

The Donager Saga:
Beginnings
By
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Episode 1:
Westward, Ho!

On a dusty street on the edge of Independence, Missouri, a man led his horse into a small blacksmith shop to ask, "Can you get that left front shoe replaced for me? I was on my way out of town when she threw it. I have to get home."

"Sure thing," Myron Talbert said as he worked the bellows at the fire. "Johnny!" he called out, turning back to what he'd been doing.

The tall, red-headed young man came from the back of the smithy, wiping his hands on a rag. "Yes sir, Mr. Talbert?"

"Mr. Connors needs a shoe for that roan - left front. He's in a hurry."

John Donager examined the left hoof of the roan mare before going to find a shoe and nails. "Won't take two shakes, Mr. Connors," he said as he went to work.

As Mr. Connors paid for the shoe and led the animal out of the stable, Mr. Talbert shook his head. "Gonna miss you when you leave, Johnny. You sure that you're going to leave with that wagon train next week?"

"Very sure, Mr. Talbert," Johnny said with a grin. "Our plans are all made, most of our belongings are already in the wagon."

"Still wish you'd wait for another train," Talbert said, shaking his head. "Taking a chance on a wagon master that no one's really heard of - especially since you'll be risking getting caught in cold weather starting out so late in the year. And that many wagons -"

"Twenty wagons - we all signed the contract with Mr. Overton," Johnny pointed out. "He'll get us through."

"Well, I'm still going to miss having you around - Can I get you to help me with this?"

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"I missed you," Meg Donager said as Johnny returned home.

"Well, you'll be seeing a lot of me for the next six months," he reminded her, pulling her close, finally noticing her worried expression.

"If we go," she said, giving him an uncertain look as she moved away toward the bedroom door.

"Meg, are you saying that you've changed your mind about going west? About all of our plans for starting a ranch -"

"No, of course not. But we might have to wait -"

"We can't wait," he insisted. "We've already paid Mr. Overton as agreed. He said there were no refunds -"

The bedroom door opened, and a young man came out. "It's my fault, John," he said.

"Charles!" John exclaimed, looking from the fourteen year old boy to his sister and back. "What are you doing here?"

"He ran away from Father," Meg told him.

"I couldn't stay there, not without Margaret," Charles explained. "Father - Father's impossible to live with. He's furious that Margaret married you and that you left New York. That's all he talked about day and night. I finally just couldn't stand to listen to the horrible things that he kept saying, so I left."

"How did you get here? It's a long trip from New York -," John pointed out.

Charles grinned and lifted his shoulders. "I just told people that I was an orphan, coming to join my sister and her husband here. It was only half a lie. Might be true, though. I know Father said that he was going to disinherit Margaret, and after the note I left him, he'll probably do the same thing to me."

"So you *did* leave a note?" Charles asked. "You didn't just run off?"

"I thought about it. But I figured that if I didn't leave one, he'd be more likely to send someone to bring me back. After the things I said in that note, I doubt he'll ever want to see me again." He grinned again. "I want to help you build that ranch. I can ride, and shoot, and -"

Johnny sighed, running a hand through his hair. "You're crazy, you know that?"

"I don't know. I think maybe I'm doing what I was meant to do. I never wanted to work as a banker like Father. That's all he lives for. You know that. I want to enjoy life. To do what *I* want to do."

"I do think that I should send Father a telegram, letting him know that Charles got here safely," Margaret announced as she finished setting the supper table. "So he won't worry."

"He won't care," Charles told her.

"I'll have to talk to Mr. Overton tomorrow morning," Johnny said. "Find out if adding another person will change what we owe him."

"If you need more money, I can help with that," Charles said. "Just a minute. I have to get something from my valise."

As he disappeared into the bedroom again, Margaret spoke softly. "That's all he had when he knocked on the door," she told her husband. "A valise."

Johnny sighed again as Charles returned with a small wooden box, and Margaret gasped. "Charles! Is that -?"

"Your jewel box," he confirmed, opening it to reveal the glittering contents. He picked up an emerald and diamond necklace. "So pretty, isn't it?"

"Most of that belonged to Mother," Margaret pointed out. "Why did you -?"

"Father gave it to you after she died, didn't he? So it was yours to take. I was surprised when I found the box in your room."

"I told her to leave it," Johnny answered. "That we didn't need to build our future on the past."

"We have to send it back," Margaret insisted, taking the box from her younger brother. "Father might not send anyone to get me - or you, but I can see him accusing us of stealing these things -"

"But they're **yours**!" Charles declared. "How could he say you stole them?"

"It's not worth it, Charles," Johnny said quietly, placing a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Your sister is right. And if they are **hers** as you insist, it's her choice, isn't it?"

He took a deep breath. "I guess so."

Margaret closed the box. "I'll write a note for Father, telling him what happened, and send it back to him in New York tomorrow."

"What about the cost for me to join the wagon train?" Charles asked.

"We'll be fine," Johnny assured him, watching Margaret put the jewel box on the fireplace mantle. "I had put money back before we left New York - and I've made decent money this year working at the blacksmith/livery stable. We'll manage."

"Supper's ready," Margaret informed her husband and brother. "And if you don't eat now, it will be cold."

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"How many families did you say were going?" Charles asked as he walked alongside John the next morning.

"Twenty wagons are scheduled to leave here next week," John answered. He waved at four men who were gathered on the sidewalk as he and the boy headed toward the office that Mr. Overton had been working out of while in town.

"Who are they?" Charles asked, referring to the people he had waved to.

"Let's see. The Collins brothers - the two on the left - are planning on opening a hotel and cafe. The other two men are Dr. Hawkins and Reverend Lee."

"A doctor and a minister? They're going all the way across the country? Seems like they'd stay here where it was safe."

"Doctors are needed in the west," John explained. "There aren't nearly enough of them. And Reverend Lee feels that he and his wife have been called to start a new church."

"Are there any kids going?"

"Well, let me see - The Halls have a boy about your age. The Cranes' son is sixteen, I believe. Then there's Sam Longdon's sister. She's around ten, I think. There are a few others. You'll meet them all on Sunday morning."

"Why? Is there gonna be a party?"

"No. Rev. Lee has been holding church services on Sunday mornings for anyone who wants to come."

"I have to go?"

"Any reason why you shouldn't?" John replied, giving the boy a long look.

"Guess not. Probably nothing else to do anyway," Charles said as John opened the door into the office.

Gene Overton was six foot tall, with longish graying hair that had once been dark brown. He kept it pulled back with a strip of leather. He looked up from the ledger on the desk before him when John and Charles entered the office. "Mr. Donager." Charles' attention was caught by the man sitting beside the desk, his dark hat pushed back on his black hair. He was dressed in buckskin, with a fringed jacket. Overton didn't look at the man as he spoke. "Why don't you go find something to do, Jennings?"

"Yes*sir*," was Jennings' response as he rose from the chair and left the office.

"Sorry," Overton told John. "Scouts tend to get bored when they're not on the trail."

"That's understandable," John said.

"What can I do for you?"

"Well, first, let me introduce you to my wife's brother, Charles Davis. He just arrived today, and is going with us. I need to find out if I need to pay you more -"

"The fee was for the wagon, Mr. Donager," Overton explained. "As long as you have the ability to provide food and a place for him to travel and sleep, there's not a problem."

"Thank you, sir," Charles said.

"Is everything still on schedule to leave next week?" John asked the older man.

"It is. Mr. Jennings just told me that everything's quiet to the west right now, so we shouldn't have any

problems."

"Quiet?" Charles questioned.

"Indians, my boy," Overton told him. "Sometimes a group of them will decide that they don't like letting settlers pass through their territories. But they're behaving at the moment. Should be a clear path for us." He stood and indicated a map on the wall. "We'll be going toward the south - toward Santa Fe, but since most of the people going are planning on continuing to California, we'll head north of there, along the southern Colorado border and then turn south again."

"And that'll take six months?" the boy asked.

"If everything goes according to plan," Overton nodded. "But that's mine and Mr. Jennings' problem. Nothing for you to worry about."

"I'm not worried," Charles told him. "It sounds exciting!"

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"Where are we going now?" Charles asked as they left the office.

"I'm going to work," John told him. "You are going back to the cabin and see if Meg has anything for you to do."

"I can't go with you?"

John shook his head. "I don't think so. I doubt that Mr. Talbert would approve of my brother in law hanging around."

"I wouldn't get in the way," Charles insisted. "Margaret will just have me helping her clean and -"

"Ask anyway, and if she doesn't have anything for you to do, you can go out and explore the area. But make sure you're back before supper so your sister doesn't worry."

Charles didn't wait for him to reconsider, and took off at a lope toward the cabin where John and Meg had been living since shortly after their arrival in the area, leaving John to laugh softly before turning back toward the livery stable.

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Margaret was just finishing tying some heavy string around the jewelry box when Charles returned. "I still don't understand why you're sending it back to Father," he complained. "He'll probably never miss it -"

"I know, Charles," she said, picking up her shawl. "But John's right: we don't need them. I'd rather we start out free and clear of any ill feelings-"

"But *he* has ill feelings!" Charles insisted. "He'll never forgive John for taking you away. Or me for leaving," he added. "Why shouldn't we take those as at least part of our inheritance?"

A knock on the door drew Margaret's attention from her brother as she tried to find a way to explain why it was so important for them to send the jewelry back to their father instead of simply keeping it. In a quiet voice, she told him, "If I had wanted my inheritance, Charles, then I wouldn't have left with John. By leaving it, I let Father know that it wasn't money that either of us was looking for. I hope one day that you'll understand that." Going to the door, she opened it to reveal two women standing there. "Mrs. Lee. Mrs. Hawkins. Please. Come in." She saw their glances toward Charles as they entered the room. "This is my brother, Charles Davis," she explained. "He arrived yesterday and will be going west with us." She smiled at Charles. "Mrs. Lee is the pastor's wife, and Mrs. Hawkins husband is a doctor," she explained.

He nodded toward the women. "I saw your husbands this morning when I went with John over to meet Mr. Overton," he explained. "Nice to meet you."

"Is there something that I can do you?" Margaret asked the women. "I thought we were having coffee at Mrs. Hawkins' -"

"We are," Alice Hawkins confirmed. "But we went for a walk this morning, and decided to collect you on our way back. Unless we're interrupting -?"

"No, you're not. I was just going to take this over to the post office. I have to mail it back - back home -"

"I can take it for you," Charles offered, stepping forward, holding out his hands. When Margaret hesitated, he asked, "Don't you trust me?"

She met his gaze steadily as she answered. "Of course I do." But it took her a shade longer to release the package into his hands than it might have. "The post office is just down the street from the office you were at earlier. Do you have any money to pay the postage?"

"Yes, ma'am," was his reply. He nodded at the other two women as he grabbed his hat and moved toward the door. "Ladies. If you'll excuse me."

Margaret followed him to the door and watched him as he disappeared down the street as Rebecca Lee came up behind her and placed a hand on her arm. "Is everything all right?"

She nodded. "Let me get my shawl and we can go."

"How old is your brother?" Rebecca asked as they left the cabin.

"Fourteen. He and our father don't get along, so he decided it would be a good idea to come along with us."

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Once he was out of sight of the cabin, Charles ducked into an alley. Using his pocketknife, he snapped the cord around the box and tore the brown paper away from it. He barely glanced at the sheet of paper on top of the box, with his sister's neat handwriting, explaining to their father that Charles was safe with her and John, and that they were all leaving for California in the next week. It also explained that Charles had taken the jewel box - but that it was being returned because John didn't want her to take anything from her father that he hadn't given to her.

The letter also stated that she hoped her father might some day understand why she had made the decision to marry John Donager, and that they would make sure that Charles would be taken care of.

Charles folded the letter, intending to tear it up, but for some reason he stopped. Opening the box, he looked at the jewelry for several minutes before closing it and carefully re-wrapping the brown paper around the letter and box. Entering the Post Office, he went to the desk and asked the man who was there, "Do you have some twine that I can use to put around this?"

"Sure thing," the man told him, studying the box in Charles' hands before cutting a length of twine from a spool on the counter. "That should be enough."

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"That was a good sermon, Reverend," John said as the meeting broke up on Sunday morning.

"Thank you," Matthew Lee replied. "Tomorrow's the day."

"Yes, sir, it is. I'm ready to be on the way. In six months, we'll be in a new place, with a new future."

"And God will be there to greet us," Matthew pointed out with a smile.

"That he will." John turned away to join Margaret, who was watching Charles talking to some of the other young people. "He'll be fine, Meg," John told her, putting an arm around her shoulders.

"I know he will be. But I can't help but worry."

"Well, I suppose it's good practice for when we have children," he teased, and smiled when she blushed.

"Behave yourself, John Donager," she admonished him. "We just finished church services."

"During which I asked God to give us a houseful of children."

Margaret looked up at him, her green eyes wide. "A houseful?"

"Well, running a ranch will take a lot of help - I figure at least three or four strapping boys would be a lot of help - if that's okay with you."

She smiled. "Of course it is. Now, I have to get over there and help with getting dinner ready. Don't go too far."

"Not likely. Someone told me that we're having fried chicken."

The group had, after their first Sunday services, taken to sharing Sunday dinner. It had been the Lees suggestion - a way for them to get to know each other, since they would be forced into close quarters for the next six months during their journey.

John glanced at Charles as he walked toward Mark Hawkins and the Collins brothers. The boy was talking to Artie Hall and Sandy Crane across the clearing, and seemed to be making friends. Meg would be relieved if that were the case. John knew that his young brother-in-law had tended to be a bit wild back in New York, with some of his friends being banned from his father's house, but things were different out here, John reasoned. And he was willing to give anyone a chance to start over.

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"What's it like in New York?" Artie Hall asked Charles as the boys waited for the food to be ready.

"Busy. All the time, busy," Charles said. "Things always going on. And lots of people. You two probably think this is a lot of people don't you?" he asked, looking around at the crowd.

"Yeah," Sandy nodded. "My Pa said he was looking forward to being able to not having people looking over his shoulder all the time when we get to where we're going."

"Well," Charles said, "multiply this by ten times - twenty times. People everywhere you look, everywhere you go."

"Wow," Artie declared. "That's a lot of people."

"Too many people," Sandy said, shaking his head. "I think I agree with Pa. Give me wide open spaces, not crowded sidewalks."

"Well, that's one reason why I decided to leave," Charles nodded. "Got hard to breathe there."

"And your Pa just let you go?"

Artie's question caused Charles to shrug. "Well, he knew that Margaret and John would make sure I was ok. We didn't really get along, though. He expected me to follow in his footsteps and work in his bank."

"Now that would have been interesting," Sandy said. "Imagine being around all of that money."

"But it's not your money," Artie pointed out. "So -"

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Sandy nodded.

Across the clearing, a dinner bell sounded, and the boys all headed toward the table that had been set up. As his new friends joined their families, Charles found Margaret and John, noting that all of the men had removed their hats. He started to sit down, but John grabbed his elbow and kept him on his feet. "Wha -?"

The half-asked question was answered as Rev. Lee began to speak. "Let us pray. Dear Lord, we ask Your blessings on this group of people as we prepare to begin our journey tomorrow morning. Be with us, watch over us, and keep us in Your will as we travel. Now, we ask You to bless this food, and the hands which prepared it. In Your Blessed name we pray, Amen."

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"Are you sure you can handle that team?" John asked Charles the next morning after they put the last trunk into the covered wagon.

"Sure! One of my friends back in New York - Stan. His father had a wagon and team. We used to take it out after he got home. Stan showed me how to drive a team."

"Well, if you get into trouble, hand the reins to Meg. She can handle 'em." He grinned at Margaret as Charles turned to give his sister a look of surprise.

"*You* know how to drive a team of horses?"

"I learned on our trip to Missouri," she explained. "I asked John to teach me so that I could help and let him get some rest." Smiling, Margaret said, "Why are you so surprised, Charles? I'm not the same girl that I was back there."

"We'd better get to the clearing or they might leave us behind," John announced, helping his wife up onto the seat.

Charles shook his head. "They wouldn't dare leave without you, John," he said as he got up beside Margaret and picked up the reins for the four horse team. "You're their leader."

John stepped into the stirrup, pausing for a moment at the pronouncement. "Leader? Me? Mr. Overton -"

"He might be the wagon master, but I watched all of those people yesterday. You're the one they look to when there's a question to be answered.

"Now it was John who shook his head, refusing to consider the boy's words. "Let's go."

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The clearing was filled with twenty-one covered wagons - one for Overton and Jennings and their cook, Hanrahan, a grizzled little man who looked more like a leprechaun than a full grown man. With at least one outrider for every wagon, there were a lot of people gathered in a half-circle. Overton, on horseback himself, saw the Donager wagon and rode over to meet them. "Starting to wonder when you'd show up, Donager," was his

comment. "I said I wanted to get an early start today."

"It's not even nine, Mr. Overton," John pointed out. "Still early enough. But we're here now. Where do you want us?"

"Behind my wagon," Overton told him, pointing toward the front of the line. Turning, he yelled, "Hanrahan! Pull it up a bit to make some room!" Overton moved toward the mid point of the arc, looking at each wagon. "Okay, are we all ready?"

John turned his horse, about to speak, when Matthew Lee stood up. "Just a moment, Mr. Overton," he called, his booming voice easily heard at every wagon. "I'd like to ask for a blessing on the wagons and our journey."

Overton sighed, but nodded his head sharply. John, along with the other men, removed their hats - except for Charles. He jumped as Margaret dug her elbow into his side before grabbing his hat off his head.

"Lord, we thank You for this day, and for providing Mr. Overton and Mr. Jennings to guide us on our journey west. We ask Your blessing on each soul here. Grant us safe travels. May Your will be done. Amen."

Overton spun his horse after slapping his hat back on. "Let's go!" he called, and Hanrahan started the wagon train on its journey West.

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"I never realized that John was so religious," Charles said to his sister as he drove the wagon.

"His mother used to take him to church when he was younger - after she died, his father didn't see any reason to keep going," she explained, watching as John rode along with Gene Overton. "After we met Rev. Lee, John and I discussed it - and we decided that we wanted get closer to God before we started a family."

"A family, huh?" Charles said with a grin. "I hadn't considered the idea of being an uncle."

"We both want a big family," she told him, still watching John. "You're right about him - even though he'll never admit it."

"Right? About what?"

"That he's a leader. Even Rev. Lee and Doc defer to him on decisions about the trip."

"Some men are just born to lead," Charles said. "Me - I'm a follower. So I guess that means I'm in the right place, doesn't it?"

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John spent most of the day checking with the wagons, making sure everything was well with the drivers. As the day went on, he found himself riding alongside Gene Overton at point. "There's a place not far from here where we can camp for the night," Overton told him. "There's water there - tell everyone we'll be stopping soon."

"How far have we travelled today?" John asked.

"Since we got a late start, I'd say fifteen miles. We'll need to start earlier tomorrow. Tell the Rev'rend if he wants to do a prayer every day -"

"I think we're all praying every day, Mr. Overton," John informed him. "But Reverend Lee will only pray publicly on Sunday mornings and at mealtime now." With that, he wheeled his horse and headed back down the line to relay the message.

It had been difficult to convince the wagon master that the group would hold church services on Sunday mornings before driving on for the rest of the day. He had warned John and the others that it would mean they might take longer to make the journey - and risk not getting to California before the snow hit in the mountains. But John and the others had taken a vote on the matter, and so Overton had had little choice but to accept the results.

Now, John told Matthew and Rebecca about his conversation with Overton, and Matthew merely shook his head. But Rebecca smiled. "Perhaps you *should* say a prayer for us every morning, Matthew," she said. "It might be exactly what the poor man needs - to hear more prayer." Her smile widened into a soft laugh. "Don't you agree, Mr. Donager?"

The two men joined in her laughter. "You just might be right at that, ma'am," he told her, continuing to the next wagon. Sam and Anna Longdon were the same age as he and Meg. But they were from the District of Columbia area. In another similarity, they were the guardians of Sam's eleven year old sister, Olivia. "We'll be stopping in about an hour," he told Sam. "Just follow Mr. Overton's lead to circle the wagons for the night." He looked around. "Didn't I see your sister out here walking earlier with some of the other children?"

Anna smiled. "Olivia got tired," she explained. "She's in the wagon, sleeping -" she turned to look behind her. "I'm not even sure that she'll wake up for supper, poor dear."

"She'll wake up," Sam declared. "She's got chores to get done when we stop. And I told her that trying to walk wasn't a good idea -"

"She's just not used to walking such a long distance, Sam," Anna reminded her husband. "I plan on walking for awhile myself tomorrow, Mr. Donager." Sam gave her a surprised look, and she shrugged. "Well, it's *got* to be less bumpy than riding in this wagon all day!"

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After Overton pulled the wagons into a circle, the women set to work preparing a meal, while the men and boys all took care of livestock. "It's like a small city," Mark Hawkins told John.

"Similar," John agreed. "Any reports of problems?" he asked the doctor.

"Stiff joints, mostly, from sitting too long. Told most of them walk as much as possible - most of the children walked, I think. A few walked, rode, and then walked. That's the way to do it. I'm even going to kick Alice off the wagon for a little while tomorrow - after I make sure that she can handle the team so that *I* can take a turn later."

"Good idea," Matthew agreed as he joined the other two men. "Rebecca's planning on walking for a spell tomorrow. Possibly the three of them could walk together."

"I'll talk to Meg about it later," John said, watching as Jennings rode into camp. "I was wondering when he would show up again," he told his friends. They watched as he dismounted and began to look for Mr. Overton. "Why don't we go and hear what he has to say?"

Crossing the circle, they three men approached the lead wagon, where Hanrahan was working over a campfire to prepare supper. The little man glanced up and greeted them with a ready grin. "Ah, gentlemen. I'd offer ya a bit of our meal, but if I'm t'be honest, I'm seriously considerin' followin' the delicious smell comin' from down that way," he told them, nodding toward the area where the women were cooking.

"You're more than welcome, Hanrahan," Matthew Lee assured him. "But what you have here smells wonderful after a long day of travels. What is that?"

"Mulligan stew," Hanrahan informed him. "Himself is over there on th' other side of th' wagon," he told John, "if that's who you're lookin' for."

"Thank you, Hanrahan." The three men moved on, stepping over the wagon tongue to join the wagon-master and scout as they spoke quietly.

"The river shouldn't be too hard to cross, but the wagons won't get there until tomorrow evening - if you can leave on time in the morning."

"We'll leave early tomorrow," John assured Jennings, and both men turned toward them. "So we'll cross the river the next morning?"

Jennings glanced at Overton, who nodded. "Yes. You might spread the word that if they have anything in the bottom of the wagons that might be ruined by water, they might want to move it up. The river isn't usually very deep, but sometimes these wagons sit lower in the water -"

"We'll spread the word," Doc confirmed.

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Charles had just finished taking care of the team and John's horse when he saw the young girl struggling with a bucket of water. As she moved closer, he hurried over to her. "Here. Let me take that."

She looked up at him, her blue eyes revealing her surprise - and something else that he couldn't identify. Shaking her head, she started to move past him. "No, I - I've got it. Thank you anyway."

"Don't be silly," he insisted, grabbing the bucket from her hands. "I'll carry it for you."

"My brother won't like it -"

"Who's your brother?" Charles asked. He'd seen her at Sunday dinner, but hadn't managed to find out her name.

"Sam. Sam Longdon. I'm Olivia."

"My name is Charles Davis. I'm -"

"Mrs. Donager's brother," she finished for him. "I heard my brother telling Anna - that's his wife - that you were going to be traveling with us. Really, Sam won't like that I'm not carrying the bucket of water that he sent me to get."

"Well, then, I'll hand it back to you before he sees us. Did he really send you for a full bucket of water? Doesn't

he have water in a barrel-?"

"He gave quite a bit to the horses," she explained. "And used some to wash up after." They came into the clearing, and saw a group of men standing and sitting, talking. "Better give me the bucket," she told him, holding out her hand.

But it was a moment too late, as Sam turned and saw Charles still holding the bucket. Speaking to the other men, he turned toward his sister, who had put both hands on the bucket's handle, taking it from Charles.

"What's going on here?" he asked, glaring at the two of them.

"I was just helping her with the heavy bucket," Charles told him. "I'm -"

"I know who you are," Sam said, his eyes narrowed into slits. "Take the bucket back to the wagon, Olivia," he told her in a firm tone. "I'll pour it into the barrel in a minute - after I have a talk with your friend."

"Sam," Olivia began, but stopped as his frown deepened. Sighing, she gave Charles a look of apology before slowly taking the bucket back to their wagon.

"I didn't mean to anger you, sir," Charles said. "I was only trying to help -"

"My sister has to learn to do her own chores without anyone's help," Sam told him. "See? She made it to the wagon without losing a drop. She's only eleven - too young to interest a young man -"

"What?!" Charles exclaimed, quickly lowering his voice as a few heads turned in their direction. "I was just being friendly. And an eleven year old little girl shouldn't have to carry a full bucket of water that far."

"I'll handle my family how I see best," Sam replied. "Stay away from her. Do you understand?"

"No," was Charles' reply, but he sighed. "But I'll do as you ask. Excuse me, Mr. Longdon, I think my sister's looking for me." She wasn't, of course, but Charles wasn't going to stand there and continue to discuss the matter.

Sam went to the wagon and removed the lid from the water barrel, then poured the bucket inside, refilling the barrel, as Olivia started walking slowly toward the cooking fire, hoping to get away before her brother could stop her. "Olivia." She stopped, turning to face him. She that tone only too well: he meant business.

"He was only trying to help me, Sam," she insisted. "I tried to tell him that I didn't need help, but he took the bucket from me."

"Don't let it happen again," he told her, placing a hand on her shoulder. "I know you don't understand, but with all of these boys, I'd just feel more at ease if you would stay away from them. Okay?"

"Yes, Sam," she replied. "Now, may I go see if I can help with supper?"

"Sure," he told her, the ghost of a smile on his face at last. "Go on."

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"He all but accused me of -" Charles told John and Margaret later that evening, breaking off as she shook her head and covered his hand with hers.

"He takes his responsibility as her guardian very seriously," she said. "With good reason. Anna told me that Sam and Olivia's father was killed by a thief who threatened the girl as well. She managed to get away and hide until the killer left, but Sam was worried about her safety, since she'd seen the killer. It's one reason why they made the decision to leave and go West."

"You understand now, don't you, Charles?" John asked.

"I understand. I just don't like being accused of something that I didn't do. All I was trying to do was help the kid. I mean, he had her carrying a full bucket of water and she was having a little trouble, so -"

"Did she ask for your help?" John wanted to know.

"No. In fact, she said that she didn't need help. But -"

"Then you should have left it at that. Making the offer was enough."

"John! Would you have just let that little girl carry that heavy bucket?"

"There's a difference - I'm a grown man and the girl's brother knows me. He doesn't know you very well - and in his eyes, you're still a boy. Olivia told him that the person who killed their father was little more than a boy - only a few years older than she is."

"Oh. I guess that *does* explain it," he nodded. "So maybe if I spend time with him, he'll be more willing for me to be his sister's friend."

Margaret finished braiding her long hair as she turned to look at her brother. "Why is it so important to you?"

"She just doesn't seem to have any friends," he told her. "I've been noticing that she's always alone - or with her family. That seems sad."

"Get some sleep, Charles," John said, helping Margaret up into the wagon. "It's going to be a long day tomorrow."

"Goodnight," Charles called softly, ducking under the wagon before crawling into the bedroll that he'd laid out a few minutes earlier. He'd come up with a plan to help that little girl. Someone had to do it.

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Over the next few days, the wagon train continued west, crossing a river with minimal drama. John and Charles traded off driving the wagon, riding the horse, or walking. Slowly some of the other travellers began to greet Charles with the same enthusiasm as they had when talking to John, giving the young man a much needed boost of confidence. He was learning a lot by just watching his brother in law and how he interacted with the others.

And he couldn't help but continue to keep an eye on Olivia Longdon. While the other children usually walked together, Olivia kept to the side of her brother's wagon, within sight of her brother and his wife. Occasionally, Charles would see her glance in the direction of the other children before sighing and looking forward again.

When the train stopped for the day, Charles waited until he saw Olivia heading toward a nearby stream with her bucket, then grabbed a bucket from the wagon. Margaret, getting ready to go help with supper, turned to look at him. "I thought John asked you to go water the animals?" she questioned.

"I'm going to. Thought I'd get them some fresh water from the stream," he explained, lifting the empty bucket. "Excuse me."

He got to the stream as Olivia was dragging the bucket from the stream. "Need some help?" he asked, moving to dip his own bucket into the cool water.

"No-no thank you," was her reply. "You shouldn't be here," she told him, barely managing to lift the full bucket.

"It's a free country," Charles pointed out. "I had to get some fresh water for the horses. I had no idea you were going to be here. But don't worry. I learned my lesson last time. I won't be carrying that bucket."

"Th-thank you," she told him, grabbing the handle with both hands as she walked back toward the circle of wagons. She wasn't able to move very fast, so Charles had no problem keeping up with her.

"I'm sorry about your father," he told her.

That made her stop and look at him. "What?" she asked, putting the bucket on the ground.

"My sister told me what happened. Must have been difficult for you, being a witness to something like that."

Olivia's eyes fell to the ground, her hands still wrapped tightly around the bucket's handle. "It was - it was horrible," she confirmed. "That boy - he demanded that Daddy give him whatever money he had." Her voice was soft, and Charles had to lean closer to hear the words she spoke. "Daddy didn't have any money. Or not very much, anyway. And it wasn't enough for the boy. He threatened to - to hurt me if Daddy didn't give him more. Daddy - Daddy told me to run, and made a grab for the knife. I was - was terrified. The boy - he st-stabbed Daddy and that's when I screamed and ran away to find someone - someone to help. There was a policeman around the corner. By the time we got back, the boy - he was gone. And Daddy - Daddy was - dead."

"Livvy."

They both turned at the sound of Anna Longdon's voice. "Anna," the girl said, clearly worried.

"You'd better get back to the wagon, honey," she said, kneeling and dipping a handkerchief into the bucket before wiping the girl's face. "Sam's waiting for you. I told him that I'd make sure you were okay. Go on, now." As Olivia picked up the bucket again, she added, "if he asks why you've been crying, tell him that you were scared by a snake, okay?"

Olivia nodded, then with a glance in Charles' direction, she turned toward the wagons.

Anna watched the girl go, then turned to Charles. "I understand that you don't mean any harm, but -"

"She needs some friends, Mrs. Longdon. I'm sure you've seen the way she watches the other children -"

"Of course I've seen it, Charles, but you must understand that her brother has his reasons for being so protective - Olivia and her father were on their way to take Sam his dinner at work that night when their father was killed. Sam had forgotten it. If he hadn't, they would have had no reason to be out on the street that night."

"If he's so protective, why is he letting her come out here alone to get water? There are a lot of things out here that could hurt her - as you pointed out - snakes. Raccoons, foxes - and she could fall into the water -"

"He hasn't considered that - if he notices she's been crying, he'll start worrying about snakes and all the rest. Look, I agree with you - she does need friends. I've been praying that he'll finally realize that himself. But I can't push him into it. Neither can you. I'll turn a blind eye to your talking to her, but please don't let Sam see you doing it. Please?"

"Yes, ma'am," he told her, still not sure how it would help the girl.

"Now, I'll go back to the wagons with you - I told Sam that I was also going over to ask Mrs. Donager to bring something with her when she comes over to help with the evening meal."

"I'm only going as far as the horses -" he explained.

"That'll be fine."

As Charles watered the animals, he watched as his sister crossed the circle with Mrs. Longdon. At one point, he saw Margaret turn to look in his direction before nodding her head at something that the other woman was saying, but Artie Hall appeared, drawing his attention away from them.

"Hey. Aren't you finished with that yet?"

"I had to go get some fresh water," Charles explained. "Almost done."

"Anything I can do to help?"

====

When the group sat down to supper, Charles found himself seated across from Olivia, while Margaret and John were across from Mr. and Mrs. Longdon. After the meal, Margaret suggested that Charles help clear the table. "I'd be glad to," he said, standing as he picked up several plates, stacking them together.

"Be careful," Olivia admonished him, doing the same thing, only far more gently. "Those plates belong to Mrs. Lee. I don't think she would appreciate you breaking them."

"I don't have a lot of experience clearing dishes," he told her. "We had servants that did this."

"We didn't," Olivia informed him, carrying her plates over to where a tub of hot water was waiting. "Just put those down over here, too," she told Charles, adding, "carefully."

"Whatever you say. You need some help with washing or drying?" he asked.

She lifted her shoulders. "I could use someone to dry them and stack them so that their owners can collect them later." Nodding toward the table, "You can use that towel."

"Are you sure that your brother won't pitch a fit if he sees me over here helping you?" Charles asked as he waited for her to finish washing the first plate.

"He might, but since we're out here in the open where everyone can see us, I think he'll figure that I'm safe enough."

"Did he ask why you were crying earlier?"

"No. I used some of the cool water and wiped my face - so he didn't notice." She smiled before turning her attention back to the dishes. "We'd better get these done. It's getting late, and tomorrow will be another long day."

Once the dishes began to stack up, the women started claiming them and carrying them back to where they were being stored, and Lillian Hall, Artie's younger sister, took the towel from Charles. "Mama told me to take your place, Charles. Said she'd never seen a boy yet who liked washing *or* drying dishes. 'Sides, my brother's looking for you - he and the others are down at the creek."

Charles grinned at the girl. "I won't argue with you," he said. "Night, Olivia."

"Night," Olivia replied. "Thank you for helping."

"My pleasure," he said, turning to leave the circle.

Lillian dried the dishes sitting in front of her, then tapped Olivia on her shoulder, noting that she had stopped washing to watch Charles Davis disappear into the darkness beyond the fires. "Hey. We're almost finished. You want me to take over?"

"No - No, I'll do it."

"Mama said that you're doing a really good job - guess your mother taught you how to wash dishes?"

"No. She died when I was a baby. Daddy showed me how to do them. We used to take turns washing and drying until Sam married Anna. Now she and I trade off. When we're in a house, I mean."

The older girl nodded. "We all trade off, too," she said. "The girls, anyway. Mandy and Lisabeth are finally old enough to start washing instead of drying. And while Mama had me take over from Charles, Artie and Philip take their turns as well." She leaned closer, confiding, "They both *hate* to wash." Both girls giggled.

====

"Well, if it's not the dishwasher," Artie teased as Charles joined the five other young men at the stream's edge.

"I wasn't washing," Charles pointed out. "I was drying. You have a problem with that?"

Artie chuckled, shaking his head. "Nah. No reason to get upset."

"I'm not upset. What are we doing out here?"

"You were going to tell us about that friend of yours back in New York, remember? You called him the 'Monkey Man'?"

Charles had taken to regaling his new friends with stories - usually based in part on his life back in the City. It was a talent he had used often over the years. "Nate wasn't the Monkey Man," he clarified now. "He *had* a monkey. Cute little thing with a long tail that could grab onto things... "

====

By the end of the first week of the journey, the wagon train was making good time. "At this rate," Overton told John and the other men, "we might make it into New Mexico a week earlier than planned."

"Unless something happens to delay us," Arthur Hall said. "Looks like rain to me out to the west. Has for the last two days."

Overton nodded. "Could be. Tends to happen this time of year. But we agreed that we would keep going no matter what the weather," he reminded them. "Rain, snow, heat, cold - we keep going. Is that still the case?"

"Sure."

"Yeah."

"Well, we'll get an early start tomorrow -"

"It's Sunday, Mr. Overton."

Overton stopped talking, his eyes narrowing at the Reverend's interruption. "That's right. Okay, we'll get started right after you finish church services. Half a day's better than nothing, I guess." With a sharp nod, the wagon master turned and left the group.

Watching him go, John sighed. "He's not happy."

"We knew that he didn't like the idea from the start, John," Doc reminded him.

"We have almost six months yet. He'll come around," Rev. Lee assured them. "I'm going to go work on my sermon for tomorrow. Gentlemen," he nodded, walking away.

"I think we need to make sure the ladies know that we won't be having a meal after services tomorrow - that will wait until we stop later," someone else suggested.

"That's a good idea," Carl agreed. "I'll go tell Betsy. She'll spread the word."

"Lets get the tables and chairs ready," John told the others.

====

"Hi," Charles said as he joined Olivia at the small, clear lake near the camp.

She smiled as she dipped her bucket into the water. "Hello." He wasn't surprised when she waited for him to fill the bucket he was carrying. Over the last few days, they had started meeting and walking back almost to the

camp before going separate ways.

"I noticed that Lillian was helping you with dishes last night."

"I missed your help, but she got there ahead of you, I guess."

Charles chuckled. "Not really. My sister asked me to help her with something in the wagon."

"I guess Mrs. Hall was right: boys don't like to do dishes."

"I don't mind drying. But I also figured that it might not be a good idea to anger your brother by helping again."

"Oh. You're probably right. Sam seemed to be okay with my spending time with Lillian and some of the other children last night. Anna said that she was going to talk to him about letting me walk with them instead of by myself."

"That's good news."

"I think so. Of course, he could refuse to consider it - he still feels so guilty about - what happened that night."

"He probably will for a long time," Charles told her.

"But he had no way of knowing that we'd be accosted by a thief. Dad had walked that stretch of road many times and never had any problem. So Sam doesn't have any reason to feel responsible."

"I can understand why he feels like he does. If he hadn't left his dinner behind, then you and your father wouldn't have had to take it to him and left yourself open to being waylaid. You became his responsibility after your father's death, and he takes that very seriously." Seeing that they were close to the camp, Charles said, "Well, I'd better head this way. See you at supper."

Sam was waiting for her when Olivia returned to the wagon. "What took you so long?" he asked, taking the bucket from her and carrying it over to the team.

"There was a bunny rabbit near the stream, and he hopped up almost close enough for me to touch," she told him. It was mostly the truth, Olivia reasoned. She **had** seen a rabbit, but it hadn't been near enough to even think about touching it.

"How many times have I told you not to touch wild animals, Olivia? That rabbit might have bitten you - or scratched you."

"He looked friendly enough," she insisted. "And I didn't say that I touched him. Only that he was close enough for me to have touched if I'd wanted to." She watched as he watered the animals. "May I go help with supper now?"

"I guess so." As she moved away, he called, "Olivia?" and she paused, turning to look at him again. "Be careful." He managed to punctuate the words with a smile, which she returned before continuing across the circle to the cook fires.

====

"Dr. Hawkins," Margaret said as Mark and his wife moved away after the next morning's service. "I need to talk to you. If you're not too busy."

"Leaving in fifteen minutes, folks!" Gene Overton called out as he rode around the circle. "Fifteen minutes!"

"What's the problem, Margaret?" he asked, continuing toward the wagon.

She looked around, lowering her voice. "I - I believe that I might be - well, expecting."

Mark looked at Alice before speaking. "What makes you think that?"

She went through her symptoms, ending with, "So far, I've been able to pass my being sick to my stomach off as traveling in the wagon," she explained.

"You're probably right, Margaret," he told her. "You could be with child. I would recommend that you walk more than ride for the time being - if you have to ride in the wagon, it might be best if you tell John -"

"I don't want him to know," she said quickly. "Not yet."

"Why not, Margaret?" Alice wanted to know.

"He'll start worrying about me. I don't want to be a distraction. I'll tell him once I know for sure, but - he won't question my saying I'm going to lay down in the wagon if necessary. Can I trust you to -?"

"Of course. I won't say a word until you tell me I can."

"Thank you."

"If you have any pains, or bleeding - let me know as soon as possible."

"I will."

"Meg!" John's voice rang out across the circle. "Where are you?!"

"I'd better go. Thank you again."

Alice Hawkins watched her young friend go. "You're going to become an expert at delivering babies in say - five to six months, Mark. How many does that make now?"

He counted in his head. "Four. No, five. What I want to see is Mr. Overton's reaction to the news." Holding out his hand, he helped her up into the wagon.

====

Jennings appeared as the wagons circled for the night, riding very fast, as though he had something important to report. Charles decided to follow John and some of the other men as they went to find out what was going on.

"Are you sure?" Overton was asking when they arrived.

After taking a long drink of water from his canteen, Jennings nodded. "I saw 'em. At least thirty or more."

"Thirty or more of what, Mr. Jennings?" John questioned.

"Indians, Mr. Donager," was Overton's answer, his voice grim. "We might have to turn north for awhile -"

"And that's going to add how long to our journey?" Olaf Norton wanted to know.

"Can't we reason with them?" Carl Collins asked.

"Reason?" Overton repeated. "You don't *reason* with Indians, Mr. Collins."

"Why not?" John's question caused the wagon master to stare at him in shocked surprise.

"What?" Overton asked.

"Why can't we try to reason with them? To ask them to let us pass through the area unharmed? Since we won't be staying, we won't be any threat to them. We might even be able to find some things to trade for safe passage -"

"I can't sanction something like that, Mr. Donager. It would be dangerous -"

"Most of these savages don't speak or understand English," Jennings informed him. "So how could you hope to reason with them if you can't talk to them?"

"And do you know for sure that none of these speak or understand English?" John wanted to know.

"No, but -"

"Then I think it's worth a try. How long a ride to where you saw their camp?"

"Really, Donager -"

John ignored the wagon master's attempted interruption and maintained his study of the scout. "Well?"

"They're a half day's ride to the west," he said at last. "Oh horseback. It'll take the wagons a full day, most likely."

"So the wagons would be close to them tomorrow night," John nodded. "How about this? We leave early tomorrow morning and when we're within an hour of the Indian camp, we park the wagons for the night. Then Mr. Jennings and I can go on ahead to try and come to an agreement with whoever is leading them."

"When I did volunteer -?" Jennings wanted to know.

"You'll go, Jennings," Overton said in a firm tone.

"So will I," Matthew Lee announced, followed by several other voices.

John shook his head. "I think a small group would be better - too many men might make them think that we're a threat. This will give us a chance to find things that they might be willing to trade for - anything in your wagons that you can spare -"

"So who's going with you and Jennings?" Mike Lawrence asked.

"I'll decide that tomorrow morning," he said.

"I thought I was the wagon master," Overton reminded them.

"If you'd like to come with me, you're more than welcome -"

"And if something happens to you and the others, who would lead the train?"

"And that is why I didn't suggest your joining us," John told him.

"We need to have a prayer meeting tonight, John," Matthew said. "To say prayers for those who *do* go."

"That's a good idea, Reverend," John confirmed. "Right after supper, will that work for you?"

"When did I lose control?" Overton muttered as the group of men moved away.

"You best just accept that while you're in charge of the wagons," Hanrahan told him, "Mr. Donager's in charge of ev'rything else."

"Shut up and go finish supper," Overton growled, still glaring at the men around John Donager. "Jennings -"

"Yeah?"

"Do you have any idea who's leading those Shawnee?"

"Not sure. I speak a little of their language, but I couldn't get too close - Didn't look like a young buck, though. The group was mostly women and children and old men -"

"Then we'll let Mr. Donager make his grand gesture. Might just work. I suppose I can be magnanimous and give him the victory. This time."

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Upon hearing the news about a group of Shawnee Indians being not too far away, and that some of the men, along with Mr. Jennings, would be going to talk with them about safe passage the next afternoon, the atmosphere at supper was more somber than usual, but there was little discussion until the meal was over and the adults moved away from the tables to gather around the fire in the center of the camp.

Matthew stood. "I know that we held services this morning, but some of us have decided that - considering tomorrow's events, we should hold a prayer service tonight for the safe return of those going to meet with the Indians."

"Who's going?" Mrs. Garnett asked.

"That hasn't been decided as of yet," Matthew answered. "I'll start with a prayer, and then others can follow..."

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As they walked back to the wagon, John looked down at Margaret. "You haven't said anything."

"There's no reason to," she said. "I know you're going tomorrow."

"You do? How do you know that?"

She smiled. "I've known you all my life, John Donager. I don't think there's anything that could keep you from going out to meet with those Indians. And everyone here fully expects you to go. Didn't you see most of the people at the table turn to look at you when it was first mentioned?"

"Not really."

"Who's going with you?"

"Matthew wants to come. So does Doc. And Arthur Hall. Carl Collins, probably. Mr. Jennings is going to show us to their camp."

"I have a couple of quilts that I can send with you," she said. "And Alice mentioned some flour and beans from her wagon. Nedra Carter was talking about a bolt of fabric -"

John nodded. "Several others have things they want to send with us. I'm hopeful it will be enough to convince the Indians to let us pass through."

====

Jennings, having ridden out that morning, returned around mid-afternoon, telling Overton and the rest that the Shawnee were still in their camp - directly in the path of the wagons.

"Circle up!" Overton called, and the words were echoed down the line of wagons. Within an hour, five men set out, one of them pulling along a makeshift travois filled with dry goods to be given to the Indians.

Once they could no longer be seen, Rebecca Lee lead the rest of the travellers to the center of the circle and began to pray for the success of the mission, and for the safety and safe return of the men.

Gene Overton stood watching and listening, shaking his head. He had never seen a group of people - especially people who - up until a few weeks ago - hadn't known each other - so quick to start praying. His own life had been rough and tumble - his father had been a trapper who had taken an Indian woman into his life. Upon the birth of their son, the woman had gone back to her tribe with that son - only to be tracked down and forced to give up her young boy.

There had been little time for religion from that point. Gene's father *had* taught him to read and to write, but most of his instruction had been in how to hunt and fish and live off the land. There had been a dog-eared Bible, but it had rarely been opened for other than reading lessons.

Even after all this time, Gene remembered one passage - and when Rebecca began to recite it, he found himself whispering it along with those gathered.

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five men
from the wagon train were saying at that moment. Only Mr. Jennings was silent, watching the trail before them for any sign that they were no longer alone.

"Just over the next rise," Jennings said as the men fell silent once again. He started to pull his rifle from its scabbard, but John shook his head.

"Please, Mr. Jennings. That will only make them nervous."

Jennings took his hand off of the rifle as Carl Collins asked, "How do you plan on talking to these people, John? If they don't speak English -"

"I speak a little Shawnee," Jennings told them. "Enough, I think, to translate. That's *if* they're willing to talk at all."

"You didn't mention that yesterday," Doc said.

"I needed to talk to Mr. Overton first," he explained. He gave John a lopsided grin. "In case you haven't guessed, Mr. Donager, he's used to being the one everyone looks to for answers. Having you around has - well, thrown him off a little."

They topped the rise to see a small encampment of Shawnee. At that moment, some of the women in the camp stopped and pointed in their direction, alerting the rest of the camp. Most of them seemed to be old men, women, quite a few children. As the group entered the main camp, an old man appeared from one of the buildings. He lifted a hand toward them, stepping in front of the horses as he did so, effectively blocking the path.

The six men pulled back, stopping their horses. Following John's lead, they all stepped down out of their saddles, and John stepped forward, with Jennings coming with him. "We are from a wagon train that is back down the road -" he pointed in that direction, noticing that the man didn't acknowledge the statement. "We bring gifts -" he indicated the travois. "Blankets, food -"

Jennings slowly began to translate his words, but the man remained where he was, his expression stoic, his arms now folded across his chest. Even though Jennings was speaking, the Chief's eyes never wavered from John.

"Tell him that we would like his permission to cross south of here to continue our journey west. That the gifts

will be theirs even if they refuse to allow this." John watched the Chief as he spoke, and saw a tiny flicker in them at his words. "You understand, don't you?"

"Grey Wolf understands," the Chief acknowledged. "Come. We talk." He waved toward a centrally located fire, turning to lead them in that direction. John glanced at his friends before following.

Grey Wolf sank down to sit before the fire. "Sit," he told the white men. Pointing at John, he pointed to the space to his right. "You. Sit here."

"Place of honor," Jennings told him in a quiet voice.

"What are you - called?" Grey Wolf asked John.

"I am John Donager," he answered, then indicated the others. "Matthew Lee, Mark Hawkins, Carl Collins, Arthur Hall, and our scout, Mr. Jennings."

"John Donager - speaks for his people like Chief?"

"In this, yes."

"You wish bring wagons through this place?"

"To the south - if it won't cause your people a problem. We don't intend to stay here - we're going on to the west, to settle there."

"We move south in two days," Grey Wolf told him. "My woman is ill - it is said she nears the great sleep."

"What's wrong with her?" Doc wanted to know.

"An evil spirit has placed a fire within her."

"Maybe I could be of help," Doc said. "I'm a doctor."

"Doc." Jennings sighed, shaking his head. "Don't -"

Grey Wolf speared the scout with narrowed eyes before looking at John again. "Would you trust him to help your woman?" he asked.

"I would," John nodded.

"Running Deer will take you to White Owl," the Chief said, lifting his hand to summon a young woman as Doc stood.

"I'll need to get some things from my horse," Doc said, and Grey Wolf spoke to the girl, who led him to where the horses were tied.

"I meant what I said about the gifts that we brought. Grey Wolf," John said as he saw Doc follow Running Deer to one of the buildings. "They will remain here even if you refuse passage for the wagons."

"And if we do not allow you to pass, what will you do? Return with guns to force your way past us?"

"No. We'll take the longer way around to the north."

"That will put us on the trail longer," Jennings explained. "We have women and children as well - just like -" his voice trailed off as Grey Wolf gave him that look again.

"We go now, see how White Owl is."

John rose as well, telling the others, "Stay here. I'll be right back."

Matthew stood. "I might be of some help," he said, and joined them as another young woman brought food over to the fire, giving it to the others.

John and Matthew ducked to enter the shelter, which was surprisingly larger on the inside than it had appeared. Doc was kneeling beside a woman with snow-white hair laying under a blanket. "How long has she been ill?" he asked Grey Wolf.

"Seven moons. A fire has been burning inside of her, and she has no air."

"What is it, Doc?" John asked.

"An infection of some kind. We have to get her fever down," he said, continuing to examine the woman. "I need cool water and clean cloth." Grey Wolf spoke to Running Deer, who left. Doc found a length of fabric around the woman's leg and began to unwrap it. John and Matthew both winced as they saw the angry red gash on her leg. Doc asked Grey Wolf, "When did this happen?"

"Four moons ago, perhaps. She fell as she was walking and the stones cut her."

"It should have been cleaned immediately," Doc sighed, tossing aside the dirty, blood-stained rags that had been wrapped around the leg. "Matthew, I need the bottle of whiskey that Mr. Jennings keeps in his saddlebag, if you don't mind. "Grey Wolf, I will need something metal, flat, heated in the fire to try to burn the infection from the wound."

Running Deer returned with the requested cloth and water, and was sent back out to find the heated metal as Matthew came into the shelter with the whiskey, handing it to Doc, who poured the liquid onto White Owl's leg, causing her to moan softly in pain.

"I know it hurts," Doc said, aware that she probably didn't understand what he was saying. "But it's the best way I know to clean the wound."

"You can save White Owl's life?"

"I'll do my best."

Matthew dropped to his knees behind Doc, clasping his hands together, his head bowed. Seeing him, John fell to his own knees, in a similar pose. "Dear God, we ask your provision for this woman. Grant our petition for her to be restored to health, if it be Thy will. If it is not Thy will, give her husband and family comfort. Be with the doctor as he treats White Owl, give him the knowledge that he needs. We ask Your blessings over Grey Wolf and his people. In Your precious name we pray, Amen."

"Amen," John and Doc both repeated.

"You ask your god to save White Owl?" Grey Wolf asked Matthew, who nodded.

"Yes. God is watching over everyone, even those who don't believe. He's a God of mercy and love."

"Anything we can do to help, Doc?" John asked as the chief looked thoughtful, considering Matthew's words.

Doc placed the cool cloth on the woman's forehead. "I need to give her a drop of morphine so that she'll be able

to handle it when I cauterize the wound. It's going to be quite painful."

"What is - cau -cau -" Grey Wolf asked, stumbling over the unfamiliar word.

"Cauterize," Doc repeated. "I'm going to press the hot metal against the wound to try to kill the bacteria in it. If you don't want to stay and watch -"

"No, I will stay," Grey Wolf declared.

Doc smiled. "Then I'll need someone to put his hands on her leg when I do it, to keep her from moving too much. Can you do that?"

The chief knelt beside his woman, and reached out to place his hands where Doc instructed him to do so. "Her skin is less fiery," he commented as Running Deer returned with a metal bar, one end wrapped with leather, and the other still red hot.

Doc took it from her, looking at his friends. "Would one of you move to hold her shoulders, please?" He waited for John to kneel and place his hands on White Owl's shoulders as Matthew began to pray once more. "Grey Wolf, please tell her what I'm about to do and why."

Grey Wolf spoke to the woman, who nodded. "She is ready," he announced.

Doc nodded and placed the hot iron along the cut. White Owl's dark eyes closed, and her body went limp. When he lifted the iron, he held his hand over her nose. "She's unconscious. Probably from the pain and the effects of the morphine that I gave her." He took the whiskey and poured it on the wound again, grateful that she wasn't able to feel the pain. Removing bandages and a salve from his bag, he wrapped the leg.

"The evil spirit is gone from her now?"

"As long as she keeps the cut clean - she'll have to change the bandage at least once a day - and it would be best if she doesn't try to walk on the leg for at least seven days - Seven moons," he clarified.

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"Where **are** they?" Artie Hall wondered as he and Charles and their friends sat watching the western horizon. The light was quickly fading, and the supper bell had sounded some time ago, but the boys had remained as sentinels, watching for the return of the five men. "I'm surprised you didn't go with them, Charles."

"I wanted to," Charles confirmed. "But John insisted that I would be needed here to take care of Margaret if something happened."

"Well, if they're not back in another hour," Artie declared, "I'm going to use one of the wagon team and ride out -"

"No, you won't," Charles said, turning to look at the group. "You're mostly the oldest sons - your mothers will need you here."

"Okay, boys," Margaret said, appearing without warning.. "Supper's ready - we're waiting for you all to join us." Seeing the looks of recalcitrance on their faces, she sighed. "I offered to come and get you instead of your mothers," she told the other boys. The boys turned in Charles' direction, and Margaret realized that - although he was younger than most of them, - they were all looking to him for guidance.

"Let's go have supper," Charles finally said, leading the group toward the tables across the circle.

The meal was somber until Charles started talking about some of his friends back in New York, retelling stories that had amused his friends here, and kept their parents from worrying. Some even laughed and smiled as he recounted the story of the monkey man and others.

Margaret sat quietly, watching, and realizing that her little brother had begun to grow up - something that he hadn't really done back in New York. And she knew the reason for it: spending so much time with John Donager.

Lifting her eyes toward the darkened sky, Margaret sent a prayer up that John and the others would return, safe and sound.

From his position across the circle, Overton heard the laughter, and shook his head. "What's wrong, Bossman?" Hanrahan asked.

"Don't they know that something's gone wrong? Those men should have been back by now."

"Ya don't know that. Could be, they're negotiatin'."

"You don't negotiate with Indians, Hanrahan," Overton said in a grim tone.

"Ya know what you're worried about? You're worried about these people wantin' t'go back if something does

happen t'those men."

"Careful, little man," Overton warned. "I don't need your opinions. You're here to cook and nothing else."

Hanrahan chuckled. "Hit a nerve, I guess." Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a flask. "Want a drink?" he offered.

"You know that I don't allow alcohol -"

"Would that include Mr. Jennings' bottle?"

Overton reached out to grab the flask, taking a drink of the whiskey it contained - but as he finished, he turned toward the dark.

"Take another swig," Hanrahan invited. "Smooth Irish Whiskey. Got a friend who-"

"Shut up, you fool," Overton said, handing the flask back to Hanrahan. "Do you hear something? Horses, maybe?"

Hanrahan went still, peering into the darkness. "I *do* hear somethin'," he nodded.

The full moon was rising, casting its light over the landscape. Overton took several steps forward, watching. "It's them!" he declared. "Go tell the others."

====

Across the camp, another spur-of-the moment prayer vigil had begun, but upon hearing someone yelling, Margaret frowned. "It's Hanrahan," she told the others, standing as he came nearer.

"They're back!" he was calling, loping toward the gathering. "They're back!"

Margaret felt herself relax slightly, and saw Rebecca close her eyes. "Thank you, Lord," she murmured as Betsy Collins and Mirabelle Hall joined her and Rebecca. The five women gave a brief prayer of thanks, and then rose to cross as the men returned to the compound.

The men greeted wives and children and friends, all smiles. "Well?" Overton asked, breaking into the myriad of questions. "Are we continuing as we have been or heading north?"

"We continue," John told him when Jennings took their horses and moved away. A cheer went up from the crowd at the news. "They won't be moving for two days at least, so we should be well out of their path by then."

"Thank you, John!" Niles Bradford said.

"I'm not the one who did it," John said, shaking his head. "It was Doc and Rev. Lee. Doc saved the life of the chief's wife, and Rev. Lee praying for her impressed him."

"What took you so long to get back?" Overton wanted to know.

"We had to make sure that White Owl was going to be okay," Carl Collins explained. "And then they were grateful, and insisted on our staying for the celebration."

Arthur smiled. "We couldn't very well refuse the invitation, could we?"

"So we leave here at sunrise tomorrow morning!" Overton said loudly for everyone to hear before moving to where Jennings was leaning against the wagon, drinking from Hanrahan's flask. "Where's your bottle?" Overton asked.

"The doc used it at the Indian camp," he said. "It's not in my saddlebag."

"Don't tell me that they left whiskey -"

"Hold on, there wasn't much in it. And from what he told me, he used almost all of it to clean the woman's wound. Never saw anything like it. And the Chief-? He understood English."

"What was his name?"

"Grey Wolf. Said he and his people were traveling south to join with others for a tribal feast day or something. I only saw women and children. Not a lot of young braves."

Overton stood watching before taking the flask from the scout. "So Donager got lucky this time."

"Bothers you, doesn't it?"

The wagon master drained the flask. "Get some rest. You've got a long day tomorrow."

Jennings caught the empty flask as it was tossed toward him, shaking his head. He returned the silver bottle to Hanrahan, who shook it and frowned. "Don't blame me. Our boss needed a drink. I'll be needing another bottle of that fine Irish tomorrow morning, if you can spare one."

Hanrahan danced a little jig, laughing. "I'll dig one out for ya."

====

"Were you worried about me?" John asked Margaret in a whisper as they lay together in the wagon once the camp had settled for the night.

"Not at all," she insisted, but she moved closer to him. "I knew you'd be back."

John looked at her in the darkness. "How did you know?"

"I trust God. I think He has plans for you - and that those plans wouldn't end here, in the middle of nowhere." She smiled and said, "You would have been proud of Charles."

"Why?"

"He was actually the voice of reason with the other young men this evening. Several of them were making noises about going to find all of you, and Charles didn't join in. He told them not to consider it. I think he's growing up."

"That's one of the good things about being out here. Tends to make a person learn what's important."

"That might be part of it," she agreed. "But I think it's also because of your influence. He sees you being a leader, and he wants to be one, too. You're going to be a wonderful father - when we have a family," she added quickly, resting her head on his shoulder.

"If you say so. Now, we'd better get to sleep. Sunrise comes pretty early, and I have a feeling that Mr. Overton meant it when he said we were pulling out then."

====

"You sure that you want to walk again today?" John asked Margaret as he stepped up into the saddle.

"I asked the same thing, John," Charles told him from the seat of the wagon.

"I'm sure," she informed them. "I'll probably fall back to walk with some of the other ladies." She waved back to where several other wives were gathering. "We keep each other company."

"Okay. When you decide you're tired, let me know and we'll get you into the wagon."

"I will," she promised, tying her sunbonnet on before blowing him a kiss and turning to join her friends.

"Wagons!" Overton called, "Ho!"

====

"We'll hit rain tomorrow," Jennings told Overton and John that evening when the wagon train stopped. "Ground's already muddy, so it will be slow going. And the river crossing will be pretty treacherous."

"Need to pass the word to batten everything down, Donager," Overton said.

"I'll spread the word, but wouldn't it be better to wait on the crossing until the waters recede a bit?" John asked. "Surely we can wait -"

Overton turned to look at the younger man. "Are you trying to tell me how to do my job?"

"Of course not. I just thought -"

"You thought - listen, if we don't keep going, we're risking not finding any water along the route - We have to get through before that happens. So if I say we go, then we go. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," was John's reply as Jennings stared at the ground. "Excuse me. I'll go tell the others."

"You were a little rough on him, weren't you, boss?" Jennings questioned once John was out of earshot.

"Am I going to have trouble with you, now, too?"

"I'm just saying -"

"Don't tell me that you've followed the rest of this bunch and think that John Donager can do no wrong?" Before Jennings could answer, he pressed a fingertip against the scout's chest. "Don't forget that you work for *me*."

Jennings' eyes narrowed, and he turned away, heading toward the horse line. "I need to brush down my horse."

Across the camp, John told the others what was coming. "Sounds like the crossing will be pretty high, so double check anything that might become waterlogged or float away."

"Why can't we wait for the water to go down?" Tim Scott asked.

"If we wait too long, we're risking running out of water in a couple of months when the summer heat hits. We have to stay on schedule."

"And the children will need to ride in the wagons," John told them. "Like they did the last crossings. Only this time, I'd suggest tying them on a rope line so that none of them gets washed into the river."

At that, some of the mothers began a concerned murmur. Sam Longdon reached out to take Anna's hand, and looked around, frowning. "Where's Olivia?"

"She went to get some fresh water like she always does," Anna reminded her husband.

"She's been gone a long time," Sam said, turning to look at their wagon. "She's not over there -"

"I'll go look for her," Anna told him. "You stay here - I'm sure I'll meet her coming back."

But there was no sign of Olivia at the lake. Anna called several times, but there was no response, so she had no recourse but to return to the camp and ask for help to search for the girl.

====

All of the men and the older boys went out to search, while the women stayed in camp to pray for Olivia's safe return.

Charles and John went toward the lake, looking for any sign that the girl might have been there. "There's a footprint here in the water," Charles told his brother-in-law, dropping to study the mark in the muddy bank.

"One of the other children might have left it," John suggested, but Charles shook his head. "No. Olivia's left shoe is worn down on the back heel -" he pointed to the print. "So is this. She was here."

John looked around. "So where did she go? I don't see any prints moving away from the water's edge, do you?" He sighed. "I pray that she didn't fall in -"

"She didn't," Charles said, pointing to a broken stick. "She went this way," he continued, still looking around. Kneeling, he felt the grass. "There's water here - as though she spilled some out of the bucket she was carrying."

John followed the young man, amazed at his ability to track the girl. "This leads away from the camp," he observed. "Why would she have -"

"Maybe she got disoriented," Charles suggested, continuing to look at the ground. "It would be easy to do out here. You can't see the wagons, and we weren't making much noise when she came out, so -"

Looking at the sky, John noted, "It'll be too dark to search soon. Why don't we go get a lantern and come back out -" he began, but Charles shook his head.

"No, I'll stay out here and keep looking. I'll leave a trail so you can catch up to me."

"Okay. Just be careful. There are a lot of things out here that can hurt you."

"Exactly why I'm so worried about Olivia being out here somewhere, alone and maybe hurt. I have to find her, John."

"I'll be back as soon as I can," John told him, turning back toward the camp, leaving Charles to continue along the sporadic trail in the hope that he would find Olivia.

As he went, he pulled up a handful of grass, laying it neatly across his own path, making his passage more

visible. "Olivia?" he called several times, and finally thought he heard a soft moan to his right. The ground began to slope downward into a gully, becoming hard to navigate.

Finding an empty bucket told him that he might be on the right path, and he paused, calling again and listening for a response.

There was none, but Charles followed a straight line from the bucket to the bottom of the gully and found Olivia laying on the ground. Her head was against a small rock, and even in the encroaching darkness, he could see that her left ankle was swollen. "Olivia?" he said, brushing her hair off of her face, but she didn't respond.

Carefully, he lifted her into his arms, keeping a hold on the empty bucket before slowly climbing back up the hillside.

====

"We found her!" John announced to the camp as he led Charles into the circle of wagons.

"Thank God," Sam breathed, moving toward them as John called out again.

"Doc?"

"Here I am," Doc replied, reaching them the same time as Sam and Anna. "Get a blanket, Alice," he told his wife, already examining the girl in Charles' arms.

Alice returned with a blanket that she placed on the ground, and Charles knelt to lay the girl on it while Alice Hawkins took the lantern from John and placed it close by.

Sam confronted Charles. "What did you do to her?!" he asked.

"I didn't do -"

"He found her, Sam," John pointed out.

"Probably because she was where he left her!"

"Sam," Anna said, placing a hand on his arm, trying to calm him down.

He shook off her hold, continuing to face Charles. "You've been following her around since we left Independence!" He came around with his right fist, connecting with Charles' chin, sending the boy backward.

Charles came back to his feet and started forward, only to be held back by John's arm across his chest. "I never touched her," Charles said in a quiet voice, his hand on his aching jaw. "If anyone is to blame, Mr. Longdon, it's you. Sending her out by herself all the time to get water instead of letting her go with the other kids. Letting her carry a bucket of water that weighs almost as much as she does over ground that she didn't know. You've been so worried about her getting hurt that you overlooked the one person who did manage to hurt her: You!" He glanced again at Olivia, taking his hat from Margaret before turning and leaving the circle.

"Charles," his sister said, but he kept going.

"What's wrong with her, Doc?" Sam asked, flexing his hand, revealing that it was probably hurting from what he'd done.

"Her left ankle looks like she turned it badly - I don't think it's broken, though. I'll know more when she regains consciousness. She must have hit her head on something -"

"Charles said her head was against a small rock when he found her," John volunteered.

Doc nodded as the girl whimpered, mumbling, "Hurts."

Kneeling across from Sam and Anna, Doc touched her cheek. "Olivia? Can you hear me?"

The girl's eyes opened, nodding as she winced. "Dr. Hawkins?" she looked up and saw her brother and Anna. "Sam? How did I get back to camp?"

"Charles found you," Anna told her.

"What happened, honey?" Sam asked.

"I got all turned around, couldn't find my way back to the wagons. The bucket was so heavy - I fell. Down a hill, and hurt my ankle -" She moved her leg and winced again. "I tried to climb back up the hill, but I couldn't, and I fell again -" She reached up and felt her head. "I'm sorry, Sam."

"It's not your fault, Livvy," he said, using the nickname that he almost never used as he touched her cheek. "You just worry about getting better."

She blinked as her brother slowly rose to his feet and moved away. "Anna? What's wrong with Sam?"

"He's just going to tell Charles that you're all right," Anna assured the girl. "Now, why don't you let the doctor finish examining you, and then you can get some rest."

====

Charles was dipping a clean towel in the water barrel to use on his sore jaw when he saw Sam Longdon approaching. "Don't think about hitting me again, Mr. Longdon," Charles began.

"I came to apologize for doing it the first time," Sam explained, and Charles turned to look at him, suspicious of the other man's sudden change of attitude. "You were right. I've been so worried about Olivia getting hurt that it blinded me to the real danger. From now on, she'll go out with the other children instead of my making her wait until they're back in camp. And I won't complain if someone else carries the bucket if it's heavy."

"Even if it's me that's doing the carrying?" Charles asked with a crooked smile.

"Even if it's you. She's awake, by the way. She got lost, and fell, hurting her ankle, then tried to climb back up the hill and fell again, hitting her head that time. Doc's looking her over."

"Thank God," Charles breathed, surprising himself. "Would you mind if I spoke to her?"

"I was going to suggest it. She thinks a lot of you."

"I think a lot of her, too. All I ever wanted was to be her friend. I thought she needed one."

"She did. She does." Sam held out his hand. "So does her big brother."

Charles smiled again and grasped the older man's hand, squeezing just every so slightly. "Friends."

Wincing, Sam pulled his hand back. "I deserved that. Okay. Come on, Olivia's waiting."

====

"Hey, you," Charles said, leaning into the Doc's wagon where Olivia was laying on a quilt. "I can't leave you alone for a minute, can I?"

"I guess not. Anna said that you found me?"

"You left a trail that was easy to follow," he told her. "It wasn't hard to find you. Besides, I needed to find my water buddy, didn't I?"

"I can't believe that I got lost. Or that I fell. Twice," she said, touching the bandage around her head.

"You should have seen the crack in that rock -" he teased. "I knew you had a hard head, but -"

Olivia started to laugh, then winced. "Ouch. It hurts to laugh."

"Well, then, I'll let you get some rest. You want something to eat?"

"Mrs. Hawkins is getting some broth for me, I think. Thank you for finding me."

"You're welcome. See you tomorrow." He stepped back to find Sam standing there. "Is she staying here for the night?"

"Doc said that he needs to be able to keep an eye on her because of her head. The ankle's just turned, not broken, so it shouldn't take long to heal."

"What about the crossing tomorrow?"

"Doc's wagon rides higher than most of the others, so she'll stay with them until we're across." He surveyed Charles' face in the firelight. "That chin's already bruising."

"I don't doubt it. But it's not the first time I've gotten slugged in the face. Probably won't be the last." He saw Sam's look of curiosity and smiled, wincing. "Back in New York, I sometimes ran with a pretty tough bunch of guys. More than one took offense at my being a rich kid." He became serious. "That's another reason why I needed to befriend Olivia, Mr. Longdon. Some of those kids would have done what that boy did to your father. I needed to try and make up for that."

"You had nothing to do with what happened to Father, Charles. But thank you for telling me. And it's Sam, okay?"

"Okay. Sam." Charles held out his hand, but this time Sam didn't take it, chuckling and shaking his head. "Sorry. But my hand is *killing* me."

====

The storm clouds were gathering to the west as the wagon train moved over rocky ground in the direction of their next river crossing. Everything had been battened down - and while several women and most of the children were still walking, the plan was for the train to stop when the rain began to load everyone to safety before they reached the river.

Things were going smoothly - until the Longdon wagon hit a rock and there was a loud 'crack', and the wagon's left rear dropped to the ground. "Whoa!" Charles called, stopping the wagons behind it.

John, hearing the noise, stopped his own wagon and jumped down, running back to examine the problem. "Are you and Anna okay?" he asked.

"We're fine," Anna assured him. "I'm just glad that Livvy's in Doc's wagon instead of ours."

"What's the hold up?" Overton demanded to know as he rode into the crowd. "That rain's almost here -" he glanced at the wagon and frowned. "What happened?"

"The wheel broke," Mike Lawrence said.

"How long to repair it?" Overton wanted to know.

"Needs a new wheel," John explained.

"I have a spare wheel," Niles Bradford said. "But getting it on -"

"How long?!" Overton's bellow caused everyone to turn and look up at him.

"An hour at the least," was John's response.

"Okay. Figure out which two men will stay behind and help him change it, the rest of us will go on -"

"No," John said, as murmurings of disapproval went through the crowd.

"What do you mean, no, Donager? We're heading into rain, and need to get to the river to get across before-"

"We'll all wait and go together, Mr. Overton," John told him.

"Listen, Donager -"

"No, **you** listen. We're all in this together, and we are **not** leaving one wagon behind to fend for itself. If we can't get the wagon repaired before it gets too late, then we'll just stay here tonight and cross the river tomorrow."

"After it rains all night, we won't get across that river before the end of the week!" Overton declared. "You people did hire me to lead this wagon train, right?"

"We did," Matthew Lee confirmed. "But we're also being lead by a Higher Power, Mr. Overton. And evidently **He** wants us to stay here for a little while."

"You all feel that way?" Overton asked, looking around at the faces that looked up at him as he sat on the horse. There was a general consensus of nods in answer to the question. "Okay. Just remember it when we hit the heat of the summer and can't find any water because we were delayed here."

"The Lord will provide, as He has already done," Matthew pointed out.

Overton shook his head and backed his horse out of the crowd. "Just- get it done!"

"Anna, why don't you go and get in our wagon with Olivia and Alice?" Doc suggested, removing his jacket and rolling up his sleeves. "Okay, gentlemen, let's get to work!"

Back at the lead wagon, Overton got out of the saddle, muttering to himself. "Crazy. They're all crazy. And I'm crazy for agreeing to lead them out here."

Hanrahan stood beside the wagon, listening and watching as the wagon master began to loosen the cinch on his horse's saddle. "You're not goin' over there t'help?" he asked. "I would'a thought that was your job, you bein'

wagon master an'all."

Overton stopped what he was doing and glared at the cook. "I don't need your lip, little man. Make yourself useful and get me some jerky. With that rain coming in, you're not going to have time to cook anything."

Hanrahan chuckled as he turned to the wagon. "Then y'better tell them that," he said, nodding toward the other end of the line of wagons where a fire was being kindled by one of the women.

Following the Irishman's gaze, Overton shook his head. "It won't last long." He nodded to the west. "That rain'll be here before they're finished changing that wheel."

====

"I made some coffee," Rebecca Lee said, bringing the pot over, followed by Margaret and several other wives laden with cups. "Betsy's heating some soup in case anyone wants some, otherwise, we have some cold ham and jerky -"

"Thank you, Mrs. Lee," Charles said, grabbing a slice of ham as he looked at the sky. "It's almost here," he announced.

"And we're almost done," Arthur said. "If you'll help getting the wagon lifted up -"

Charles stuffed the rest of the ham into his mouth and grabbed the back of the lever they were using - "Ready!"

The wagon lifted, the wheel was slid onto the axle and the hub attached as the first drops of rain began to fall. "Here it comes!" someone called out.

"Come back to our wagon, Sam," Doc said as everyone else began to scatter.

"Thanks, everyone!" Sam called, following Doc back to the wagon where Alice, Anna, and Olivia were waiting.

"The three of you might as well stay here until this is finished," Alice said, handing them something to eat. "We have enough room."

"How are you doing, Olivia?" Sam asked his sister.

"I'm not as dizzy," she told him. "But my ankle still hurts a lot."

Doc smiled. "It'll get better."

"And when it does, you won't have to worry about going out alone to get water," Sam told the girl.

"I won't?"

"Nope. Because from now on, you'll be going out with the other boys and girls. I guess there *is* safety in numbers."

Olivia was smiling. "Do you mean it, Sam?"

"Yep. And if your friend Charles wants to carry the bucket for a little while, I won't say a word about it."

====

Jennings rode up to the lead wagon and went to the back, still on his horse. Lifting the flap, he peered inside. Seeing Overton and Hanrahan playing two-handed poker, he frowned. "What's going on? I thought you were wanting to get to the river today!"

"That was the plan," Overton said. "Until Longdon's wagon lost a wheel and they all insisted on staying to help him fix it. You might as well tie the horse up and settle in for the night. I don't think we'll be moving until the rain lets up."

"That river's gonna be a bear to cross -"

"I told 'em that. Not sure why I'm here, since no one listens to me."

Jennings caught the glint in Hanrahan's eyes. "I'm listening. Be right back. Deal me into the next hand."

"None of them do!" Overton yelled after him, waving toward the other wagons.

====

The rain continued until well after noon the next day, putting the wagons a full day behind. Overton sloshed through the mud to tell the drivers and riders, "Okay, here's the plan. We'll head out to a spot as close to the river as we can - and then wait for it to go down enough to cross safely. I want every wheel inspected before we pull out in fifteen minutes. It'll be slow going because of the mud. Watch out for puddles of water. They could be deeper than they look - and the last thing we need is another wheel to get broken. Fifteen minutes," he repeated, then turned back toward the lead wagon and his horse. He'd sent Jennings out as soon as the rain let up at all to scout out the trail down to the river, but he wasn't sure how long it would take the man to get back.

Matthew Lee turned to look at John as the wagon master stomped away as best he could in the mud. "Think we should tell him?" he asked.

"That we all checked our wagon wheels as soon as we could?" John questioned, then shook his head. "He'd just as likely ride out and leave us to find our way on our own."

Matthew chuckled. "You're probably right."

"We might as well look like we're doing what he told us to do. I'll spread the word for the front wagons if you'll take the back."

"On my way."

Margaret looked around the side of the wagon. "What did Mr. Overton have to say?" she asked.

"That we'll see what the river looks like when we get there, and make decision then about crossing. Said it would slow going because of the mud, and that he wanted the wheels checked on every wagon."

"You already did that, didn't you?" she asked as he climbed up onto the seat with her.

"We all did," he nodded. "But we didn't tell him that. Where's Charles?"

"He took the horse back to see how Olivia's doing today. Saving her life seems to have made him feel even more responsible for her than he did before."

"Another sign that he's growing up, I suppose. If nothing else, Olivia being hurt has made that brother of hers realize how unfair he's been up to now."

"Here he comes," Margaret announced as the call went out from the lead wagon.

"Wagons, Ho!"

====

The wagons were within sight of the swollen river when Overton gave the signal to circle the wagons for the night. Hanrahan turned the lead wagon and rolled it around to enclose the encampment - when the back wheel's spokes gave way, leaving the wagon tilted.

Hanrahan peered around the canvas as Overton rode over, saying, "I thought you checked the wheels!"

"An' I was thinkin' that you'd checked 'em!" the Irishman declared, standing up to jump down, but Overton held out a hand to stop him.

"Don't! As short as you are, you'd sink up to your neck in this mud! Just - stay there. I'll - handle it!" The mud wasn't that bad, but Overton was clearly frustrated - and possibly a little embarrassed.

"Do you have a spare wheel?" John asked.

"Yeah. It's tied under the wagon."

"Charles! Can you get under there and get the spare wheel while we start setting up?"

"Sure!"

"I'll help," Artie offered, moving around the wagon with Charles, since it would be easier to get the wheel from the higher side.

"Look," Overton said, "I can handle this -"

"You don't have to- I take that back. Would you mind loosening that hub if you can?"

The women were picking their way across whatever dry spots they could find, setting up camp while the men went to work repairing the wheel.

"Try to stay out of the mud, children!" someone called out.

"Aww! Rats!" one of the boys was heard to say.

Lillian Hall came over to the ladies, asking, "Mrs. Hawkins, would it be okay for me and some of the other kids to go over and talk to Olivia?"

"Some of the other children and *I*, dear," Rebecca corrected automatically without looking up from the fire.

Mirabelle Hall smiled. "Of course. It *is* okay, isn't it, Alice?"

"Anna's with her, but I'm sure she won't mind. Try not to get the inside of the wagon *too* muddy, though."

"Yes, ma'am," Lillian said, leading the three girls with her toward the Hawkins' wagon. Standing on tip-toe, she looked over the tailgate to where Olivia was sitting talking to her sister in law. "Hi, Olivia!" she said. "Mrs. Longdon."

"Hello. Lillian," Anna said, glad to see the smile on Olivia's face.

"Lift me up, Lillian," Joan Smith called. "I want to say hello."

Lillian rolled her eyes, but she lifted each of the smaller girls up so that they could hold onto the tailgate and see their friend. "How're you doing?" Joan asked.

"I'm better. My ankle's not as swollen as it was. But it's really bruised."

"I turned my ankle once," Jenny, Joan's sister said. "It seemed like forever for it to get better."

Anna rose to her knees. "Just a second, girls, why don't you step down and I'll lower the tailgate for you to sit on?" Sticking her head out of the wagon, she asked Alice if that would be all right.

"That's a good idea, Anna," Alice called out. "Wish I'd thought of it."

Anna opened the tail-gate and lifted the smaller girls up, reminding them, "Keep your feet dangling off the edge and not in the wagon. I'm going to go help with supper." She gave Olivia a hug. "See you later, Livvy," she said,

exiting the wagon through the front, where she had left her own muddy shoes in the footwell.

"Livvy?" Joan questioned after Anna had gone.

"That's what Anna calls me. Daddy called me that, too. Sam's always used my full name. *Almost* always," she corrected, recalling his having used it after she'd gone missing.

"Which do you prefer?" Lillian wanted to know.

"Olivia, I think. But I answer to either one."

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It was late that night when John and several others found themselves standing, looking to the south. Charles stuck his head out of the wagon. "What's going on?" he asked.

"We heard something out that way, sounded like a loud clap of thunder."

Charles looked up. "There's no clouds," he said.

"The ground shook," Lionel Garnett added. "Never heard anything like it."

"I have," Arthur Hall said. "An earthquake back in Missouri."

"You're not saying it was a quake, are you?" someone else called out.

"It was just a slide caused by the rain," Gene Overton yelled from inside his own wagon. "Happens all the time out here. Now get back to sleep!"

"A slide?" Garnett muttered, frowning.

"Rocks and mud, most like," John replied. "Night!"

====

John woke early, intending to re-inspect the wheels on the wagons, but when he finished the outside wheels on his own wagon, he turned and looked toward the river - and stopped in his tracks. "What on earth?"

"John?" Margaret called.

"Out here, Meg." More loudly, he called, "Overton!"

Several faces appeared around the edges of the wagon covers, all of them curious about what might be happening. Overton came out of his wagon, wincing as he dropped into a puddle, and stalked in John's direction. "What's your problem, Donager?" he asked, sounding more than a little put out, possibly because he'd still been asleep, as evidenced by his uncombed hair and hastily donned clothing.

"The river," John said, pointing in that direction.

Where the river had been flowing swiftly out of its banks the previous afternoon, now, it was a relative trickle of water, almost placid. "I'll be -" Overton began.

"Jennings is ridin' in!" Hanrahan called out, pointing.

Overton turned as the scout rode into the circle. John joined them, as did several others. "I expected you last night," he told Jennings.

"Sorry. I had some trouble -" he turned to look at the river. "I see you've noticed."

"Couldn't help but notice," Overton said.

"Darnest thing I've ever seen, boss," Jennings said. "There was a massive slide this morning - I guess the rain loosened the soil - anyway, all of that went into the river. Created a dam, blocking the water. Now, it won't last forever, since the water is pooling in behind it, eating it away, so if we're going to get these wagons across, we need to go now!"

"It's a miracle!" someone called out. "Thank you, God!"

A flurry of "Amen"s, "Praise the Lord" and "Thank you God"s followed before Overton's lips thinned and he turned to call out, "We can pray after we get across! Let's get these wagons moving, people! You have ten minutes to be hitched up and ready to go or we'll end up stuck here when that dam breaks!"

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With Jennings riding behind the wagons, they crossed the river, going well past the high water mark on the other bank as Overton sat on his horse, urging them onward. "Keep going! Don't want to be too close when that water breaks through!" As the last wagon lagged behind the others, he yelled,

"Get that team moving, Baker!"

"Think one of 'em threw a shoe," Slim Baker replied as the outside horse was limping. "If I push him, he could hurt himself!"

"If you don't get him going, you're gonna be the one who's hurt!" Going over to the team, Overton grabbed that horse's rig. "Get up there, you mangy -"

Slim flicked the reins, making the horses take the incline a bit faster than Overton expected, and the wagon master was dragged off of his horse, landing on his back in the shallow water. Sputtering, he sat up as Jennings handed him the reins to his mount. "It's not Saturday night, boss," the scout said, trying not to grin.

"Shut up, you idiot," Overton growled, stepping back into the saddle. Sending the animal into a trot, he went back toward the front wagon as they circled. "We'll stay here for the day," he announced, "so that Mr. Baker can get another shoe on that horse. We pull out tomorrow at sunrise. No later! We have to make up some time!" That said, he climbed into the back of the wagon to find some dry clothes.

Matthew Lee didn't bother to wait for anyone to exit their wagon. He stood up and removed his flat-brimmed hat, bowing his head. "Almighty God, we give thanks for what can only be called a miracle, ensuring our safe passage crossing this river... "

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"You don't think he's hurt, do you?" Slim Baker asked Niles Bradford as the man looked at the horse. John was working at a makeshift forge to repair the shoe that had come loose, and several of the boys in the camp were gathered around, fascinated by the sight.

"No, I think he'll be fine once John gets that shoe back on."

"Whew!" Slim chuckled. "Did you see it when Overton fell into that water? Took ev'rything I had in me not to bust a gut laughin'!"

"You took a chance that he might have been hurt, Slim," John told the man. "That wouldn't have been good for any of us."

"Yeah, I know. But I betcha he'll think twice before grabbing anyone else's horse, won't he?"

Niles turned toward the boys, shooing them away. "I'm sure your folks have chores for you to do," he said. "George, see if your mom needs some help with anything."

"Yessir, Pa," George Bradford said with a sigh as he and the others scattered.

"It's not a good idea to talk that way about Mr. Overton around the children, Slim."

"Guess you're right," Slim agreed. "But since they're gone, will you admit that it was hard to keep from laughing?"

"I thought it was more amusing when he stood up and glared at poor Mr. Jennings," John noted, never looking up from where he was bent over with the horse's leg between his. "Slim, you want to hold this beast's head so he won't try to nip me again?"

Slim chuckled and moved to put his arm around the horse's neck. "Did he do that when you shod him the last time?"

"He tried. I got Charles to hold him for me." He placed the nails into the hoof. "There. I guess I need to do a check on the other animals - Niles, would you mind asking around, seeing if anyone's noticed any problems?"

"Be glad to."

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"How much longer are you going to wait to tell him?" Alice Hawkins was asking someone as John neared the wagon.

"I know that I can't wait much longer, but, well, I'm sure he'll be worried -"

"Probably. But that's going to happen no matter when you do it. You're not going to be able to keep it a secret for much longer."

"That's another thing. With five of us, poor Mr. Overton's not going to be happy about this, either."

Easily recognizing Meg's voice, John paused to listen. "Still, it's nothing that you can do anything about. He'll just have to deal with the fact that five babies will be born around the time we get to where we're going."

John's mouth fell open, and then he smiled as he realized Meg was carrying his child. Their child. A baby. Suddenly, he took a deep breath, as thoughts about how dangerous this journey they had undertaken was filled his mind - especially for a woman carrying a baby.

"Did you hear something?" Meg asked.

"Maybe -"

A second later, Meg's head appeared around the edge of the cover. "John," she said. His smile must have told her that he'd overheard the conversation. "Are you okay?" she asked him.

"I'll be going now," Alice said, jumping to the ground. "Supper will probably be ready soon," she told them, fully aware that neither of her friends had heard her. "Well, I'm sure someone will ring the bell. Hopefully you'll hear that."

John carefully lifted Meg out of the wagon. "I love you, Meg."

"And I love you," she said. "I'm sorry, I should have told you -"

"You're right. I *am* worried about all the things that can happen. But I trust that God knows what he's doing." He lowered his head to give her a kiss, feeling the changes in her body as he pulled her closer. "Now I understand why you've been trying to keep me at arm's length. Did I hear you say there are four others?"

"Yes. Susan Scott, Clara Lansing, Lucy Lawrence, Bonnie Smith, and me."

"Do their husbands know?"

Margaret looked slightly embarrassed as she admitted, "I'm the last one."

John shook his head, and laughed. "I *almost* feel sorry for Overton," he told her. "But I think I'm looking

forward to his reaction when he hears the news."

"Alice told me that Doc said the same thing," Meg said as the supper bell began to ring. Touching his cheek, she said, "Let's go. I'm hungry."

"Of course you are. You're eating for two."

Holding her hand in his, John led her across the circle to the table and saw her seated.

Reverend Lee stood and bowed his head. "Let us pray..."

The End