

The Donager Saga: Beginnings
By Nancy Eddy
Episode 5
Year One

Margaret stood with Kevin in her arms as she watched Mariana hanging the laundry. "I *can* help, you know," she said.

"Your husband hired me to do the work around the house so that you would not have to do it," Mariana said. "He would not be pleased to return and find you hanging the wash." She looked around, but found no sign of Margaret. Shrugging, she turned back to her task.

The winter had been less harsh than expected, with only a few days of snowfall before an early spring. Crops had been planted, several buildings had been finished in town, and John Donager had made good on his promise of a new, bigger house, allowing Pedro and Mariana to return to their adobe cabin after spending eight months in the modified barn.

"Give me some of those clothes pins, please," Margaret said, and Mariana jumped, surprised not to have heard her return.

Looking around, she asked, "Where is the little one?"

With a grin, Margaret pointed toward the metal wash pan that Mariana had emptied after finishing the clothes. It was deep enough and big enough to keep the crawling baby from escaping. "Over there. Now I need some pins, please," she said, holding out her hand for the wooden clothes pins.

Reaching into the pocket of her apron, Mariana placed some pins into her hand. "Your husband will not be happy with me."

"I'll handle my husband," Margaret assured her, placing a towel on the line before securing it. "He tends to forget that I grew up with servants doing everything, and that's not what I expected out here."

"Or perhaps he does recall how you grew up, and does not think that you should have to do these things."

"He knows better than that. What was it like for you growing up?"

"Apache men and women do not interact much. The women do not speak unless given permission. They cook, and clean and tend to the children, usually as a group. I was luckier than most - my mother being related to the chief - and then saving the life of his son. We were allowed more freedom."

"Is that how you came to meet Pedro?"

"I found him on the desert, near death, and dragged him back to our camp. Cochise was not pleased, but because of the debt he owed my mother, he spared Pedro's life. While I was taking care of Pedro, I came to care greatly for him. I learned that his mother was an American who met his father when he sold *her* father some horses."

"So you married Pedro and left the tribe?"

Mariana hesitated. "Cochise only agreed to the shaman joining us as man and wife if we agreed to move here, to this land - and to take care of it."

"Is it that late already?" Margaret wondered, looking behind Mariana. "Charles is riding in." John had been having him work the mine half-days so that he could help John and Pedro in the afternoon.

Bringing his horse to a stop near the two women, Charles slid off, reaching down to say hello to his nephew. "Had a good morning," he said with a grin as he pulled three bags of gold out of his saddlebags. "I almost didn't want to stop digging to go help with branding. There's so much gold out there - we're going to have to start carrying it in buckets!"

Smiling, Margaret picked up Kevin while Mariana finished with hanging the wash. "I'll go pack the lunch for you to take out to Pedro and John," she said, leaving brother and sister alone.

Charles watched her go back to the house, shaking his head. "Sometimes, I think she doesn't like me."

"Nonsense!" she declared, balancing Kevin on her hip before slipping her arm through his. "Let's go put that gold into the strongbox, and then you can wash up." she suggested.

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Inside the house, they both went into the room that John used as his ranch office, and Charles lifted the top from the window seat where the wood and metal strong-box was hidden. Margaret pulled the key from around her neck and handed it to him so that he could open the box. "I'll be glad when the safe that John ordered arrives," she told him, watching as he placed the three new bags of gold on top of the others. "I'm tired of having to hold onto that key. I'm always afraid that I'm going to lose it."

"It's almost full," Charles noted. "It won't be long before he has to take it over to Mr. Garnett to be assayed."

"I think the plan is for Mr. Garnett to come here and do it," she said. "Go get cleaned up so you can help with the branding."

"Yes, ma'am," he replied, handing the key back to her.

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"You say the vein you found is how wide?" John asked Charles as the three men ate the ham sandwiches that Mariana had sent with the young man.

"A foot wide, at least. And it's not showing any sign of disappearing. We might need to put in some more timbers soon."

John gave a low whistle. "I knew there was gold there, but, I didn't count on this. What do you think, Pedro?"

"I think that the people in town will be very happy," Pedro said, standing up. "Are you ready to learn how to brand a cow, Charles?"

Charles stood up as well. "Yes, sir!"

"First, you have to catch the cow with your rope," he said, picking up his own rope. Slowly approaching the cow nearest to them, he finally tossed the looped end toward the animal. It went around the cow's neck, and Pedro moved quickly to tie the animal's four feet together. "Is the iron ready, John?"

John, who had been standing beside the fire, picked up the length of iron bar with one of his gloved hands, revealing that the brand was glowing a bright red because of the heat. "I'd say so." He carried the iron over to the cow and pressed the end against the animal's hindquarter.

The smell of hair and flesh being scorched hit Charles' nose, and he backed away. "Oh wow. Does it always stink like that?"

"You get used to it," Pedro told him, releasing the cow's legs and the rope to let the animal go free. "Why don't you get the next one, John?"

John, aware that Charles was watching, focused on what he was doing. He threw the rope - and missed. Turning, he shot a look of warning toward the young man, but still saw him hide a grin. "Why don't you see if you can do better?" he suggested, handing him the rope.

Charles took the rope and surveyed the cattle for a moment before heading for one with long, very pointed horns and a mean look in its eyes. He took a few steps forward, watching the animal for any sign of movement.

"Maybe you should start with that calf over there," John said. "Might be easier -"

Determination set Charles' jaw as he tossed the loop in the rope over the cow's head, clearing the horns just as Pedro had done. Feeding out more rope, he tossed it over the cow's back to encircle its legs, making short work of tying the hooves together. Turning Charles saw John's mouth was hanging open. "You were saying, brother-in-law?" he asked as Pedro started laughing. "Show me how to use that iron, Pedro," he said, going over to the fire.

John watched as Charles, under Pedro's watchful eye, branded the cow, then released it. "Charles!" he finally said. "Where on earth did you learn how to do that?"

"If you'll remember," Charles explained, "I spent quite a bit of time out in the barn during the winter - to give you and Margaret a little privacy?"

"Yes, and I've thanked you for that - but -"

"Pedro taught me how to rope and tie a cow then," he finished quickly.

John turned toward his foreman. "And you never said a word, just let me think that he had no idea -"

"Sorry, jefe," Pedro said, but he was still smiling. "He asked me not to tell you, to let him do it."

Suddenly John began to laugh, and the other two joined in. "Come on. Let's get this done -" he stopped as he saw a line of horses ridden by uniformed men. "What's this about?" he questioned.

"Soldiers," Pedro said. "Do not look, but we have eyes in the mountains, watching."

Charles, who was still facing the mountains, spoke softly. "Twenty or so of Cochise' braves up there, John. Probably wanting to see how you handle this. Should I go get my rifle from my horse?"

"No. That will only escalate things. Let's just wait and - welcome our guests."

They waited until the soldiers stopped, scattering the cattle they had painstakingly gathered. "A half day's work, wasted," John said, looking up at the man at the front of the line. "We'll have to finish branding tomorrow now."

"Forgive us, senior," the man apologized, but he didn't sound in the least regretful. "I am Capitan Luis Sanchez of the Army of Mexico. You are an Americano. What is your name?"

"John Donager," he answered.

"And why are you here, senior?"

"Branding cattle," John answered. "At least, we *were*, before you and your men -"

"Sr. Donager, I think that you deliberately misunderstand my question. Why are you in Mexico?" he wanted to know.

"We live here," John answered.

"On land that has long been claimed by the Apache? Their chief would never allow this."

"As you say, it's their land, they can allow anyone they want to live here, Capitan."

"I do not think that you heard me correctly. I said that the Apache *claim* the land. My government does not recognize this claim. The land belongs to us. And we have given no one permission to live here. Especially not Americanos. My government is at war with yours. I would be within my rights to arrest you as enemies of the government."

John's relaxed stance changed as he drew himself upright. "I am a blood brother to Cochise." It wasn't a lie. After some of Cochise' braves had chased the first stagecoach into Providence from Mesa City, John had asked for another pow-wow with the Chief. For another milk-cow every six months, and sharing blood, the agreement to allow the freight wagons and stages to pass had been granted. "I have his chief's lance in my lodge. If you do not retreat, immediately, all it will take is for me to lift my hand to call them down on you and your men -" he moved as though to raise his hand.

The captain jumped back onto his horse, his dark eyes scanning the mountains behind John and Pedro. "You are not welcome in Mexico, Sr. Donager. I would suggest returning to your own country without delay."

John's hand inched higher, but no verbal response came.

The horsemen followed their Captain back toward the south, finally disappearing from view. "Will they

come back, Pedro?" John asked.

"I do not think so. Capitan Sanchez has reason not to face Cochise in battle."

John released his breath and lowered his arm. "What reason?" Charles asked.

"Cochise has promised that if he sees Luis Sanchez again, the Capitan will lose his scalp to his blade. The Capitan killed one of the children of Cochise," he explained.

"That was well-played, John," Charles said as John sat down on a rock.

"Glad you thought so." He took a deep breath before standing and turning to look toward the mountains. "Our friends are gone."

"They are still there," Pedro told him. "But they will not be seen."

"Do you think he meant it, John?" Charles asked. "About them being at war with the United States?"

"I have no idea," John answered.

"Why don't we try to gather a few head and get more of the branding done?" Charles suggested.

"Can you two handle rounding them up?" John asked. "I'll stoke the fire back up to heat the iron." He watched as they rode off in the direction of the cattle, then lifted his head to the sky. "Thank you, Lord, for keeping us safe - and for saving the life of Captain Sanchez at this time. I know, Lord, that it is not my shadow that keeps these people with me safe - but Yours. Help me to always remember that. In Your name, Amen."

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As they rode into town for church a few days later, Charles caught sight of Olivia carefully carrying what looked like a heavy pot toward the Cafe. "I'll catch up with you," he told the others as he turned his horse into the hitching posts and slid off in front of the girl. "Here. Let me take that - Ouch!" he yelped as his fingers touched bare metal. "That's hot!"

"Yes, it is, silly," she said. "Why do you think I'm carrying it with towels? And I can carry it, thank you."

"What is it?" he asked as he studied his thumb. "I'm lucky that I have a callous there or it would have blistered."

"Baked squash - from our garden," she told him. "Anna used a recipe that her mother gave her."

"Why is it still so hot?" he asked, opening the door to the cafe for her. "It's a long ride from your place into town."

"It was wrapped in some quilts with some warmed rocks around it," she explained as Mrs. Collins came over with a towel in her hands to take the pot from her.

"I've got it, Olivia," she said. "You two had better get to church."

"Yes, ma'am," Charles nodded, remembering just in time to remove his hat as Olivia giggled. "Com'on," he said to her, taking her elbow and leading her outside. "Have y'all seen any strangers out your way?"

She looked thoughtful. "No. It's just been us. Why?"

"I'll tell you why after church," he said as Artie came over to them and Olivia continued on to her brother and sister-in-law.

"Hey," his friend said, "You wanna go fishing after dinner?"

"Sure!"

"Charles!" John called. "Come on!"

For the first service in the new building, most of the boys had sat together - but their giggling and whispering had led to a decision that families should sit together instead. "Coming, John!" he called back, exchanging grins with Artie. "Still your fault, friend," he insisted. "If you hadn't gotten the giggles -"

"Me?! It wasn't me, I keep telling you -"

"Charles!"

"On my way!" he said, turning his back on Artie and moving to join the family to enter the church.

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Coming out of the church, John caught up with Leon Carter. "Leon, can you call a meeting of the council while we're waiting for dinner?"

Soon after the town of Providence was named, it was decided that they needed a town council to make decisions so that the entire town wouldn't have to gather when something needed to be done. John had refused to serve - even though he had gotten more than enough votes - because "I think the council should be made up of only citizens living *in* the town." So Leon, Joe Baker, Paul Grover, Niles, and Lou Smith had been elected to serve, with that group choosing the owner of the Mercantile to be their spokesman.

Now, Leon frowned. "Something wrong, John?"

"We had a visit from some Mexican army troops the other day, and I think it would be a good idea if -"

"Oh. Wouldn't it be better to call a town meeting, then?"

"If you think we should."

"With everyone already in town - it's as good time as any. How about after dinner?" Leon suggested.

"It's up to you. You're head of the council."

"Only because you refused to take the job," Leon pointed out with a wry grin.

"And you were the perfect man for the job," John told him. "I'll help spread the word about the meeting," he offered, stopping in his tracks as three uniformed men rode into town. "What in the -" he shook his head, glancing at Leon. "At least they look like US Cavalry."

Letting Leon take the lead as several others joined them, John looked up at the Lieutenant. "Welcome to Providence, Lieutenant," Leon said.

The man, who didn't look too much older than John, smiled in response. "I'm Lt. Carl Evers, US Cavalry stationed in Denver, Colorado." Pointing to the other two men, he said, "This is Sgt. Cramer and Trooper Stanton. What did you call this place?" he asked.

"Providence," Leon said again. "I'm Leon Carter. I'm head of the Town Council." Turning toward John, he continued, "This is John Donager -"

"Excuse me, - Carter wasn't it? What are you people doing here? You are aware that you're in Mexican territory, aren't you?"

"We are. Why don't you and your men join us for Sunday dinner, Lt. Evers, and we'll talk."

Evers looked as though he was confronting a madman - or perhaps a town full of them - as he told the others, "Dismount." Getting off of his Army-issued mount, he waited for Trooper Stanton to take the reins before removing his gloves. "Find food and water for the horses, Trooper," Evers said.

"Yes, sir," Pvt. Stanton said.

Niles stepped forward. "The livery stable is down this way," he told the young man and lead the way.

"Our question, Lieutenant, is-" John said, finally breaking his silence, "What are *you* doing here?"

"We're a scouting party, sent to find out how many Mexican soldiers are posted here on the northern border." He paused before continuing. "We're at war with Mexico. Have been since April. You're all American?" he asked as they started to walk toward Front Street - as the eastern road was now called, with the sergeant following on their heels.

"For the most part, yes," Leon answered. "Mr. Donager here has a Mexican couple working for him on his ranch."

Evers looked at John again. "Your ranch?"

"The Diamond D," he said. "Starts right about the end of this street, then goes to the south for almost a hundred miles."

"We had no idea that there might be any Americans living here."

"Mesa City's a two day ride to the west," John told him.

"We knew about Mesa City. I meant *here*. Haven't the Apaches always claimed this valley and the land around it?"

"Cochise himself gave us his permission for us to settle here," John told him.

"Cochise - the Chief of the Chiricahua Apache? *That* Cochise?"

"Is there another?" John smiled, nodding. "We have a peace treaty with him." He held out his right hand to reveal the now-healed scar. "He hates the white man - but at the moment, he hates the Mexicans even more."

The dinner bell began to ring, and John said, "We can finish our discussion over dinner," stepping out to lead the clearly confused Army officer to the trestle tables that stood in the middle of the street.

Usually, family sat with family, but due to the special circumstances, John, Rev. Lee, and Doc joined the town council as they sat with the Lieutenant. Without turning around, Lt. Evers said, "Sergeant, you and Pvt. Stanton find a plate and enjoy the meal."

Sgt. Cramer snapped a salute before going in search of the private, only to stop as Rev. Lee rose to stand before the tables. "Brothers and sisters, let us bless this food and this day." Heads were bowed as he began to speak. "Our Father - we thank You for this beautiful day, and for the opportunity to enjoy the fellowship. Thank You for the visitors in our midst, protect them as they go about their work. We ask now for Your blessing on this food, and on the hands that prepared it, and be with each family represented here today. In Your precious name we pray, Amen."

As several of the women began serving the meal, Lt. Evers asked, "You said that you have a treaty with the Apache against the Mexicans?"

"With Cochise," John confirmed. "A mutual protection pact, in a way. He'll help us fight any Mexicans that come up here and try to move us, and we'll help him in the same way - The Apache are being forced to remain here in the northern part of their range because the Mexican government forced them off of the southern grounds."

Evers glanced up as Mariana placed a plate of fresh bread on the table. He smiled at her. "Thank you."

"You are welcome," she replied, moving to place the other plate she was holding further down.

"She's married," Niles informed the young officer, pointing to where Pedro was seated. "That's her husband."

Forcing his attention back to the matter at hand, Evers asked, "What happens to the treaty if the United States takes control of this section of land?"

"Is that going to happen?" Doc asked.

"Well, Mexican troops did attack some of our troops in Texas, and that resulted in a declaration of war between the two countries. That's why we're here - to find out if they're moving north toward Colorado."

Have you seen any Mexican troops in the area?"

Most of the men shook their heads, but John spoke up. "We saw a small troop two days ago," he said almost nonchalantly. "Pass the bread, please, Leon. Thank you."

"How many?" Evers asked. "Where?"

"Oh, ten to fifteen riders. They were lead by a Captain Sanchez, who informed me that we weren't welcome in Mexico and suggested that we return to the United States."

"You hadn't mentioned anything about that, John," Niles noted.

"I was going to, but the Lieutenant arrived before I could. They went back south once they realized that they wouldn't just be facing us if they tried to move us by force. It seems that he and Cochise know each other. In fact, Cochise has promised to personally remove the good Captain's scalp if he ever sees him again."

Evers' eyes widened in shock. "Why?"

"Apparently Sanchez was responsible for the death of one of the chief's children."

"Wow," Joe Baker breathed. "I think, if I was that Mexican Captain, I'd give Cochise a *very* wide berth."

"Do you think they'll be back?" Evers questioned. "If they were sent up here to look around -"

"You didn't see the expression on the man's face when he realized who was up in those mountains," John told him. "I doubt they'll be back. There's no reason for them to. The only thing of value in this valley is the people who have chosen to make their homes here."

"You still haven't told me how that happened, Mr. Donager."

The remainder of the meal was punctuated by the story of their journey west - and decision to stay in the valley - everything *except* the fact that they were sitting on a pile of gold. "After our wagon master died suddenly, it just made sense for us to stay," John finished.

"It was all John's idea," Paul Grover said. "His dream was to build a cattle ranch - then decided that we could build a town as well."

"Without a wagon-master, we were stuck here anyway," Doc said. "John made sense."

"We saw the grave back up the trail," Evers nodded. "I suppose that's where you buried your wagon-master?"

"Yes." The faces were somber now. "We've discussed moving him down here - we're planning on using the land beside the church for a cemetary, maybe having Niles there build him a real coffin. We'll probably do it at some point."

"*If* we can get everyone to agree," Rev. Lee reminded him, then turned to Evers. "Some of us aren't

sure about a disturbing the grave."

"That's understandable, I suppose," Evers nodded, his eyes widening as a plate of chocolate cake was placed before him. "Oh."

"Dig in, Lieutenant," Doc told him. "You haven't lived until you've tasted one of Betsy Collins' chocolate cakes."

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After dinner, Charles found Olivia standing near where Private Stanton was talking to some of the young men. "I thought you were going to help with the dishes?" he asked her. When she didn't respond, he deliberately stepped into her line of sight. "Hey."

Olivia sighed, trying to move her head to see past him, but he kept blocking her gaze. "What did you ask me?"

"Never mind," he answered, perching on the edge of a wooden crate. "What's so fascinating?"

"He's so handsome," she sighed.

Charles frowned, glancing at the man. "If you say so."

"I guess it's the uniform," she confessed. "I remember seeing soldiers back East. They were everywhere."

"I think Anna was looking for you," he told her. "Something about helping with the dishes."

"Okay," she said, sighing again as she walked away, leaving Charles to stand there, glaring at the young soldier that had held her attention, wondering how much longer the man and his superiors would be in Providence. Olivia had just turned 13, and was, in Charles' opinion, far too impressionable to be exposed to someone like Pvt. Stanton.

That was the reason that he'd lied to her about being needed to help with the dishes, he told himself.

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"I'm sure there's room at the hotel for you and your men, Lieutenant," John said to the officer as they walked through the town.

"We'll bivouac to the north," he said. "We'll be moving on at first light - to the west. How far north do we need to detour to avoid the Apache encampment?"

"Several miles. They're as far south as the Mexican government will allow them to come without fighting."

"Do you think that there's a chance of their agreeing to help us in this fight against our mutual enemy?"

"You can try to talk to him about it. Ride in under a white flag. He'll respect that."

"Thank you. You know, you didn't answer my question that I asked, Mr. Donager."

"Which question was that?"

"What will happen to the treaty if this land becomes part of the United States?"

"That won't matter - not to Cochise," John clarified. "I'll have to wait and see if the other chiefs like Geronimo and Magnus Colorado will either honor that treaty or if they'll agree to a new one."

Evers grinned and shook his head. "I should tell the War Department to talk to you. Might make my job easier."

"No, thank you. I'm perfectly happy doing what I'm doing. Now, I have a question for you: Do you believe that's going to happen?"

"What? That we'll take this land out here?"

"Yeah."

"Well, there's a group of Senators and Representatives who believe that we need this land out here. Especially California. You know there are rumors that they've found gold out there?"

"Gold?" John questioned, scratching his chin with a wry smile. "Really? I don't think that the Mexican government will give that up without a major fight. From what I've heard, anyway. Are **you** aware that the majority of Mexico's citizens probably won't fight to remain part of Mexico? At least the poor ones in the small towns. The big landowners, now, they'll fight."

"Are you sure you don't want to come with me and talk to my superiors, sir?"

"Just relay the message. If they want to talk to me, send 'em this way. I'll try to carve out some time from starting the ranch." He looked up to see Pedro helping Margaret into the wagon. "I need to be going. You and your men should have breakfast at the cafe before leaving tomorrow." He held out his hand. "It's been a pleasure, Lieutenant."

"Same here, Mr. Donager." He hesitated before saying, "You're an amazing man, sir."

"Don't sir me. I'm younger than you are."

"My father always told me that some people are born old. I don't think I believed him until I met you. I hope we'll meet again."

"So do I."

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"Why didn't we have a town meeting yesterday, Leon?" Slim Baker asked. "I need to be out diggin' gold!" It was mostly the men of the town and surrounding area there, since they would take any decisions made back to their families.

"Because we need to discuss that gold, Slim," Leon said. "Everyone's gold. Finding out that that we're smack-dab in the middle of a war between the Mexicans and the Apaches and the United States makes it even more pressing that we not let word get out about the gold in the area."

"Don't worry 'bout me spillin' the beans," Slim said. "Anyone who's gone into my place knows that there's nothing in there to show that I'm diggin'. All they'll see are wooden walls and stove-pipe up through the top of the mesa for my stove. It takes moving one of the wooden panels to see th'gold in the walls - and my pokes are hidden behind another one."

Everyone grinned at his description. "And Charles and Pedro are out covering up our mine," John confirmed. "But if anyone from outside of the area comes in, we all need to make sure that we don't slip up and say anything that might arouse suspicion. Children, our wives, everyone."

"What happens to the gold if the US takes over the land, John?" Olaf wanted to know. "You were worried that gold hunters would come -"

"Well, if Mexico loses the war and this land, Slim and I will file claims for our mines, and put out the word that all of the gold in the area is located on private property, and that claim jumpers will be shot."

There was a soft murmur of surprise at his statement. "Could you do that? Shoot someone over - gold?" Olaf asked.

"I would hope that I won't have to find out the answer to that question, Olaf," John answered. "But we all need to be aware that we might be forced to fight to protect our families and homes from the Mexican Army." He saw the expressions of concern. "I'm not asking you to do anything that I'm not willing to do. Listen, we agreed when we settled here that we would fight to keep this land, didn't we?" There were nods. "Well, now we have to back that up with action. If we don't, I'm sure you've all heard Pedro talk about what some of those soldiers might do to our wives and loved ones. We've built homes, started farms and ranches -" he waved his hand up the street, "built a *town*. Isn't all of that important enough for you to fight for it?"

"What if we fight them - and then they win the war?" Sam Longdon asked. "They won't be happy that we fought against them."

"I think that's something we'll have to deal with when - and if - it happens," Matthew Lee told him.

"He's right," John said. "We need to make sure that every household has at least one rifle to use for protection," he said, looking at Art Hall. "Can we manage that, Art?"

"I think so. I'll order more rifles and ammunition from Mesa City when Paul and Sean make their next freight run out that way. But they're probably going to be arming themselves for what might come."

"All we can do is try," John agreed. "If one of the southern farms or ranches is attacked, we need to arrange for someone from that household to be able to get word to the rest of us to come and help."

"How about signal fires?" Lou suggested. "We could set up a bonfire on each property and here in town that could be lit if an attack happens."

Matthew Lee stood up. "Before we make any further plans, I feel that we should ask God to protect us during this time. Without His protection, nothing that *we* do will matter."

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As he returned from Providence, John detoured by the mine just as Charles and Pedro were finishing their task. "Looks good," he told them, surveying the pile of mesquite and boards.

"We placed several cactus under it all," Pedro told him. "Anyone who tries to look under this will find it very painful."

"How'd things go in town?" Charles asked.

"Why don't we wait to discuss it until we get home?" John suggested. "That way, I only have to go through it once."

"Fair enough," Charles nodded, getting up onto his horse.

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"The Mexican army will not attack us," Mariana said after John had explained the plans made by the town council.

"You can't be certain of that," John told her.

"They are more afraid of the Apache than they are of us."

"But - what if Captain Sanchez' superiors aren't as scared?" Margaret asked. "Yes, he has reason to fear Cochise, but the rest -"

"The Apache have fought the Mexican Army many times - they have killed many soldiers," Mariana told them.

"Then why haven't they pushed back to the south," Charles questioned, "if they can defeat them so easily?"

"They always spend the summer in the mountains," she explained. "And winter on the plains to the south. They will not attack until they are ready to move as a united people."

"United?" Margaret asked.

"Cochise and the Chiracahua will be joined by other chiefs."

"Geronimo and Magnus Colorado?" John asked, and Mariana nodded her confirmation. "Mariana, after the war - will our treaty with your cousin still be honored?"

"Cochise will honor it. But the other chiefs - they will require other treaties."

"And will Cochise fight them against us?"

"That is something that you must ask Cochise."

John nodded, understanding that the woman couldn't speak on such matters. It wasn't within her power to commit the Chief of the Chiracahua to fight anyone, much less his fellow Apache. "Even if the Mexicans won't attack, I believe it would be wise of us to be prepared."

Charles exhaled loudly. "Guess that means that I need to start setting up a bonfire."

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John, Pedro and Charles were out on the range a few days later, taking a short break from chasing some of the wild horses that lived there, when Pedro stopped and looked to the southeast. "What's wrong, Pedro?" John asked, turning to see smoke rising from the horizon.

"That's the Longdon place!" Charles declared, turning back toward his horse, but John managed to grab his arm.

"No! It's further south - That's the Scott ranch!"

All three men leapt onto their horses and rode toward the column of smoke.

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They were joined by Sam Longdon and George Lansing and three other riders near the Scott ranch. The sound of rifle-fire brought them up short, and John said, "We'll move in on foot. Too easy for them to get to us if we're on horse-back." Using mesquite and scrub to stay hidden, they moved toward the house. There was at least one Mexican soldier laying motionless near the building. Once they were close enough to see the soldiers, John called out, "Fire!" and eight rifles blazed to life.

John called to Pedro and Charles, "I'm going to try to get into the house - cover me."

Charles began to fire as John made a mad dash across the stretch of open area up to the back door of the house, hitting one of the soldiers, who fell forward. He hesitated for a second before taking aim at another soldier who was trying to get closer to the house. This one grabbed his leg and pulled himself back to cover without his rifle.

John rested his back against the door, listening. "Tim?!" he called out.

"In here, Mr. Donager!" Susan Scott yelled.

Entering the front room, he found her tying a bandage around her husband's left leg. "What happened?" John asked as he went to one of the windows and fired a round toward the Mexicans.

"They got me when I went out to light the fire," Tim said. "Susan managed to keep them busy so I could get back into the house," he explained. "She shot the one out in the yard, and kept them at bay until I got back inside."

"Where's the boy?"

"Tom's in his room," Susan said. "I need to go check on him -"

"Go on," John told her. "We've got this."

"Thank you."

"Stay low," Tim reminded her. Once she was out of the room, he managed to pick up his rifle and return to one of the other windows. "How many of ours are out there?"

"Eight, including me. I figure the others from town will be here soon -" he fired another shot. "If we can hold them off -" Another shot as Tim fired as well.

"How about Susan?" Tim said. "I can't believe that she shot that man and didn't fall apart."

"Didn't you tell me that her father was a sheriff or -"

"He was. But I'm not sure that he ever had to shoot anyone."

Two more soldiers fell, and John told Tim, "Hold your fire. Looks like they might be pulling back."

"Probably just regrouping," Tim said as he reloaded his rifle.

"No, they're leaving. We did it!" he declared as the soldiers quickly rode out of sight, taking their wounded with them.

Several horses entered the yard, and John told Tim, "That's why they left - the reinforcements arrived. We need to get you into town to let Doc look at that leg." He went to the door and opened it just as Matthew Lee was lifting his hand to knock. "Matthew! Doc!" he exclaimed. "I didn't expect -"

"Shooting usually means people get shot, John," Doc pointed out. "And sometimes killed. So where else should we be?"

"Tim Scott's got a bullet in his leg - he's inside."

"Where are Mrs. Scott and Tom?" Rev. Lee asked as Doc moved past them to enter the house.

"In his room. I'm sure she'd like to talk to you." He nodded toward the body of the first soldier shot. "She fired at that one to save her husband."

The minister nodded before following Doc inside.

John stepped off of the porch as the others approached him. "Was anyone other than Tom Scott wounded?" he asked, looking around at everyone.

"I don't think so, John," Charles said. "And I counted five dead soldiers."

"You think they'll be back?" Olaf asked John.

"We pretty well bloodied their noses," John said. "I think this was most likely an attempt to see how hard we would fight back if they tried to force us off of this land. I don't think that they expected so many of us." He glanced up, looking toward the west, just in time to see several of Cochise's braves riding away. "How long had the Apache been over there?" he asked. "Anyone know?"

"Since not long before the Mexicans turned tail and ran like scalded dogs." Leon told him.

"I don't think the Mexicans saw them," Charles said. "I know I didn't. It was only as they rode away that I finally saw them."

Knowing Charles' tendency to see well at a distance, John nodded. "That would make sense."

"Anything else that we can do here?" Leon wanted to know.

"We need to put out the remains of the bonfire and prepare another one - just in case they decide to make another attempt. I'll be out to join you after I check on Tim."

Inside of the house, Doc was telling his patient, "You need to stay off of this leg for at least a week - maybe a little longer."

"Doc, I have a ranch to run. I can't just lay around -"

"I'll ask Charles to stay here and help out," John told his friend. "Where are Rev. Lee and Susan?"

"The kitchen," Doc answered. "He put her to work making some coffee. He and I will stay until we're sure they're both doing okay."

"I'm fine, Doc," Tim insisted.

"Even if you were - what about your wife?" Doc asked. "Susan went through something today that might break most women. Reverend Lee and I just want to make sure how she's handling it."

=====

"We saw the smoke earlier. What happened?" Margaret asked when he and Pedro returned home.

"The Mexicans attacked the Scott ranch," he explained. "Once they realized that they weren't just fighting a man and woman, they turned tail and rode off," John told her. "Tim took a bullet in his leg when he was coming back to the house after lighting the bonfire, and Susan shot the soldier who did it."

"Oh my," she murmured, looking concerned. "How are they? And - where is Charles?"

"I think they'll be fine. I left Charles there to help Tim out with the ranch until he's back on his feet."

"We had a visitor while you were out," she told him, glancing at Mariana.

"A visitor? Who?"

"Cochise," Mariana said. "He wishes to speak with you."

"Where?"

"The blind canyon, at the top of the hill," she told him.

"The Western Ridge," he said, using the name that he'd given that spot. "When?"

"He said that he would know when you arrive there."

=====

John stood at the peak of the entrance to the small canyon, surveying the surrounding land. As far as his eye could see was the Diamond D Ranch - his and Margaret's legacy for their children. One day, Kevin would be sitting here, looking over the land that he would leave to *his* children.

A rock slipped behind him, and John straightened, a smile on his face as he turned to see the Apache Chief standing there. "Your hearing is improving, my brother," Cochise said, extending his hand as John did the same to grasp the other man's wrist in greeting.

"Only because this place is so quiet. The smallest sound becomes larger," John answered. As they both turned to look over the view, he said, "You asked to speak with me."

"You and those you lead fought bravely today. I do not think you will be troubled by them again. They are not used to people fighting back."

"Pedro told me as much. I have to wonder if they ran because they saw your braves."

"They did not see us," Cochise confirmed. "You sent an American Army officer to my camp."

"I only suggested that he go and speak to you," John pointed out.

"He asked me to help fight the Mexicans."

"And what was your answer?"

The Chief was silent for a long moment. "If there is a benefit for the Apache, we will fight."

"Will you try to reclaim your lands to the south?" John asked.

Cochise turned to look at him. "Possibly. We will decide later in the Council."

John nodded, aware that the Council meant a gathering of Apache Chiefs. "Would you need our help?"

"No. This would be Apache fight."

"Cochise, my brother, would you be willing to arrange a meeting between myself and the other Apache Chiefs?"

"You wish to make a treaty with them like the one we made." It wasn't a question.

"Something like that, yes."

"I can arrange this. But we will wait until the Apache retakes the land to the south. Will that be acceptable to you, John Donager?"

"Yes."

"I wanted to tell you that I was right to allow you and your people to live on this land. Today, you showed that you are willing to fight for the land - even your women will fight. Our women do not fight in battle." He held out his hand again. "I will go now, my brother."

"Go in Peace, Brother," John replied, shaking his hand. "I will ask my God be with you." After Cochise was gone, John remained on the ridge for a few minutes, thanking God for His mercy and being with His people in battle. "Thank you, Lord, for keeping us safe, and that Tim's wound wasn't serious. I thank You also, Lord, for my friend Cochise and his people. I ask that You be with them, keep them safe, and that You show them that You are the one true God. In Your name, I pray."

He stayed a few more minutes before riding back down the hill and going home.

====

There was no sign of the Mexican Army for several months. John had begun writing his lawyer friend, Otis Maxwell, and in his replies, Otis told him that the war was still ongoing - with most of the battles in California and Texas. It was his belief that the Mexicans would eventually sue for peace, giving up much of the disputed territories.

"Did you invite Mr. Maxwell to visit?" Margaret asked him as she sat sewing.

"I did that before we left him," John reminded her. "He knows that the invitation is still good. I'm sure he'll be here when he finally decides to leave Rykerton. What are you making now?" he asked.

"A new shirt for Kevin. He's outgrown most of his shirts already."

"Hard to believe that he'll be a year old in another month," John said, smiling at the little boy who was sitting on the floor alternately shaking and then trying to stuff a rattle into his mouth.

"And that we've all been here for a year."

"Did I tell you that we saw a line of Apache headed to the south this morning?"

Margaret stopped sewing and looked at him. "No, you didn't. But Charles did, while you were finishing up in the barn before supper. He and Pedro think that they're going to fight the Mexicans."

"They'll have no choice, once the Mexicans realize that the Apache are moving south again, they'll try to stop them and push them back into the mountains. I think that the Mexicans are going to be surprised by what happens. Cochise was going to meet up with Geronimo's and Magnus Colorado's braves. With their army spread from Texas to California, I don't think they'll have enough men to fight the Apache

nation."

She sighed. "I hate the idea of them fighting. I've been praying but I'm not sure what I should pray *for* in this case."

"Same as I pray for: for God's Will to be done." Standing up, he bent to scoop up his son. "I think you're about ready for bed, aren't you son?"

"Bed!" Kevin said, rubbing his eyes with a tiny fist.

"He's sleepy," John told her.

"I'll get him into bed," she said, putting aside the shirt and getting up.

"I can do it," John told her. "Why don't you go and get ready for bed, and once I get him to sleep, I'll be in to join you?"

Margaret smiled, moving closer to cup his cheek with her palm. "Don't be too long."

John smiled as well, using his free hand to move hers so that he could place a kiss on that palm. "I'll be in before you know it."

====

Margaret woke later, having fallen asleep waiting for John to come to bed. Worried, she went across the hallway to Kevin's room, pushing the door open. Moonlight streaming through the window revealed John sitting in the rocking chair, snoring softly, with his son peacefully asleep in his lap.

Carefully, she lifted Kevin into her own arms, carrying him to his crib, taking care not to wake him as she covered him. Kneeling beside the rocking chair, she leaned forward to whisper into John's ear. "Come to bed, husband."

He jerked awake, looking around. "Kev-"

She placed a finger to her lips, then pointed toward the crib. "Sound asleep." Standing, Margaret rose to her feet, holding out her hand. "Are you coming, or not?" she asked.

With a sheepish grin, he took her hand and stood, following her back into their bedroom, closing the door behind them. "Sorry," he apologized. "He decided that he wasn't sleepy and by the time we'd rocked long enough for him to fall asleep, I guess I fell asleep, too."

"Well, you're here now," she told him, pushing him to sit down on the bed before she kneeled to pull off his boots. "And since we've both had a little nap, and probably aren't sleepy -" placing his boots beside the bed, she set about unfastening the buttons on his shirt...

====

Charles watched as Mr. Garnett removed the gold bars from their molds. "I wanna learn how to do that," he declared.

Lionel smiled. "You have to be careful not to burn yourself," he warned, lifting a hammer to hit the top of the bars to remove the hardened, dark slag. Put it with the rest, boy," Lionel told Charles.

Charles took the four bars of pure gold and placed them into the nearby strongbox. "I need to take these into the house and get them in the safe."

"I'll get the fire stoked up and let you do the next batch when you get back out here," Lionel said. "I need to stop by the Stovepipe when I leave here and find out when he wants me to turn his gold into bars."

"I'll be back in a few minutes," Charles said, managing to lift the box and carry it into the house. The safe had been placed in a corner of the ranch office. "Margaret!" he called, finally dropping the heavy box and pulling it into the room.

"Be right there!" she said from the kitchen, and Charles sighed as he sat down on the box to wait. When she finally appeared, she apologized. "Sorry. I was putting a cake in the oven."

"If I'm going to be the one responsible for putting the gold into the safe, then John needs to give me the combination," he told her. "Doesn't he trust me?"

"Of course he does," she insisted, bending down to open the heavy door. "I'll talk to him about it tonight. Do you need help?"

"No," he said, taking the bars out of the chest. "You're making a cake? Where's Mariana?"

"She's finishing the wash, so I offered to make a cake for dessert. I thought you liked my cooking."

"I do," he assured her. "It's just -"

"Mariana's is better."

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to." She smiled. "Don't tell anyone, but I like her cooking better than mine, too."

"Mama!"

"Sounds like someone woke up from his nap," Charles told her.

"I'd better go before he manages to climb out of his crib," she said. "Make sure you lock it up when you're done."

"Don't I always?" he said as she left him alone in the room.

====

"We put another fifteen bars into the safe today," Charles told his brother in law. "And three of those *I* made."

"You?"

"I asked Mr. Garnett to show me how to do it. I figure that if we get some equipment, we won't have to call him away from his farm."

"Ordering that equipment could create problems if people started asking questions," John told him. "But I may have a way to do it. I could ask Otis Maxwell to order it, then place it in a crate without any mention of mining equipment on it. With the war going on, it might be difficult to even get that through right now."

"That attorney that helped you in Rykerton? Would he be willing to do that?"

"All he can do is say no, right? And if he can't, I'll see if Mr. Garnett would be willing to lease his equipment for us to use."

"I asked him about that - he said he'd have to think about it. Apparently it belonged to his father."

Nodding, John finished marking the day's count in his books. "We need to finish up the count so we can cut out the cattle for Cochise."

"Are they back from the south?"

"I'm not sure. But I still need to have the cattle ready when they do."

"Do you really think that they'll defeat the Mexican Army and get their land back?"

"Possibly. If our small group could beat the Mexicans, then they don't stand a chance against seasoned Apache warriors."

=====

"The cattle for Cochise are gone," Pedro said a few days later.

"You're sure?" John questioned.

"I rode out to the Western Ridge canyon early this morning," he said. "While Mariana was preparing breakfast. "The cattle are not there."

The blind canyon had become the "dropping off point" for the promised cattle to be left. "Did they leave the usual calling card?" Charles asked.

Pedro nodded, taking something from his jacket pocket and laying it on the table. John picked up the marked, smooth, flat rock and studied it before handing it to Charles. "Put it with the other receipts," he told the young man.

Charles grinned as he took it and carried it to the fireplace mantel. "I'd never heard of using a rock as a receipt for cattle - or for anything til we came out here." Placing it with the others, he stepped back. "Eleven rocks - receipts," he corrected. "I wonder what happened down south?"

"I followed the tracks from the cattle," Pedro told them. "Most were taken to the north - to where the women and children wait in camp - the rest went to the south."

"So they're still fighting?" John asked.

Pedro lifted his shoulders. "Perhaps. And perhaps they are just making sure that any gains are not of a short-lived nature."

"Well, if they were able to get back here for the cattle, then they're probably safe enough," John pointed out. "The last letter I got from Otis had a newspaper clipping about how the Mexican Army is losing battles in California. He thinks that the war will be over soon."

====

As John, Pedro and Charles were about to leave for a day's work on the range - this time rounding up some wild horses that Charles had seen - they were distracted by the arrival of Paul Grover and Sean Hanrahan's freight wagon. "Whoa!" Sean called, pulling back on the reins.

"Got a crate for you, John!" Paul declared, jumping off the wagon and going around to the back, where he began to untie the ropes holding the contents.

"I'm not expecting anything," John told him.

"This is from Otis Maxwell- bill of lading says that it's law books."

"Law books?" Charles questioned, giving John a strange look as they helped Paul unload the wooden crate. "I'll go get a crowbar to open it," he offered, taking off toward the barn as Marianna and Margaret came out of the house.

"Hello, Mr. Grover," Margaret said. "Mr. Hanrahan. Would you like some coffee?" Margaret offered.

"No, thank you, Mrs. Donager," Paul answered. "We're on our way to Mesa City, just stopped in to deliver this to your husband."

"What is it?" she asked, stepping off of the porch to look at the writing on the wooden planks. "Oh, it's from Otis Maxwell. John, could this be -?"

Hearing his sister, Charles looked at John. "The gold crucible and molds!" he said, levering the flat iron under the top of the crate, revealing another, smaller crate inside, cushioned by straw.

"There's a letter -" John said, glancing at the address on the second crate as he opened the envelope that had his name written in Otis' neat hand. "Let's see - *'Hope this finds you all well. I told everyone hereabouts that I needed the equipment because I was planning on going gold-hunting in California once the war is finished. I re-crated and marked it as books, so I doubt anyone will bother to check it. Now, I'll have to find a way to convince my friends here about what happened to the equipment. The war continues to go well by all reports. All my best, Otis.'*" John grinned as Charles opened the second crate to reveal a set of scales to weigh the gold, several crucibles and molds, along with other items to be used in the trade. "How about that? He came through for us."

"Now Mr. Garnett won't have to worry about having to take time from working his farm," Charles said.

"Well, we have to go catch some horses," John reminded the young man. "So let's get this into the barn. You can look at it later. Thank you, Paul, Sean, for bringing it out."

"You're welcome. We need to get moving, too, if we're going to make it to Mesa City by tomorrow. Let's go, Sean."

"Giddyup," Sean said to the team of mules as Charles and Pedro lifted the crate and carried it into the barn.

====

Herding the ten horses they had captured into the new corral, Pedro said, "We're going to need more hands, Boss. Neither of you have ever tried to break a wild horse - it's not something that you learn to do without breaking a bone here or there. The first time I tried to do it, I was still a boy and I broke my leg," he told them, reaching down to rub his left leg.

"Charles, do you think you could catch up to Mr. Grover and ask him to post a help wanted over in Mesa City?" He took a small notebook from his saddlebag, along with a pencil, and quickly wrote out what he needed. "Cowboys needed. Contact Pedro Lopez or John Donager, Diamond D Ranch." Tearing the paper out, he folded it and handed it to Charles. "Catch up and then come straight back. We need to at least try to break a few of these things tomorrow morning."

"Don't start without me," Charles told them as he jumped onto his horse. "I'd hate for you to break any of your brittle old bones," he said with a confident grin.

"Get going, boy, before I have to remind you to respect your elders," John said, slapping the horse's flank with his hat, sending the animal forward toward the trail to the west.

Once Charles was out of sight, John turned back to study the horses as they paced around the corral. "Let's get them some grain and oats, Pedro, and then we need to start thinking about getting that bunkhouse built. If we don't, any new hands will have to bed down outside or in the barn."

"I think we need a new, bigger barn, too," Pedro said as they moved toward the building. "This one was never meant to hold so much."

"You're right. We can work up some plans before Charles gets back. But why don't we go inside and have some coffee while we do it?"

"You're the Boss," Pedro said. "I will finish giving the horses something to eat and refill their water, then I will join you."

"And I'll make sure your wife puts a fresh pot of coffee on the stove," John agreed.

====

"Are you sure about this, Charles?" John asked as Pedro brought the wild horse over to the side of the

corral. It had taken two days to get a saddle onto the animal, and he was still skittish and kept pulling away, even in the makeshift 'chute' that Pedro had built into the structure.

Charles pulled his gloves up, giving him a cocky grin of self-confidence. "Afraid I'll show you up, brother-in-law?" he asked, climbing up onto the rail as the horse bucked once.

"You ready, amigo?" Pedro asked, and Charles nodded, dropping to the saddle and grabbing the reins.

"Go!" Charles yelled, and Pedro released the gate, letting the horse out into the corral to start bucking, trying to rid itself of the added weight on his back.

"Hold on!" John said, not seeing the two women come out of the house behind them and move toward the rail.

"Ride him!" Pedro called. "That's it!"

All seemed to be going well until the horse spun to the left, then back to the right, and Charles was caught off-guard. He dropped to the ground and rolled away as Pedro leapt into the corral to grab the rein to lead the horse away from him.

"Are you okay, Charles?" Margaret asked, clearly concerned.

Charles was laughing as he stood up, slapping his hat on his leg to clean it off. "I'm fine!" he told her.

"You'll probably be stiff as all get out tomorrow," John warned him.

"Probably," Charles nodded. "But it was worth it. Get him ready again, Pedro."

"You're pushing your luck, amigo," Pedro said, shaking his head as he led the horse back to the gate.

"Maybe. But I think I've got the hang of it now."

"You're loco," Pedro told him. "Crazy in the head."

"Aren't we all?" Charles asked, climbing back up on the fence rail. "Hold him still." He dropped onto the horse again. "Ready!"

This time, Charles hung on when the horse tried a reverse spin, but a series of spins later, he lost his seat and took a moment longer to get back on his feet, narrowly avoiding the angry stallion's sharp hooves. "You worthless piece of crowbait!" he yelled at the horse, and started for the chute.

"Don't let him do it again," Margaret begged John. "He's going to be seriously injured if he doesn't stop."

"Why don't we stop for the night?" John suggested, covered Margaret's hand that was clinging to his arm.

"I'm so close, John!" Charles insisted. "Just one more ride, and he'll be gentle as a puppy!"

John shook his head. "You can have another go at him tomorrow morning," he said. "It'll be a good way to work out the pain you're going to be feeling by then."

"And he'll have a chance to rest up. It'll take me longer to break him -"

"John is right, amigo," Pedro told him. "Best to let him rest while you rest yourself. He'll still be here tomorrow."

Charles sighed and muttered something about 'women' under his breath as he turned toward the house. "I'll go get washed up for supper."

Watching him go, John reached down to peel his wife's fingers from his arm, then flexed the hand on that arm. "I wasn't sure how much longer I could handle the circulation being cut off," he told her.

"I'm sorry, John," Margaret told him, giving him a kiss. "Was I wrong?"

"No, Meg, you weren't wrong. But you know your brother. He won't give up until he breaks that animal - or it breaks him."

=====

John, Margaret, Kevin and Pedro were all sitting at the table the next morning as Charles came into the room. He didn't have his usual exuberant gait - he walked slowly, wincing as he pulled out a chair. "Don't anyone say a word," he warned them, wincing again as he picked up his napkin and shook it open. "I think every muscle in my body is screaming at me this morning."

John and Pedro hid their smiles as John asked, "Still want to ride him?"

"Oh, yeah. A little -" he winced as he reached across the table for the plate of biscuits, then finished, "pain isn't going to stop me from breaking him."

"I'll go out and get the saddle on him after we eat," Pedro said.

=====

At the end of his second ride, Charles rode the now calm horse around the corral in a circle. "You did it!" John said, slapping the young man on his back when he'd handed the reins over to Pedro and come over to the fence.

"I told you that I would," Charles reminded him. "He's a good horse." As Pedro removed the sand-colored stallion's saddle, the animal pawed the ground, snorting. "Still has lots of spirit, too."

"You like him," John stated.

"Oh, yeah. I like him," Charles confirmed.

"Then consider him yours."

"I thought we were going to use the horse for the ranch-"

"You'll be working on the ranch, so he'll still be here. I figure you've earned him, considering all the work you put into breaking him."

"Ya-Hoo!" Charles said, tossing his hat into the air before wincing. "Guess I better to work breaking the others now."

"They'll wait a day or so," John told him. "We need to start working on getting the bunkhouse built. And get a start on a new barn."

"What's wrong with the one we have now?" He'd had been exhausted the previous evening, so he'd gone to bed before hearing the others discussing plans for the new buildings.

"Pedro says that we need a bigger barn - and he's right. Hiring more hands means we'll need the bunkhouse for them to sleep in. I'd like to include an office in it for Pedro to use as foreman. We drew up some plans yesterday while you were gone. Let me go and get them out of my office."

====

The three men spent the next three days getting started on the bunkhouse. After looking at the plans, Charles had made some suggestions that John had approved. It wasn't going to be huge - built only for ten men, which meant five bunkbeds, a small kitchen area, and a long trestle table with benches. At one end, a room to be used as the foreman's office with a door into the bunkroom and one leading outside.

"We can always expand the place by the time we hire more than ten hands," John said.

"What if the men we hire are married?" Charles questioned.

"We'll build another small house. It's not like we don't have room for more," John pointed out, looking around the area.

"Did Mariana mention that she and Mrs. Donager were making curtains for the bunkhouse?" Pedro wondered.

"She did. I drew the line at her idea of a tablecloth, however," John said, and they all laughed. "We'd better get back to work. I'd like to at least get the roof finished. Those clouds to the west say that we could have some rain before too much longer."

"Not before tomorrow evening," Pedro informed him. He narrowed his gaze as he continued to look westward. "Rider coming in."

The man who rode in wasn't much older than John. He was wearing buckskin trousers and a cotton shirt, and looked as though he'd been born in the saddle. Coming to a stop, he smiled. "I'm looking for John Donager," he said, his blue eyes scanning the three men before settling on one of them.

"I'm John Donager."

He slid down from the saddle, extending his hand. "Henry Collier. Most folks call me 'Hank'."

John shook his hand. "This is my brother in law, Charles Davis, and my ranch foreman, Pedro Lopez."

Hank nodded at Charles, his attention focused on Pedro. "I remember you. You're married to Cochise' cousin - uh - Mariana, right?"

"Yes. We lost track of you. We thought -"

"That I was dead, I bet," Hank finished. "Not quite. For awhile there, I wished I was. Tried my best to make it happen, but it wasn't in the cards, I guess."

Seeing John's curious expression, Pedro smiled. "Forgive us, Boss. Hank is married to an Apache -"

"Was," Hank stated, his voice suddenly hard.

"Was?" John questioned, looking at Hank.

Something dark glinted in the blue eyes as he answered. "Singing Dove was killed by Mexican scalp hunters two years ago." He removed his hat to reveal sun-bleached blonde hair. "They weren't interested in mine, just hers. Because she was an Apache."

"I am very sorry to hear that, Hank," Pedro told him.

"What can I do for you, Hank?" John asked.

"Well, I'm looking for a job, sir. I was in Mesa City and saw Mr. Grover putting up that notice - and followed him and Mr. Hanrahan this way so I could talk to you."

"You have any experience working on a ranch?"

"Well, I was raised around ranch work - my folks had a little ranch to the south, and when they died, I went from place to place, learning as I went. Done just about everything, herding cattle, breaking horses, cleaning stalls, shoeing - Singing Dove and I were starting a place of our own when -" he broke off, looking into the distance. "I'd really like a chance to show you what I can do, Mr. Donager."

"Forty a month," John told him. "Room and board included. Sundays off."

"Mr. Grover told me that everyone in the area goes into town for church services that day."

"Are you a believer, Hank?"

"Never really thought about it much," Hank confessed. "But I'm willing to give it a try."

"You're hired."

"Before you make the decision, Mr. Donager - I should tell you that there's a chance that I might be wanted by the Mexicans."

"For what?"

"For catching up to and killing the scum who murdered my wife," he stated. "I'd been out rounding up cattle and was heading back in when I saw them leaving the cabin that day. I was close enough that I could see their faces - I even called out to them, but they just took off as fast as they could. So I went inside and found -" his eyes closed. "What I found. I caught up with them in Sonora. They were drinking, spending the blood money they'd gotten from the government. The minute that I walked in, they knew who I was. The first one took a shot at me. I shot him, and then his friend. Then I went home and buried Singing Dove, and burned the shack. There was no way that I could ever live there again - not after -" his voice trailed off.

John reached out, placing his hand on the other man's arm. "Thank you for telling us. We'll just have to pray that Mexico *doesn't* win the war, won't we?" He nodded toward the half-finished building. "Now, why don't you put your things in the bunkhouse and we'll show you around." Seeing the look of amusement on Hank's face, John grinned. "I don't suppose you're any good with a hammer and nails -?"

"I can manage. Like I told you, I've done a little of everything." He picked a spot near the wood stove to put down his bedroll and rifle.

"Pedro, why don't you go and let the women know that we'll have one more for supper?"

"Yes, Boss."

=====

"What's so interesting out there, Mariana?" Margaret asked, coming over to stand beside her friend, Kevin perched on her hip. "We have company," she noted, seeing them talking to a stranger.

"I know this man," Mariana said. "He married one of the girls in my tribe. Singing Dove."

"That's a lovely name."

Mariana nodded. "It suited her. She was beautiful - had been promised to the son of a chief. One day, she found a white man, nearly dead after he was thrown by his horse. She got him back to camp and took care of him."

"Sounds like you and Pedro," Margaret told her. "Did Cochise have a problem with her taking care of the man?"

"He was not happy," she said, moving back over to the stove, where she put the pot of coffee back onto a burner to heat. "When he left, she left with him. Yellow Knife, the Apache to which she had been promised, followed them and brought them back, challenging the man to fight him for the hand of Singing Dove."

"I assume that the white man won?"

"He wounded Yellow Knife in the challenge, and was given Singing Dove to be his wife."

"What's his name?"

"Hank is all I remember. He and Singing Dove left the tribe and rode toward the southwest, where he

told her that he had land for a ranch."

"Don't you want to go out and talk to him? Find out how Singing Dove is?"

"They will come in soon for coffee. I can wait," she declared as Pedro opened the back door to deliver John's message before going back to rejoin the other men.

====

As the four men entered the house by way of the back door, Hank froze in his tracks as he looked at Mariana. "You know Mariana, of course," John told him, and he nodded.

"Sorry. For a moment I was seeing -"

She stepped forward, touching his arm. "I understand." Her hand lingered as he eyes met his. "I share your sorrow," she told him. "She was your wife, and my friend in childhood. I will remember the happy things, and put aside the sad. I hope you will do the same."

"Thank you. That's what I'm trying to do."

Continuing with the introductions, John said, "And this is my wife, Margaret, and our son, Kevin."

"Welcome to the Diamond D, Mr. Collier," Margaret said. "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"That'd be fine, ma'am," he told her. "And call me Hank. If you call me Mr. Collier, I might not know who you're talking to and forget to answer."

====

Hank joined the Donager and Lopez families for church on Sunday, riding his own horse into town beside Charles, who was proudly riding the horse that he had broken and named Stony.

"That's a new horse, isn't it?" Artie asked.

"Yep," Charles nodded. "We caught him with some others this week and I broke him."

Artie and the other boys looked doubtful. "You?"

"It's the truth. Ask John or Pedro. They'll tell you. I broke another one, but Hank and Pedro broke the others."

"I want to learn how to break a horse!" George Bradford declared.

"So do I!" agreed Artie's brother, Philip.

"You're too young," Artie told him.

"I am not! You take that back!" Philip raised his fists, but Mr. Hall called out.

"Artie, Philip! You're not going to fight on a Sunday! Get inside!"

"Yessir," Philip said, whispering to his brother, "Just you wait'll tomorrow."

Charles turned to make sure the horse was securely fastened to the hitching rail, only to find Olivia standing there, stroking the horse's neck. "He's pretty."

"He's handsome," he corrected her, giving the reins an extra tug.

"Did you really break him?"

"I did. And John gave him to me."

"What's his name?"

"Stony."

"That's a funny name for a horse."

"He's the same color as sandstone, but Sandy didn't fit him, somehow."

"Stony," she said.

"Livvy, honey, time to go inside," Anna called.

"On my way," Olivia replied, and Charles turned to join her, knowing that John or Margaret would be summoning him any second. "Who's the man that came in with you?" she asked.

"Hank Collier. He's working at the ranch."

=====

"We need to talk to you, John," Matthew said as they were finishing Sunday dinner.

"What about?"

Well," Lionel began, "With school about to start, several of us are of the opinion that we need a school-board."

"Oh, stop dilly-dallying around and get to the heart of the matter," Hortense Garnett told her husband. "We think that you should run for the school board, Mr. Donager."

"Me?" John questioned, shaking his head. "I've told you all that -"

"Your reasoning doesn't apply here, John," Matthew told him.

"I'm still not convinced it applied before," Niles murmured.

"Anyway," Matthew continued, sighing, "the school board needs people who have an interest in

making decisions as to how the school should be run. That means some parents. Charles -"

"Will be finished with school in a few years," John pointed out.

"But you have a son who'll attend school here - and any other children you and Margaret have as well."

"I don't have time - I have a ranch to -"

"We all have businesses to take care of as well," Arthur Hall said. "And I've been recruited to run. So you can be, too."

"Who else is running for the board?" John wanted to know.

"Doc, George Lansing, Lionel. With the two of us, that makes five members," Arthur told him.

"Five's a good number," Niles said. "Terms would be for two years, elected at the same time as we elect the Town Council."

"How much time would this take?"

"Once a month - unless necessary," Lionel said.

John sighed as he looked at Margaret, who was smiling. "Okay. I'll do it."

"Do we need to have an election, Niles?" Doc asked. "Five members, and there are five of us -"

Niles nodded. "I'll handle it." He stood up in his chair. "Fellow citizens, could I have your attention, please?" Very slowly, conversation stopped and every face turned toward Niles. "Thank you. Since we're all here, I'd like to ask a question- It's been decided that with school starting in a week, we need a school board. There are five volunteers to be on the board. Mr. Hall, Mr. Lansing, Mr. Garnett, Doc, and Mr. Donager. Is there anyone else who would like to be considered for the board?" he asked, looking around. The question was met with silence. "Very well, then. Does anyone have a problem with any of these men being on the board?"

"How long would they be on the board?" Tim Scott wanted to know.

"Two years," Niles answered, and Tim nodded. "Okay. Now, unless someone objects, we'd like to hold a vote by show of hands right now to elect all five men to the school board. If you're in agreement with the five men named being elected to the board, please raise your hand." Niles and the others looked around, not even trying to count all of the hands. "You can put them down now. Anyone who disagrees? Then it's settled. For the next two years, these five gentlemen will be on the board. It's up to you, gentlemen, to decide when and where the first meeting of the Providence School Board will meet."

"When should we have the first meeting?" Lionel asked the others.

"How about tomorrow afternoon?" George Lansing suggested. "Around three?" The others nodded.

"And where?"

"How about the church?" John said. "It's going to be our school, so that would make sense."

"You're right. Anyone interested in the school is welcome to attend," Lionel announced. "Three pm tomorrow afternoon at the church."

====

Margaret was waiting on the porch when she saw John and Charles ride back in from the meeting the next day. Seeing how tight John's jaw was, she hesitated before going to greet him.

John gave his wife a kiss before asking, "How is Kevin?" The boy had been fussy, so Margaret had decided to remain at home with him instead of attending the school board meeting.

"Better. Mariana remembered a salve that the Apache women use for their babies to soothe their gums when they're teething. She made some of it for me to use. How did the first meeting go?" she asked.

"Just great," he muttered, handing the reins of his horse to Charles, who was grinning from ear-to-ear.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Don't -" John began as Charles spoke up.

"The first thing the board did was elect someone to be their leader."

"- ask," John finished, his eyes narrowing as he glared at Charles while the younger man continued to talk.

"If I tell you that the vote was 4 to 1, that should tell you who they chose."

"They *ambushed* me, Meg," he declared. "Had it all planned out before the meeting ever started!"

Margaret tittered with amusement, looking at Charles. "You mean that John is -"

"He's the head of the school board," Charles confirmed. "But he won't have to actually vote on anything unless the vote is tied."

"So what else happened?" she asked, swallowing her smile as she took John's arm.

"We're going to order more textbooks, paper, ink, inkwells, and pens," John told her.

"Don't forget about the chalk," Charles reminded him.

"Oh yeah. Mrs. Lee said that she needs more chalk."

"I saw that huge blackboard that she brought with her," Margaret said. "But she forgot chalk?"

"No, she had some," he said. "A whole box full - but it got wet in one of the river crossings and dissolved."

"Oh my." She sighed. "Well, supper's almost ready -"

"That's another thing. I had things that I needed to do today. Taking two hours out of my day - We needed to do some more work on that bunkhouse before it starts to rain. And then I needed to do a new head count - I thought I saw a couple of new calves on the way in yesterday. Not to mention getting the next group of cattle ready for Cochise -"

"Since I'm the only one in the bunkhouse," Hank said, having overheard John's complaints, "I'll manage. I can always move into the barn if the rain gets too bad."

"And we did a count this afternoon, Boss - the numbers are on your desk," Pedro told him. "There are three new calves - two bulls. As for the cattle for Cochise - we have another few days, and we looked over the herd today while making the count."

"We picked out the ones to send the Apaches," Hank said. "Just need your approval to cut them out."

Mariana came from the house. "Supper is getting cold. If you want to eat hot food, come to the table."

"Yes, ma'am," John said. Once she turned and went back into the house, he leaned closer to the others. "You're wrong, Pedro. I'm not the boss around here." He nodded toward the house. "She is."

Pedro grinned. "You are right," he agreed, and everyone laughed.

====

"You might be interested in this, Boss," Hank said a few weeks later as he held out a gold nugget.

John looked across the desk, taking the gold. "Where did you find it?"

"Further west than the other mine," he said, going over to the map that Margaret had hung on the wall. "About right - here," he added, putting his finger on the paper. "Don't worry, I covered it up after taking the nugget." He traced a line from the original mine to the new one. "Looks like it could be part of the first one."

John tossed the nugget back to him. "Consider this a bonus for being honest and telling me about it. There are some men who would have kept quiet and pulled gold out for themselves."

"I've seen what gold does to usually intelligent men. My parents died because my father was fighting for a mine he had found."

"I see." John studied the map. "We won't open up that vein until we know the outcome of the war," he decided. "Did you tell anyone else?"

"Just Pedro. He said that I should tell you."

"Thank you. If you want to, Charles would be glad to turn that into small ingot."

"I think I'll leave it like it is for awhile."

Margaret came to the doorway. "Two riders coming in, John," she announced. "From the west."

"We're on our way. Will you go get Pedro, please, Hank?" he asked as he rose from behind the desk to lead the way out of the room. Pausing beside the front door, he grabbed his coat, telling Margaret. "You might as well stay in here, Meg."

"I'll go ask Mariana to put the coffee on. I'm sure whoever they are, they would welcome something hot to drink."

The two men were bundled up against the cold wind. They reached the house just as John stepped out onto the porch. "Afternoon, gentlemen," he said.

"Are we on the Diamond D ranch?" the older of the two men asked. He was grizzled from a hard life. His rough stubbled face was darkened by years spent in the sun.

"You are. I'm John Donager. What can I do for you, Mr. -" he prompted.

"Passmore," came the answer from the younger, taller man. "David Passmore. Folks call me Davy. And my friend here is Phineas Green. We're looking for a job, Mr. Donager."

Phineas nodded. "Saw your notice in Mesa City 'bout needin' cow punchers."

"Why don't we go inside?" John suggested. "There's a fire and hot coffee."

"Thank you," Davy said, as he and Phineas dismounted. "Is there a place where we can put the horses to get them out of the cold?"

"I'll have Hank put them into the barn for now," John answered. "Hank! Can you see to these horses?" he called out, leading them into the house. Pedro was waiting in the living room, putting more wood into the fireplace. "This is my foreman, Pedro Lopez," John said. "Pedro, this is Davy Passmore and Phineas Green."

"Hello," both men said to Pedro before exchanging a look between themselves.

"Don't be fooled by Pedro," John told them. "He might look Mexican, but his mother was American. Knows this part of the country by heart." He smiled as Mariana brought coffee in. "And this is his wife. Thank you, Mariana." She nodded and left the room again. John pointed to the tray. "Help yourselves," he told them, picking up one of the four cups before sitting down in his chair beside the fire. "And have a seat."

"I'll stand if you don't mind," Phineas said, backing up to the fire. "Been ridin' most of the day." Davy, however, sat on the hearth, his hands wrapped around a cup.

"That's fine. How much experience do you have as ranch hands?" John asked.

"We've worked a few ranches up north," Davy said.

"Done a bit of everthing," Phineas added.

"Which ranches?" Pedro wanted to know.

"The Double S, the C bar T, and the last one was the Circle N," Davy listed. "I'd be glad to give you the names of the people to contact if you want to verify that we're telling the truth, Mr. Donager."

"That won't be necessary right now," John answered. "What I would like to know if you would have a problem working for Pedro."

"Why should we?" Phineas asked.

"I couldn't help but see the look you and he exchanged when I introduced him. And since there *is* a war going on -"

"You tryin' to tell us that you're *not* on the side of the US?" Phineas wanted to know. He was a short little man, but John had a feeling that getting on his bad side wouldn't be a good thing.

"This isn't about me. Answer my question, please."

"I got no problem," Phineas assured John. "Long as I get treated fair, I'll work for anyone."

"What about you, Davy?"

"Same for me."

"Forty a month, room and board. Sundays off - we go to church on the Lord's Day, so be ready."

"Church?" Davy asked.

"It's not a requirement, but I do ask that you give it a few weekends before deciding not attend."

The two men looked at each other again, then nodded. "I guess we can give it a try, Mr. Donager," Davy said.

John held out his hand. "Then welcome to the Diamond D. Pedro, would show them the way to the bunkhouse and get them settled?"

"Yessir, Boss," Pedro confirmed, leading them toward the front door. Both Pedro and Hank knew not to discuss the gold on the property or in the area without permission from John to do so, so he wasn't worried. So far, he'd been blessed with Hank. He was a hard worker who seemed to be a good man as well. While John knew that everyone who came to work on the ranch wouldn't meet the same high standard, he knew that all he could do was pray that God would be with whoever he hired. Going through to the kitchen, he took Kevin from Margaret as Mariana worked at the stove, preparing the evening's meal. "There will be two more for supper, Mariana."

"Hank said that the three of them would eat in the bunkhouse," she told him. "I will prepare the food here, and Pedro will take it out there for them."

"Did he explain why?" John asked.

"Hank said that it made sense for him to eat with us when he was the only hand," Margaret told him. "But now that there are two more, they need to make use of that table you put out there."

"I guess it makes sense," John agreed, but apparently his wife picked up on his air of distraction.

"You don't sound too sure about these new hands," Margaret said.

"It's not that. I just - don't know them yet. I'm sure they'll work out."

=====

"Where did Hank say he found a new vein, John?" Charles asked, moving over to the map.

John joined him to point to the spot. "Right here. And he seems to think that it could be part of the same vein as the first mine, and I think he could be right."

"Slim's mine could be part of it, too," Charles said, drawing the line with his finger before finding the mid-point. "Isn't Stove-Pipe just about there?"

"It is. It won't matter. I doubt any of us will pull enough out to run into the other."

"What about these new hands? You think it will be safe for them to know about the gold?"

"We have a week before they'll be in town. That *should* be enough time to find out if they can be trusted or not. Come on. I'll introduce you."

"But - Margaret said that I had to do my homework before ranch work," Charles reminded him.

"Fine. You can come back in and do it - after I introduce you to Davy and Phineas."

"Phineas," Charles repeated, chucking. "What a name."

"I wouldn't say that to him if I were you. He looks like he could take care of himself in a fight."

"Where are you going, Charles?" Margaret asked as they passed through the kitchen. "John, he needs to get his homework done -"

"He will, Meg. I'm just taking him out here to meet the new hands. I'll send him right back in. Promise!"

"I'll hold you to that, John Donager!" she called out the back door. "If he's not back here in ten minutes, I'll come out there and drag him back!"

"Do you think she'd really do it?" Charles asked John as they walked toward the corral.

John glanced back toward the house, then grinned. "What do you think? Come on, let me introduce you to the new hands and you can get back so we don't have to find out."

=====

After John introduced Charles to Davy and Phineas, Hank told the men, "This is the young man I told you was so good at breaking a horse." Turning, he looked to where Pedro was riding one of the horses they had captured a few days before. "Hang on to him, Pedro!"

But Pedro wasn't able to hang on, and ended up in the dust of the corral while Hank grabbed the reins of the horse. "Whoa," he said softly, calming the animal. "That's it. You okay, Pedro?"

"Yes. He's not being very cooperative, is he?"

"He took a right and you went left," Charles told the foreman.

"You'd better get back to the house, Charles," John reminded him.

"I guess so," Charles nodded with reluctance.

"Why don't you get on that animal and show us how it's done?" Davy asked Charles, clearly not convinced that Hank had been entirely honest about the young man's ability.

Charles glanced at the house, then said, "Let me borrow your spurs, Hank," he said.

"You're still wearing your school clothes," John said. "Meg won't be happy if you -"

"Don't worry, John," Charles said, strapping on the spurs before climbing the fence. "Load him up," he told Hank. Once he was set in the saddle, he said, "Ready!"

The horse spun and bucked, even reared a couple of times, but Charles stayed in the saddle, even after the animal walked around the corral, clearly under his control. Sliding out of the saddle, he tossed the reins in Hank's direction, giving the two new hands a decided smirk. Bending over, he removed the spurs, hanging them on the fence rail. "Now, if you gentlemen will excuse me, I have to get my homework done before my sister -"

"Charles Davis! You get yourself in this house *now*!"

"Coming, Margaret!" he called back, walking toward the house.

"You have any more questions?" Phineas asked his friend.

"Nope."

"Why don't you bring the next one in, Hank?" John suggested. "And we'll see what Davy can do."

"Fair enough," Davy replied, climbing up on the fence to wait for Hank to load a bay mare into the chute.

"He any good?" John asked Phineas.

"Depends on the horse," Phineas replied. "I'm the bronc buster, truth be told. T'be honest, Davy-boy can't see a reverse comin'. The one the boy rode - he woulda thrown Davy for sure."

John nodded. "Do me a favor - don't call Charles 'boy'. He might be just sixteen, but he's proud of what he's accomplished. This summer, he did a man's work alongside Pedro and I. He can rope, brand, ride a wild horse and shoot a rattlesnake before it strikes."

"Gotcha," Phineas nodded, returning his attention to Davy as Hank opened the gate. "Ride that animal, Davy!" he called. "Show 'em -" The horse came out of the gate with a turn to the right, then back to the left - which, as he had predicted, caught the rider off guard and out of the saddle. "Load 'er up for me!" he called to Hank, shaking his head as Pedro helped Davy to the fence. "You all right?"

"Yeah," Davy said, clearly disgusted with himself. "Should have seen it."

"Y'never do," Phineas told him, pulling on his gloves before going to the chute.

After two reverses, Phineas was still on the mare. "He's good," John said to Davy.

"Yep. Phineas is scrawny but he's stubborn. Used to say that there wasn't a horse that he couldn't ride. Got a couple of broken bones over the years to prove it. But he gets right back on - That's it!" he called. "You got it! Yes!"

The horse stopped fighting and let Phineas trot her around the corral. Hank took her reins. "Good ride, Phineas. Between you and Charles we'll have this string of horses tamed in no time."

"Thanks." Returning to John, Phineas shook his head. "Weeoo," he half whistled. "I'm getting' too old to keep doing that. Been trying to teach Davy here, but just don't learn easy."

"Do you think you could teach me?" John asked.

"You?"

He told them the story about wrangling a bull for branding, then moved the narrative over to breaking wild horses. "Charles got on the horse and all I could do was watch. I think, though, that I need to be able to break a horse."

"Not really, Boss," Pedro told him. "You won't be good to anyone if you break your neck."

John sighed, looking at Phineas. "See what I mean? Charles and I were raised on the same streets - and he never spent a lot of time with horses. Of course, what my father and I handled were already broken before they were purchased - but I don't see any reason why I can't ride broncs. My roping's improved, hasn't it, Pedro?"

"Yes, but considering your first attempts, the only way it could go was to get better," he said with a grin. Seeing John's set expression, the foreman's grin was suddenly gone. "If you want to kill yourself, I can't stop you. Just don't expect me to explain it to Mrs. Donager," he declared. "Hank, go get that pinto for the Boss."

Hank looked at John. "Is that what you want?"

"Go get it," he said, pulling on the gloves he'd been carrying in his back pocket. Turning to Phineas, he

asked, "Tell me what I need to know before I get into that saddle."

"Hold on with your legs, but keep the rest of your body loose," Phineas began...

Pedro stood outside of the corral while Davy and Hank saddled the brown and white pinto, leading it into the chute. "Okay, Boss," Hank said. "He's ready."

Taking a deep breath, John glanced toward the house to make sure Margaret wasn't there to watch what he was about to do. Deciding that the coast was clear, he climbed onto the fence and braced his boots on the rails to either side of the horse. "He's liable to buck a bit when you drop into the saddle, but get your boots into the stirrups and grab the reins tight," Phineas told him, having climbed up on the outside of the fence.

"Here goes nothing," John muttered, sitting on the horse. Hank kept his hand on the bridle as John found the stirrups and wrapped the reins around his hands. It was now or never, he decided, and nodded to Hank. "Ready."

====

Margaret was setting the table for supper when her brother ran past her. "Charles! What are you doing?"

"John's riding one of the horses!" he yelled back as the back door closed behind him.

"Riding one of the -" she began to repeat, suddenly realizing what he meant as she followed him, with Mariana on her heels.

She reached the corral as John slid out of the saddle, grinning from ear to ear. "Wow, Boss!" Hank was saying as he slapped John on the back.

"Knew you could do it," Phineas declared.

"Forgive me for doubting you, Boss," Pedro said, shaking his head.

"Finally found something that he could outdo me at," Charles stated, blocking John's view of the two women behind him. "I looked out the window of my room and couldn't believe it."

"Are you okay, John?" Margaret asked, stepping around her brother, and John's smile dimmed slightly as he took her hand.

"I'm fine, Meg. No, I'm great! Did you see what I -"

"I saw. And next time, give me a little warning, please? I nearly had a heart attack when I realized what you were up to."

"I'm sorry, honey," he apologized. "I was afraid you'd worry more if you knew."

"Supper is ready," Mariana announced. "I will have food for the bunkhouse ready in a few minutes."

"We'll be right in," John said, still smiling even as Margaret turned to follow Mariana back to the house. Pedro started to follow, but stopped when John asked, "Pedro, the pinto - would he be a good cow pony?"

Pedro turned to look at the animal as it paced around the corral. "Yes, I think so."

"Saddle him for me tomorrow when we go out to look at the herd."

"Instead of the bay?" John had been riding the horse that he'd brought from St. Jo, but had been looking for something else.

"I think so. The bay's earned a rest, don't you think?"

====

"This is good chow," Davy said as he, Phineas and Hank ate supper.

"Pedro's wife's about the best cook I've ever known," Hank told them. "Second only to a couple of women in town."

"Town?" Davy asked.

"Providence - about ten miles due north of here," he explained.

"Never heard of it," Phineas told him.

"It's only been there for a year - same as the ranch. Everyone came out here with Mr. Donager. The way I understand it, when they got to the north entrance to the valley, the wagon-master was killed in an accident, and there was no one else to lead the wagons on to California. Donager decided to stay here and talked everyone else into staying, too, and starting this ranch and a town."

"That's where the church is that he mentioned, I guess," Davy said, and Hank nodded.

"It is."

"You go to church?" the younger man asked.

"Yeah. I wasn't sure at first, but I find myself looking forward to it."

"They have a saloon in - Providence, was it?"

"Yes, Providence. And no, no saloon," he answered, seeing Davy frown. "The mercantile sells bottles of whiskey - mostly for medicinal purposes. But there's a doctor there, too."

"Boss got any rules about liquor in the bunkhouse?" Phineas wondered.

"Hasn't come up. I don't drink as a rule," he said.

Phineas nodded. "I don't drink much - just a little for my rheumatis from time t'time. How'd you come

to work for him?"

"Same as you did - saw the ad in Mesa City as it was being posted. I'd met Pedro and his wife a few years ago and he vouched for me with Mr. Donager."

"So you've worked with Pedro before?"

"No," Hank answered. "Where are you boys from?" he asked, changing the subject. Talking about Singing Dove still hurt, and if he told them about her, he would have to tell them about Mariana - and he'd learned the hard way that not everyone was as accepting of the story as John Donager had been.

"I was born in Kentuck," Phineas told him. "My pappy's family was one of the first to settle out there. Mama always told me that I was heading west even before I could walk. Davy here's a Texican."

"You're from Texas?" Hank asked.

"Yep. Haven't been there in awhile, though. Traveled north after my folks passed, and met up with Phineas. How 'bout you?"

"My folks had a small ranch southwest of here. They died when I was sixteen, and I lost the ranch. I went to work for other ranchers - mostly Mexican haciendas. Ranch work is the same here in Mexico or in the US."

====

Over the next days, the new hands settled into their jobs, and things were quiet. Until the day John and Phineas were finishing up the roof of the new barn, when Phineas looked past John and frowned.

"What's got into him?" he wondered.

John turned to see Davy returning from the western pasture at a full gallop. "Let's go find out," he suggested, moving to the ladder against the side of the building.

"Apaches!" Davy was yelling. "I saw some Apaches!"

John started to laugh, and Phineas frowned. "What's so all-fired amusin', Boss?" he wanted to know. "You think injuns are a joke?"

"Not at all," John said, shaking his head as Davy pulled back on the horse's reins to stop the animal. "Mr. Donager - there are some Apaches in a blind canyon. They're taking some cattle -"

"The cattle belong to them," John informed both men. "Pedro and Hank drove those cows into the Western Range canyon yesterday while you two were working the cattle on the eastern range."

"But I know some of those cows were the ones that we branded -" Davy insisted.

"It's part of an agreement I have with Cochise so that he'll let us live here and not attack. I send him cattle every month for his people. They're camped up on the other side of the mountain range."

"You made a treaty with the Apache?"

"It's worse than that," John said, showing them the scar on his hand. "I'm blood brother to Cochise himself. I saw you looking at the lance hanging on the wall in my office - it was given to me by Cochise."

"I thought he hated all white men," Davy said.

"Not all of them, or else none of us would be here." John asked, "What were you doing over by the canyon, Davy? I thought you were going to look for strays in the south pasture."

"I was down there, but I saw some movement to the west and went to check it out," Davy explained. "I almost shot one of them when I saw-."

"We don't shoot Apaches on this ranch," John stated in a firm tone. "Is that clear?"

"Yes sir," both men replied.

"Phineas, why don't you go back down south with Davy and gather those strays?"

"What about finishin' the barn roof?" Phineas wanted to know.

"There's not much more to be done. I can take care of it. I want those cattle in the east pasture with the main herd before the end the week. Feels like it might decide to snow."

"I'll go saddle your horse, Phineas," Davy said, walking toward the barn.

"Don't worry, Boss. I'll talk to him 'bout the Indians. He won't cause no trouble."

=====

"We really goin' to church, Phineas?" Davy asked quietly as they rode behind the others.

"Why shouldn't we?"

"Well, I haven't been in a church since before I left home."

"Do you some good, then."

"But - what about -?"

"You let me handle the 'what about', Davy-boy. We need more information - town's the best place to get it. Lots more people to talk to."

=====

"Friendly town ya got here, Boss," Phineas said during the ride back to the ranch after dinner.

"Even without a saloon?" Hank asked, recalling Davy's reaction to Providence not having a place to drink whiskey and dance with girls.

"That would make it better," was Davy's response. "But I didn't see a Sheriff's Office or a bank, either."

"We haven't had need for a sheriff," John said. "And while I've been doing most of my banking in Mesa City, Leon Carter at the Mercantile handles any cash transactions in town. He keeps a decent supply of cash on hand for just that purpose. If he can't handle something, there's Carl Collins at the Hotel. I'm sure we'll need a bank eventually - same with a Sheriff - but right now, we're managing without either."

"And I guess there's no saloon 'cause you're all church-goin' people," Davy said.

"If that were the case, the Mercantile wouldn't sell whiskey," he pointed out. "But since most of us spend evenings with our families, there's not really a need for a saloon. I'm sure once there are more hired hands and people without families, someone might decide to open one." He smiled. "We've been incredibly blessed here. God knew what He was doing when he led us to this place."

"It's hard to believe that it will be a year ago next week that we made the decision to settle here," Margaret said.

"And that Kevin will be a year old," John added, looking at the boy in Margaret's lap. "We're having a big celebration next weekend. Speeches, games -"

"Don't forget the horse race, John," Charles reminded him, patting Stony on his neck. "Stony here's going to beat everyone."

"We'll see about that. My pinto kept up with him while we were chasing that stray."

"The race is longer," Charles pointed out. "That pony was fading fast."

Hank shook his head, laughing. "You'll both be following me and Wrangler," he declared.

"He won't beat Stony," Charles insisted, spurring the stallion into a full gallop.

"Excuse me, folks," Hank said as he followed.

====

"We have company," Pedro announced as the wagon and riders entered the ranch yard.

"They were here when we rode in," Charles told them.

"Who rode in first?" Mariana wanted to know.

"We both did," Hank answered. "It was a tie. Excuse me," he said, moving toward the bunkhouse as John got out of the buggy, leaving Pedro to help Margaret and Mariana.

"Brother," John said, greeting Cochise with an outstretched arm. "To what do we owe the pleasure of this visit?"

"I bring a gift for your son on the day of his birth," Cochise said.

"Thank you, but his birthday isn't until later this week - four days from now."

"The son of a chief will have many celebrations." He straightened his arm toward those with him. Brightly woven blankets were brought, along with buckskin fabric. Cochise himself held up a strand of leather that held a beaded ornament. "This will keep him safe from evil," he declared. "The fabric will be his clothing, and the blankets will keep him warm at night."

"Thank you," John said. Margaret and Mariana stepped forward to accept the gifts as Hank returned and stepped forward.

Speaking in Apache, he asked permission to speak to the Chief of the Chiracahua, holding something in his hands.

Cochise nodded. "You are the one who took Singing Dove away from her people," he said.

"She went with me, Chief. The second time with your blessing."

"Speak."

Hank held out the thing in his hands. "I ask that you take this to Singing Dove's father, White Buffalo."

"White Buffalo is dead," Cochise told him. "His woman still lives in our camp."

"Then White Buffalo and Singing Dove are reunited in death and now ride together once more," Hank said. "I know that her family would want to have this cloak that she finished making before her death."

Cochise stepped forward to take the leather garment, a cape colored to show a brilliant sunset. "Singing Dove's mother and I share your sorrow over her death. I will give this to her upon my return to our camp."

"Thank you."

"How did she die?"

Hank managed to stand straighter only because he knew that Cochise wouldn't respect anything else. "Mexican scalp hunters took her scalp while I was away."

"You avenged her death." It wasn't a question, but a statement. "The husband of Singing Dove has brought honor to her people. Your name among us will be Namonowate - The One Who Avengers, and you will always be welcome among my people."

"I am honored," was Hank's response.

Cochise took Hank's wrist in his hand, and Hank followed his lead.

The Apaches left soon after, and John took Margaret and Kevin inside, along with all of the gifts, while the others remained watching as the sun began to sink below the distant horizon. Hank watched until the oncoming darkness had claimed Cochise and his braves. It was a pity that he had been unable to

gain the approval of Singing Dove's people before her death.

"You were married to an Apache squaw?" Davy asked, the words jarring Hank out of his thoughts as he turned to face the man.

"What did you say?"

"Davy didn't mean anythin' by it," Phineas insisted. "He was surprised is all. Isn't that right, Davy-boy?"

Davy's back had straightened, as though he was expecting to fight. "Sure," he answered, but he didn't relax. "I was surprised."

"Then you will be just as surprised to learn that I am half Apache as well," Mariana stated, drawing the attention of the two men as Pedro stepped up to stand at her side. "But I am not **just** an Apache," she added, lifting her head proudly. "I am the cousin of Cochise."

Phineas never batted an eye at the news, but Davy began to stutter and stammer. "But,- you're - a - cousin?!"

"If I were you, Davy-boy," Phineas told him, "I'd shut my pie-hole and git myself back to the bunkhouse."

"Scuse me, ma'am," he said, tipping his hat to Mariana before turning tail and almost running toward said bunkhouse.

"Forgive him, ma'am," Phineas said to Mariana. "He don't tell most folks, but his parents were killed by the Comanche back in Texas. Took a long time for me to stop him from killing every injun that he saw."

"Then **you** don't have a problem with my being half Apache, Mr. Green?"

"Naw. Most of the injuns I knew back home were pretty tame."

Hank spoke. "I'll let you go talk to him before I follow," he told Phineas.

"I thought we might play a few hands of poker before bed," Phineas told him.

"You in a hurry to lose some money?" Hank asked, grinning. The three of them had taken to playing the game before bed most nights - and Hank was right: he tended to win most of the money in the game.

"I feel lucky tonight."

"You always feel lucky. I'm right behind you."

"I am not sure that the Boss would be pleased that you are gambling on Sunday," Pedro said.

"I'll tell him about it tomorrow," Hank said. "I should apologize to you and Mariana - I didn't mean to cause -"

"It was not your fault," Mariana told him.

"Thank you, but it was. I've been waiting for Cochise to visit so that I could tell him about Singing Dove and give him the cloak. When I saw him, I didn't bother to think about how it might affect you."

She smiled, reaching up to touch his cheek. "You are a good man, Hank Collier. Be at peace. With yourself and with your memories."

As they watched her go toward the house, Hank said, "Pedro, don't ever do anything to lose that woman."

"I have no such plans, amigo," Pedro assured him.

====

"Before we start playing," Davy said, "I want to apologize for the way I acted out there -"

"Don't worry about it," Hank said, shuffling the cards. "Cut the deck."

"I mean it," Davy insisted as he lifted part of the deck and restacking it under the other cards.

"Are we going to play cards or talk?" Hank asked, dealing.

Davy picked up his cards. "I'll open for a dollar."

====

"Was everything okay when you got back to the bunkhouse last night?" John asked Hank the next day while they were riding the eastern range.

"I guess Pedro told you what happened after you and Mrs. Donager left us," Hank said.

"He did. It's his job to report any possible problems with the hands," John pointed out.

"Everything was fine. Davy apologized, I accepted the apology - and I guess I should tell you - we played a few hands of poker."

"Poker."

"I know, we shouldn't have been gambling since it was Sunday, but -"

"I don't have a problem with playing poker," John told him. "Played it myself every now and then back in New York. Before Meg and I got married," he clarified. "Haven't played since then. I did it to get the money to come out here. Think Phineas and Davy would mind if I sat in on a game?"

"Pretty sure they'd be okay with it. But I'd hate to take your money, Boss."

"We'll just see who takes the money. I used to be pretty good at the game."

=====

"John Donager, you promised me that you wouldn't play poker anymore, remember?" Margaret said as she stood in front of his desk.

John sighed. "Meg, honey, there's no better way of getting to know a man than to play cards with him. I've been wanting to find a way to get to know those two, this is a good way to do it."

"You don't need money now -"

"I know. And trust me, I don't plan to make a habit of this. But I -"

She moved around to stand beside him, perching on the edge of the desk. "You **want** to play, don't try to hide it, John. You liked playing with the stable boys and servants - Until they got tired of losing to you."

John pulled her into his lap. "I'll admit that you saved me from a life of dissolution, Meg. If it hadn't been for the fact that you've always been part of my life, I hate to think of where I would have ended up."

"Probably playing poker in a saloon, drinking whiskey and romancing every pretty girl you could find," she told him.

"But always looking for you, honey. I love you."

She slid her arms around his neck as he kissed her. Once he lifted his head, she sighed. "And I love you. Oh, go play your poker game. Have fun. I suppose if your one vice is playing poker, I'll have to learn to live with it. Just don't forget that I'll be in our bed, waiting for you to come home."

"That's one thing that I'll never forget, my love," he murmured as his lips met hers again.

=====

Hank was shuffling the cards when the outside door opened and closed as someone else entered the bunkhouse. "Feels like it's getting colder out there, Pedro," Hank observed, not looking away from what he was doing.

"I think it is," John said, and three faces turned in his direction.

"Something we can do for you, Mr. Donager?" Davy wanted to know.

"You can deal me in for the next hand," John answered, sitting down next to Hank.

"You're gonna play poker?" Phineas asked, and John could see the wheels spinning, wondering what the boss might be up to.

"I used to play back in New York, but I promised my wife that I'd give it up." He grinned. "But she gave me her blessing, so here I am."

Hank shuffled again, then placed the deck face down in front of John. "Cut the cards." John did so, and Hank began to deal...

====

Charles entered the parlor, scratching his head. "Margaret?" he asked, seeing her sitting beside the fire. "What are you doing up?"

"It's not that late," she insisted.

"It's nearly ten," he pointed out. "Where's John?"

"You need to get to bed so you can be up for school -"

"I'll be ready. When I passed by your room, I could see that he wasn't in bed. Is something going on?"

She sighed. "No. He's out in the bunkhouse."

"The -?"

"He's playing poker with the men," she explained.

"Poker? I didn't know that John knew how to - do you think he'd be willing to teach me how to play?"

"I would have thought that your friends back in New York would have contributed to that part of your education."

"We rolled the dice a little," he admitted. "But it's easier to break it up and run if the law is coming in if you don't have to stop and collect cards and get the money."

"I'll refrain from asking how often that happened," she told him. "John and some of the servants used to play quite often before he and I were married."

"But - there were a few of the men in the wagon train that played - Mr. Overton, Sean, Mr. Jennings and Mr. Collins -"

"Mr. Collins?"

"Gerald," he clarified. "John never sat in with them. I watched them play, and I *think* that I know the basics, but if someone who knows the game, like John - if he would help me -"

"He promised me not to play the game after we married," she explained.

"Then why is he out there now?"

"Because he says that it's a good way to get to know a person. As for his being willing to teach you - you'll have to ask him. Tomorrow. Now get back to bed. I'm heading that way myself in a few minutes."

"I guess I should ask if he's any good at the game."

She smiled. "How do you think he managed to save enough money for us to leave the city and come west? Now get to bed, young man."

"Yes ma'am!" he replied, leaving her alone to return to his room and crawl back under the now-cold bed covers.

=====

John decided that he had learned all he needed to know about the other men in the game, and stopped playing "soft" as he called it. "I'll take one card," he told Phineas, who was now dealing.

The man looked surprised, as did Davy. It was Hank who asked the question. "You sure about that, Boss?"

"I'm sure." Picking up the card, he placed it into his hand. "Who can open?" he asked.

"I can. Three cards," Davy told Phineas. "And I'm in for a dollar," he said, tossing a coin onto the center of the table.

"Dealer takes two cards," Phineas said, "And I'll add another dollar."

"I'll take two cards as well," Hank said, and put in two coins, then added a third. "That's three to you, Boss."

John kept his face purposefully blank. "I'll stick with these," he told them, "And add another dollar. I think that's four to you, Davy."

"You're bluffing," Davy stated.

"Are you calling the hand?" John wanted to know.

"Not yet. No cards this time. But I'm upping the pot by - three more dollars."

John sat back in his chair as Phineas put his three dollars in, and Hank added another two. "Five dollars," John said, dropping his bet into the pot.

"Okay, *now* I'm calling," Davy said. "Whatcha got?" he asked.

Phineas lay his cards down. "Three tens," he sighed. "Kept hopin' I'd draw another one or another pair."

"Hank?"

"Heart flush," he said, shaking his head. "Looks like it's between you and Davy, Boss."

"What've you got?" John asked.

"Uh uh. You first."

John smiled, turning his cards over one at a time. "Four Kings."

Davy's mouth dropped open. "You drew into that?"

"Phineas dealt me three - and the one card I asked for just happened to be the fourth. Can you beat it?"

Turning his own cards over, sighed. "Almost. Full house, deuces over trays. Take it." Shaking his head, he muttered, "I really thought he was bluffing. Who draws into four of a kind?"

John pulled the pot over. "Shall we play again, gentlemen?"

====

He entered the bedroom as quietly as possible, his boots in hand. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he unbuttoned his shirt and unfastened his trousers. Before removing them, he pulled his winnings out of a pocket and placed it onto the table beside the bed.

Even with his long johns, John shivered in the cold air and lifted the blankets to slide in beside his wife. "Mmm," she murmured. "What time is it?"

"A little after midnight," he whispered in her ear.

She turned over to look at him in the darkness. "How'd you do?"

"Won all but the first two hands," he told her, laying on his back and picking up the cash. "There are also some coins -"

"They're not going to let you play with them anymore," she told him.

"They'll get it back with their pay this month," he assured her, putting it back onto the table before rolling over and pulling her close.

"Your hands are cold," she said.

"They'll warm up shortly," was his reply as he buried his face against her neck...

====

"A year ago this last week, we all made the decision to build a dream. Each of us is dependent on everyone who made that same decision. Without the hotel, there would have been no place for people to stay during those early months. Without the Mercantile, we would no place locally to buy the things that we can't make for ourselves. Without the freight company, there would be nothing *to* buy. Without the livery stable, we'd likely all be on foot. But the most important of them all is this building where we stand now: our church. And not because of the building - but because we all know that it was the Good Lord that led us here and that He has been with us since before we left St. Joseph. He is still with us." John looked out over the sea of faces. "I know that I don't say this enough, but I want to say 'thank you' to each and everyone of you for believing in my dream and making it your own. Thank you, God, for Your Blessings to us."

John stepped away from the lectern, making room for Rev. Lee to say a prayer of thanks.

====

"I hadn't thought it would be this cold," Doc said as the group began to make its way over to what was now Front Street. "I think we're going to have to consider moving the celebration up a few months, say the end of August or September."

"Think about those poor riders in the race, Doc," Gerald Collins said.

"I told them all to make sure they put scarves or mufflers on to try and protect their face from the cold."

John nodded. "Meg knitted a muffler for Charles -" he touched his own scarf "and one for me as well. Speaking of, I'd better get over to the livery to make sure my horse is ready."

"Be careful," Doc said. "And good luck."

====

The race came down to John, Charles, and Hank, with Hank in the lead at the last turn. The other seven horses and riders were far enough back that there was no hope of their winning. Feeling the pinto starting to fade, John sat forward in the seat of his saddle as much as he could, but it wasn't enough as he fell behind Charles and Stony.

Now in sole possession of second, Charles used the end of the reins as a makeshift riding crop, slapping Stony's hindquarter. The horse took off, gaining on Hank and Wrangler.

At the finish line, it was decided that Stony's nose had been just barely ahead of the Wrangler's, making him and Charles the winner of the race.

"Woodstove's lit in the Cafe!" Betsy Collins yelled. "Riders in here for hot coffee and to get warmed up!"

As he unwrapped the scarf from his neck, Margaret examined the knitted garment. "This isn't the one that I made for you, Charles," she observed.

He grinned, nodding toward the young woman just entering the room. "Olivia made it for me - I didn't want to upset her, so I gave yours to Hank. I hope you don't mind."

"Of course I don't," she told him, finally recognizing the scarf around Hank's face as he removed it and stood close to the pot-bellied stove.

"Congratulation, Charles!" John said, slapping the young man on the back. "You were right: that pony just couldn't keep up over the long run."

"He's still a good pony," Charles insisted. "There's just not another horse like Stony. He's one of a kind."

As the celebrations were winding down and dinner was almost ready, Charles found himself sitting at a table in the corner, catching his breath. "Congratulations," Olivia said.

"Thank you." He lifted the scarf. "I told you it would give me luck."

"And I still say that there's no such thing as luck," she reminded him.

"Then I was blessed," he conceded.

"Why are you sitting here alone?"

"Just felt like being alone for a minute," he shrugged. When she nodded and would have turned away, he stopped her. "You don't have to go. I've been along long enough." He pulled out a chair. "Sit down."

"I promised to help serve the meal," she told him as Artie and George and several other young men approached the table.

"Hey, Charles!" Artie called, dropping into one of the chairs. "Would you tell George here to give me the five dollars he owes me?"

"And why would he listen to me?" Charles wanted to know.

"Because he knows you'll beat him up if he doesn't, since I'm your best friend."

"You are?" Charles asked, but he was unable to hide the grin. "Pay up, Georgie-boy, or he'll whine about it all night."

"Whine-? Hey!"

George reached into his pocket and pulled out a five dollar coin, slapping it onto the table. "There ya go, Artie. You can stop crying now," he said, tossing a mostly clean handkerchief after it.

While everyone else laughed, Artie tied the cotton square into a ball and tossed it at George, missing him and hitting Reverend Lee squarely in the chest. "Sorry, Reverend," Artie said sheepishly.

Matthew Lee bent to retrieve the handkerchief, holding it out toward the table. "I'm going to guess that this belongs to one of you." George reached out and claimed it. "Now, as I was saying, why don't we bless this meal that we're about to share?"

Everyone stood, with Charles reaching up to remove Artie's hat - then preventing his friend from stooping to retrieve said hat before the prayer began.

"Dear Lord, we come again today to thank You once more for the fellowship we have with our brothers and sisters, and for this place that You have so graciously provided for us to serve You. We ask now for Your Blessing on the meal that we are about to enjoy - for the hands that prepared it. In Your Precious and Holy Name we pray. And all of God's People said: Amen."

"Amen."

====

As they rode back to the ranch alone the next evening - after a second day of celebration - Davy asked, "Phineas, when are we gonna do what we *came* here to do?"

"You in a hurry, Davy-boy?" his friend asked. "Ya got a roof over your head, a bed to sleep in, and good food on your plate. And you're makin' more honest money that you've ever made in your life. We got time, Davy-boy. Just be patient - we got lots of time."

The End