

*The pitying stars shone out o'erhead,
On the heartbroken immigrants
Burying their dead.*

*Over the graves the long train has passed;
The last goodbye has been given,
Till the graves on the trail give up their dead
And we'll meet in the light of heaven.*

*Oh, beautiful stars a loving watch keep,
O'er the immigrant trail where our loved ones sleep.*

FROM THE DIARY OF
MARY COLLINS PARSONS, 1852

Chapter One

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Samantha clutched Micah's hand, water splashing up both sides of the wagon as their two oxen labored to pull them and the Waldron family belongings across the swift Snake River. The wagon bumped over another rock and listed to the left. She swallowed hard. What would happen if her family's wagon tipped, as the Baylor family's wagon did two weeks past?

She'd promised Mama that she would take care of her little brother, but it hadn't been easy. Micah could swim—Papa had taken him down to the pond several times before they left Ohio—but this current would be too hard for him to fight, the river too wide for him to cross. Micah squeezed her hand, and his words trembled along with his fingers. "Are we gonna tip?"

She steadied her voice. "Papa will take care of us."

Micah's hand relaxed in hers.

Their father rode beside them on the one horse they'd purchased for their journey west, yelling at the oxen as he cracked his whip over their heads. During their five months on the trail, Papa had changed from an ordinary small-town lawyer to a passionate horseman and teamster.

They'd all changed, she supposed.

The wagon groaned from the pressure of the current, but she tried to stay calm for Micah's sake. She wished she could jump off the

wagon bench into the river, to help Papa lead their supplies and livestock to safety. But even if the river were shallow enough for her to walk safely through it, Papa would be angry if she got off the bench, and Captain Ezra Loewe, their hard-nosed wagon master, would be furious.

The captain was still fuming over her last attempt to help. How could she possibly have known that there was an entire family of rattlers lurking in that bush? When she screamed...well, at least their animals hadn't run very far. And they had eaten the snakes for supper. But instead of making herself a needed member of the Loewe party as she'd hoped, the captain had refused her further offers of assistance.

About a hundred yards ahead of them, Captain Loewe, the handsome Jack Doyle, and most of the other sixteen men in their company worked on the grassy bank, leading teams of oxen and wagons out of the water and up to safe ground. Behind the men lay a small valley with endless brown hills that blended into the horizon. More steep climbs, deep ruts, and rugged volcanic rock for their wagon party to cross with lofty mountains towering around the fringe.

A small part of her wished this current could take her and Micah back east, toward Ohio and all they'd left behind them. She missed Grandma Emma and her cousins, her bed, and the fashionable dresses in her armoire. She missed eating just about anything other than beans, biscuits, and dried buffalo meat. But this journey—it was all a grand adventure, and there was nothing she loved more than an adventure. Mama once told her that she'd grow out of this craving, but she was eighteen now and had yet to outgrow her thirst for all things new.

Something bumped against their wagon, and Micah squeezed her hand again as the waves lapped up on both sides of them. As they lumbered forward, she prayed softly, as Mama would have done, for their safety and their supplies. Papa had caulked the box with pine

tar, but nothing could stop the water from splashing over the top of the wagon box and soaking their food.

She glanced into the box behind her. It was once bulging with burlap bags and barrels filled with wheat, coffee, dried fruit, corn, and beans, but their food supply was rapidly dwindling. The wagon also held bedrolls and canvas for their tent, Papa's tools, and Mama's rosewood chest. Vinegar, hardtack, saleratus to make bread, wild onions they'd collected from the plains, loaves of sugar, candles, guns, rope, an ax, whiskey, peppermint oil, and a bottle of laudanum that they'd thankfully yet to use. They'd started out their journey with seventy-five pounds of bacon as well, but they'd had to dump most of it back on the plains when mosquitoes tried to carry it away.

Her brother kept his treasures with him in a knapsack he'd lugged all the way from Ohio. Before they left home, Papa had made it for him out of canvas cloth and wooden pole. When it wasn't propped over his shoulder, Micah slept with it close to his head or held it tightly on his lap when they crossed the rivers. He wouldn't let either her or Papa see the contents of what he'd packed.

He was small for his seven years, but sometimes her little brother could be just as stubborn as her and Papa.

Boaz, the Waldron family's wolfhound, paddled in the water below the bench. If only she could swim in the river alongside her dog and cool her skin as she cleaned off the trail dirt and mud. She wished she could help Micah get cleaned up as well. Her brother's blond hair was as long as a fur trapper's—she hadn't trimmed it since they left Ohio, to protect his neck from the bugs and the sun—and she'd stopped reminding him to wash his hands and face. If Mama were still alive, she'd be appalled to know how filthy her children were at the moment.

She could almost hear Mama reminding her to wash when they got to the other side of the river. With Papa in charge, her mother would never for a moment doubt that they would arrive safely.

Ahead of them, the Kneedler family's wagon reached the shore. Jack reached out and took the hand of Arthur Kneedler's elderly wife, helping her climb down from the wagon bench and up the muddy bank. It was late in life for Mr. and Mrs. Kneedler to be starting out in this new territory, but their son now lived in Oregon Country. She'd heard Mr. Kneedler once tell Papa that it was never too late to begin again.

The Kneedlers' dog scrambled out of the water behind the oxen and rushed up the hill. For some reason Colt wasn't fond of oxen, but many of them on this journey—animals and people alike—weren't fond of each other. Those in conflict had learned to tolerate one another for the sake of their company.

Her family's wagon would be next, the last one to arrive on the safety of the shore.

"My belly hurts," Micah said.

She ruffled his blond hair. "We'll make bean soup tonight."

He groaned. "We had that last night."

And every night for the past week, since they'd eaten the last of the dried buffalo meat. "We'll pretend it's Mama's oyster stew."

He looked down at the moccasins Papa had bought him back at Fort Hall. "I miss Mama."

She put her arm around his shoulders, giving him a quick hug. "Me too."

They had followed the Snake River for three hundred miles now, crossing it multiple times in their journey west, but the captain said they would have to leave this river at the bend. The Snake had lived up to its name, the waters snaking up and down. Ahead of them, a canyon boxed in the river as it turned north.

They'd lost the Baylors' wagon on a particularly treacherous crossing of the Snake. Bags and barrels—the entire contents of their wagon—plummeted into the river when their wheel hit a rock. They'd

almost lost Mrs. Baylor along with the wagon, but Jack had grabbed her skirts from where he sat astride his horse and dragged the poor, flailing lady across the river to her anxious husband on the shore. They'd all watched with an alarming fascination as the swift current seized the Baylor family's earthly goods and swept them away.

The Baylors lasted three more days after their accident, subsisting on borrowed food and supplies from the other wagons, before they turned back East with two other trail-worn families. The rest of the company would probably never know what happened to those friends, who had become like family during the journey, but Samantha prayed every day for their safe return to Missouri. And she hoped that those who remained would reach their new home in the fertile Willamette Valley, on the west side of Oregon Country, before the winter storms began.

The traders they'd met at Fort Hall said once they left the Snake, water might be hard to find until they reached the mighty Columbia River near the end of their trail. They were a couple hundred miles west of Fort Hall now, and if everything went according to plan, they would begin their climb up the Blue Mountains in a week and be settling in the Willamette before November.

Unfortunately, little on this trip had gone according to the plan.

Samantha sighed. Even though they'd crossed the boundary line into Oregon Country, they were three weeks behind schedule. It was already the beginning of September, and the fur traders back at Fort Hall had said snow would be coming soon to the Blues. They should stay and winter at the fort, the traders said, but the men in their party cast a vote before they left. They all wanted to move ahead toward the Willamette at an even faster pace.

Few Americans had traveled over these mountains before them, and those who had done it left their wagons at Fort Hall to travel with packhorses for the last month of their journey. The traders said they

were foolish to bring women and children out here, that it would be impossible for them to get their wagons over the canyons and rivers in the northwest. But their warnings hadn't deterred Captain Loewe, Papa, or the others from bringing wagons, livestock, and—according to the traders—the first American children overland. Captain Loewe, however, had left his wife back in Missouri.

A fish leaped out of the water and Samantha pointed it out to Micah, trying to distract herself from the painstakingly slow pace of their oxen. There was certainly hardship in traveling for months like this to an unknown valley, but land was free and so fertile, they were told, that if they planted vegetables first thing in the morning, they'd be ripe for supper that night. There was also triumph in conquering this overland journey that very few had attempted, moving to a land where few had been.

The oxen wrestled against the current, the water flowing up over their strong shoulders and splashing across their backs. Papa continued to urge them forward from his horse, lashing their thick coats with his switch, shouting for them to “get up,” but instead of moving forward, they stopped altogether—halfway across the river.

“Come on,” Samantha whispered.

On past river crossings, their company had waited for hours until one of their gentle but often stubborn oxen decided to move forward. They couldn't afford to wait here for hours—it would be dark soon, and they needed to set up their camp and cook supper while it was still light. If their oxen wouldn't budge, the thirty-two people already on shore would have to continue on and circle up for camp without them. The Waldrons would catch up once the oxen decided to move.

Boaz nipped at the hindquarters of the nigh ox, George, and he bellowed, stepping forward with Abe, the ox yoked beside him. Then they stopped again.

Jack rode back into the river, steering his horse toward their raft. Samantha couldn't see his dark brown hair under his wide-brimmed hat, but she could see the focus in his face, the strength of his arms as he guided his horse.

When he glanced over at her, she blushed.

Micah elbowed her. "Someone's sweet on you."

"Hush," she whispered.

"Papa says you're going to marry him."

She elbowed him back. "I told you to hush."

Micah tipped his hat low over his shaggy hair, but she could still see the grin on his face.

Jack whipped the oxen, yelling at them to move. Samantha winced every time the whip hit their backs. She knew it was necessary to prod them forward—an ox refused to be led—but she hated seeing any animal in pain, especially these oxen that had pulled almost two tons of weight for more than a thousand miles.

Mama believed in angels—the fiery messengers mentioned in the book of Hebrews who were sent to care for those on the road to salvation. Mama would have asked God to send these angels to help both the oxen and the men, so Samantha did as well, quietly asking God to send help in nudging the oxen forward.

The two men continued shouting, goading with their whips and sticks, but the oxen fought them, almost as if they were afraid of dangers on the other side of this river. More men joined them, trying to coax the animals to move.

Samantha breathed with relief when the oxen stepped again, heaving as they moved toward the shore. She'd spent much of this trip holding her breath, not knowing what might happen next, but with Papa and Jack and perhaps a host of angels at the helm, they would make it safely to the end of this journey.

The wagon shook, the hitch chain clanking, as the oxen tugged

again. This time they didn't stop pulling until they reached the other side.

Micah hopped off the wagon with a loud cheer and waded beside Boaz through the shallow water and up the bank. Before she jumped to the ground, Samantha slipped off her moccasins and dropped them into her apron pocket. Jack dismounted, and she took his proffered hand, thanking him as she slid off the bench.

She tried to focus, dipping her feet into the blessed coolness of the river before wading to shore. "I think our oxen are afraid of you."

He laughed. "Not me as much as my stick."

"They certainly obeyed you."

He helped her climb up the muddy bank. "We had a dozen oxen back home."

She glanced over at him. "You miss your farm, don't you?"

"It was my parents' farm, not mine. And no, I don't miss it."

She stepped onto the land and turned toward him. "But you miss your family."

He released her hand with a slight bow of his head. "Very much."

She wished they had hours to linger, talk. But Jack moved away quickly, back among the company of the other men as they prodded the Waldrons' oxen forward again. Their wagon clamored, the contents banging, as the oxen heaved it up the bank.

Boaz rushed down to her, like he was needed to escort her now that Jack had gone, and she bent to pet him before they joined more than a dozen women, four children, and a swarm of animals on the flat land.

"Get that dog out of here," the captain barked behind her.

She turned around, glaring at the man down the bank. She wished Boaz would bark back.

"We're going," she said, but she didn't think he heard, as he ordered the men to stock up with water. Even after five months on this journey, she didn't believe the captain knew the name of her

dog...or even Samantha's first name, for that matter. She supposed she should be glad he was keenly focused on the details of the journey rather than the names of the people and their pets, but he could at least try to be polite.

Lucille McLean waved, but Samantha thought she saw a trace of jealousy behind her friend's smile. She waved back, trying to shrug off the feeling that she'd done something wrong. It wasn't like she'd asked Jack Doyle for help off the wagon. The man did make her heart flutter a bit, but she hadn't determined whether she liked the fluttering, nor had she confided her conflicting feelings to Lucille. Her friend was convinced that she would be changing her name to Lucille *Doyle* when they reached the end of their journey.

Lucille lifted the muddy hem of her skirt, but not a single strand of blond hair escaped her pink bonnet as she moved toward Samantha. "I'll be perfectly fine if I never have to cross another river again."

Samantha grinned. "You didn't enjoy the ride?"

"Hardly." Lucille nodded toward the Waldrons' wagon as it emerged on the hill. "Did you fill your barrel with water?"

She shook her head. "Papa will fill it."

Oxen and dogs milled around the people and the contents from the wagons scattered among the sagebrush. After boxes and barrels were jostled in the river crossing, most of the emigrants wanted to repack their loads before they continued.

"I need to fill my canteen," Gerty Morrison said, holding out her two-year-old daughter to Lucille. Lucille welcomed the child into her arms.

As Gerty climbed into the back of her family's emptied wagon, wind stole over the river, rustling the canvas bonnets on the wagons. Colt barked, and Mrs. Kneedler hushed him.

Samantha scanned the barren hills around them, but she didn't see anything unusual. Several companies of Indians had followed

them along their journey—curious, she supposed, about the white men and women who traveled through their lands. The captain had traded shirts and fishhooks for food, and one of the Indians had tried to barter with Papa to exchange Samantha for three horses. Fortunately, Papa declined.

Two more dogs began barking, and then one growled. Her skin prickled. If the dogs had spotted a rabbit or a prairie dog, one of them would have chased it down by now.

Something else was wrong.

Samantha didn't know exactly what happened next, but Colt charged at an ox as if it were a wolf or bear. "No!" Mr. Kneedler shouted, chasing after his dog, but it was too late.

The ox lumbered forward, no one to guide him. And then another ox followed.

Dust billowed into a maddening cloud and Samantha waved her hands in front of her face, trying to see. The oxen bellowed in unison as a thundering sound rippled across the company.

"Stampede!" someone yelled.

People scattered as the oxen pushed toward the hills. Clods of dirt flew off the ground; bows cracked as oxen broke loose of their yokes.

She couldn't see. Couldn't breathe.

All the dogs were barking now, and the oxen harnessed to the Morrissions' wagon took off after the others. Gerty screamed, and through the dust, Samantha saw Gerty peeking out of the back flap as though trying to determine whether she should jump.

Men ran toward the oxen. Lucille and the other women ran away from the wagons, their screams echoing in Samantha's ears.

Samantha ran toward her father.

"Steady," she heard Papa say as he clung to the oxbow on the lead team, his voice a controlled calm in the midst of the chaos.

"Where's Micah?" she shouted.

“Hold on to them!” Papa yelled. She reached for the bow on the other side, trying to anchor the large animals to the ground.

A child cried out from the storm of dust, and she turned around, searching for her brother. “I have to find Micah!”

“Steady,” Papa said again before he looked across at her. “Go, Samantha.”

A horse raced past her, and she jumped back, coughing as she scanned the chaos. She glimpsed her brother’s blond hair close to a rock, but then he was gone.

“Micah!” she yelled as she tore through the confusion.

God help all of them.