in a few minutes, please?"

"Okay."

John led the couple away from the camp in an attempt to gain some privacy before turning to look at them. "You mentioned the \*secret\* of the land yesterday - When I was riding back from your cabin, I found -" he looked around before pulling a single nugget of gold from his pocket, "this."

"That is the secret," Pedro confirmed.

"So you know it's there, and you still want me to take the land?"

"We have only taken what was necessary," Pedro said. "We could not risk taking more. If the government were to find out about the gold, they would move in and take it by force, if necessary."

"The government?"

"This is Mexico," Pedro reminded him with a shrug.

"So, I won't be able to use any of the gold?"

"You can use it," Mariana insisted. "But not so much at a time so that the government does not find out."

John nodded thoughtfully, looking around. "How much gold is there, do you think?"

"Mucho," Pedro answered. "Very much. Very, very much."

"Stories about the land called this the 'Valle de oro'. The Valley of Gold," Mariana told him. "There are pockets all along the valley and to the south. Enough for many families."

Hearing her words, John smiled. "You know what I'm thinking, don't you?"

"Do you not remember what I said about the man of shadow from my dream? That his hands move to the secret of the land and scatters what he finds," she reminded him.

"Yes, I remember. Tell you what, I'm going to be needing a ranch foreman - someone who knows the land and where to find cattle, and water, and maybe a few men to help - Would you be interested in the job, Pedro?"

"Yes, I believe that I would like that," he said, smiling.

"And Mariana - I'm sure that she'll say that she doesn't need it, but - with a new baby and all - would you be willing to help my wife take care of our son and the house - when we get one built, that is."

Her smile was the only answer that he needed. "I would like to meet your wife - and your son."

"And she wants to meet you."

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"You want to stay, don't you?" Alice asked her husband.

"We've planned to start a practice in California," he reminded her.

"I'm sure they already have doctors there," she reminded him. "Mark, you've seen these people through broken bones and illness and have brought new life into this group - they believe in you. Can you really just - walk away and leave them without making sure that there was someone here to take care of them?"

Someone rapped on the side of the wagon, and Doc stuck his head out to find Matthew and Rebecca Lee standing there. "May we come in, Mark?" Matthew asked. "I think we need to talk about what's going on."

"Of course." He extended a hand to help Mrs. Lee up, then waited for her husband to join them.

"Mark and I were just discussing it," Alice told them.

Sitting on a box, Rebecca smiled. "I told Matthew that I feel that we should accept the offer and start our church here. We already have an active congregation - just as the doctor has a growing practice."

Mark and Matthew exchanged smiles, and Mark shook his head. "It sounds like they've made up our minds, Matthew."

"To tell you the truth, I wasn't sure how I would feel once we got to California and everyone scattered as people are wont to do. Not tending to their spiritual needs after the last six months - I'm sure you feel the same way about their physical needs."

"Yes," Doc agreed. "We'll be staying."

Rev. Lee placed a hand on his wife's shoulder. "And so will we. Shall we say a prayer and then go tell John that he has at least the four of us?"

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After seeing Pedro and Mariana off with another promise to come and visit soon, John had found himself overtaken several times on his way back to the wagon, eventually by Hanrahan. "Might I have a word with you, Mr. Donager?"

"Of course, Mr. Hanrahan. Now what is it that I can do for you?" John asked with a passable Irish brogue that caused the old man to grin and shake his head.

"Did your invite earlier include me?"

"Of course it did. You heard me make sure that you were there. Mr. Jennings said that he wasn't sure what your plans might be, so I wanted to give you the same invitation as I gave everyone else."

"Well, now, I might as well stay, no family to turn to, and no place I need to be. Might be something that an old man who knows his way 'round a campfire can do."

"You'll be more than welcome," John told him, seeing the Lees and the Hawkins coming toward them. "Excuse me," he told the Irishman, moving forward. "Mark. Matthew. Ladies," he said, tipping his hat. "I hope your being here means that you're staying."

"We all believe that we're where God wants us to be, John," Matthew confirmed.

"Hallelujah!" John said. "Thank you! We need to have another meeting - I'm going to get Charles to spread the word, but -"

"We'll be glad to help," Mark said. "Matthew, if you and Mrs. Lee will go that way, we'll go this way."

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Once again, John stood before his fellow travelers, most of whom had confirmed their plans to stay in the valley with him. But there were a few, such as Slim Baker and Olaf Norton, had yet to make a decision. Knowing that he had an ace in the hole, John placed his hands into his coat pockets and took a deep breath.

"Friends, I want to thank those of you who have decided to stay. And for those who are still riding the fence - I think that once I show you what I've found, you'll make the same decision." The murmurings were loud, but John quieted them with his hands. "Please. Before I continue, I have to explain - what I am about to share must go no further than those gathered here. I need your assurance and acceptance of that fact before I continue." Slowly, as John scanned the crowd, which this time included wives and older children, hands were lifted in a silent promise of silence. Once he saw that all hands were raised, he nodded. "Thank you. Mrs. Lopez told me that this land held a 'secret'. One that her mother's people had carefully protected for generations, because while they didn't value that secret, others would. As I was returning from their cabin, I found this." Slowly, he drew out the largest of the gold nuggets that he'd found and held it up to the sunlight.

The audible gasp that rose changed into oohs and ahhs, and Slim Baker took a step forward. "May I -?" he asked, his voice shaky with suppressed excitement. His hand was also shaking as he took the nugget and examined it, weighing it's heft in his hand. "Is there more than this?"

"According to Pedro and Mariana, there's a lot more. Now, as of right now, this is my land, so all of it belongs to me." He took the nugget from Slim. "However -" he said as sounds of grumbling began, "if you find it on the land that you sign a paper for, any gold that you find will be yours. Now, that being said, every family who stays will get one-twentieth of half of whatever is taken out of the ground that I control. Five percent of the remaining fifty percent will go to the town's coffers for the first five years."

"Doesn't sound like very much, if we only get a 20 share of that half, John," Arthur Hall said.

"Look at it this way, Arthur: If I pull a million out of the ground, half of that is five hundred thousand. And twenty percent of that is one hundred thousand."

The grumbling was gone. "Now, as I said, we can't publicize this - we can only use it for what's needed as it's needed."

"For how long?" Tim Scott wanted to know.

"I'm really not sure, Tim. But think about this: if word gets out, we'll be overrun with people we don't know looking for gold. If we keep it quiet, things will be much easier all the way around." Tim nodded as though he accepted the answer. "Now, what I need to know is: how many are going to stay?" Every hand lifted - except for one: Jennings, still on the edge of the group stood with his arms folded across his chest. "Now, tomorrow is Sunday - and we all know what that means. I think - if we can - that we should move the wagons further into the valley, where we'll have our first church service in our new home. And to get things off on the right foot - let's put that to a vote. Everyone who thinks we should go further into the valley, raise your hand." He waited for hands to be raised. "And those who think we should stay here and move on Monday morning?" John smiled. "We'll move, then. Is an hour enough time for us to be ready? One hour, then."

John started toward Jennings, who had turned back toward the lead wagon, only to find himself confronted by Slim. "You found more than that nugget, didn't you?"

"I did. And it's marked with my kerchief - which, as you know, is embroidered with my initials. Don't worry, Slim, we'll find you a nice, rich spot to dig in."

"You better. I got reasons for wanting to strike it rich."

"And I can't think of anyone who deserves it more," John replied, slapping the man on the back before he continued to where Jennings had vanished around the corner of the wagon. "Jennings."

The scout stopped, and took a deep breath before turning to face him. "I need to get the team hitched to the wagon so that Hanrahan can drive it into the valley. He'll need someone to help him unhitching later -"

"You won't be here to do it?"

"No. I figure if the wagons are going that way -" he pointed to the south, "I'll head that way -" he pointed to the east. "I've got some friends in Texas that I haven't seen in awhile. Might go to work for the Army. I hear they're looking for scouts these days."

"I really wish you'd reconsider and stay. I could use someone to help on the ranch."

"I'm not a wrangler," he said. "But thanks for the offer."

John reached into his pocket and pulled out several gold nuggets, placing them into the other man's hand. "This might help you find something that you want to do instead of settling for something that you *\*have\** to do. And remember that you'll always be welcome here."

Jennings fingers closed around the gold before he stuffed it into his own pocket. "Thank you. Now, I need to get this team hitched and say my goodbyes to the Irishman."

"God Bless you," John said. "We'll say a special prayer for your safe travels."

====

As the wagons rolled out, Jennings sat beside the trail, nodding and speaking to each family for the last time. John glanced back as the last wagon rolled past, to see Jennings turn his horse toward Texas. He said a silent prayer for the man before riding his own horse up in front of Mr. Hanrahan's wagon to lead the way into the valley.

At the narrowest point in the valley, which he guessed to be at least twenty-five miles across, he lifted his hand, shouting "Whoa! Circle the wagons!"

"Supper will be ready as soon as we get a fire going," Mrs. Collins told him.

John nodded in acknowledgment of the statement, telling her, "I'm going to check on Margaret and the baby."

"We'll bring supper over in a bit, then. This wind is still too strong for her to bring the child out of the wagon."

"Thanks." John continued around the circle, spreading the message about supper to everyone else until he came to the wagon he shared with his family. Charles was already leading the team away, and John handed him the reins of his horse before climbing inside the wagon. "How are you doing?" he asked, giving her a gentle kiss.

"I'm fine. If it wasn't so cold and blustery, I'd be out there helping with supper." He saw her shiver and grabbed her shawl and placed it over her shoulders as he looked down at the baby in her arms. "Hey, little man," he said, taking hold of his tiny fist. "How about you come to your daddy and give mama a few minutes to rest?" John deftly lifted Kevin and held him close. "Mrs. Collins said -"

"I heard her," Margaret told him. "John, how is this going to work? We'll need wood to build a town - and there aren't a lot of trees big enough to cut down - even if we had access to a sawmill."

"Pedro said that there's a town out to the west. It's at least a two day ride each way. They have a sawmill there. We'll figure it out tomorrow. But I am going to suggest that the first building that goes up should be the church."

====

John's suggestion was well received when he told the other about it over supper. After the meal, they all sat, drawing a plan for the city's streets in the cold dirt, before someone unknowingly echoed Margaret's question about where they were going to find wood. He told them about the town further west - "Pedro told me that the trail there runs alongside the west mountains and back to the west in the foothills."

"But - isn't that where the Apache are camped?" Gerald asked.

"I'll speak to Pedro about it tomorrow. Since he told me about it, I'm sure he'll have a safe way for us to get there using a couple of the wagons."

"In this cold and wind?"

John sighed inwardly at Emil Crane's question. "At least it's not snowing," was his answer.

"How do you know that the Lopez' will come to town tomorrow?" Tim Scott wanted to know.

"I invited them to church when they were here earlier," he said. "They're Catholic, but I told them they would be welcome."

====

Sunday morning dawned clear and cold - but the wind, which had been partially responsible for Gene Overton's death, was gone. Just as the Reverend began the prayer, Pedro and Mariana rode into camp, and John waved for them to join him, Margaret and Kevin and Charles. With almost everyone wrapped in quilts and sitting around the campfire, Rev. Lee said a prayer and read the Bible text for the day before everyone joined in singing a hymn.

"Welcome home, brothers and sisters. Welcome to a new life, a life that we have only our Lord Jesus to be grateful to for giving us. While He used sinful, human hands to achieve His purpose: bringing us to this spot which He has prepared for our use to further His Kingdom, we should - we \*must\* always remember that it's only through His Divine Grace and Mercy that we are here at all, and give Him thanks for His provision... "

Once the service was dismissed, Mariana offered to help with Sunday dinner, while John and some of the men met with Pedro to ask him about the best way to get to Mesa City. "Will the Apaches allow us to get through?" Sam Baker wanted to know.

"That is no problem," Pedro assured him, reaching inside of the shirt he was wearing to pull out a leather cord, upon which a bead and feather ornament was attached. "This will give us safe passage through Cochise' territory. Mariana and I each wear one. It is a sign of our connection to the chief."

"How many wagons will we need to take?" Paul Grover wanted to know.

"That will depend upon how much lumber you are planning on buying. A town will take much lumber."

"We're going to start with the church building," John told his foreman. "We can use it to house the youngest among us until we are able to build homes -"

"And a hotel," Carl Collins said with a grin.

"I would say we should take at least two wagons - perhaps three, if that many can be spared."

"You can take mine," Slim announced. "I won't be needin' it."

"Why not, Slim?" Carl asked.

"I'm gonna be out lookin' for my plot of land," he said. "All I'll need is my bedroll and my tools and my donkey."

"We can clean my wagon out, too," Sean Hanrahan offered. "Most of what's in there is supplies that I'm sure the ladies will be glad to take off my hands."

"We have three wagons," Olaf declared. "With the small cabin that I will build, I won't need most of the things in my wagon."

"We'll find a safe place to put them, Olaf," John assured the man. "I remember your telling me that you made most of those pieces yourself. That kind of craftsmanship is difficult to find."

====

"Need some help?" Charles asked as Olivia dipped a bucket into the stream not far from the camp.

She turned and smiled. "No. I'm just getting some water ready to wash dishes after the meal," she explained. "I'll take this back and Lillian will come out to get the next bucket." As she started back toward the cooking fires, he joined her.

"Sharing the load," he nodded. "Good plan."

"And what are you doing?" she asked. "I thought that you'd be over there with the men making plans to get lumber for the church building."

"That's about finished," he told her. "They're deciding right now who's going - other than Mr. Lopez, of course."

"And you don't want to go?"

"I never get to go, haven't you noticed? John always wants me to stay with Margaret while \*he\* goes off on adventures."

"I'll sleep better knowing that you're here making sure everything's going as it should," Olivia told him.

"You're making fun of me," he accused, stopping.

Olivia stopped as well, frowning. "I meant it," she told him. As Lillian Hall ran up to them, slightly out of breath.

"There you are! We were beginning to think that you'd gotten lost again. Hello, Charles."

"Lillian," he nodded, but he was looking at Olivia.

"Come on," Lillian told the younger girl. "Let's get that water poured up so I can go get another bucket. At this rate, we won't get the water full and hot before we need it."

Charles stood there, a smile on his face as he watched them walk away until a hand fell on his shoulder and he looked up to see John. "Daydreaming?" John asked.

"I guess. So how many wagons and when are you leaving?" Charles asked.

"Three wagons. But I'm not going. You are - if you want to, that is."

Looking shocked, Charles said, "Of course I do! Why aren't you going?"

"I'll stay here with Margaret and the baby - and try to help get people settled as much as possible."

"You still feel responsible," Charles guessed.

"Right now, I \*am\* responsible. None of them would be staying here if I hadn't talked them into it."

"And offered them gold."

"Yeah. There are a lot of things that have to be done before we can even start building the church. I can get some of those things ready before you and the others get back with the lumber."

"Who else is going?"

"That will be announced after dinner - what I need you to do after dinner is get some of your friends to help you clean out Mr. Norton's wagon and remove the canvas to cover the contents for protection from the elements. Then Mr. Hanrahan's wagon. Think you can do that?"

"Sure! You said we were taking three wagons -"

"I think Slim Baker can take care of cleaning out his own wagon," John told him.

"Let me guess: he's going to look for his own gold claim."

====

Besides Charles and Pedro, those who had been chosen to go on the trip to Mesa City were Niles Bradford, due to the fact that his father had been a master carpenter and he had grown up in the trade; Sean Hanrahan; Olaf, because he, too, knew about building things; and Paul Grover, who planned to inquire about setting up freight service between the two towns.

"I'm counting on you to get them there and back safely, Pedro," John told the other man later that evening.

"You can depend on me, Mr. Donager," Pedro assured him.

John smiled at the formality. "How about you call me 'John'? We're going to be working together for a long time."

"As you wish - John." He smiled. "We should be back here no later than Saturday if all goes well."

"We'll be praying for you."

====

It was just after dawn the next morning- a warmer morning, with a slight south wind - when John pulled Charles aside while the wagons were being packed with the supplies for the trip to Mesa City and back. Handing him two small bags that contained the gold they would need, John said, "Guard these with your life, Charles. And remember: they're part of an inheritance that we brought with us."

"I'll remember."

"Good. Now, I want you to understand that - well, you're my representative on this trip - but Pedro's the one in charge. He's the one who will get you all there and back safely, so don't argue with him or question his decisions."

"I understand, John," Charles assured him, his expression serious. "Don't worry. I won't embarrass you."

"I didn't think that you would," John said. "But as I said last night, I have a responsibility to these people - to keep them safe. That includes you. Besides, Meg would never forgive me if anything happened to her little brother," he finished with a grin.

Charles grinned in return. "Don't worry. I'll be back."

"Now get over there and tell your sister and nephew goodbye. I think the wagons are about ready to pull out."

After speaking to Margaret, Charles went in search of Olivia. He found her feeding oats to some of the livestock. "Mr. Slim's donkey isn't here," she said. "I guess that means he's already gone to look for gold."

"Yeah. He said he was going to head south before sunrise," Charles said. "We're about to leave," he told her. "But I didn't want to go without saying goodbye - and that I hope you'll be able to sleep with John here instead of me."

She gave a deep sigh and smiled. "I'll manage somehow," she said. "Be careful," she added. "I'll be praying for you and the others to get back safely."

"Thank you. Rev. Lee has already said that they'll be holding prayer meetings while we're gone to pray for that."

"Then I know that God will hear the prayers and answer them," was her reply.

"Would you - walk back to the wagons with me?" Olivia nodded, joining him as he turned back toward camp. "It's hard to think that this will be a full-fledged town soon."

"It already is," she insisted. "We're here, aren't we?"

"Yes, but, we could all just move on -"

Olivia shook her head. "No. Mr. Donager is right: this is where we should be. Where God wants us to be. I can see the town," she told him, pointing to where the Lee's wagon was sitting. "The church will be there - and back toward the south will be the Carter's mercantile, and the Collins' cafe and hotel, and -"

"Charles!" John called, sounding more than a little frustrated. "There you are! We're waiting for you so that Rev. Lee can bless you all and the wagons."

"Sorry," Charles apologized before jumping up beside Pedro. "I needed to ask Olivia to do me a favor while we're gone."

John shook his head, then looked at the minister, who removed his black, flat brimmed cap. "Brothers and sisters, let us pray... "

====

Once the wagons disappeared into the distance, John realized that everyone seemed to be watching him. "While they're gone, we need to start preparing the spot where the church will be built, Then we need to move wagons to where families intend to place their businesses."

"And those of us who want to get land?" Tim Scott asked. "What about us?"

"Tomorrow, several of us can ride out and have a look around," John told him. "But right now, I think it's important for us to pray - and make things ready for the church. They'll need to start work on it so that it will be finished before it \*does\* decide to snow." He looked around. "So, anyone not at the prayer meeting can help with that. Get yourself a shovel or a hoe or cultivator and meet me back here."

As the crowd began to scatter, several going to get their tools and the rest headed toward where chairs were set up for the meeting, John called, "Mrs. Collins -"

She turned upon hearing her name. "Yes, Mr. Donager?"

"We're going to be needing coffee."

"I already have it on the fire," she told him. "And I'll have something for lunch as well."

"Forgive my doubting you," he said.

John went to the wagon and retrieved his shovel, returning to the spot where they had decided to build the church. Facing the south, he told the others who joined him, "In front of the church, running east and west, we'll build what we can call North Street. Then over there, to the east, heading south, will be East Street, then South Street, and over there, West Street. The town can grow from there, don't you think?"

"Sounds good," George Bradford agreed. "My Pa showed me how to measure and mark things like that - Might be a good idea to get that done before they get back, too."

"That's what we can do on Wednesday," John nodded. "I figure this to be the back corner of the church - George, why don't you mark off how much of this we'll need to prepare for building?"

====

"Talk to him, Lionel," Hortense Gamble said in a sharp tone as they approached John.

"Hortense, please."

"Is there a problem, Mr. Garrett?" John asked.

"The only problem we have is -" she began when John looked behind her.

"Forgive me, Mrs. Garrett," he said, "But I do believe that Mrs. Lee is trying to get your attention."

She turned to look. "I don't see her."

"She went behind the wagon - Why don't you go and see what she wants, and I'll discuss whatever the problem is with Mr. Garrett?" John suggested. Unwilling to ignore a potential summons from the pastor's wife, she left the two men standing there.

Lionel grinned. "Thank you."

"What's the problem?" John asked again.

"It's not a problem, really. I just wanted to let you know that - well, I know how to work with gold. Assaying it, creating coins and even small bars."

"You do?"

"Back east, I was a master jeweler," the man confided. "But it wasn't a challenge - and I wanted to work with the land, not precious gems and metals. So we came west. My wife, well, she's not convinced that she'll be happy as a farmer's wife, and insisted that I let you know -"

"I'm very glad that you did, Lionel," John said. "And I might just make use of your talents. I'll be needing someone to weigh up the gold. What I sent with Charles, I used a scale that Doc has for medicines."

"Just let me know."

"I'll do that. Thank you."

====

"Do you see them?" Charles asked Pedro, trying not to look to his right, where he'd seen several men on horseback on a rise.

"I saw them ten minutes ago," Pedro replied. "They are some of Cochise' warriors. As long as they remain where they are, we have reason to worry." In a louder voice, he told the others, "Leave your rifles where they are unless I say otherwise."

"What do they want?" Niles wondered aloud, clearly already worried.

"They're coming down," Olaf announced, and Pedro drew back on the reins, as did the other two drivers.

Pedro turned to watch as the five braves, one of them carrying a lance with feathers tied to it, rode up to the lead wagon. The one with the lance spoke in his native tongue, and Pedro replied in Apache as well. After he finished, he translated for the five men who were with him. "He wanted to know who you were, I told him that we were friends, and are going to Mesa City for supplies."

The Apache spoke again, this time gesturing with his hands. Pedro pulled the amulet out of his shirt and showed it to the young man, saying something about Cochise and then someone else.

Finally, the man turned and rode back the way he had come. The rest of the braves followed him, and five men gave audible sighs of relief. "What did he say, Pedro?" Paul wanted to know.

"Apparently Cochise has given his braves orders to kill any Mexicans they find on Apache land. At the moment, he is more concerned about Mexicans, not Americans. Once I told him who I was and that Mariana is with the rest of your friends, he rode away."

"Why are they killing Mexicans?" Arthur Hall asked.

"My government has been taking land that the Apaches have lived on for many, many years. And they are offering bounties to Mexicans for Apache scalps."

"That's terrible!" Charles said. "They're still up there on the hill," he told them.

"Standing watch as they have been ordered to do," Pedro nodded, setting the wagon back into motion. "They will not bother us again."

"I pray not," Olaf said. "My heart can't take another visit."

=====

Slim Baker knew that he'd gone too far when he saw the small adobe house and barn ahead of him. He was on Donager's land - well, all of it was still Donager's, he reminded himself with a cackle of humor, stopping to look around the area. He'd stopped every so often to look for gold, but so far, other than the area marked with John Donager's bandana, he had had no luck. Turning west, he headed toward a small valley in the foothills.

It wasn't much of a valley, really. More of a wide path alongside a small plateau. Studying the wall before him, Slim raised his pick axe and dug into it. As he pulled the axe free, something fell to the ground, and Slim bent down to pick it up.

"Daisy! I think we found it!" he told the donkey, who brayed as Slim grabbed a shovel from the animal's back and started to dig. There definitely *\*was\** gold here, he realized, and it seemed to increase in size and appearance the further he dug. "Woo-hoo!" he yelped, causing Daisy to side step and bray again, making it difficult for Slim to grab one of the empty bags. "Be still you flea-bitten nag! We'll gather up what we can, and then mark the mine as ours," he told the donkey. "We'll find Donager tomorrow and stake our claim. We found the Mother Lode!" he declared, stuffing bits of gold into the bag.

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"I know the place he is talking about," Mariana nodded after Slim told John which section of land that he wanted. "It is five miles to the northwest of the cabin where Pedro and I have been living."

John nodded. "How much of the land do you want, Slim?"

"Only that mesa and the valley that runs along the east side," Slim said.

"Mariana," Margaret said, having overheard the conversation. "Would you take the baby, please so that I can get pen and paper to write this down?"

"Of course," Mariana nodded, moving to take Kevin from her as Margaret disappeared toward the wagon, only to return a few minutes later, pen, ink and paper in hand.

Looking at John, she told him, "I think we might want to consider bringing a small writing desk out of the wagon to use for doing this."

"I'll find something," John offered.

But Leon Carter joined them to hold out a flat piece of wood. "Here. It's the writing board I plan to use at the Mercantile."

"Thank you," John said, giving the smooth-finished board to his wife. "There you go, Meg."

Margaret smiled and began to write. "On this date, I, Mr. John Donager transfer control of the agreed upon section of land to -" she looked up, the pen hovering above the paper. "What's your first name, Mr. Baker?"

"Just use Slim. It's what I go by now."

She nodded. "To Mr. Slim Baker, for the sum of - ten dollars." She glanced at Slim before writing, and when he nodded, she continued writing. "If, in the future, Mr. Slim Baker or his heirs abandon said property, control will revert back to Mr. John Donager or his heirs. Similarly, should Mr. Baker or his heirs decide to sell the property, it is understood and accepted that the Donager family will have the first option to purchase said property for fair market value. Signed this date and witnessed by -" she looked up at John again. "We need two witnesses, John."

"Mariana, would you go and ask Dr. Hawkins and Rev. Lee to join us, please?"

"Right away," she said, heading across the camp with baby Kevin still in her arms. Since Rev. Lee was still holding a prayer meeting, she found the doctor and quickly explained that he was needed.

Doc nodded, moving over to touch the minister on the shoulder and whisper into his ear. Matthew glanced toward John, Margaret, and Slim were and nodded, stepping away silently.

Margaret took the opportunity to write a second copy of the document, just finishing it as the two men joined the group. They watched as John and Slim signed the papers, then signed their own names, dating the deeds.

John looked at Slim. "Just one more thing to be done," he said.

Slim's grin widened into a full smile as he took the canvas sack out of the donkey's pack and opened it. Pouring some of the contents into his hand, he concentrated on selecting one piece of the gold. "This should cover it."

"More than, I think," John said, taking the nugget and weighing it in his hand while some of the others came over to look as well. Thank you.

Waving the pages to dry the ink, Margaret finally handed one copy out to Slim. "Don't lose it, Mr. Baker," she admonished.

"Tell you what," he replied. "Would you mind keeping it for me, Reverend? I don't plan on building a cabin right now -"

"I'll be glad to keep it for you," Matthew confirmed. "Where will you live? If we get snow -"

"I can stay in the wagon until I get a hole dug and shored up into the mine," he answered. "Then I'll just live in the mine."

Leon chuckled at the man's statement. "You go right ahead, Slim. Makes sense, I guess, since you're by yourself. John - Some of us are getting ready to move our wagons - but I thought maybe those of us planning on opening businesses should get together and discuss exactly where -"

"Sounds like a good idea," John agreed. "Why don't you go get them over here and we can discuss it now?"

"I suppose I should be here for that conversation," Doc observed, "since I'll be needing office space in town."

"And I'm going back over to the prayer meeting," Matthew told them.

"Thank you, Matthew," John said, shaking his hand before turning to Doc. "And thank you, Mark."

"No need. Glad to be of service," he said, turning to examine the area of East Street while he and John waited for the rest of the town's soon-to-be merchants to arrive.

They chose to walk down what would become East Street. "I'm sure we'll change the name," John commented as they walked. "Here's what I see. He pointed to the area to their right. "I see the Livery Stable here - Do you think that your pa will agree, George?"

"He said that he wanted to be where people come into town and leave town," the young man confirmed. "Can't get any closer to that than right here."

John moved north. "And Mr. Lawrence, would you be amenable to here, beside the stable?"

"Sounds good to me."

"And next to that, the hotel, and the cafe next to the north... "

At the end of the walk, everyone left to hitch up teams and move the wagons, leaving the rest of the wagons still encamped in front of where the church was going to be built, and everyone gathered to say a prayer for the still unnamed town and its citizens.

"We need a name," Mrs. Scott stated.

"Well, I still like the idea of Donager City," Emil insisted, and several people nodded their agreement.

"I don't," John said in a firm tone. "As I said, just because the town is on donated Donager land doesn't mean that it's my town. It's only through the Good Lord's Providence that we're here at all." He paused, considering what he'd just said. "How about Providence?"

"I think it should be put to a vote," Alice Hawkins said. "With \*everyone\* voting. Well, everyone over the age of majority," she corrected as the sounds of children laughing and playing nearby swelled into the conversation.

"You're saying that you women should have a vote?" Tim Scott questioned, sounding not at all sure of the idea.

"Why not?" Rebecca Lee asked. "We're going to be living here, aren't we? Shouldn't we have a say in what happens?"

All eyes turned to John, who shrugged. "Looks like we'll have to have \*two\* votes," he told them. "The first one to find out \*who\* will vote in the second."

It was Margaret who asked the next question. "And just \*who\* will be voting in the first one?" she wanted to know.

"Everyone," he assured her. "As soon as the others return, we'll vote - twice."

Looking down what he visualized to be the main street of the town, John smiled as he stood there, looking at the wagons parked where businesses would someday be located. "What are you looking at?" Margaret asked, taking his hand in hers.

John put his arm across her shoulders and nodded toward the wagons. "Just looking around the town," he told her. "We're building something here, Meg. Something important. Something that will be here long after both of us are gone -" he touched the baby's cheek. "Some for him and his children, and \*their\* children. I can't wait to get started building the ranch."

"Well, that's already started, thanks to Pedro and Mariana. I'm not sure that we'll ever be able to really thank them for all that they're doing."

"We'll find a way," he promised.

====

As the three wagons rolled into Mesa City, several people stopped and stared. "You'd think they've never seen a wagon before," Charles told Pedro, who nodded.

"It's not the wagons, Charles," he said. "They've never seen you and your friends. These days, strangers make them nervous." He returned a wave from one of the townspeople before bringing his wagon to a halt before the general store to smile at the man standing on the dusty steps. "Hello, Mr. Garrity."

"Mr. Lopez," Garrity replied. "Looks like you've picked up some new friends since your last visit."

"Yes. These are some friends."

"Where is Mrs. Lopez?" the storekeeper asked.

"With more friends. We need to buy lumber and nails -"

"I have both. How much do you need?" Niles answered the question, and Mr. Garrity gave a low whistle. "That's a lot of wood, Mr-?"

"Niles Bradford," he answered.

"Mr. Bradford," Garrity repeated. "That's gonna just about clean me out. Why do you need that much lumber?"

"We are building a town," was Pedro's answer.

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The men went into the store, where Mr. Garrity poured them some hot coffee that he kept on the stove for customers. "So you're building a town," he said, shaking his head. "Where?"

"In that valley north of us," Pedro said. "Let me introduce you to my friends. You're already met Mr. Bradford. Then there is Mr. Olaf Norton, Mr. Paul Grover, Mr. Sean Hanrahan, and then Mr. Charles Davis."

"Excuse me," Paul said, "Can you tell me where the freight office might be?"

"Down the street at the corner. You can't miss it. It's a big building."

"Thank you. Com'on, Sean," he said to the Irishman. During the trip to Mesa City, Paul had offered the man a job if he wanted one, and Sean had accepted the offer.

Once the two were gone, Garrity frowned. "Why do you need a freight company when you have three wagons?"

"Mr. Grover is planning on starting a freight-hauling concern when we get the town started," Niles said.

"I'll have to admit to being a little confused," Garrity sighed. "How on earth did you end up over in that valley?"

"It all began six months ago, when we met John Donager and he convinced twenty families to journey west in a wagon train," Niles began to explain...

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"And that's the story," Niles finished, having left out any mention of the gold that John had found to the south of the valley.

"All because this Donager asked you to stay instead of trying to go on to California. John Donager must be a remarkable man," was his comment.

"He is, Mr. Garrity," Pedro insisted. "A big man. He has much -" he paused, searching for the right word. "Presence. Very much a man who knows what he wants and will fight to keep it once it is his. He has a strong faith in God."

"As we all do," Olaf added. "That's why the first building in town will be the church."

"I'm looking forward to meeting the man," Garrity told them.

"Charles' sister is married to John Donager," Niles stated.

"John asked me to come along as his representative, Mr. Garrity," Charles said.

"This is a fascinating story - I know that you probably won't have any problems with the Apache since Mr. Lopez and his wife are there - but what are you going to do when the Mexican government realizes that you're there and come in looking to take over unless you're willing to pay their 'tribute'?"

"The Mexican government does not come onto Apache land - and, as you said, my wife and I will still be there, it is \*still\* Apache land."

Garrity shook his head. "You could be right, I guess. I remember hearing stories that there was a huge cache of gold in that valley, just waiting for someone to find it - I think that would be the only thing that would cause the Mexican's to try to take the land from Cochise and his people."

"Pedro told us about that legend, Mr. Garrity. We don't intend to look for any gold," Charles said. It was the truth. The gold had already been found, and none of the six men who had come into Mesa City had any reason to look for more.

"Okay, well, before I let you men load that lumber those wagons, I need to know how you intend to pay for it?"

Charles smiled. "We don't have to look for gold, because we brought our own," he said, holding up a pouch. "It's an inheritance from John's father."

Garrity looked unconvinced, but when Charles opened the pouch to pour some of the gold onto the counter, the man quickly nodded and told the men, "Take the wagons into the alley beside the store. I keep the wood back there. I'll get your bill toted - what else can I get for you?"

====

The last of the lumber was being put into the wagons when Paul and Sean returned. "Came back to help," Paul said.

"It's all done," Niles told him. "But thank you anyway. What did you find out?"

"The owner of the stage and freight office here has been looking for a stop going east. So I think we'll work together. Might even get a stage through at least once a week."

"That's \*if\* th'Mexicans don't shut us all down, now," Sean added.

"We got the same story about the Mexican government - but were told that since we're going to technically be on Apache land, we'll be some of the last to feel it."

"And \*I\* say," Olaf began, joining them, "that the good Lord knew precisely what he was doing by sending us into that valley."

"Anyone else hungry?" Charles asked. When the older men laughed, he grinned. "What's wrong with my wanting a hot, homecooked meal? I'm not complaining about Mr. Hanrahan's beans and jerky, but -"

Niles put an arm across the young man's shoulder's. "I agree. I think I saw a cafe across the road from the general store."

"They have good food there," Pedro confirmed.

"Fine! We can go there and have supper before starting back home," Niles decided.

Charles stopped, looking at him. "Do you really think about it as home, Mr. Bradford?"

Niles considered the question, and the fact that he had said the word. Finally, he nodded. "Yes. Yes, I do. Even if we don't know what to call that home," he added with a chuckle.

"First thing I'm going to do when we get back is tell John Donager that we need to vote on a name for our new town," Arthur said.

"Let's go have supper," Niles told them.

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"I'm getting writer's cramp," Margaret complained as she finished yet another land contract - this one with Tim and Susan Scott for a hundred acres of land on the southern border of the property.

John took her hand and brought it to his lips, kissing each knuckle. "That should be the last one. All of the men with Charles and Pedro will be living in town, so they won't need contracts. So your fingers can rest."

"I can't wait to move out to where we'll be living," she told him. "Do you realize that I still haven't \*seen\* it?"

"Without a buggy to use, we'd have to take the wagon, and I'd rather wait until the others get back, but -"

"Is there a problem, John?" she asked him.

"Problem? Why would you ask that?"

"You keep making excuses about why you can't take me down there. It's been four days -"

"We'll go down there on Sunday," he assured her. "The cabin's small - and I don't want to displace Mariana and Pedro. Other than the barn, there's no shelter - other than the wagon."

She smiled, turning her hand into his. "I don't care - as long as we're together, I don't care where we live."

John smiled. "I just don't want you to be - disappointed when you see the cabin and barn."

"John Donager, after spending the last six months in this wagon, I think a barn would feel like a mansion." She leaned in to give him a kiss, which ended as the supper bell began to ring. Resting her forehead against his, "I'm looking forward as well to being alone with you. Between Charles and now the baby, it seems like it's been forever since we've -" she broke off, feeling her cheeks grow warm with embarrassment.

John gave her another kiss. "You're shameless, Meg," he teased. "But I feel the same way."

"We'd better join the others before someone comes looking for us," she told him. "Let me get Kevin."

====

By Friday afternoon, everyone in the emerging town kept looking toward the west, watching for the wagons. Most of the town were seated at the prayer meeting, heads bowed as Rev. Lee prayed yet again for the safe return of the six men who had gone out.

But Artie Hall was standing in front of his father's wagon, his eyes scanning the distant horizon. Seeing something move, he waited a moment before finally calling out. "Here they come!" he yelled.

Calls of "They're back!" and then "Praise the Lord" flew through those gathered, and Rev. Lee's prayer became one of thanksgiving as he dismissed the service and joined John and Doc to welcome the men home.

Wives and children greeted husbands and fathers; Doc and Rev. Lee welcomed Olaf and Sean. "You made good time," John told them, and Pedro, his arm around Mariana, nodded.

"Yes, we did. It is good to be home."

"We got all of the lumber they had," Niles told everyone. "Should be enough to finish the church, with some left over for other projects." He surveyed the prepared plot of earth. "Looks like you were busy here."

"We did what we could," John agreed. "George was a big help getting it ready. "He helped lay out the streets as well."

Niles smiled at his son with pride. "It's starting to look like an actual town," was his comment.

"Speaking of the town," Paul Grover said, "We need to settle on a name for ours. It wasn't easy to convince anyone in Mesa City that we were building a town when we couldn't even tell them the name of said town."

"I told 'em that we should've told 'em the name was Donager City," Sean said with a smile. "But the rest insisted that I wait."

"Good for them," John said. "We discussed that very thing while you were gone. But that led to a discussion about \*who\* would be voting on the name."

"What do you mean?" Olaf asked, frowning.

Before John could answer, Mrs. Lee spoke up. "He means, Mr. Norton, that some of us think that if a person is over the age of majority, they should be able to cast a vote. Men \*and\* women."

"We're going to be living here, too," Mirabelle Hall stated.

John shrugged. "So we're going to hold a vote first to establish who can vote, and after that, we'll vote on the town's name."

"I still like the idea of Donager City," Joe Baker insisted.

Shaking his head, John told them, "And I still \*don't\* like it. We need something that tells people why we're here. About the things we've gone through on this journey. Something that establishes that it was by God's Providence that most of us made it to this place."

"I thought we decided to call it \*Providence\*?" Olivia suggested.

"That's a good idea," John nodded. "Thank you, Olivia. Does anyone else have a suggestion for a name?" When no one spoke, he said, "Okay, then. To make it fair, we'll vote for either Providence or Donager City - Tomorrow will be election day. Anyone who would like to help with making the ballots, see Mrs. Donager." He smiled as Margaret opened and closed her right hand several times, sighing. He was relieved to see several of the other wives approach her.

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"You're only fifteen," Charles muttered. "You can't vote. They're voting about the women because they live here, too. Well, \*I'm\* going to live here, but I \*still\* can't vote. Six more years, Charles," he continued muttering as he saddled the horse.

"Where are you going?"

He recognized Olivia's voice and smiled, but didn't turn around. "For a ride."

"That still doesn't tell me \*where\* you're going."

"Figured I'd head south away," he told her. "Look around. We'll be moving down there this week, according to what John told me."

Olivia nodded, coming around so she could see his face while they talked. "We'll be moving to our farm, too," she said. "It's to the southeast of Donager Ranch."

"Yeah, I looked at the map that Pedro made up, showing where everyone's going. Sam chose land to the east of Mr. Scott's place. He needs to watch out - I think Mr. Scott's going to be wanting to try and expand his boundaries."

"He can't - not without Mr. Donager's agreement, since if Sam were to sell, he'd have to sell it back to Mr. Donager, not Mr. Scott."

"We'll see." He tightened the cinch, dropping the stirrup.

"You're not going to wait and find out how the voting went?" she asked.

"Nope. Don't care. It won't make any difference to me who gets to vote on what to call the place. I don't have a say in any of it."

"That's what you were saying when I walked up," she realized. "Sorry, I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but you didn't hear me, and I didn't want to interrupt what sounded like a very serious conversation with yourself."

Charles finally turned to look at her, still smiling. "It was." He swung up into the saddle, looking down at her.

"Will you be gone long?" she wanted to know. "So I can tell your sister if she asks."

"An hour or so. With all the excitement going on, I doubt she'll even miss me."

"Be careful," Olivia told him, stepping back as he turned the horse to ride out past the line of wagons.

====

"Who's going to be counting the ballots?" Carl Collins asked as he took the ballot from John.

"Rev. Lee and Mrs. Carter will be doing the counting," John told him.

Carl nodded, waiting for his wife Betsy to take her ballot before they moved away to mark them. Once done, the ballots were folded and placed into an empty cook-pot. One by one, ballots were handed out.

It seemed like forever before the last ballot was cast. John called, "Anyone who hasn't voted?" He remembered the conversation with Charles the previous evening and added, "Anyone who's over 21, of course," as he looked around for his brother-in-law. "Okay. Mrs. Carter, Reverend - it's in your hands now."

As they began to call the votes, Margaret made marks on the paper before her. "Men only," Nedra Carter read.

"Men and women," Matthew Lee called.

Reaching into the pot a few minutes later, Mrs. Carter felt around. "That was it," she announced.

Margaret held the sheet out for John to read. "Thirty-eight votes were cast. The results: Men only: Seven votes. Men and women: Thirty-one votes."

It was easy to see who those seven that had wanted to keep the women from voting, but no one made an issue of it as John spoke again. "Now, we'll vote on what we're going to call our little community. Providence or -" he sighed before continuing, "Donager City. Let's line up and go again."

Margaret had already placed the ballots before her on the table, and began handing them out. After everyone was through the line, she marked her own ballot and handed one to John to mark as well.

Once again, the ballots were counted and John just barely managed to keep his smile at bay as he read the results: "Fourteen votes were cast for Donager City," he said. "Twenty four for Providence. Ladies and gentlemen: Welcome to Providence."

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Charles found the gold mine that John had marked that first day, picking up a few small nuggets to take back to town, then continued to the south-southwest as John had said to. The adobe cabin and barn were there in the distance, and he rode closer to look them over. The cabin was small - Pedro had confirmed that it only had one bedroom - that he had been getting ready to add a second one but hadn't done so. But the rooms were large, from what he could tell.

The barn wasn't much bigger, and the interior was dappled with sunlight coming through the walls between the timber that had been used to build it. He stopped at the well between the house and barn to draw a drink of the cool water, pouring some of it over his head before giving the rest to the horse.

Once the animal was finished drinking, he got back in the saddle and turned his head toward Providence. Or Donager City. Charles was betting that it would be the latter.

====

Artie and some of other boys met him as he returned to town. "There you are! You missed all the excitement!" Artie declared.

"Excitement?" he questioned, sliding out of the saddle and turning his attention to unfastening the cinch.

"The vote!" Philip said.

"Was there a fight over who voted?" Charles asked.

"What?"

"He's still pouting about not being allowed to vote," George said.

"I'm *\*not\** pouting!" Charles said, turning to confront the older boy. "So how many votes did Donager City win by?" he wanted to know as he turned back to grab the saddle from the animal's back, angry that George had been right.

"It *\*lost\** by ten votes!" Artie informed him.

"You're telling me that they voted to name the place Providence?"

"Yeah!"

"And exactly *\*who\** got to vote?"

"Everyone!" Philip said.

Charles' eyes narrowed as he turned around. "Everyone?" he repeated.

"Everyone over twenty-one," Philip confirmed. "Men *\*and\** women."

"Wow. Never thought *\*that\** would happen," Charles said. "How close was it?"

"Only seven people voted for only the men," Artie told him. "Hey, guess what else I heard?"

Charles sighed, used to his friend's habit of quickly changing a subject without warning. "What?"

"Mrs. Lee told my ma that she's going to start a school after the church is built -"

"School?"

Philip nodded. "Only two days a week right now, since most of us will be needed by our families to get things set up, but by next fall, she's going to have the school ready to go five days a week. And \*she's\* going to be our teacher."

"Mrs. Lee?"

"Uh huh," George told them. "That's what she had planned on doing when they got to California. It won't affect me, since I'm already 18, but the three of you -"

"I'll be working on the ranch," Charles told them. "I doubt John will be able to spare me to go to school -"

"You wanna bet?" Artie challenged him.

Philip looked horrified. "Artie! Ma will take you to the woodshed if she finds out -"

"She won't if you don't tell her, little brother," Artie told him.

"What's the bet?" Charles asked, ignoring the bickering between the brothers.

"If your brother in law tells you that you have to go to school, you pay me - five dollars -"

"Artie!"

Charles considered the bet for a half-second before he shook his head. "I'm not going to bet."

"Why not?" Artie challenged him. "Chicken?"

Shrugging, Charles sighed. "No. I just know you're right. John will insist that I go to school if it's open. And I really \*should\* go. I mean, how would it look if I don't? The younger kids would point to me and ask why \*they\* had to go if I didn't." He grinned. "Besides, it's \*got\* to be better than the school my father sent me to back in New York. All boys, and we had to wear dark coats all the time." He shuddered at the memory.

George laughed. "I bet you ducked out of most of your classes, didn't you?"

"How'd you guess?" was Charles response. "Even forged the old man's name to a few notes about that from the headmaster. Mr. Feeny. Horrible little man who loved to slap a rod across a boy's legs for breaking the rules."

Philip's eyes widened in shocked surprise. "Really? That's terrible."

Artie laughed, messing up his younger brother's hair. "You wouldn't know anything about that, Phil. But only because you've always been the teacher's pet," he teased. "Com'on it's almost supper time, and we need to get cleaned up."

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"So," Charles asked during supper, "how long will it take to finish the school - I mean, the church?"

The adults all smiled at the question, as the children gave a collective groan. Niles Bradford answered the question. "We should have the building up and ready to use for whatever purposes we need it - as well as services - by the end of the week. That's even without those men who are going to be moving away from town to their own properties."

John paused as he passed a bowl of beans along. "I'm sure we could stay in town, Niles, if it would help."

But Niles shook his head, glancing at Carl Collins and Olaf Norton and others. "Those of us who will be living in town talked it over, John, and decided that we can handle it."

"Are you sure?" John questioned.

"Take your family and get things going out there on that ranch," Doc said. "We'll manage without you. Somehow."

John joined in the teasing laughter. "\*We\*, Doc?" was his reply. "And what happens if you hit your thumb with a hammer?"

"Don't worry, John," Arthur said. "He's just going to be carrying lumber. No hammers or saws. Or ladders."

"Yeah," Leon Carter said, "we \*don't\* need him to break his leg."

"I'll have you gentlemen know that my father was a master carpenter," Doc informed them. "But if you don't really want any help -"

"We do. But we need to make sure the only doctor for two hundred miles doesn't get himself hurt," Arthur pointed out.

====

Bright and early on Monday morning, six wagons pulled out of Providence. One turned to the north, taking Jack Cooper to the land which he had chosen.

The other five went south, two veering off more to the east. John lead the way south. As he pulled his wagon to the right, Tim Scott and Sam Longdon continued on, finally separating quickly. Charles returned Olivia's waves until he could no longer see her, then turned to follow Pedro and Mariana along the little-used trail toward the cabin and barn.

He looked around and realized something that struck him as odd. "Pedro!"

The man stopped his horse and turned to look at him. "Yes?"

Charles dismounted, squatting to look at the ground. "How come I see tracks back there, but there aren't any here?"

"The ground here is harder than there. There are strips of this all around the area. It is very difficult to follow tracks for that reason. All a rider must do is enter what I call the 'flat' and go east or west before continuing in the direction you were heading."

John had continued on, with Mariana riding her horse alongside the wagon. As they came up on the first view of the house and barn, he turned to look at Margaret. "That's the center of the ranch, Meg," he told her, watching her reaction as she surveyed the view.

"I think I can understand why you fell in love with this place, John," she told him, and John took a breath, only then realizing that he'd been holding it. "There's a rugged beauty in the mesquite and patch-work of the landscape." She pointed to the mountains to the west. "I love the view of the mountains. When we build our house, I'd like to have it face that view."

"I'll see what I can do," he promised, snapping the reins to start the team moving again as Charles and Pedro joined them.

They entered the compound, and Margaret, holding baby Kevin, gasped. "John!"

There, in front of the well, an Indian lance was stuck into the ground, its' feather fluttering in the light breeze. John jumped off of the wagon, grabbing the lance and pulling it out. Looking at Mariana and Pedro, he asked, "Is this -?"

"It is an Apache chief's lance," Mariana confirmed. "It is an invitation for you to return it to its owner."

"Cochise?" he asked.

"Yes. It's his."

"It wasn't there when I was here on Saturday," Charles said. "I'd have seen it."

John examined the ground around the well. "It was a single rider, I think."

"It was Cochise," Pedro told him. "A chief's lance can only be held by a chief. He expects you to return it to him personally."

"But I'm not a -"

"Whether you choose to admit it or not, you are the chief of these people who came with you," Mariana explained. "He wishes to meet with you."

"Can you arrange that, Mariana?"

"I do not think that it will be necessary. No doubt he is watching from the mountains."

Charles was helping Margaret and the baby out of the wagon, and turned to survey the same mountains that his sister had spoken of just minutes earlier. "I don't see them,"

"You won't - until they wish to be seen. When you are ready," she told John, "lift the lance flat above your head with one arm, as high as you can."

He glanced at Margaret, who looked slightly terrified, and smiled as he lifted the lance with more than a hint of defiance.

"You can lower it," Mariana said, scanning the mountains. "He is on his way."

"Charles," John said, "Take your sister into the house -"

"No," Margaret insisted, refusing to move as Charles reached out to take her arm. "I'm staying here."

"Stay close to her, Charles," John said as he finally saw a black and white pony flanked on either side by at least ten riders.

Without turning, Mariana told John, "Now, hold the lance in both hands, the left on top, the right on the bottom. She held out her hands to show him what she meant, and John complied, watching as the Apache chief approached the compound. The others remained on their horses as he slid to the ground and stepped over to Mariana, speaking to her in their language before moving to stand before John.

"You are John Donager?"

"I am," John replied, hiding his surprise that the man spoke English.

"I am Cochise, Chief of the Chiricahua Apache. So you are the man who casts the big shadow over this land." He turned to look at Margaret and Charles. "And who is this?"

"My wife, Margaret and our son, Kevin. And her brother, Charles Davis."

Cochise dropped gracefully to the ground, sitting cross-legged. Mariana nodded, and John did the same - still holding onto the lance. Now on equal ground, the chief extended his hands toward the lance. "I will take my lance now," he said.

John half smiled as he held it out - but didn't relinquish his hold even after Cochise' fingers closed around the wooden shaft. "Do you think that you can hold onto it this time?" he asked.

For a second, he almost regretted the comment. But when Cochise returned the smile, John relaxed and released the lance as the chief said, "Until one comes who deserves it more." He lay the lance across his lap. "You have many lives under your shadow, John Donager. Do you think that you can protect all of them?"

"From you and your braves?" John questioned.

Cochise shook his head. "I have given my word to my cousin that those on this land will remain untouched as long as she and her husband are also here."

"And they will be, for as long as they want to stay," John promised.

"There are others who would take this land - and the golden rocks it holds. If the Mexicans hear about that, they will not hesitate to destroy everyone here."

"Those with me have given their word not to allow others to know about the golden rocks."

"But with so many people. The Mexicans will notice and come to investigate."

"We can take care of ourselves," John said. "The question I have is - can we count on your help if it happens? If they \*do\* come?"

"If you need the Apache to fight for you, then you are not strong enough to keep the land." Cochise's statement was firm.

"I did not ask that the Apache fight \*for\* us, but \*with\* us. Tell you what, Chief - once I have had a chance to gather a herd of cattle, I will give you twenty head a month - and two milks cows for your children. You can run them on this land - mine will carry my brand." He drew a D and enclosed it inside a diamond shape.

"Thirty head," Cochise countered.

"Twenty-five."

"Twenty-five," was the reply, and both men laughed as Cochise grasped John's wrist with his fingers. John returned the clasp. "And if the Mexican dogs attack, we will fight beside you against them." He picked up the lance again. "A chief should have a lance," he said, holding it out. "As long as you keep it, there will be peace between you and me."

John drew a deep breath of gratitude as he accepted the lance. "Thank you, my friend."

====

"I don't want to displace you and Mariana, Pedro," John insisted as his foreman carried a chair out of the cabin. "This is your house -"

"No, we did not build it," Pedro told him. "The old man who lived here before us, he built it."

Mariana nodded in agreement. "We have only been using it until someone else needed it. We are okay with living out in the barn until we build another house. We will put bales of hay against the walls to keep out the cold - it will be good, you will see."

"What about me?" Charles asked, coming back into the cabin with the cradle that he had bought for Kevin during the visit to Mesa City.

"You can sleep in the front room," John told him, putting the chief's lance on the mantle above the fireplace. "The sofa's big enough to sleep comfortably."

"Or -" Margaret said, pushing aside a folding screen that she had placed in a corner of the large room to reveal that bed that Charles had used back in Missouri. "I think this will be more comfortable, don't you?"

"Thank you, Margaret. Doesn't really matter, though. I'll probably be tired from working cattle all day," Charles nodded.

"Well, I was planning on putting you to work digging for the first few days, at least. Pedro and I can handle gathering the cattle -" John informed him.

"Digging what?"

"Gold, of course." John grinned as Charles' eyes widened.

"You trust me to dig the gold?"

"Is there any reason why I shouldn't?" he asked. "Besides, some of it's yours, remember?"

"Mine? But I'm not one of the -"

John placed a hand on the young man's shoulder. "You're part of this family. And that means part of that gold is yours."

"How much?"

John laughed. "We can discuss that later. Right now, let's get things into the cabin and help Pedro and Mariana get their things into the barn, hmm?"

=====

John was standing on the front porch of the cabin, watching as the sun dropped behind the mountains. "Brrr," Margaret said as she joined him, pulling her coat tighter. "Once that sun's gone, it gets cold, doesn't it?"

"There are clouds up to the northwest," he told her, putting his arms around her. "It'll likely be colder during the day tomorrow." Looking down at her, he said, "Still happy?" he asked.

"Blissfully so," she confirmed.

"We're home, Meg," he told her. "This summer, we'll build another, bigger house with space for everyone. And a bigger barn. Pedro mentioned that when we do have to hire more men, we'll need a bunkhouse for them to sleep in. I know that the last six months have seemed like a hard row - but now the \*real\* work begins. It's not easy to build a dream."

She turned in his arms. "But it's not just your dream, John," she reminded him. "It's the Collins', and the Carters, the Lees and Doc's. Every one of those families have a dream that's tied to yours."

"I know. But don't you see, Meg? If I can make my - our," he amended, "-dream of a magnificent ranch come true, then their dreams will come true as well. It won't be easy - but I trust that God will let it happen."

"I love you, John Donager," Margaret said.

John lowered his head and kissed her. "I love you," he told her as the last of the light faded into black. "Now, I think we need to get to bed. If we're going to build that dream, we need to rest."

The End.