

The Donager Saga: Beginnings
By Nancy Eddy
Episode 6
Year Two

Author's Note: I researched basics about the Mexican-American War, but I did not go deep. As with other things in the story, I sometimes get things wrong, but with previous episodes already online, I would have to re-write a large segment of those episodes. --NE

By the end of February, the snow had all melted, and an early Spring had begun. The flowers that Margaret had planted in front of the porch were all sprouting, and she and Mariana had begun Spring cleaning by bringing the rugs and bedding out of the house to get some fresh air.

Mariana came from the house carrying several pillows, and saw Margaret trying to lift a rug over the clothes line. Dropping the pillows onto the porch, she rushed over. "Margaret! I told you to let me do the heavy lifting, remember?"

"I really wish that everyone would stop treating me like a piece of fragile China," Margaret fretted as Mariana took the carpet-beater from her. "Give that back, Mariana."

"No," Mariana responded in a no-nonsense tone. "I will not. If you want to help, go bring those pillows that I left on the porch over here and hang them on the other line."

"Honestly!" Margaret fumed as she retrieved the pillows. "I've been here for over a year now! I've helped you with cleaning and cooking, and -"

Mariana stopped beating the rug and turned to face her friend. "And when are you going to tell your husband that you are expecting another child?" she asked.

"What?"

"Surely you know that you are with child."

"I wasn't - I planned to find an excuse for you and I to go into town before long so that I could talk to Doc -"

"You do not need a doctor to tell you that you are expecting," Mariana told her. "You know the signs."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I do the wash - there has been no sign for the last three months. And you have not been eating breakfast for the last week at least. Shall I go on?"

Margaret sighed, then shook her head. "No. There's no need."

"You aren't happy at the prospect of giving Mr. Donager another son?"

"That's the problem. I'm not sure it *is* a son," Margaret told her. "I was barely ill with Kevin. I've had trouble hiding it from John this time. "What if - what if this child is a girl?"

"John Donager will love any child that you bear him - boy *or* girl," Mariana declared in that quiet way that revealed that she, at least, believed in her words.

"But a girl won't be a help to him on the ranch," Margaret insisted.

"Perhaps - however, she will marry one day, and that man will be a help."

Margaret looked thoughtful. "I hadn't really considered that idea."

"After we finish this," she said, indicating the rug and pillows, "I will hitch up the wagon and we will pay a visit to Dr. Hawkins before I begin preparing supper."

"What will I tell John about - about why we have to go to town?"

"Tell him that I needed flour to make dumplings," Mariana suggested, lifting the carpet beater and going back to work.

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"I hope you're not upset about my wanting to see Doc," Margaret said to her friend as Mariana drove the wagon toward Providence.

"I understand that you would prefer to speak to a trained physician."

"It's *not* that I don't trust you," Margaret insisted. "It's just that -"

Mariana finished for her. "It's just the way you were raised. An Apache woman knows when she is carrying a child. It is not something that we are taught or have to speak with others about."

"I'm sorry. My having another child must be difficult for you -"

"Pedro and I will have children when the time is right for us to do so. That is something else that is different. Apache women still bear children as they become older. The Great Spirit will provide us with sons."

"And daughters?" Margaret questioned, and Mariana smiled.

"And daughters," she nodded as the wagon entered Front Street. "In the meantime, I have Kevin and the child you are carrying to help take care of." Stopping the horses in front of the Mercantile, Mariana took Kevin from his mother and suggested, "We will purchase the flour while you go to see the doctor."

Doc's office was across the street, and Margaret crossed to step onto the narrow walkway in front of the office. She opened the door to find Alice Hawkins sitting at the desk. "Margaret!" she said, rising to her feet. "This is a surprise! Come in and sit down. I'll get you some coffee -"

"Thank you, Alice. Is your husband in?"

"He's in the examining room with Betsy Collins, but he should be nearly finished. Is something wrong?"

"What's wrong with Betsy?" Margaret asked, hoping to change the subject.

The answer to that question came from Betsy herself as the door into the examination room opened and that lady and Mark Hawkins appeared. "Carl's going to be so happy, Doc. Thank you."

"I didn't do anything, Betsy," he replied with a grin. "Now remember, take that tonic, and don't overdo. Let someone else lift the pots and pans." He saw that Alice wasn't alone. "Margaret."

"Hello, Doc. Betsy."

"I'm just bursting to tell someone the news!" Betsy declared, moving to clasp Margaret's hands in hers. "I hope that Carl will forgive me for not telling him first - I'm going to have a baby!" she blurted.

"You're - congratulations!" Margaret said, exchanging a hug with the woman.

"I'd best be getting back to the cafe so that I can tell Carl that he's going to be a father."

They watched her leave, and Doc looked at Margaret. "What can I do for you?"

"I think that Betsy's not the only one who's with child," was Margaret's answer, and Alice smiled.

"How wonderful!" she declared.

Mark was smiling as well, but he asked, "And just why do you think that?"

As she'd done the last time, Margaret gave him a list of her symptoms. "It's been hard to keep John from discovering that I'm ill in the morning. With that and everything else - plus the fact that Mariana insists that I'm expecting - I thought I should talk to you."

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John came out of his office as they entered the house by the back door, with Hank carrying the bag of flour. He gave John a grin before putting the cotton sack onto the counter and leaving again.

"I was just thinking about going to find you," John stated, taking Kevin from Margaret as she removed her hat.

"I spilled the flour," Mariana told him. "I needed it to make dumplings for supper." Taking her apron from a nearby hook, she put it over her head and tied it. "I'll get supper started."

John frowned as he followed Margaret into the parlor where she placed her hat on a table beside the door. Putting Kevin down onto his feet, he looked at Margaret. "What's wrong, Meg?"

"Wrong?" she repeated, moving over to the mirror beside the door where she patted her hair. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"Since when does it take you *and* Mariana to buy flour?"

She lifted her shoulders, smiling. "I just decided that it was a good day for a ride. We've been cooped up for almost two months," she pointed out, moving to check Kevin's headlong dash toward the stonework fireplace. "If you'll excuse me, I have to get the pillows off of the line and bring them back inside -"

"Meg." She stopped, allowing John to place his hands on her shoulders and turn her to face him. "What's going on?"

"We saw Betsy Collins in town," she told him. "She's going to have a baby."

"That's good news." He lifted her chin as she focused on his shirt buttons. "Meg, how long have you known -?"

"About Betsy? I just found out in town -"

"That's not what I meant, honey, and I think you know that. How long have you known that you're expecting again?"

Margaret's eyes widened with surprise at his question. "I wasn't sure - not until today. How did you know?"

He smiled, brushing her cheek with his thumb. "Oh, Meg. A man learns to notice changes in a woman that he shares a bed with. A little rounder here, a bit fuller there. Whether she purrs or hisses at his touch. I didn't want to upset you if you weren't - We both agreed to having a houseful of children, didn't we?"

She nodded. "I'm just - afraid-"

"Afraid of what?"

"What if this one is a - a girl?" she questioned.

John's soft laughter caused her to relax. "Is that what's troubling you? Oh, Meg, don't you realize that I don't care if we have a houseful of girls or boys," he declared, hugging her.

"It's just that - I've been so ill in the mornings, and I really wasn't with Kevin."

"When can we expect the arrival of this one?"

"Around the end of August," was her answer.

"Kevin," John called, and Margaret turned around to see their son standing beside the hearth, trying to climb up onto it. "No."

Kevin looked at his father, then at the fireplace before sitting down on the floor. "No."

"Good boy," John praised, moving over to ruffle the straight golden locks.

"Oh, Nedra Carter gave me a letter that came in for you," Margaret remembered, pulling the envelope from the pocket of her dress. "It's from Mr. Maxwell."

John opened the envelope and scanned the writing. "He says that the newspapers are reporting that things are going well in the war. That the Indians have been fighting the Mexican army to the south. They're not fighting *for* the US interests, but at least they're not fighting against us."

"That's something, anyway. What else did he write?"

"He's managed to convince his friends that he decided *not* to go prospecting, but he *is* considering leaving Rykerton and going further west."

"Maybe he'll come to visit us," she suggested.

"I seriously doubt that it will happen until the war is over," he observed. "The trip would be too dangerous."

"That worries you, doesn't it?" she asked.

John exhaled, nodding. "A little. As long as this war drags on, there won't be many people who want to settle the area. If Providence is going to grow, we'll need more people."

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As summer neared, John hired another three hands since the herd was growing and he was going to take at least half north to market. The three men, Chuck, Joe, and Jim, were all experienced with driving cattle.

"Do you have to do this, John?" Margaret asked. Her morning sickness had finally passed, and she was herself again - except for the 'bump' in her midsection, that is.

"It'll only be for a couple of weeks, Meg," he told her. "And with the profits, I'll be buying a new bull and a few head of cattle to strengthen the herd. This time next year, we'll be taking twice as many head to market."

"Who's going with you?"

"The new hands, and Pedro. Hank will stay here to act as foreman for Charles, Phineas and Davy."

"You're not taking Charles?"

"He can go next year," John told her. "From what I've heard, some of those trail-towns can get wild. He'll be old enough next year that I won't feel like I need to keep a close eye on him."

"What if Cochise wants to see you while you're gone?"

"I sent Pedro to the Western Ridge Canyon when they picked up their payment. He told them that we were going north and would return in two weeks."

"I'm going to miss you," she told him. "The longest we've been apart was when you made the trip to Mesa City last summer to talk to the banker."

John pulled her into his arms. "I'll miss you too, Meg, honey. The time'll fly by."

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"Perhaps it was not a good idea for me to come with you, Boss," Pedro said as they rode beside the herd.

"Why? You've made this trip before -"

"But there was no war then," he pointed out. "I would hate to be the cause of any trouble."

"You know, I don't see any soldiers to question us," John noted as he looked around. "Mexican *or* American."

"There might be some in Dawson who distrust me."

"I'll just tell them the truth: that you're my ranch foreman. Stop worrying, Pedro. God will see us through whatever happens and get us safely home again."

He could tell that Pedro wasn't convinced as the foreman wheeled his horse to go after a cow who had wandered away from the rest of the herd. Continuing to ride on, John prayed, "Dear Lord, I ask again for Your hand to be on us, to keep us safe from harm. Help us to remember that You are in control, and that Your will be done. Amen."

Pedro returned with the cow. "If I recall correctly, there is a good place for us to camp just ahead. We'll be in Dawson by noon tomorrow."

John nodded. "I'll go tell the men."

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Charles found his sister standing on the porch, staring off to the north. "I don't think you can see them from here," he stated. "They're probably almost to Dawson."

"I know," she sighed. "But it makes me feel a little closer to him. I'll be glad when they get back." She smiled as he put an arm across her shoulders. "Did you finish your homework?" she asked. With John and Pedro gone, Margaret had agreed to let Charles go help with whatever Hank needed done after school and then do his homework after supper.

"It is. I told you last fall that doing it this way would work, remember? You didn't believe that I could do it."

"Well, I still say that once John's home, you should go back to doing it when you get home."

Charles sighed and shook his head. "I feel sorry for Kevin - and his brother or sister. They're not going to be able to have any fun."

"Don't be silly."

"There are only two weeks of school left," he pointed out. "So why go back to the old way for just a week?"

"We'll discuss it," she agreed. "I want to see what your grades are over this week and next."

"Haven't they been good this week?"

"So far," Margaret grudgingly admitted.

"Actually, they've been *better* than before," he reminded her. "For some reason I can concentrate more on my schoolwork after doing a little work and having supper."

"Like I said, we can talk about it."

"I give up. I'm going in to bed. Why don't you come in, too?"

She shook her head. "I'll be in soon. Once the light fully fades."

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"Phineas!" Davy hissed softly, looking for his friend in the darkness near the corral. "You out here?"

"Right here, Davy-boy," Phineas answered, grabbing the younger man's arm to stop him from moving past. "Thought you were about t'turn in."

"I needed to talk to you, without Hank listening," Davy explained. "Told him that I needed a breath of fresh air."

Phineas' sigh was loud in the dark stillness that surrounded them. "What's up?"

"I found something in the barn when I was moving those hay bales this afternoon," he explained, digging into this shirt pocket to pull something out. "This." Opening his hand, he revealed shiny bits of metal that glistened in the light of the moon.

"What is it?"

"What is it?" Davy repeated. "It's what we came here to find!" he declared, glancing around as he realized he might have spoken loud enough to be overheard. Lowering his voice, he said just one word: "Gold!"

"Even if it is, there's not much there. Not enough t'get excited over," was his comment as he looked at Davy's hand.

"What is *wrong* with you, old man? This just means that there's more gold here somewhere. We just hafta *find* it!"

"It could be anywhere -"

"We both know where it is - that safe that Donager's got in his office. It *has* to be in there."

"And maybe there ain't anymore gold," Phineas reasoned. "Takes a heap o'money t'run a ranch, boy. He's just now gone t'sell some of his cattle - Could be that he used up all that gold on feed and wages and lumber t'build all these buildings."

Davy shook his head in denial. "You don't believe that. The story in Mesa City was that the first gold the storekeeper took in payment was nuggets - and later it was gold bars."

"So he turned the nuggets he brought into bars once they got settled."

"You know, Phineas, sometimes I think that you've lost your nerve."

Suddenly a large knife appeared in Phineas' hand as he pushed Davy up against the barn wall. "What'd you say, Davy-boy?"

Davy swallowed as he stared at the knife, his eyes wide with fear. "N-nothing," he stammered.

Releasing Davy, Phineas stepped back, returning the dark-bladed knife to the scabbard on his belt. "Best get t'bed. Hank said we were ridin' out t'gather up the cattle for the Apach'," he declared, turning toward the bunkhouse, leaving Davy to follow cautiously.

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His pocket full of money for the herd, John stood beside the fence as he surveyed the black bull standing inside of the rail.

"He's a good looking bull, Boss," Pedro told him. "He will make the herd stronger for next year."

"That's what I'm praying will happen," John nodded, pointing to another corral nearby. "And those five cows will help as well." He looked down at his friend. "Why aren't you here instead of in one of the saloons having a glass of cold beer with the others?"

"I thought it best to wait until I could go with you."

"Has anyone said a word to you about being Mexican since we got here?" John wanted to know.

"No. But I have seen a few people give me uncertain looks, as if they are worried. It would be understandable, wouldn't it?"

"Not at all," John insisted. "Come on. I think I saw a church steeple as we were driving the herd in. "I want to find out what time the services will be tomorrow morning."

The church was smaller than the one in Providence - even though the town was much larger. The sign in front read simply, "Dawson Church"

"A simple sign for a simple church," Pedro noted, following John up the stairs and into the building.

A man was sitting in the first pew, and stood when he heard the door open and close. As he turned, it was easy to see the white collar he was wearing, revealing him to be the minister. "We have no money here in the church," he declared. "If you are here to try and rob -"

"We're here to pray, Reverend," John informed him. "My name is John Donager, and this is my foreman, Pedro Lopez. We brought in a herd from down south and were wondering what time church services will be tomorrow morning."

"You want to attend the Sunday service?"

"Yes. Why does that surprise you, Reverend-"

"Branson," he said. "Michael Branson. Most of the men from the cattle drives don't come to church," he explained. "They spend Saturday night in the saloon drinking whiskey and gambling and dancing with the ladies, and are sleeping all of that off on Sunday morning."

"Well, Reverend Branson, we'll be here - what time?"

Branson finally smiled. "At eleven. You said that you came up from the south?" he asked.

"A little place called Providence."

"I've never heard of it."

"It was just started around 18 months ago. My ranch is just south of there - the Diamond D."

"There's nothing between here and Mexico," he told them.

"The town and ranch are *in* Mexico -" John began, and Pedro finished.

"For the moment, anyway."

"We'll see you tomorrow morning, Reverend," John told him. "At eleven." As they came from the church into the bright sunlight, John put his hat back on. "Why don't we go find a steak and a cold glass of beer, my friend?"

"That sounds very good."

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Charles was in the barn, working on a new horse shoe for Stony when he saw Hank, Phineas and Davy riding back in from the western range. Lifting the shoe from the fire, he went to the doorway. "Hank, could I see you for a minute, please?"

"I need to take this slip with the day's count over to the office,-" Hank replied, waving the piece of paper.

"I'll take it over for you," Davy offered.

Hank nodded, handing it over. "Just put it on his desk under the ledger. Thanks," he added as he turned to join Charles. "What's up?"

Phineas waited until he was out of earshot before grabbing Davy's arm. "What do ya think you're doin', Davy-boy?"

"Taking this to the boss' office," Davy answered, waving the slip of paper as he tried to pull away.

But Phineas' fingers tightened, forcing Davy to look at him. "You best behave y'self, Davy-boy. You hear me?"

Davy winced and nodded. "I hear you. Now lemme go. You're cutting off the circulation -" Phineas released his arm and Davy exhaled before heading toward the house.

Inside the barn, Charles went back to the fire, and Hank followed. "Why'd you call me in here?" Hank finally asked as Charles glanced toward the other two men who were having a discussion. "Charles -"

"Did you ask Davy to move some of the hay bales in here?"

Hank shook his head. "Not that I remember. Why?"

"You remember the corner where I was melting the gold down and putting into molds?"

"Yeah. You had a wall of hay around it to keep the air away."

"And after I was finished and things cooled down, I put it all into my room inside the house, and put the bales back against the wall. I remember having spilled a drop or two of the gold into the hay on the floor and covered it up until it could dry and I could retrieve it."

"That I didn't know about."

"No one did. I forgot about it myself until I saw that the hay had been moved away from the wall."

"What about the gold?"

"It wasn't much, but it's gone."

"Are you sure? Maybe it just got covered up with dirt -"

Charles shook his head. "No. It's gone. Unless John found it and didn't tell me, that only leaves two others."

"So they found some droplets of gold," Hank said, looking behind him.

"Well, I'm going to keep an eye on those two anyway."

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Davy looked through the open door into the house. He knew that he **should** knock, but he knew that doing that would probably lose him the opportunity to enter John Donager's office and have a quick look around. The front room was empty - he could hear sounds coming from the kitchen to the left, but it was the other door that he moved toward. Opening it, he went inside.

He'd been here before, but other than the Apache lance, he hadn't really noticed very much. He picked up the ledger on the desk, revealing a stack of papers similar to the one he held in his hand. After placing it on top of the others, he returned the ledger and surveyed the contents of the room.

Along with the desk and chair, there were two more chairs - and a safe in the corner of the room. Davy moved over to examine it - studying the lock mechanism. If there **was** gold on the Diamond D, it would most likely be inside of the heavy iron box, he decided. Maybe Mrs. Donager or her brother would be able to open it, he decided.

Realizing that he would be missed soon, Davy opened the door - and very nearly ran into the boss' wife. "Sorry, ma'am," he apologized, reaching out to steady her shoulders.

Margaret frowned. "What are you doing in Mr. Donager's office, Davy?" she asked.

"Hank said that the livestock count that we made needed to be put on Mr. Donager's desk, ma'am," he explained. "He stopped to talk to your brother, and I offered to bring it in for him."

"The usual practice is to knock before entering someone's house," she pointed out.

"I didn't want to disturb the boy in case he was napping, so I came directly to the office and was just leaving to go back out and ask Charles if I could straighten the tack room."

"That's one of his usual jobs," she told him.

"Yes, ma'am, I know that. But I just wanted to help him so that he wouldn't have so much to do. If I'm going to ask, though, I need to get out there before he starts working."

Margaret stepped aside so that he could move toward the door. "Next time, Davy, please knock before coming inside."

"I'll do that, ma'am," he assured her, bowing slightly before turning and leaving the house.

She stood there for a second before going into John's office to make sure nothing was out of place. It didn't look like anything had been disturbed or taken, but the idea that the man had been in the house without anyone's knowledge was troubling.

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"I know I'm probably making too much of this, Charles, but I thought you should know about."

Charles' jaw was set and his eyes were narrowed in anger, she noticed. "No, you have every right to be concerned," he said in a tight voice. "He should have knocked and announced his arrival instead of just coming into the house that way. I think he might suspect that we have some gold around here."

"How could he? He only goes to town with us on Sundays - and no one there would have said anything."

Charles told her about the drops of gold that he'd left in the barn. "The bales of hay were moved. Someone found them, and whoever it is is probably looking for more."

"You should have picked them up when it happened," she told him. "What on earth were you thinking, just leaving them in the dirt beneath a bale of hay?"

"We were breaking a string of horses, and I had promised to be at the corral as soon as I finished with the last bars," he recalled. "I guess I got in a hurry - that's why the gold sloshed out, and why I just left it there, planning on going back for it later."

"But you didn't. And now Davy or Phineas have found it and want more."

"I'm going to be keeping a close eye on them," Charles stated. "Hopefully they won't try anything before John and the others get back. I think John's going to have to tell them about the gold."

"You left him very little choice. If he tells them he'll have to tell the new hands as well. I won't be able to sleep a wink until John's back to handle this."

"Look, I told you that I'm sorry. I should have been more careful. It won't happen again." His fist clenched. "And as for your being able to sleep, you let me worry about it. You need your rest."

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"Everyone in town attends church on Sunday?" The question was asked over dinner at Reverend Branson's modest home.

"Yes, even the hands who work for me," John confirmed, nodding at Pedro. While Chuck, Joe and his brother Jim *had* attended church, it had been after a long night in the saloon, so they had given their apologies and returned to the hotel to get some rest before the return trip to Providence.

"I simply can't imagine such a thing," Mrs. Branson declared. "Why, if that was the case here, the church wouldn't be nearly big enough to hold everyone!"

"We made sure to include room for the town's expansion when we built it last year," John told her. "You have to realize, Mrs. Branson, that almost all of us came out here together. Six months in a wagon train tends to forge strong bonds, and if those same people decide to settle in the same place, those bonds are still there. Our pastor held church every Sunday morning, rain or shine."

"Not only do we go to church, all of the businesses in town are closed on Sunday," Pedro said. "And one Sunday a month, we have Sunday dinner together."

Mrs. Branson sighed. "It sounds wonderful. Doesn't it, Michael?"

"Who's your pastor?"

"Matthew Lee. He and his wife Rebecca came out here with the intention of starting a new church to the west. Instead, they chose to remain in the valley and started their church in Providence."

"Matthew," Mrs. Branson noted. "And you're - John, am I correct?"

John nodded, knowing where she was heading. "Our doctor's name is Mark," he told her.

"Oh my." She tittered with amusement. "Matthew, Mark - and John," she recited. "All you need to complete it is a Luke."

"Sadly, we don't have a Luke in our community. But when God decides that we need one, he'll send one."

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"What do ya think you're doin'?"

Davy froze in his tracks upon hearing Phineas' voice. "You scared the daylights outa me," he said. "I thought you were asleep."

"You know that it don't take a pin droppin' t'wake me up, Davy-boy," Phineas reminded him. "You didn't answer my question."

"I want a better look at that safe. I might be able to get it open -"

"You get that thought right outa your head," Phineas told him. "Leave that safe be."

"I can't do that - and there was a time not too long ago when you would have been going in there with me."

"We don't need that gold, Davy-boy."

"Maybe you don't, but I not only need it, I'm going to get it."

"If you go breakin' into that safe, the only thing that gold'll get you is a bushel of trouble. And some of that trouble will brush off on me. I got no desire t'be spending time in jail."

"There's not a jail in Providence, remember? No law?"

"They got law, Davy-boy," Phineas pointed out. "They got God's law - and that says clearly "Thou shalt not steal".

"So that's it. You got religion. Why don't you go back to the bunkhouse and say a prayer and sing a hymn? I got things to do."

"Don't say I didn't warn ya, boy," Phineas said, watching as Davy was swallowed up by the darkness.

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After Kevin and Margaret were in their beds asleep, Charles quietly dressed and went into John's office. He sat down on the window seat, pulling the heavy drapery closed so he wouldn't be seen if someone else entered the room. Leaning back, his eyes began to close, and it wasn't long before he fell asleep.

He wasn't sure exactly what woke him, but he almost bit his tongue to keep from making any noise. Someone was in the room beyond the curtains. With a slow, steady movement, Charles pulled the drapes every so slightly apart, scanning the dark room.

A match flared to life near the safe, revealing Davy's face as he studied the metal box. Charles remained silent and watched as the cowboy reached out and turned the knob, putting his ear against the door as he did so. Charles knew that the locking mechanism couldn't be heard through the metal - John had made sure that anyone who opened the safe would *have* to know the combination, so he wasn't worried about Davy getting it open.

But now that he knew who the would-be thief was, he knew who he needed to keep an eye on.

After ten minutes without any results, Davy stood up and moved to the desk, lighting another match as he opened various drawers, no doubt looking for the way to open the safe. He hesitated and examined the cash inside of a small metal box, and Charles tensed, getting ready to jump out and accuse him of theft, but Davy put the money back into the box and returned the box to its drawer.

It was wrong for Davy to be in the house at all, but Charles wanted proof before revealing his presence. As it was, Davy could simply plead curiosity about the house, and that he was too shy to be around Mariana and Margaret.

When Davy finally left the room, Charles stayed in the window seat, closing his eyes to sleep.

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As John and the others were about to start heading the six heifers and bull back south, a surrey with Rev. Branson, his wife, and several other people who had been in church the previous morning arrived. "Reverend," John said, removing his hat as he greeted his guests. "We're just about to pull out for home."

"We came out to bless your journey," the minister explained, getting out of the surrey so that he could stand. Hats were removed - some after John and Pedro gave expectant glances, and Rev. Branson said, "Dear God Almighty, we ask that Your hand of mercy and safety be upon these men and their animals as they return to their home. Grant them a safe journey. These things we ask in Your Holy Name. Amen."

"Amen," John repeated, reaching out to shake the hand of the Reverend and the other men. "Thank you. I pray that you will be blessed for the blessing. Getting onto the paint, he called to his men. "Let's go!"

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"Just had t'go snoopin', didn't ya?" Phineas hissed as he and Davy rode on night watch.

"I didn't do anything," Davy insisted.

"Except sneak into that house when ev'ryone was 'sleepin'," Phineas surmised. "Or s'posed t'be."

"What's that mean? Davy asked. "I didn't hear a peep while I was in there."

"Haven't ya noticed the way Charles has been watchin' you the last few days?"

"No, not really. Look, Phineas, if he saw me in there, he would have said something - or even grabbed me when it happened. It's been almost a week now."

"Could be, he's just been waitin' for you to do somethin' else even more stupid. Listen, the last thing I need is for them to tie me into whatever you're plannin' t'do. I'm getting' too old t'be a tumbleweed. I need to settle down, and this is as good a place as any. If you don't like that, you're free t'ride out, just don't mess things up for me. As a matter of fact, keep yer distance from here on out," he concluded, spurring his horse to ride away to the other side of the herd where he spent the rest of the night.

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They were nearing the border less than twenty miles from Providence when Chuck pulled back and let John catch up. "What's wrong?" John wanted to know.

"I just saw four men riding in this direction," he explained. "They look like Mexican soldiers."

"Pedro!" John called, looking around for the foreman. He was riding drag behind the small herd of cattle.

"Yes, Boss?"

"Chuck tells me that he saw four Mexican soldiers up ahead."

Chuck nodded to confirm his statement. "Looked like they were heading for cover to let us pass by and attack from the rear."

"Let's not give them the chance," John decided. "We'll stop here. About time for lunch, anyway. Chuck, you go tell Jim and Joe what's going on. Tell them we're stopping here for a few minutes. Then tell Joe to dig out some ham and bread." Nodding, Chuck turned his horse and went toward the small chuck wagon and the other mounted rider. "Tell them to box the cattle into the side of the hill using the wagon as best he can." Again Chuck nodded and rode away, leaving John and Pedro studying the trail ahead.

"It wouldn't be our old friend Capitan Sanchez, would it?"

"It's hard to say," Pedro answered, lifting his shoulders. "Most likely it's a patrol watching the border to keep - undesirables out."

"I suppose we fit that description in their minds. Do you think we'll be able to reason with them?"

"Possibly, but even if they have been told not to attack us because of your friendship with Cochise, they will most likely try to stop you from crossing the border with cattle." A shot rang out, and both men dropped out of their saddles onto the ground, making a mad dash toward the wagon.

"Can you hear me, Americanos?" a voice called from the rocks ahead of them.

"We hear you!" John responded, drawing a bead on the man.

"You cannot come through the border. It is closed to Americanos!"

"One of us is Mexican!"

"But he is with you, Senor! Leave the cattle behind and give us your weapons and horses and you can pass through!"

John remained where he was until the man spoke again.

"What is your answer, Senor?"

Very slowly, John squeezed the trigger of the rifle, and was relieved when he saw the man flinch and reach up to touch his left ear. "The sight on this thing needs adjusted," he muttered, turning to smile at Pedro and the others. "I was aiming for his right ear."

"That is not the answer you needed to give us, Senor. Now neither your cattle *nor* you will pass through!"

John and the others took cover as the soldiers began to fire at them. "We are under the protection of Cochise, Chief of the Chiricahua Apache! If you harm us or our cattle, you will answer personally to him!"

"I do not see Cochise here, Senor!"

The sound of a bugle being blown heralded the arrival of someone who *could* help, and John called, "Then you'll have to answer to the United States Army!"

The soldiers came in firing, and soon the Mexicans realized that they were out manned and out gunned, leaving them no choice but to ride back to the east at full gallop. "Should we pursue them, Lieutenant?"

"No, I doubt they'll be back. They didn't have much of an appetite for fighting," the Lieutenant told him. "They were another small border patrol. Tell the men to dismount and take rations."

"Yes, sir," the Sergeant said, snapping a salute which was promptly returned.

The Lieutenant shook his head, holding out his hand. "How come I'm not surprised to find you in the middle of this, Mr. Donager?"

John grinned. "Because you're a very perceptive man, Lt. Evers. You have no idea how glad I was to hear that bugle and see your men."

"We've been shadowing that patrol for a month from this side of the border. Our scout told us that they had stopped a small herd of cattle and five men. I think you know him. Corporal!"

John's grin turned into a smile as he recognized the young man. "Stanton! You've been promoted!"

"Yes, sir," Stanton confirmed, smiling as well. "Been about a month now. I thought I recognized you and your foreman when I looked through the glasses."

"I'm very grateful that you alerted the others. I'm not sure that we could have held them off for very long."

"I have every confidence that you could have, sir," Stanton replied.

"Back to your duties, Stanton," Evers said, watching him return to the rest of the soldiers. "He's a good man. I think he'll go far." His eyes moved to the cattle as Pedro joined them.

"Lt. Evers," he said, extending his hand. "It is good to see you."

"The Corporal wasn't sure which direction you were heading -" Evers told them.

"Heading home with some new stock," John explained. "Sold my first herd up in Dawson and bought a bull and breeding stock. I figure to mix them into the scrub cattle and see what happens."

"Should work out. I've seen it done before. That is a nice looking bull."

"Should be, considering what I paid for him."

Evers chuckled and nodded. "So how are things in Providence?" he asked.

"We're blessed. So far, we only had one attack by the Mexican Army - and that was almost a year ago."

"Who's ranch?"

"The Scott place, to the south east of mine. The Mexicans lost several men - we had one wounded, Mr. Scott. And he recovered quickly."

"And they've left you alone since?"

John nodded as Pedro spoke. "They are more afraid of Cochise than they are of us," he declared.

"They weren't today," John reminded his friend. "I was saying all kinds of prayer asking God to get us through this so I'd be able to see my next child born."

"Mrs. Donager is expecting?"

"Due around the end of August. Any chance that the war will be over by then?"

"That's hard to say. Are you aware that we've claimed the New Mexican territory and put a territorial governor in place?"

"No. I hadn't heard about that."

Evers nodded. "The territorial government is in Santa Fe, but the territorial governor lived in Taos."

"Lived?" John questioned.

"The Mexicans and some Pueblo indians staged a revolt and killed him. Our army held off a revolt by the Mexicans in the area who objected to the way they were being treated. Another governor has been appointed, but the territory is under military control. Has been since September of last year. And we're making progress in California - you were right about some of the citizens there fighting against their Army. Even some of the landowners have surrendered to our forces. The Indians have been keeping them busy down here, reclaiming lands that the Mexican government took from them."

John nodded. "That's about what I've been hearing from a friend of mine up in Kansas - and from Cochise when we meet."

"I'm not sure I could stand to meet him again," Evers told them. "Once was enough. He's a very formidable man." He smiled. "But so are you."

Pedro nodded as John shook his head. "I'm just a regular man trying to take care of my family and friends. Nothing special."

"Do me a favor, Mr. Donager," Evers requested. "Don't ever let yourself believe what people are going to say about you. You're one in a million, sir."

John gave his usual half-grin in response to the praise, extending his hand. "Well, we need to get back home. Thank you again for your help."

"I'd offer an escort, but I don't think our friends would appreciate it. Go with God," he added, finally releasing John's hand.

"You as well. I pray every day that this war will end so that you and the others can return to your homes."

"So do I," Evers confided. "But I have a feeling that after we defeat the Mexicans, we're going to be in another fight - one that will last longer and be more difficult." He looked out over the landscape. "Once this land is opened up to settlers, the Indians will have no choice but to fight to keep them out. Not just the Apache. All of them. That's when the real battle will begin. Give the good citizens of Providence my regards."

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As the Diamond D hands pushed their small herd to the south, John found himself considering Lt. Evers' words. "Pedro," he said, joining his foreman.

"Yes, Boss?"

"Do you think Lt. Evers was right?"

"About the Indians? Yes. They will fight to keep their land - but they have always done so. Even before the white man came here, tribes fought other tribes. Mariana has told me that even Cochise knows that there is no future for his people, but he will still fight."

"If he knows they'll lose, then why -?"

"Because that is their way. He will fight for his land the same way that you would, even if you were convinced that you could not win," Pedro stated. "You should have no problems here."

John nodded. "The treaty."

"Yes. Oh, there may be an occasional attempt by other tribes, but they all know that this was Apache land - and that Cochise has agreed to let you stay."

"Even the other Apache chiefs?"

Pedro shrugged. "That remains to be seen."

=====

"Excuse me, Mrs. Donager. I have a favor to ask."

Margaret was sitting on the porch, keeping watch. John was due back any day, and she really needed to see him. Turning at the sound of Davy's voice, she smiled. "I'd be glad to help if I can."

"Well, I need a place to put my pay where I know I can't get to it and spend it while I'm in town this afternoon. I'm saving it for something special, and if I go into that mercantile, I'm liable to go hog-wild."

"You can't just leave it here?" she suggested.

"If I have it, I'll be tempted to take it," he told her.

"I'd be glad to hold onto it for you -"

Davy grinned, looking embarrassed. "Thank you, but - well, I'd rather not put that kind of responsibility on you, ma'am. I thought, well, maybe - if you could let me put it into Mr. Donager's safe 'til I get home?"

Margaret frowned. "The safe? I don't -"

"I thought maybe you might have the combination, but - I guess I was wrong. I thought Mr. Donager would have trusted you with it."

Margaret thought quickly. Mariana was in the kitchen with Kevin. Hank and Charles were out with the herd, and Phineas was probably still in the bunkhouse getting some rest before having to ride night herd again. She knew that Davy had been tasked with going into Providence to pick up some supplies. "Follow me," she told the man, leading him inside the house and to the office. Making sure she blocked his view, she managed to bend down to unlock and open the heavy metal door.

Once it was open, Davy grabbed her arm and pulled her back, telling her, "I don't want to hurt you, ma'am. So why don't you sit down on the window seat?" He motioned behind her with the gun in his hand. After she sat down, he continued to talk. "If you make any noise, I'll be forced to use this, and I'm sure you don't want Mariana to be hurt." He bent to look inside the safe, frowning as he picked up a canvas sack of money. "Where's the gold?"

Margaret frowned. She knew there had to be some gold in there - Charles had gone to the 'new' mine just a few nights ago to collect it. But she wasn't about to tell Davy that. "Gold? There's no gold here," she told him.

"You're lying to me," he declared. "We heard in Mesa City that Mr. Donager paid his bills with gold bars and nuggets."

"What's left is in the Mesa City bank," she explained. "Just take the money in the safe and you and Phineas can leave. If I were you, I'd do it before my husband returns. He won't be pleased that you're holding me at gunpoint, considering the fact that I'm due in three months time..." She moaned and fell onto the floor, her eyes closed.

Davy reached over to touch her shoulder. "Mrs. Donager? Wake up, ma'am." When she didn't move, he grabbed the money and a canvas bag that contained still more before leaving the office and the house.

As soon as she heard his boots on the porch, Margaret, who had been feigning having fainted, rose from the floor, grabbing the rifle that John kept loaded beside the front door and followed him outside, just in time to see his horse galloping toward the east. Lifting the rifle, she took aim ...

Phineas woke, stretching his arms. "Hey, sleepy-head, time to wake up -" he reached out to pull the covers back on the other bed, only to find some rolled blankets and a pillow instead of Davy. He grabbed his trousers and pulled them on as he heard a horse galloping away. Moving to the door, he threw it open to see Davy riding away, hell for leather. "Damnation!" he muttered, finally seeing Mrs. Donager standing the porch of the house, a rifle at ready.

He was shocked when she fired the weapon, and even more shocked when Davy fell from his saddle. Phineas stopped to pull his boots on just outside the bunkhouse and hurried over to the porch, where Mariana, with Kevin in her arms, was just coming from the house.

"What's going on?" she asked the clearly shaken woman.

"Davy - Davy stole the money from the safe," she said. "He and Phineas -"

"I didn't have no part in that, ma'am," Phineas told her as he joined them. "I'll swear t'that on the Good Book," he added, wrapping his fingers around the barrel of the rifle. "Why don't you let me take that?"

Margaret hesitated, but released the rifle. "Would you go and bring him back to the house, please, Phineas."

"I'll get him and the money he stole," Phineas promised, leaning the rifle against the house.

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"We're almost home, Pedro!" John called out, a smile on his face.

"I hope Mariana has prepared a feast for our return!" Pedro replied, laughing. The laughter faded as the sound of a single rifle shot rang out.

"That came from the house," John declared. "You three bring the herd on in," he told Chuck, Joe and Jim as he and Pedro spurred their own horses into full gallop.

As they neared the buildings at the heart of the Diamond D, John saw Phineas dragging someone across the yard toward the house. Margaret and Mariana were standing in front of the porch, watching him until they saw John and Pedro.

"Thank God you're home, John!" Margaret declared, throwing herself into his embrace.

"You're shaking," he noted. "What's going on? Who is that with Phineas?"

"D-Davy," she answered. "I need to - to sit down."

Pedro was already getting the rocking chair from the porch, bringing it out for John to help her into. "Thank you, Pedro," she told him, her gaze moving to Phineas. "I - I shot him, John."

"You -?" John knelt beside her as Pedro ran to help Phineas. "Why? What did he do?"

"He's alive, Mrs. Donager!" Phineas yelled as Pedro reached them.

"Oh, thank You God," she said. "I was terrified that I'd killed him."

"He might be after I get finished with him," John stated. "What happened, Meg?"

"He - he tried to steal the gold from the safe," she told him. "Said that he wanted to put his pay in the safe to keep from spending it in town this afternoon - I didn't really think about it, I just opened it - he had me sit down while he looked for the gold." She looked at John. "But it wasn't there. I told him to take the cash and leave. After he left the house, I picked up the rifle and came out and -"

"He's got a bullet in his right leg," Pedro declared. "Lost a lot of blood."

"I should just let him bleed to death -," John muttered, glaring at the unconscious man.

"No, John," Margaret insisted.

Taking a deep breath, John nodded. "Pedro -"

"I'll go get Dr. Hawkins."

"I'll take him over to the bunkhouse," Phineas told them, but John rose from beside his wife.

"I'll help. We need to talk." Turning to Mariana, he said, "Take Meg inside, please, Mariana. I'll be there in a minute."

The other three men rode in, herding the seven head. "You need any help, Boss?" Chuck asked.

"Not right now - why don't you put the cattle into that corral? We'll get them branded on Monday." He and Phineas were almost back to the bunkhouse with Davy between them when Hank and Charles returned, clearly having heard the gunshot as well.

"We heard a gunshot!" Charles declared, sliding out of the saddle as the horse came to a stop. "What happened to Davy?"

"Margaret shot him," John explained. "Apparently he tricked her into opening the safe, looking for gold." He and Phineas lay Davy onto his bed, and Phineas held out a canvas bag.

"I think this is yours, Mr. Donager."

John took it, tucking it under his arm. "Were you a part of this, Phineas?" he asked.

"Not this time. He told me that he was thinkin' 'bout tryin', but I was hopin' that I'd talked him out of it. I decided that this place is what I've been lookin' for all this time - a good job, at good pay, with a good boss. Told 'im that I was getting' too old to keep wanderin' around, tryin' to outrun the last place we were. When I realized he wasn't in here when I woke up this afternoon, I headed out t'find him - and I saw him ridin' away and then saw Mrs. Donager shoot him. That's some woman y'got yourself there, Mr. Donager."

"She is, isn't she?" John confirmed, finally smiling.

"I'll get my things packed up and -" Phineas began, but John shook his head.

"We'll talk about it later," he said.

"This is all my fault, John," Charles told his brother in law.

"Your fault?"

"I knew that Davy was curious about the safe and the gold, and I've been keeping an eye on him. But he hadn't made a move, and since I thought you'd be home today, I thought he'd given up."

"You didn't warn Hank? Or Margaret?"

"I didn't want to worry Margaret," Charles insisted. "I had already upset her by telling her about the small pieces of gold that I'd left in the barn -"

John's reaction was immediate. "What?!"

"They were just small pieces," Charles tried to explain. "Drops that fell into the dirt that I planned to pick up and forgot about. When I went back to get them, they were gone."

"Davy found 'em," Phineas announced. "Said it was proof that there was gold here - we'd both heard stories in Mesa City that you had gold when you were there."

"And the gold that's not in the safe?" John asked, his eyes narrowed as he glared at Charles.

"It's - where we used to keep it before we got the safe."

Phineas eyes widened. "You mean - there really **is** some gold?"

John chuckled, taking Charles' arm. "Hank, explain it to him while I have a talk with my brother in law. Come along, Charles."

=====

"Is Margaret okay?" Charles wanted to know as they entered the house.

"Luckily for you, she's only a little frightened. But I'll ask Doc to look at her while he's here tending to Davy." John went directly to the window seat and lifted the board to reveal several pokes of gold nuggets. "These need to go back into the safe," he decided, going over to the safe to open it. Putting the bag of money in first, he held out his hand, signaling to Charles to give him the sacks of nuggets."

"Do the new hands know about the gold?" he asked as he took the sacks out.

"They do. Pedro and I told them about it last night when we made camp. I want this melted down on Monday morning so that we can get it to the bank over in Mesa City."

"You're still going to do business with them? Apparently someone over there talked -"

"The only one who knows that we're depositing gold is Mr. Bartholomew, and I doubt he was the one who said anything. I'll send a note with Sean and Paul when they go that way on Monday that he should be expecting a deposit later in the week." He held out his hand, and Charles shook his head.

"That was it. I got three of those at night last week."

"You made sure to cover the mine up again, right? Just in case the Mexican Army decides to pay us another visit?"

"I covered it so well that even I might have trouble finding it," Charles assured him.

"Good. Why don't we go and see how Margaret's doing?"

=====

As Hank told him about the gold and how it tied into John Donager and Mariana's dreams, Phineas used his knife to cut away Davy's pant-leg, revealing a bloody, angry looking wound in his thigh. "Hope the Doc gets here soon. He's in a bad way."

Mariana seemed to appear out of nowhere, carrying a length of fabric and a bowl of water. "Perhaps I can stop the bleeding until the doctor arrives," she told them. Using some of the fabric, she cleaned the area around the wound, then used the rest of the fabric to wrap the leg, leaving the ends free. "I need a wooden spoon from the kitchen," she told them. Hank retrieved the long-handled spoon, watching as

she tied the ends around the handle and twisted it to tighten the bandage. "It will have to be loosened every few minutes, or he could lose the leg."

"I'll take care of it, ma'am," Phineas volunteered, his hand replacing hers on the wooden spoon.

"Someone should put water on to boil. It will be needed. The doctor should be here soon," she said, and then left the bunkhouse as quietly as she had entered.

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"I'm sorry, Margaret," Charles apologized. "I shouldn't have kept what I knew to myself - If I'd told you, then you wouldn't have opened the safe in the first place."

She smiled at him. "At that point, he might have tried to force me to open the safe for him," she pointed out. "It's over and done now. I'm fine, the money is back, he didn't get the gold - thanks to you. All that's left is to see if Davy lives or dies."

"I'll go watch for Doc," he told them, reaching down to ruffle Kevin's hair. "You be a good boy."

"Good boy!" the two year old repeated with a smile.

John bent over to pick up the boy, but his expression was serious as he looked at his wife. "Are you sure that you're -"

"Right now, I'm just tired. I suppose it's from all of the excitement - At least I know now that I'd be able to shoot that gun if I have to. I never told you, but after you taught me to shoot it, I wasn't sure that I could do it."

"I knew that you had doubts," he admitted, sitting next to her, with Kevin still in his arms. "Can I ask - how did it happen that Davy didn't tie you up when he left?"

Margaret smiled. "I pretended to faint," she explained. "He shook my shoulder, trying to wake me up, but I just lay there until he grabbed the money and ran off. Then I got up and grabbed the rifle from beside the door."

"We're going to turn you into a pioneer woman yet, Meg Davis Donager."

"I have a question for you - What's going to happen to Davy and Phineas?"

"Davy did try to steal that money," John reminded her. "And while Phineas claims that he wasn't part of that, he admitted to having stolen from past employers. Honestly, I'm not sure what's going to happen. I hate the idea of Davy not having to pay for his crime, but on the other hand, Phineas appears to have turned over a new leaf and doesn't want to continue the life he and Davy had been living."

"It would be a little simpler if we had a jail in Providence."

"And a sheriff," John agreed.

=====

As soon as he saw Pedro and Doc's buggy, Charles turned back to to the house, calling, "Doc's here!"

"It's about time," John declared, standing up, only to be held back by Margaret's hand on his arm.

"He needs to take care of Davy first, John," she told him. "I can wait. Davy can't."

John stepped onto the porch as Doc helped Alice out of the buggy, then grabbed his medical bag.

"Welcome home, John! What's going on around here? Pedro told us that Margaret shot Davy?"

"It's a long story, Doc," John replied. "But Davy's got a bullet in his leg and has lost a lot of blood. He's in the bunkhouse."

"I'm going to go check on Margaret," Alice told her husband. "I'll be over to help in a moment."

John gave her a grateful smile as he and Pedro accompanied Doc across the yard to the bunkhouse.

"He'll probably need a blood transfusion," Doc said as they entered the building to find all six ranch hands gathered around the younger man's bedside. "I'll need a volunteer."

Phineas spoke up. "I'll do it, Doc."

Doc looked him over, then shook his head. "I'd prefer a younger man," he said, and for once Phineas didn't bristle at being passed over because he was 'over 30' as he put it. Looking around, Doc eyes finally settled on Charles. "You."

Charles' eyes widened. "Me?"

"You," Doc confirmed. "Everyone else get out. That includes you, John."

"I ain't goin' anywhere, Doc," Phineas declared. "I feel like this is all my fault. Don't make me go."

"You might as well make yourself useful and heat some water on the stove," Doc nodded, already rolling up his shirt sleeves. "Charles, take his place with the tourniquet."

"The -?"

"That wooden spoon. When I tell you to, twist it to tighten the bandage. Who's idea was using it?"

"Mariana's," Phineas said as he checked the fire in the stove. "She had us put water on, too. It's just started t'boil."

"Tighten it, Charles. She would've made a good nurse," Doc murmured as Alice entered the room.

"Alice. How's Margaret?"

"Rattled, but considering everything's she's been through -" Like her husband, she was rolling up her sleeves. "What do you need me to do?"

"You can release it, Charles. I need to look at the wound - I'm going to do a transfusion from Charles to Davy," he told Alice. "You know what I need for that."

=====

Mariana took coffee out to the hands as they waited outside of the bunkhouse. "How long's it been now?" Joe asked his brother, and John took a watch from his pocket before answering.

"Best part of an hour, I think."

"If he was dead, Doc would have already been out here," Hank told them.

"Are things always this exciting around here?" Chuck asked.

"Not usually," John said as he and Margaret joined the group.

"Ma'am," the men all said, nodding as they had when Mariana had brought the coffee out.

Smiling, Margaret told Mariana, "Why don't you give me that pot, and you can go finish what you were working on for supper?"

Mariana gasped. "I had forgotten all about - oh my!" she said, reverting to a mix of Apache and Spanish as she hurried back toward the house.

"I don't smell food burning," was Chuck's comment as he sniffed the air.

"It's beef stew," Margaret informed them as she went around refilling cups while John picked Kevin up. "I'm sure it will need more water by now, but it was a big pot. The only problem could be the bread that she was letting rise before cooking it."

"Knowing Mariana, it will be delicious," John said as the door to the bunkhouse opened and Doc appeared, rolling his sleeves back down. "How is he, Doc?"

"I got the bullet out, and he's resting comfortably. I managed to save the leg. We won't know how much use of it he'll have until he's fully awake. If his body doesn't reject the blood he got from Charles, and if the leg doesn't get infected, he should be okay."

Margaret lifted her face to the Heavens and whispered "Thank you, God." The brief prayer ended with a chorus of "Amen's".

Doc sighed, shaking his head. "You can all go back inside, but try to keep the noise down, please. He needs to rest. I'd feel better about it if he were in town so I could keep a closer eye on him."

All of the men except for John and Pedro went back inside.

"Mariana will check on him, Dr. Hawkins," Pedro stated.

"I figured that much. I'll be back out tomorrow after church. When he does wake up, he'll probably be in a lot of pain. I'll leave something with her to give him." Pedro nodded and went into the bunkhouse, probably to remind the men to keep it quiet.

"Thank you, Doc," Margaret said, smiling as Alice joined them. "Why don't you both come to the house for coffee before you go back to town?" she suggested.

"I was hoping you'd offer," Doc replied, watching as she walked away, one hand holding onto her son's and the other around Alice's waist as they talked quietly. Turning to John, he said, "She appears to be fine. Phineas gave me the barebones about what happened. Both he and Charles seemed surprised that she actually shot Davy."

"I was, but I shouldn't have been. Margaret's a lot stronger than she thinks she is. Speaking of Charles -"

"Here." He walked out of the door, looking a bit paler than normal. "I'm going over to my room and some sleep -" Two steps, and he fell forward onto his face.

Sighing, John, with Doc's help, pulled him up and half-carried him across the yard to the house. "Is this from the transfusion, Doc?" John wanted to know.

"Yes. But he'll be fine once he gets some rest. I have an iron tonic that he can take that will help."

"Charles!" Margaret gasped as they entered the house, rushing over to look at her younger brother with concern. "What's wrong with him, Doc?" she asked.

"Nothing that some rest and iron tonic won't cure," he explained, helping John carry the young man into his bedroom. After Margaret pulled the covers back, they placed him in the bed, removing his shoes, then left him to sleep.

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"I'll look in on him and on Davy before we leave," Doc told them as they returned to the parlor. "Now, Margaret -"

"Really, Doc," she sighed. "I'm fine! Yes, I was a bit shaken right after it happened, but that was hours ago." Picking up her full cup and saucer, she smiled. "See? Not in the least bit shaky."

"You have a stubborn wife, John," Doc told the other man.

"I know."

"What's going to happen to Davy?" Alice wanted to know. "Once he's recovered enough to be moved, of course."

"Meg and I were discussing that just before you arrived. It might be time to talk about building a jail in Providence and hiring a sheriff."

"We can't hold a trial," Doc insisted. "You haven't forgotten that this is Mexico -"

"Actually, we're in US territory at the moment, Mark," John said, telling them about having run into Lt. Evers' patrol, leaving out the events preceding it. "And even if we weren't -the townspeople agreed to abide by God's Laws for the time being, right?"

"Yes, but -"

"And what does the 8th Commandment say?"

"'Thou shalt not steal'," Doc quoted.

"We'll seat a jury of twelve volunteers, and whichever one of the town council who wants to can sit as Judge."

"This is going to open a big can of worms, John," Doc told him. "We'll have no choice except to create laws and consequences of breaking said laws -"

"That will be the easy part," John stated. "The hard part will be in finding a law officer willing to come down here into Mexico to enforce those laws."

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Phineas sat dozing beside Davy's bunk while the others played poker at the far end of the table. Doc had come in to check on the young man, declaring that he was looking good, and that he didn't think there would be any problems from the transfusion.

When Davy moaned, Phineas was wide awake, leaning forward. "Davy? You awake, boy?"

"Hurts," Davy moaned. "My leg -" he opened his eyes. "Phineas. Did you shoot me?"

"Naw. It was Mrs. Donager who took the shot."

Davy turned his head, clearly surprised. "Mrs. - But she was unconcious -" He frowned. "Guess she was only pretending so I'd leave. There was no gold, Phineas. Only money."

"Don't worry 'bout that right now, Davy-boy. Doc said that when you woke up, I should see if you can move your right foot. Not fast, but -"

"My foot?"

"Yeah. Just- waggle your toes."

Davy moved his toes, then gasped. "My leg hurts!" he declared. "Like it's on fire."

Hank tossed his cards onto the table as he stood up. "I'll go get Mariana to give him the medicine that Doc left," he announced before leaving the room.

"Phineas?" Davy asked. "What's gonna happen to me?"

"Like I said, don't you be worrin' 'bout that. You just worry 'bout getting back on your feet."

====

The next morning, Hank volunteered to stay with Davy while everyone else went to church - even Phineas. "You understand why I can't leave you out here, too, don't you?" John asked the older man as they were getting the wagon ready.

"I understand, Mr. Donager. After what I told ya, I didn't expect that you'd be trustin' me."

"It's not a lack of trust, Phineas," John clarified. "And I prefer my hands to call me 'boss', remember?"

Phineas, realizing that he'd been forgiven for his part in not telling anyone what Davy was planning to do, found himself smiling broadly. "Yessir, Boss," he confirmed.

"We still have some talking to do, but for right now, here, you have a clean slate."

====

Doc and Alice were just coming out of the office when the Diamond D hands rode into town. Stepping into the street, Doc flagged Phineas down. "How is Davy this morning?"

"Still in some pain, Doc. Mariana had t'give him some of that laudanum to ease him a bit."

Mariana nodded. "I changed the bandage last night and again this morning. He is able to move his foot and toes."

"No stomach ache?"

"No. He had some broth for breakfast, and does not seem to have a fever."

"And how are you, Margaret?" he asked. "Still fine?"

"I am," she confirmed with a smile as John lifted her from the wagon to the ground.

Doc finally turned his attention to Charles. "And what about you?"

"I'm good, Doc," he said. "But don't ask me to do that again, please."

"I'll try to remember that." He looked at John as the others went into the church. "I spoke to Leon and some of the other Council members last night after we got back into town, John. They've agreed to call a town meeting this afternoon."

====

John and Margaret insisted that Phineas and the other hands stay in town for dinner, only agreeing their returning to the Diamond D at that point, carrying food for Hank. Phineas was the only hand that left after the meal, however, as he accompanied Doc and Alice out to check on Davy.

Leon stood, lifting his hands. "Friends, I know this is getting to be a habit, but we need to call a town meeting due to something that happened out at the Diamond D. John, would you like to explain?"

John shot his friend a glare before rising to his feet as well. "One of the hands - not the new ones -" he clarified, since Chuck, Joe and Jim were part of the crowd, "-", having heard rumors about my having paid some merchants in Mesa City with gold, decided that he was going to steal that gold..."

As John finished recounting the event, Carl asked, "You say he's recovering from his wound?"

"He was as of this morning," John confirmed. "No one else was involved in the attempted robbery, Davy acted alone. Leon, I believe you should continue -?"

"What needs to be done is to establish a legal trial. Since we have no judge or attorneys in Providence, it's been decided that the Council will rotate into that position, starting with me. An advocate for the defendant will be a volunteer from the townspeople. The judge will act as Prosecutor as well. The jury will be made up of twelve citizens who will be picked by the judge. Does anyone have any objections to this process?" he asked, looking over the crowd.

"You said citizens," Rebecca Lee pointed out. "Does that mean men *and* women?"

"Yes, Mrs. Lee, it does."

"I think I have one," Slim Baker announced. "What's the penalty for theft?"

"That's the next thing we need to settle on, Slim," Leon answered. "Right now, I want to see a show of hands of those who approve of our plan to conduct the trial." Again, he surveyed the townspeople. "Looks to me like it's a yes. Now, as to what the court can do in response to a law breaker being convicted. The council discussed this, and recommend a sentence of ten days to a year in jail, depending on the circumstances and amount of the theft."

Several hands went up this time. "We don't have a jail," Arthur Hall pointed out, and the hands dropped as people nodded or murmured in agreement.

"Then we'll build one," Leon told them. "It's going to be awhile before Davy is well enough to stand trial, and until then, John will keep him on the ranch. Everyone who agrees -" Again, it was unanimous. "The next thing is that before the next meeting of the Town Council, we will create the laws and penalties for breaking those laws, and we'll have a vote on each one if necessary. The last thing we need to discuss is the fact that, with a jail, and statutes, we're going to need a Sheriff. We've decided that it would be best for the permanent Sheriff to not be from Providence. Not to say that some of you might show favoritism. John has offered to find someone to take the job." The crowd applauded John's offer. "Now, if you're all agreed, I declare that this meeting to be over."

====

"Bars are set in, Pa!" George Bradford informed his father - as well as everyone else who had been helping build the newest addition to Providence: the town jail. Due to the need to get it finished, it had been decided to build the part of the building that would contain the two cells out of adobe bricks. The bars for the one window and cells had been ordered through Mesa City the day after the town meeting, nearly a month ago. The rest of the building was built with the same lumber as the rest of the town. Located across from the hotel, near the corner of Front street and South Street, it was also centrally located.

"Should be, it's been a week since we put them in," Niles responded. "Just hope that metal reinforced door gets here soon."

"Paul said it should be in this next trip," Lou said, looking around the room that would serve as the sheriff's office. "We're gonna need a desk -"

"I have one in my store," Olaf told him. "And a chair to go with it."

"And there's a gun rack in my store," Arthur chimed in. "I'll bring it over later and get Artie to help me hang it over there."

Niles nodded, moving to the open doorway leading into the back room. "We can hang a curtain here in the doorway," he decided, "and build a fifth cot so the sheriff will have a place to sleep."

"What if he's married?" George asked.

"Then he'll have to get a place built for the family," Niles told his son. "We'll work on those cots after supper. Two for each cell and one for in here."

"What we need now is a sheriff," Arthur stated.

"John said he'd asked his attorney friend to do some asking around. Last letter he got said that he'd had a few men contact him and that he was in the process of checking them out."

"Why are we letting someone who doesn't even live here do all of that?" George asked.

"Because it's easier to send mail in the states, boy," Niles explained. "We have to send mail out to Mesa City with Paul and Sean, and then wait for a reply to be brought the same way."

"I'll be glad when this war's over and we're part of the US again," Olaf declared.

"According to John, Lt. Evers told him that we're basically part of the US now, but as long as the war continues, that can change. He did say that the Mexicans had lost quite a bit of California already."

====

John glanced up at the man standing in the doorway of the office, then returned his gaze to the ledger on his desk. "Phineas."

The man entered the room and stood in front of the desk, holding his hat in front of him. "Ya told Pedro that ya wanted t'see me, Boss?"

Nodding toward the chair, he didn't look up. "Have a seat. I'm almost finished with these figures." John copied the last number into the appropriate column, closing the cloth-bound book. Looking up, he saw Phineas' head turned to study the lance hung above the fireplace. "Fascinates you, doesn't it?"

Phineas gave him a sheepish grin. "Never seen one up close and personal that wasn't bein' held by an Indian. Means a lot that he gave it to you, you being a white man an' all." His bushy brows furrowed. "I got a question - I understand why you and everyone here wouldn't want word getting' out about the

gold in the valley - if the Mexicans knew, they'd be up here diggin' it out while shootin' ev'ry Apach they saw. And if word got out t'the north, then prospectors'd be swarmin' over that border, forcin' a fight with the Mexicans, puttin' this place and all the others right in the middle."

"That's true."

"Why do the Apach want you t'keep it a secret?"

"For the same reasons, really. But there's the added reason that while we've been given permission by Cochise to stay here, even if prospectors came and accepted that the land is all considered private property and that the gold can't be claimed by anyone else - " he stood and moved to the window. "Come and tell me what you see, Phineas."

"The mountains."

"It's likely that most of the gold in this valley was washed down out of those mountains. If a prospector were to think about that, then he would go up into those mountains to look for the motherlode. The Apaches don't claim this valley, but those mountains, from about halfway up and to the other side, they *do* claim, and they would have no choice but to kill those miners."

Phineas looked thoughtful, then nodded. "Makes sense."

John indicated the chair again, and Phineas sat back down. "Davy's doing well, according to Doc's latest report."

"Yeah. He's been tryin' t'use that crutch I made for him. Guess that means he'll go on trial afore long, don't it?"

"Yes. He'll be serving any jail time at the jail in town." John drew a deep breath. "Now, about the others you and he have stolen from -"

Phineas sighed. "I knew tellin' ya 'bout that was a mistake. But we did it. Gotta pay for it."

"Exactly. I might not worry about it, but, once this war is over and we become a permanent part of the United States, we'll probably have to answer to any wanted posters -"

"And there might be one or two of those around," Phineas had to admit. "So you gonna have 'em try me, too?"

"No. But I do think you and Davy should make restitution."

"You mean pay the money back?"

"Yes."

"Davy and me, we spent the money as we got it - didn't put none of it back fer a rainy day -"

John raised his hand in a silent request for silence. "What I want you to do is to make a list of how much you stole and from whom. I'll send the money to them, and then you and Davy can pay me back out of your wages."

"But Davy's gonna be in jail for -"

"He'll be able to work when he gets out," John reminded him, "and when he does, he'll have a job waiting here."

"That's awful nice of ya, Boss. More'n I would've expected, considerin'."

"Well, there was no real harm done - luckily for Davy. Mrs. Donager has recovered from the excitement of that day, and Davy's almost well. And it brought out the truth about your past exploits," he added with a crooked grin. "I figure everyone needs a second chance. Don't waste yours."

"Oh, I won't, Boss," Phineas said, holding out his hand toward John. "And I'll make sure Davy don't either. Thank ya."

John shook his hand. "You're welcome. Just get me that list as soon as possible."

"You'll have it," Phineas promised. "Thank you again."

====

Phineas went directly to the little room at the end of the bunkhouse, where Davy had been staying since a few days after the surgery on his leg, finding his friend sitting on a bench outside of the door, rubbing his right thigh. "You'd think that it wouldn't still hurt this much after a month," he muttered.

"Ya gotta use it," Phineas told him. "Can't just sit around, feelin' sorry for y'self."

"I'm not feeling sorry for myself!" Davy insisted.

"That's good, 'cause I have some good news fer ya."

"The only good news I want to hear is that I'm not going to have to go to town and be tried," Davy sighed.

"Ya done wrong, boy," Phineas pointed out, chuckling softly when he saw Davy's look of accusation. "I know, I know. But I just had a talk with the Boss, and you'll never believe what he said he would do."

"What?"

"He told me that if I give him a paper showing who all we stole money from, he'll repay that money."

Davy's eyes narrowed with suspicion. "What's the catch? What's he expect in return for his generosity? He's not going to repay those ranchers without expecting something in return."

"Just that we stay here and work for him, repayin' him with some of what he pays t'us."

"Do you realize how long that's going to take?" Davy asked. "I mean, it's fine for you - but I'll have to stay here working for the rest of my life! You know I don't like being tied down, Phineas! I need to be able to pick up and go whenever I want. You used to be the same way, that's why we got along so well."

"Listen, Davy-boy, John Donager's better to work for than any of those other fellas that we stole from. And with what he's payin' us, it won't take that long fer you t'pay him back. Don't you recognize it when ya get offered grace and mercy, boy? I figure you'll git about a month in that jail in town for what ya tried t'do. That jail's got a window and you'll git three good meals a day and the Doc's care durin' that time."

"What's your point? A cell's a cell, even with good food and -"

"It's ain't prison, boy, and that's what you'll be facin' if you don't accept this offer. Once the war's over, and this area is part of the US - you could be arrested for what happened up in Colorado and the Wyoming territory -" He moved closer. "If you think any of those ranchers would consider doing what John Donager's offered to do, well, then, you're a bigger jjit than I think ya are! They'd slap th'both of us in prison s'fast our heads'd spin! One or two of 'em would probably want us hung!"

"Hung? For just stealing some money? We never hurt anyone!"

"And I think that's a point in our favor with the Boss. Now, I'm gonna take that offer. I was hopin' I could get your help t'write up that list of names and amounts, but I'll do it m'self." He turned, as if to leave.

"Phineas."

Hearing the younger man's quiet voice, he turned around again. "Yeah?"

"Bring the paper and pen back here and we'll get the list done for Mr. Donager."

Phineas smiled. "I'll be right back, Davy-boy!"

Davy smiled as he watched his friend hurry toward the main door into the bunkhouse. Phineas had saved a cold, frightened, half-starved boy, barely old enough to shave, from a cruel Buffalo-hunter and taken him under his wing. He'd saved Davy's life more times than Davy could remember. If giving Phineas the chance to stay here, where he seemed happier than Davy had ever seen him, meant tying himself to John Donager and the Diamond D Ranch, then that's what he would do. Perhaps, one day after Phineas had gone to his reward, Davy would find a way to gain his freedom.

=====

"You and Davy didn't steal much, did you?" John noted as he mentally added the numbers on the page that Phineas gave him.

"Just enough to survive. Davy - Davy's not good with stayin' in one place fer too long," Phineas told him. "And he don't take t'bein' cooped up for more than a day. Spendin' time in jail ain't gonna be easy for 'im."

"We'll make sure he gets the cell with the window - and I'll talk to whoever we end up hiring as Sheriff to see if he'll agree to let Davy sit outside like he's been doing here."

"Thank ya. Davy'd never tell ya, but - well, after his folks were killed by the Comanche, he was found by a Buffalo-hunter who beat the boy and barely fed him. Kept him locked in a tiny wooden box most of the time so's the boy wouldn't run away. I took pleasure in stickin' a knife that man's ribs," he declared, missing the frown on John's face as he continued the story. "It took awhile for me t'gain Davy's trust and fer him t'sleep indoors."

"Thank you for telling me, Phineas," John said. "It helps me to understand him. I'll get this taken care of," he added, indicating the list. "Now that I have the figures, I'll draw up contracts for you and Davy to sign. We need to make this as legal as we can."

====

Two days later, George Bradford rode out to where John and the men were digging a new water well on the southern range. "Mr. Donager!"

"What is it, George?" John asked, his first thought being concern about Margaret.

"Pa asked me to come and get you. Another one of the men you wrote to about becoming Sheriff just rode into town."

John was almost ready to give up on the search for a peace officer. None of the four men who had come to talk to the council had been in the least suitable for the job. "What's this one's name?"

"Um -" George said, trying to remember. "Lucas -"

"Morgan?" John questioned, and George nodded.

"Yes, sir. That's it. Lucas Morgan."

Sighing, John turned to Pedro. "I'd better go in and see if this one's any better than the others have been," he decided. "At least Otis Maxwell said that he'd actually met Morgan and was impressed by him."

====

John approached the Sheriff's office, greeting and smiling at the people who were hanging around, clearly curious about the newest applicant.

"Think this one might be the one, John?" Olaf asked.

"I'll know more once I've met him, Olaf," John answered, opening the door and closing it behind him. Now inside, it felt as though the room was full. He nodded at the members of the Town Council, Matthew Lee, and Doc, but it was the stranger in the room who got his attention.

Niles stepped forward. "Lucas Morgan, this is John Donager."

Morgan held out his hand, smiling. "Mr. Donager. It's a pleasure. I've heard good things about you."

"From Otis Maxwell," John nodded.

"And from Sheriff Walt Murphy. He was quite impressed by your - persistence in clearing your wagon-master of murder."

Several of the other men snickered as Niles said, "John's known for his - persistence, Mr. Morgan."

"I don't doubt it," Morgan replied. "These gentlemen said that I needed to talk to you before they could make a decision about hiring me as Sheriff. I will tell you that I had worked for Walt as his deputy until about five years ago when I left to take a position as sheriff in Wyoming Territory."

"Why did you leave there?"

Morgan shook his head. "I had a - difference of opinion with one of the area's biggest cattle ranchers over a lynching that happened without my knowledge. He wasn't pleased when I arrested about six of his top hands - and his son, for having committed the murder the man was hung for."

"I can see where that might have caused a - difference of opinion," John confirmed, "- but didn't the citizens of the town back you up?"

"They were more worried about how the town would survive without that ranch than they were about justice being done. So I turned in my badge and sent a wire to a US Marshall to come and take over."

"Has the council explained what we're about to do here with regard to an attempted theft on my ranch a little over a month ago?"

"They have. And while I'd prefer an actual judge in charge, I admit that since we're just barely a US territory, that could be a problem - unless you want to contact the Mexican authorities - and I was told that that's not an option."

"No, it's not. The Mexican army has more or less left us alone up here since right after the war began -" John began.

"Because of some - treaty with Cochise."

"For the most part, yes. I can see that my friends have been - thorough in telling you about our situation here in Providence."

"We tried, John," Paul Grover said with a grin.

"Did they tell you that since we're a new town, we're just setting up laws and punishment?"

"They did. They told me that if I'm hired, I'll be given the opportunity to suggest any laws that they might not have considered, and that the laws would be voted on by the citizens."

"There's not much crime here - what happened at my ranch was the first time we've really had a need for a jail or a sheriff or a codified set of laws. Most of your job would be just making sure businesses were secure and upholding any laws that are approved."

"Sounds good to me, after dealing with a wide-open frontier town," Morgan assured him.

"He's even a church-goer, John," Matthew declared, and Morgan nodded.

"Not often that I get to attend church in my line of work. Usually, there's a prisoner to be attended to or a Saturday night drunk who hasn't sobered up making trouble. Last place had a saloon with gambling that started at eleven am even on Sundays."

"Well, you won't have that problem in Providence," John pointed out, "since we don't have a saloon."

"And even if we did," Leon told them, "it would be closed on Sundays, just like everything else."

"At least I wouldn't have to deal with any drunks or someone getting shot for cheating at cards on Sundays," Morgan agreed, then added, "*If* I get the job."

The council exchanged looks before their eyes moved to John. "What do you think, John?"

"It's your decision, gentlemen," he told them. "I have no objections. But I would suggest a three-month trial period, at the end of which, if either the town or Mr. Morgan is dissatisfied, he can leave with no ill feelings."

"Reverend? Doc?" Niles asked. "Any comments?"

"I think we're both in agreement with John," Matthew said, to which Doc nodded.

Niles spoke again. "Show of hands - who *doesn't* want to hire Mr. Morgan to be Providence's Sheriff?" When no hands were raised, he held out his hand. "Welcome to Providence, Sheriff Morgan."

"Thank you, but -"

"I think what he's about to say, Niles, is that he needs to be sworn in and given a badge," John stated, hiding his laughter.

"Oh, oh, of, of course," Niles stammered as he went around the desk and started opening drawers. "I know it's here," he muttered.

"Center drawer, Niles," Joe Baker suggested.

Niles opened the center drawer and picked up the shiny new badge. "Thanks, Joe. Matthew, may we borrow your Bible, please?"

"With pleasure," Matthew stated, stepping forward to lift his Bible as Niles swore Morgan in.

"Do you, Lucas Morgan promise to uphold the laws of the town of Providence to the best of your ability?"

"I promise," Morgan answered, one hand on the leather-bound Bible and the other hand raised.

Niles handed him the badge. "You are now *officially* our Sheriff."

Morgan took the badge and pinned it onto his shirt. "You said you were waiting to hire a sheriff before holding the trial -"

"That, and the doc saying he was healed enough to stand trial," John said.

"He's been ready, John," Doc told him. "I just wanted to make sure not using it except to pace a jail cell for a few weeks wouldn't set him back."

"Then since tomorrow's Saturday, why don't we notify those who agreed to serve on the jury and hold the trial tomorrow afternoon?"

"Looks like Davy Passmore is going to get his day in court," John declared, "I'll go back to the ranch and -"

"Mr. Donager?"

John and everyone stopped and turned to look at the newly hired sheriff. "Make it John. Is there a problem?"

"May I - speak to you- in private?"

John looked at the others. "Go on and get things ready for tomorrow. I'll see you later." He waited for the door to close behind them. "What's the problem, Sheriff?"

"Did you say that the man who tried to rob you is Davy Passmore?"

John went still. "That's right. He works for me."

"And does he have a friend named -" Morgan's eyes narrowed as he thought. "Phineas Green? Older man, from Kentucky or some such -?"

"How do you know them?"

"I have a good memory for names on wanted posters," the Sheriff told him. "But I also met those two. They stole five hundred dollars from the rancher that I was talking about earlier. As far as I know, that poster's still valid. There's a two-hundred and fifty dollar reward on their heads."

"Each or together?" John asked.

Lucas Morgan held back a smile as he answered. "Together."

"That figures. The poster might be valid up north, but until the war ends they're down here in Mexico," John pointed out.

"From what I'm hearing, that will probably change in the next year or so."

"And by then, all of the ranchers that they stole from will have had their money returned."

"Come again?"

"I agreed to pay the ranchers that they stole money from, and they're going to repay *me* out of their wages."

"But - Davy will be here in jail for at least a month, from what I understand, if he's at all repentant for what he tried to do."

"And once he's free, he'll come back to the ranch and fulfill that contract. I did promise Phineas that I'd ask a favor, though."

"What favor?"

John told him about the man's childhood and that he'd been held prisoner and abused by a hunter. "He's not able to stand being locked inside all of the time. Now, having him in that cell with the window will help, but if you could find a way to let him sit outside -"

"I don't know, Mr. Donager -"

"He's not dangerous. I'm convinced of that. You can put handcuffs on him and let him sit on the sidewalk - knowing that everyone in town is watching, he'll behave himself. I you my word. And I told you, call me John. I'm too young for people to call me Mister."

"Otis and Walt were right about you. To be perfectly honest, I never thought those two were bad. The only trouble I had with either one was throwing them in jail overnight for having too much to drink in the saloon. And Davy started a fight over a bad poker hand that he was sure had been rigged."

"He doesn't play very well."

"I wouldn't know about that," Morgan told him. "I don't play poker. Or gamble at all. Back to Phineas and Davy, most people liked them. Until the morning Mr. Jamison woke up and found the \$500 that he kept in a metal box in the office was gone - and so were Phineas and Davy. He sent some of his hands out to track them, but that old man was too good at covering his trail."

"You know, I'm sure now that God knew what He was doing when he sent you here," John confirmed. "I think you might be just what was needed for me to keep those two in line."

"You mean, put the fear of God into them?" Morgan suggested with a grin.

"Something like that. Knowing you're aware of the way they used to be just might keep them from trying it again."

"I think we're going to be good friends, John," he agreed, holding out his hand. As John took it, he smiled. "And my friends call me Lucas."

====

"I'll see ya tomorrow, Davy-boy," Phineas assured his friend as Hank and Chuck pulled away with the wagon with Davy laying in the back. He turned to John. "Ya say that th'town hired a Sheriff?"

John nodded, turning back toward the house. "We did. Seems like a good man. He'll do a good job keeping an eye on Davy while he's in jail - I did speak to him about Davy's problem with being closed in, and I think we came up with a plan so that it won't be quite so hard on him."

"Thank ya, Boss."

John paused, leaning against the corral fence. "You're welcome. I'm sure that Lucas Morgan's going to work out as Sheriff." He saw Phineas' dark eyes widen, then narrow with concern. "Is there a problem, Phineas?"

"Did you say the new sheriff's name was -"

"Lucas Morgan," John repeated. "I take it that you recognize the name?"

Phineas nodded, pushing his hat back on his head and scratching his furrowed brow. "He told ya 'bout how we met up in Wyoming Territory, I guess."

"He did. And about how you and Davy stole that five hundred dollars from Mr. Jamison."

"His name was on that paper," Phineas pointed out.

"Yes, it was. Sheriff Morgan's willing to overlook the wanted poster he put out when Jamison insisted on one, but I'm also sure that he'll be keeping a watch on the both of you. So I'd keep my nose clean, if I were you."

"Don't worry 'bout that, Boss. I got no plans t'go breakin' anymore laws. And I'll make sure Davy don't, either."

====

Doc met the buggy from the Donager Ranch the next morning, giving Margaret a look of exasperation. "Margaret, what on earth do you think you're doing?" he asked as John lifted her out and onto her feet. "You're less than a month from -"

Smoothing her dress, she turned to Mariana, who was being helped from the buggy by Pedro. "I said this would happen, didn't I?" She took a deep breath. "I'll tell you as I told John: I spent six months riding in that bumpy covered wagon and had no problem. A much shorter ride in a well-sprung buggy is a decided improvement. I told you that I was going to be here for this trial, Doc," she added. "I'm the only witness, and I believe that a person accused of a crime should be able to face his accuser."

John leaned closer to Doc to say in a quiet voice, "We'd better be careful, Doc. She's just liable to ask the judge to release Davy into my custody instead of sending him to jail."

"That's not a bad idea," Margaret declared, a dimple forming in her cheek as she smiled and moved away from them with Mariana toward the church, where the trial would be held.

John saw the grin on the doctor's face. "I honestly don't know what I'm going to do with her, Mark. Since she managed to shoot Davy while he was riding away, she's gotten, well -"

"Too big for her britches?" Doc suggested, barely able to hold back his laughter.

"You laugh. Just wait until it's *your* wife acting like this."

"I'll let you in on a secret, John: Alice already does. Com'on. Lets get inside."

====

"Hey there, Sheriff Morgan!" Phineas said as he stood in the doorway of the office. "Long time, no see!"

Lucas swallowed his smile as he studied the other man. He was definitely older, with a beard that was mostly gray now. The lines around his eyes were deeper, the result of squinting against the sun.

"Phineas. Been behaving yourself?"

"Yessir! I'm a law-abidin' model citizen now. I was wonderin' -"

"You'd like to see Davy before I take him to court," Lucas finished.

"Yeah. If ya don't mind."

"Give me the knife," Lucas told him, holding out his hand as Phineas drew the knife from its sheath and placed the hilt into Lucas' palm. "Five minutes. We're due in court right after that." He used the key to unlock the heavy metal-clad door, ushering the older man inside before closing it again.

"Phineas!" Davy called, grasping the bars. "I guess you recognized -"

"Sheriff Morgan?" Phineas questioned. "Yeah. The Boss told me last night who they had hired."

"You could have tried to ride out and warn me," Davy said. "The minute I saw him, I knew I was in trouble. He never liked me - just because I liked to play poker and he can't."

"Don't know if he can or not, boy," Phineas pointed out. "Never seen him try."

"Jamison's hands told me that he couldn't. Phineas, if I have to stay here with him in charge -"

"Now you listen t'me, Davy-boy," Phineas began, standing almost toe-to-toe with the man, "you're gonna do whatever that court says ya have t'do. No arguin'. He'n' the Boss have come up with an agreement so's ya won't have t'be locked up all the time. Give 'im a chance."

The metal door opened again. "Time for us to go," Lucas told them. "I'll see you out and then come back for Davy," he said to Phineas.

"I kinda figured to walk down there with ya', Sheriff."

"Then I guess we'll leave your knife in my desk," Lucas replied, waiting for Phineas to nod in agreement before he moved to unlock Davy's cell.

====

"Mrs. Donager," Niles began once she had been sworn in. "Can you please tell the court what happened on the date in question?"

"I was sitting on the front porch, watching for John. He and Pedro and the other hands were due back from a cattle drive."

"What time of day was this?"

"Just after lunch. Hank had told Davy to go into town and pick up some supplies, and he came up to me, asking me to put his money into the safe in the office."

"Is this something that usually happens?"

"No. But he told me that he was worried about spending it when he was in town, so I agreed to open the safe for him to put the money inside."

"And what happened when you opened the safe?"

"He pulled a gun and had me sit in the windowseat while he looked at what was in the safe. He was upset that there wasn't any gold in there. Apparently he had heard some of the shopkeepers in Mesa City talking about how they had been paid with gold, and thought the safe would be filled with it. I told him that any gold was in the bank in Mesa City, and that he should take the cash in the safe and go."

"And that's when he left?"

"Not quite. I - pretended to faint, and fell onto the floor."

"And what did Mr. Passmore do?"

"He seemed concerned - probably worried about what John would do to him if anything had happened to me," she said, smiling at John as she continued. "He came over, calling my name, and shook my shoulder to see if I was really unconscious. Then he went back to the safe, and I saw him take the bag of money out before leaving the room. That's when I got up and went to the front door, grabbing the rifle that's kept there. I walked out onto the porch and saw him riding away, raised the rifle and fired." Her voice was a bit shaky as she recalled that moment. "I think he was as scared as I was, to be honest. And I don't think he wanted to hurt anyone."

John rolled his eyes, shaking his head as he listened to her words. "I knew it," he whispered to himself.

Niles looked at the jury. "Do any of you have a question for this witness?" he asked, and they all shook their heads. "Thank you, Mrs. Donager. You can return to your seat. Are there any other witnesses to the crime?" He looked at Davy. "Do you have anything to say on your own behalf, Mr. Passmore?"

"N-no, sir," Davy stammered, belatedly rising due to Lucas' prodding.

"Sit down," Lucas said quietly.

"Make up your mind," Davy sighed, dropping into his chair.

"I got somethin' t'say," Phineas announced, coming to his feet.

Davy sank down in his chair, and John ran a hand over his eyes in concern, but Niles ignored the various reactions. "Then step up and be sworn, Phineas." Pointing to the Bible on the podium, Niles told him, "Raise your right hand. Do you swear that what you're about to say will be the truth, so help you God?"

"Yessir!"

"Sit down."

"I ain't much fer speechifyin', but I need folks t'understand that my friend Davy-boy is a good kid who just got off on the wrong path. Now, some of that was my fault," he admitted. "He regrets what he did, and wants t'show everyone here that he can change and make up for what happened. That's all I got t'say, Mr. Bradford."

"You may retake your seat. Anyone else?"

As Margaret started to stand, John wrapped his fingers around her arm. "Meg -"

Determined not to be silenced, she shrugged off his hold and rose to her feet. "I'd just like to say that I meant it when I said I don't think he wanted to hurt anyone - and to ask the jury for leniency on Davy's behalf. He just needs another chance to turn his life around. I think that, with God's help, that will happen." Sitting down again, she ignored the fact that her husband had his hand over his face once again.

"The jury will now go to the Freight office to deliberate on the case. You have the option of finding Davy Passmore innocent or guilty of attempted robbery, and if guilty, you will decide what his sentence will be. Court adjourned."

====

"We find Davy guilty of attempted robbery," Olaf, the jury's foreman, announced while Davy stood.

"Thank you," Niles said. "Did you decide on his punishment?"

"One week in the town jail, and two further months in the custody of his employer, Mr. John Donager. If he attempts to leave the area during that two months, with the intention of not returning, he'll be returned to jail for six months."

"The jury is dismissed. Sheriff you will take Mr. Passmore to jail and detain him there for the next seven days. This court is now dismissed."

"I'll bring your razor and some clothes in for ya," Phineas told Davy as Sheriff Morgan waited nearby. "Anything else ya need?"

"I don't think so," Davy answered, clearly worried. "A week. Seven days. I can't stay in that cell for that long, Phineas, I'll go crazy."

"You won't have to," Lucas informed his prisoner. "Let's go back to the jail and I'll explain what's going to happen. See you later, Phineas."

As they passed John and Margaret, Davy paused. "Thank you, ma'am. For what you said. I'm glad you weren't hurt."

"A week will pass before you know it, and then you'll be back at work," she told him in a calm, almost serene tone. "You'll see."

Davy nodded, clearly not convinced as he and Lucas continued out of the church and back to the jail.

=====

"Doc said that you're not ready for to be fully released from his care," John told Davy upon his release from jail a week later. "So until he declares that you're recovered, you'll be doing smaller jobs around here. You can start by straightening the tack room."

"Yes, sir."

"And Davy -" John waited for him to stop and turn toward him. "Welcome back."

Davy nodded, a small smile turning up the corners of his mouth before he continued on to the tack room. Charles was standing outside of the barn when John came out. "He doesn't look very glad to be here," was his quiet comment.

"Give him some time. I thought you went out with Pedro to start looking for horses?"

"I came in to get lunch. Mariana said she'd have it ready for us."

"I need to invest in a chuck wagon," John said. "We could have used one on the drive." The wagon they had taken had doubled as a supply wagon/chuck wagon, and hadn't really been big enough to do either job adequately.

"I think Niles could build one for you -"

"That's what I was thinking. Come on. Let's go get that food. No doubt Chuck will be fainting from hunger by the time you get back out there."

Charles laughed. "You know Chuck. Always hungry."

=====

Margaret looked out of the window as most of the men rode out with John, except for Davy and Charles, who were working on the new corral. Smiling, she opened a sheet to cover the mattress on the bed she shared with John, flinging it out so that it would settle. Mariana had made her promise to wait for her return to tuck the sheet in, but Margaret, impatient as usual, decided that it wouldn't hurt for her to do it and save her friend a few steps.

Bending over, she lifted the mattress, then winced, placing a hand on her abdomen. After a moment, the pain went away, and she grabbed the sheet with the intention of tucking it in, but another pain caused her to gasp and pull the sheet onto the floor. "Mar- Mariana!!"

Mariana heard the cry from the kitchen. Grabbing Kevin from the floor where he'd been playing, she ran into the bedroom. "Margaret!" she cried when she saw the other woman half-sitting beside the bed. "What's wrong?" she asked, putting Kevin onto the bed and then moving to help Margaret up to lay there as well.

"The baby," Margaret told her. "Pains -" she placed her hands on her stomach.

Rushing to the window, Mariana called out. "Charles! Go get the doctor for your sister!"

Charles' eyes widened as he made for the barn and Stony. "Davy, saddle a horse and go tell John to get back here now!"

"On it!" Davy called, finding a saddle to throw on one of the horses in the other corral, ignoring the pain in his leg as he got back on a horse for the first time since he'd been shot. He found himself praying that he would find the Boss quickly.

====

"Someone's coming in, Boss," Hank told John.

"Looks like -" Joe began, and Phineas yelped.

"It's Davy! He ain't s'posed t'be ridin' a horse yet!"

"Must be something impor -" John mused, exchanging a look with Pedro. "Margaret!"

"Boss!" Davy was calling out, waving his hat in the air. As he came to a stop, he exclaimed breathlessly, "Charles sent me to get you! Mariana told him to get the Doc for Mrs. Donager!"

"Pedro, you're in charge! Get those horses -"

"I will, Boss," Pedro assured him. "Go!"

"Can I go with you, Boss?" Davy asked.

"If you can keep up," John answered, kicking his paint into a full out gallop.

====

"I sent Charles for Dr. Hawkins," Mariana informed John as he entered the room and went directly to Margaret. "I am not certain that he will arrive before the infant does."

"You can handle it, Mariana," Margaret stated, taking John's hand in hers. "You should go."

"Mariana might need some help," he told her. "Doc can throw me out if he gets here in time. Where's Kevin?"

"In his room," Margaret replied.

"I put him in there to take a nap," Mariana explained, "but I do not think he is asleep. He probably senses that he is about to be a big brother."

Margaret tensed, her fingers tightening around John's hand as another pain began. When it eased, she released his hand, giving him an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I don't think you broke any bones," he teased, wiping her brow with a towel that Mariana handed him.

"I will need hot water," Mariana told him. "Would you mind going into the kitchen and making sure that the fire is still hot in the stove?"

"Of course." He leaned down to give his wife a kiss. "I love you, Meg."

"I love you," she replied, barely managing to hide the onset of another pain before he closed the door behind him. "Mariana -" she whispered, and grabbed ahold of the other woman's hand...

====

"They're coming!" Davy yelled from his watch on the front porch as he spotted two horses riding quickly toward him.

Mark Hawkins didn't usually ride a horse, but he had told Alice it would be faster for him to do so this time, since he would have Mariana to help him with the delivery. As a result, the fast ride left him out of breath and he was already sore. "I'm going to pay for this tomorrow," he told Charles as they dismounted and Doc grabbed his medical bag from where he'd fastened it onto the saddle. He looked up as John came from the house. "Am I here in time?"

"Barely, according to Mariana," John told him. "They're in the bedroom. Charles, Kevin's in his room, would you mind going in and making sure he's okay?"

"Why don't I bring him out to the barn?" Charles suggested. "He likes looking at the horses."

John nodded before he returned to the house, torn between wanting to go to Margaret or watching the water on the stove. "Papa!" Kevin cried as Charles and the boy appeared. Kevin ran over to his father, clearly wanting to be picked up. John went down onto his knees.

"You're scared aren't you, son?" he asked, and the boy nodded, the tracks of his tears evident on his cheeks. "Everything will be okay. Why don't you go with Uncle Charles and look at the horses?"

"Lookit horses!" With a big smile, he made a headlong dash toward the kitchen and the back door of the house, leaving John alone once again. Setting his jaw, he turned toward the bedroom, getting to the closed door in time to hear Margaret cry out as another pain began. Very carefully, he reached out and turned the knob, pushing the door open enough for him to see inside.

"When the next pain begins, I want you to push," Doc was saying. "I can see the baby's head."

From this angle, John wasn't able to see what Doc saw, but he saw Margaret gritting her teeth and squeezing Mariana's hand with her right hand as her left clawed into the mattress.

"That's it, Margaret! Push! Keep pushing, almost there -"

John entered the room, trying to see what was happening.

"It's a girl," Doc announced, tying off and cutting the cord before starting to take hold of the infant's feet. But before he touched them, the baby began to cry - loudly, as though she wasn't at all happy about having been in a nice, warm place instead of the heat of the summer. "Mariana, would you like to clean her up and put on her diaper?"

"A - girl," Margaret repeated, her eyes moving to John. "I'm sorry, John," she apologized.

John came over to sit in the chair that Mariana had abandoned, grabbing her hands. "I'm not sorry." Lifting her hands to his lips, he smiled as Mariana brought the baby back over to them, now wrapped in a blanket that Mrs. Lee and some of the women from church had made. She placed the baby into the crook of her mother's shoulder. "She's beautiful," John declared as he surveyed his daughter's wrinkled face topped with a crop of bright red hair. "Just like her mother."

"With that hair?" Margaret objected. "She's her father's daughter. Just promise me you won't spoil her too much."

"I'm not sure that I can make that promise, Meg. But I'll promise to try."

"Okay." She reached over and pulled one of the baby's hands out to stroke it. "Hello, there, Jessica Donager. Welcome to the world. I pray that God will Bless you and that you will grow up to know Him."

"Amen," Doc agreed, finally speaking. "That's two little girls I've delivered today. Betsy Collins had her baby at six this morning."

"I hope they'll be good friends," Margaret stated.

====

A few weeks later, Anna and Olivia paid a visit to Margaret, along with Susan Scott and her son. Mariana brought tea for the guests as Kevin and Tom played nearby. "Thank you, Mariana," Margaret told her. "Would you mind pouring?"

"That baby is so adorable," Susan gushed. "And that red hair - it looks like fire!"

"She has the temper to go with it, I fear," Margaret confided with a smile as she held her daughter. "She's not in the least patient."

"All babies are that way, aren't they?" Susan asked.

"Mrs. Collins' daughter Millie barely cries at all," Olivia announced.

"Olivia -" Anna sighed.

But Susan was giving the girl a look of disbelief. "And how would you know that?"

"She was talking to Mrs. Hall at church last week, Mrs. Scott," she explained. "I was standing with Mandy and Lisabeth and couldn't help but overhear the discussion."

"Well, be that as it may, you shouldn't have listened to what was likely a **private** discussion," Susan declared, chastizing the young woman. Then, ignoring Olivia, she told Margaret, "My Tim has already been talking about his hopes that your Jessica and our Tom might marry one day."

Margaret took a sip of her tea, setting the cup into the saucer. "We'll see. They're both still a bit young for us to start planning their future, don't you agree?"

"I was only saying that -"

"My father made an agreement with a fellow wealthy businessman in New York soon after I was born, suggesting that when we were old enough, I would marry the other man's son. It was a move wholly designed to consolidate the two families' fortunes and businesses, with each man leveraging to get more out of the union. But as we grew older, I knew that my heart was fixed on someone else, and the young man only wanted to travel to Europe and paint pictures. So why don't we just let Jessica and Tom make their own decision about their futures?" she advised.

Susan put her cup onto the table with a loud clatter, clearly unhappy with Margaret's statement. But Olivia jumped from her seat. "Mrs. Donager, may I - would it be all right for me to hold her? Just for a minute."

"Of course it would be. Sit back down beside Anna," Margaret told her, slowly rising with Jessica still in hers, telling Mariana, who looked worried, "Just stay there, Mariana. I'm perfectly capable." Crossing the three or four feet, she placed the child into Olivia's arms. "Support her head - that's it."

Jessica's eyes opened, looking into the face of the young woman, and her lips seemed to curve upward at the corners. "She's smiling at me!" Olivia declared, clearly delighted by the idea.

"Nonsense," Susan scoffed. "Babies don't smile. She has-" whatever she would have said was lost as Margaret spoke again.

"That's because she likes you. Would you like to hold her, Anna?"

"Not right now. She's so tiny," Anna declared. "I'm not sure I'll ever be ready to have one of my own."

"You will be ready when the time is right," Mariana told her.

Margaret, hearing something in her friend's voice, turned to study her, but Mariana seemed to be focusing on the contents of her cup.

"Well, I need to get home to start Tim's supper," Susan announced, standing up and plucking her son up from the floor. Since Anna and Olivia had ridden over with her and Tom, Olivia sighed regretfully as Margaret took Jessica back into her own arms.

"I was just getting used to holding her," she sighed.

"Tell you what, Olivia, you're welcome to come and visit her whenever you like."

"Really? That would be wonderful! But with school about to start again, I won't have a lot of time."

"That goes for you as well, Anna."

"Thank you," Anna said as she and Olivia followed Susan Scott to the front door. "And thank you for the tea, Mariana," she added as Mariana had begun gathering cups and saucers.

"You're most welcome, Mrs. Longdon."

Margaret waved as the buggy headed to the east, then went back into the house, not surprised to discover that only Kevin was still in the parlor. Bending, Margaret took his hand and pulled him to his feet, leading him with her into the kitchen.

Mariana was washing the cups and saucers. "I can't believe Susan Scott," she declared, sitting down as Jessica started to whimper. "She's hungry."

"Probably," Mariana confirmed.

"I guess I'll go into the bedroom and feed her - Can you keep an eye on Kevin?"

Mariana turned around to look at her. "Of course I can. Why would you ask?"

"You're pregnant, aren't you?" Margaret asked. "Something you said in there about having a baby when the time was right - you said that once before. You are, aren't you?"

Mariana nodded, finally smiling again. "Yes."

"Does Pedro know?"

"He does. I did not tell you because I do not want you to think that I would not be able to continue my job."

"But -"

"I will let you know when the time comes for me to - do less," Mariana assured her as Jessica's whimper threatened to become a full-blown tantrum. "Go. Feed your daughter. I will keep an eye on your son."

=====

"John, you're spoiling her," Margaret accused as her husband moved to pick up their daughter from the cradle in the parlor.

"I'm just saying hello to my princess," he replied, touching his finger to her cheek as Kevin dropped the wooden blocks that he had been stacking and smiled.

"PaPa!" he declared, standing up and running over to grab John's leg.

John reached down to tousle the boy's hair. "I mustn't forget you, right Kevin?" he questioned as his son looked up at him. "Have you been a good boy today?"

Kevin nodded. "Yes," he answered, lifting his arms, wanting to be picked up, too. "Go up."

"Let me put your sister back into her cradle," John told him, stepping toward the cradle as Kevin tightened his hold on John's leg and put his feet on top of John's boot. "Okay, I surrender," he laughed, bending down with Jessica in the crook of his right arm, he lifted Kevin with the other one. "Happy now?" he asked the boy, who nodded, a huge smile on his face.

"Happy!" Then he pointed at Jessica. "My sister!"

"Hey, you learned a new word! Meg, did you hear that?"

"He started saying it this morning," she admitted. "I was changing her diaper when he said it the first time."

"My sister!" Kevin repeated, clearly delighted by the attention it had gotten for him.

"That's right, little man," John nodded. "She's your sister."

Mariana appeared in the doorway to the kitchen, smiling. "I thought you might be home when I heard Kevin," she said. "Supper is will be on the table shortly."

"Thank you, Mariana," John replied.

Alone with the children again, Margaret asked, "John, are you aware that Mariana's going to have a baby?"

"What?" was his surprised reply as he sat down next to her on the sofa. Kevin scrambled back down onto the floor, playing with his wooden blocks again.

"After our guests left -"

"Guests?"

"I'll explain that in a minute," she told him. "Mariana confessed that she's around six months."

"Six months," John mused, shaking his head. "I would never have believed it - Pedro hasn't said a word."

"I think she's afraid that we'll want her to take it easy - but she insists that she can continue to do her job. I tried to help her this afternoon, and she refused to let me."

"That sounds like Mariana. I'll speak to Pedro, see if -"

"No, please don't. I get the impression that it's very important for her to keep doing what she's doing. I think she'll let us know when and if she needs that to change."

John nodded. "And now, about those guests?"

"Susan Scott brought Anna and Olivia over for tea. I don't think she'll be back again for awhile, though."

"Who? Susan or Anna or Olivia?"

"Susan. Did you know that her husband has suggested that Tom and Jessica should get married when they grow up? She's barely a month old!"

He reached over to take her hand. "I wouldn't worry about it, Meg. That's a long way off - I'm sure Susan and Tom will find someone else they want their son to marry by the time he's old enough."

"Just promise me that you'll never arrange a marriage for Jessica - or for Kevin, for that matter."

"Meg," John sighed, shaking his head.

"Promise me. I don't want either of our children to decide that they would be happier running away from home instead of being forced to -"

"Are you saying that you're **not** happier here?"

"You know that I'm happier than I've ever been, John Donager. You haven't promised."

"I promise not to force either of the children into a marriage that they don't want," he assured her. "You said that Anna and Olivia came with her?"

"And poor Olivia upset Susan," Margaret confirmed.

"It doesn't take much for anyone to do that," John pointed out, and then winced. "I shouldn't have said that. What happened?"

After telling him about the comment about Jessica's crying impatiently, she said, "I let her hold the baby, and Olivia said Jessica had smiled at her. That's when Susan made a comment about babies not smiling at this age."

John laughed, looking at the baby in his arm. "She obviously hasn't spent much time around Jessica, has she little one?" Jessica's lips curved, and John shook his head. "She's a smart one."

"She certainly already knows how to wrap her Papa around her little finger," Margaret observed. "I told Olivia that she was welcome to come and visit her anytime."

"Probably won't happen," John sighed. "Charles told me that Sam's keeping her pretty busy with chores when she's not in school. I really hoped all of that got settled on the trail, but the older she gets, the more protective he seems to become."

"It's understandable, all things considered."

"I suppose. Charles asked if it would be okay with me if he went to see if Sam needed any help every now and then. I told him sure, as long as he made sure his chores here were covered."

====

Olivia was carrying a bucket of water toward the barn when Charles rode up and hooked his leg on the saddle horn, watching her. "Still carrying water, huh?"

She stopped and turned to look in his direction, putting the bucket down and using one hand to shield her eyes from the sun. "Charles. What are you doing here?"

"Well," he said, sliding out of the saddle, "I'm *not* offering to carry that bucket of water for you," was his response, and they both laughed at the memory. "I came to see Sam."

"He's in the house," she told him, picking up the bucket again. "Just got in from working on repairing some fences around the corn field for next spring. I'm taking water to the horse."

"Um, do you think he would accept some help around here? I know he's trying to finish some of his harvest -"

"You know Sam," she told him. "He's very prideful sometimes. I guess it won't hurt to ask."

"Okay, well, I'll go talk to him, then." Charles knocked on the door, smiling as Anna appeared.

"Charles!" she opened the screen door. "Come in! Sam, look who's here!"

"Hello, Sam," Charles said as the man stood up. In just the two years they had been in the valley, he looked five years older. His hair was streaked with gray, and his was thin. Too thin. "How are you doing?"

"Could be better, could be worse. Still kickin' though. Have a seat. Anna, get me another glass."

"Sam, he's only seventeen."

"And I was his age when I started drinkin' my daddy's brew," he reminded her. "Don't argue with me, just get a glass."

"Thank you, Sam," Charles began, sitting in the chair across from him, "but I told Mariana that I'd be back home in time for supper."

"You can have supper with us," Sam declared as Anna returned with the glass. "We got enough, don't we, Anna?" He punctuated the question by pouring a good measure of liquid from the bottle next to his chair.

"I'm sure we do, but I'm also sure that Margaret and John would be worried if he doesn't make it back before supper."

Sam held out the glass. "Here you go. Take a swig of that. I made it myself with some of the corn I grew."

Charles had taken a drink of whiskey, but that didn't quite prepare him for the strong corn liquor. It burned his throat and made his eyes water. "Wh-" he croaked, then cleared his throat while Sam started to laugh at his discomfort. "What I'm here to do is offer my help -"

"Help? I don't need any help. Just because I don't have a big place like your brother in law or even Tim Scott, and I can't afford to hire anyone to help - I've got Anna. And Olivia."

"But - you've been getting the payouts from the gold, just like everyone else has," Charles reminded him.

"What I spend my money on is **my** business!"

"Look, Sam, I-"

"You'd better go."

"Sam, you might at least hear him out," Anna quietly suggested. "He's trying to be neighborly -"

"He doesn't think I can handle the place on my own, Anna!" Sam declared, standing up. "Now you get out of here. You're not welcome. You're like all the others, thinking that Sam Longdon is a loser! I said get **out**!" he repeated, this time reaching out to grab the front of Charles' shirt and pulling him to his feet. "You can tell all your friends that I don't want any of you hanging around here!"

"Let me go, Sam," Charles warned, his tone deadly quiet.

Sam pushed him toward the door as he released Charles' shirt. "Get out of here!" Dismissing Charles from his mind, he went back to his chair and poured more of the liquor into his glass.

Anna moved toward Charles. "I'm sorry," she told him, following him to the door.

"You don't have to apologize," he replied. "I think I expected his reaction. I'd better get. Will you and Olivia be okay?"

"He's never violent, just yells," she assured him, rolling her eyes as Sam made her point.

"Anna! I'm ready for supper!"

She nodded and went back into the house, leaving Charles to return to his horse. He was about to get into the saddle when he saw Olivia hiding just inside the barn. Leading Stony in that direction, he said, "I'm sorry that I upset him."

"He's far too prideful," she declared. "He really *does* need help. Maybe if you talked to him earlier in the day? He's fine before he starts drinking."

"I might try that. Anna said that he doesn't hit you -"

"He doesn't. I heard him yelling and decided to stay out here until Anna called me in for supper. Shameful of me, I know, I should be in there helping her and listening to my share of his yelling."

"Livvy!" Anna's voice drew her attention.

"I have to go."

"So do I. I'll see you at school tomorrow."

She nodded and started toward the house while Charles rode back to the Diamond D.

=====

"You say that Sam's drinking quite a bit?" John asked as he paused in transcribing herd figures into the ledger and looked across the desk to where Charles was sitting.

"I'm pretty sure he's brewing corn liquor over there - He mentioned something about having started drinking his 'daddy's brew' when he was my age. And before you take me to task about drinking - I only had one drink." He gave a sheepish grin. "I don't think I could have stood another one."

"I had no idea - he certainly hasn't given any indication of it on Sundays. I have to admit that he's seemed thinner and more gaunt, but I put that down to working too hard with no help other than his wife and sister."

"That's the thing, John, he's getting just as much money in the payouts as every other family, but except for seeds and fertilizer and necessities, he barely seems to spend anything."

"I suppose I could talk to him - but I think he'd see it as my meddling in his personal business."

"So what are we going to do, John? Just ignore it? Sure, he might not be violent now, but I've seen the results of too much liquor and anger spilling over onto other people. Some of my friends back in New York - Do we have to wait for him to hurt Olivia - or Anna before we do something?"

"Let me speak to Reverend Lee. Maybe he has some ideas to help."

=====

But Matthew Lee and Doc both agreed that confronting Sam about his drinking would likely do more harm than good at the present time, especially where Anna and Olivia were concerned. "He's obviously

still doing a day's work before starting to drink," Doc pointed out. "Olivia did tell Charles that he was usually sober in the earlier part of the day."

"You'd be surprised how many of our friends have a few drinks after a day's work, John," Matthew informed him. "Most of them don't hide it by making their own the way Sam is apparently doing, but so far none of them have come into town drunk or hit their wives or children."

"Moderation," John sighed, aware that he himself had been known to have a small sip of brandy while doing bookwork after supper.

"In all things," Matthew nodded with a smile. "We're not saying that we won't keep an eye on things - I'll ask Rebecca to pay a bit more attention to Olivia's attitude and classwork. And Anna Longdon has been participating in the Sewing circle that Mrs. Carter has been hosting. If anyone sees any sign of further problems, we'll move to act in some way. Until then, that's really all we *can* do. Except to pray, of course."

"About all things," Doc proclaimed.

All three men chuckled, and added, "Amen."

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"It feels like it might snow," Margaret told John as she climbed into bed after making sure that the children were warmly covered.

"Why do you think I asked Davy to make sure the woodbox was full?" John asked, shivering. "Your hands are cold," he told her.

"I can go put on some gloves," she stated, making a half-hearted move to get out of bed, only to find herself pulled closer to him.

"That's okay. I think I know a better way."

"I do like the way you think, John," she said.

The room fell silent as outside the first snow of the season began to fall.

The End