James Washington and John Carter were freight haulers who worked along various parts of the Oregon Trail and the Bozeman Trail. Baptist Jim was a recent member of their company and was working a third wagon for the summer. He was an ordained minister who was also actively hunting outlaws for their bounties. In the fall, Jim planned to move on into California while Washington and Carter would resume hunting buffalo for their hides and meat. Washington had served in the 13th United States Colored Troops during the recent Civil War, and Carter had served in the Confederate Army as a volunteer in a Texas regiment. They both came to the Nebraska Territory to start new lives for themselves.

The men were hauling freight for the army over the Bozeman Trail from Fort Laramie with an army escort when a Sioux war party attacked them. The party killed most of their guard with Sergeant Parker and two privates being the only survivors.

When the freighters arrived at Fort Reno, they met four freight wagons that were returning to Fort Laramie. The news from the drivers was not very good. The Sioux, Northern Cheyenne, and Arapaho had been harassing anyone using the Bozeman Trail for over a year. Now, suddenly, all attacks had ended. Rumor said that the tribes were massing their warriors for an all-out assault on the forts along the Trail.

Washington and Jim stayed with the wagons near the fort while Carter went to meet with the supply officer for the army. Meanwhile, Sergeant Parker went to the fort commander to give a full report on their activities.

The supply officer, Captain Krenshaw, met with Carter in his office. When Carter entered, Krenshaw said, “How may I help you?”

“We got three wagons loaded with freight for Fort Phil Kearny. Some of it stays here. If we can get it unloaded and have the paperwork signed, we can get back on the road tomorrow,” Carter said.

“Let me see the paperwork,” Crenshaw said.

After he examined it, he said, “I’ll have Sergeant Corbet see to the unloading. He will also be loading a wagon with additional supplies for Kearny. That wagon will accompany you when you leave.”

“Will we have a cavalry escort going with us?” Carter asked.

“We are an infantry post. I see that you came in with six cavalry horses. Perhaps we can find some infantrymen who can ride horses. If so, we will assign them to you as an escort. We will also put a guard on each wagon to accompany the driver. The two cavalrymen who rode in with you will go along as well. Sergeant Parker will command the escort. These supplies are essential for the fort and must get through.”

After the meeting, Carter went looking for Washington and Baptist Jim. He caught up to them in a tent that had a sign over the entrance, The Broken Leg Saloon. The walls were wood, and it had a packed dirt floor. There were four round tables and a ten-foot-long plank that served as a bar. A backroom for storage and an office were behind a canvas wall.
His two friends had a jug and three wooden cups sitting on the table. As soon as they saw Carter, they waved him over to their table, and Washington said, “We’ve been getting mighty thirsty waitin’ for you.”

As he uncorked the jug, Carter said, “You all could’ve started without me.”

“This here is our second jug,” Baptist Jim said. “We finished the first one almost ten minutes ago, and it just whetted our whistles a bit.”

“We waited on this one because we want you to test it and make sure it’s safe to drink in excess,” Washington said in a whisper. “We think the owner makes it himself from potatoes.”

“Sounds disgusting,” Carter said as he poured some into a wooden cup.

Taking a close look at the liquid as he sloshed it around inside the cup, Carter grinned and said, “Well, it don’t seem to hurt the wooden cup none.”

He gulped the brownish liquid and turned beet-red just before he had a short, violent coughing fit. Then, taking a deep breath, he looked at his friends and said, “I’ve had worse. I don’t think it’ll kill us.”

Washington and Baptist Jim laughed as Jim picked up the jug and filled their wooden cups almost to their brims. They figured on finishing this second jug of whiskey before going back to where they set up camp. Then they could discuss business in private.

Meanwhile, Washington watched two men who were drinking at the bar. One was a big brute and wearing a poorly cured leather shirt and filthy army trousers. The other man was much smaller and wearing stained buckskin trousers and a torn, dirty shirt. They did not appear to be very friendly and kept watching the three friends with surreptitious glances.

Before Washington could say anything to Carter and Jim, three off-duty soldiers came into the saloon and stopped at the bar. The two men focused on them, apparently forgetting about Washington and the others.

One of the soldiers gave the two men a hard stare and said, “You two still hangin’ around here. You know the Colonel told you to get lost when he kicked you outta the fort.”

“We go where we please, and we stay as long as we want,” the bigger man said as he took a Bowie knife out of its sheath and placed it on the bar.

“That supposed to impress me?” one of the other soldiers said, stepping away from the bar.

“Take one step toward me, and I’ll gut you with it,” the big man threatened, resting his hand on the bar beside the knife.

The first soldier shifted his feet as if preparing to leap forward. Seeing that movement, the big man took the knife off the bar and pointed it at his belly. He started to push it forward when a shot rang out in the room. The Bowie knife flew out of his hand and bounced off one of the barrels holding up the makeshift bar. It landed at the feet of the soldier.

Everyone froze in place, and all heads turned toward the source of the shot. The shooter was sitting alone at a table and waving a Colt army pistol in the air, first pointing it at the two scruffy men and then at the soldiers. While everyone was staring at him, he said in a mild voice, “Why don’t you boys go play outside and let me enjoy my drink in peace?”

When no one moved or said a word, he cocked the pistol and softly said, “Or do I have to put a few holes in one or two of you?”
The soldiers mumbled a few words among themselves and slowly backed out of the saloon. The two troublemakers turned their backs to the shooter and said, “We got some drinkin’ to do. Then we’ll leave when we are good and ready.”

When the speaker lifted a jug to pour some whiskey into a cup, it shattered in his hand as a gunshot rang out. A follow-up shot blew the wooden container off the bar as his partner reached for it.

“We’re goin’,” the big man said as he picked up the Bowie knife while they walked toward the door. When they reached the door, the man suddenly turned and whipped his arm back, prepared to throw the knife. As he started his throwing motion, a fourth shot from the stranger shattered his wrist, and the knife clattered to the floor.

“You might want to get that wrist looked at. There’s a doctor at Fort Laramie who works on animals,” the stranger said.

As the big man whimpered while holding his shattered wrist, his partner said, “You better watch your back mister. We ain’t fogettin’ this.”

Then he started to go for the knife but stopped when the stranger cocked his pistol and said, “That’s mine now.”

He stepped back from the knife, and both men walked out the door. After they left, the shooter reloaded his pistol and got up from his seat. A large, broad-brimmed hat worn low on his head hid his facial features. A pair of worn army-issue trousers and a loose flannel shirt held in place by a belt holding cartridges and a cavalry style holster completed his outfit. He slowly walked over and picked up the knife. After turning it over in his hands and testing its sharpness and balance, he tucked it inside his belt next to a now holstered pistol.

Washington and his friends had watched the proceedings with some interest. They kept their guns handy but did not draw them. The stranger seemed to have everything under control. As he took ownership of the knife, they returned to their drinking.

The first thing Jim said as he poured fresh drinks was, “That there fella walks funny.”

“What do you mean? I didn’t notice no limp or anything,” Carter said.

“I ain’t sure,” Jim said as he held up their jug and caught the stranger’s eye. “Maybe it’s the moccasins he’s wearing. Let’s invite him over and have a bit of a chat.”

After picking up the knife, the stranger walked over to Jim and pulled up a chair. Jim signaled the bartender to bring another cup and said, “Nice shootin’. Y’all stopped what could’ve been a nasty fight.”

“They were disturbing my relaxation. I didn’t want them busting the place apart over some stupid male posturing,” the stranger replied as she took off her hat, her lengthy, black hair cascading over her shoulders and down her back.

“I thought there was somethin’ different about the way you walked across the saloon,” Jim said with a big grin on his face.

“Y’all be kinda tall and a might filled-out for a woman,” Carter said. “What are you doin’ here on your own and packin’ a pistol?”

Resting her hand on her new Bowie knife, she showed a brief flash of anger before sitting back and taking a mouthful of whiskey. After swallowing it without hesitation, she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and said, “You got a problem with that?”
Jim refilled her cup from the jug and said, “We ain’t got any problem with it. We are just curious. That’s all.”

“I was looking for three freight haulers headed to Fort Phil Kearny,” she said.

“You found us,” Jim said. “What can we do for you?”

“The army hired me and my wagon to go along with you. I have a load of axes and saws, along with a few crates of .50 caliber ammunition.”

“I can’t see the army contracting with a woman to haul freight anywhere, let alone to a fort on the Bozeman Trail.,” Washington said.

“My father, God rest his rotten soul, named me Sam. I think he was too drunk to say Samantha, or he passed out during the naming. The army hired Sam Ballard to haul freight for them. If anyone tries to take that contract away, I’ll make him very sorry.”

“I don’t think we want to nursemaid a woman through Indian country. I may have a word with Captain Crenshaw,” Carter said as he stood and stepped past Sam on his way out of the saloon.

Before he took a second step, he was on the floor looking at the ceiling. Sam had buckled his legs from behind with a quick kick and pulled him down onto the floor with a chokehold. Slapping him on the chest, she stood beside him and rested her hands on her weapons.

Jim applauded and laughed before saying, “Carter, did you trip over a crack in the floor?”

Sitting up, Carter rubbed the back of his neck and said, “If’n you weren’t a woman, I’d kick your ass from here to Fort Laramie.”

“Why don’t you try kicking it from here to Fort Kearny instead?” Sam said as she offered him her hand and pulled him up to his feet.

“Maybe I’ll do just that,” Carter said, standing beside her.

“I guess we got our fourth wagon,” Washington said.

“As long as the army don’t look too closely at the driver,” Jim said.

Sam twisted her hair and put it back under her hat as she and Carter resumed their seats.

“I’ll just be one of the boys for this trip,” she said, pulling it down low on her head. “Then I’m off to the Montana goldfields.

“Them golds fields are played out,” Carter said.

“I’m not after gold. I got other business there.”

The four of them shared another round of drinks, emptying their third jug. When Jim asked Sam how she ended up driving a freight wagon, she abruptly stood and said, “I’ll see you three at first light.” Turning away from the table, she walked out of the saloon.

As she walked away, Jim said, “She sure doesn’t walk like a man.”

“I think you scared her away, Jim,” Washington said as she passed out of sight.

“Naw. She’ll be meetin’ us at the wagons in the morning. She is one determined woman,” Jim replied.

Carter finished draining his cup and said, “You two sure you want a woman along?”

“Why not,” Jim said. “She shoots better than most men and isn’t afraid to put a man onto the floor.”

“Besides, if we don’t let her join us, Jim won’t be too happy,” Washington said, slapping him on the shoulder with a wide grin on his face.
The banter continued until they had their dinner and finished off another jug of whiskey. Finally, the three men turned in for the night. The next morning, they felt like death warmed over when they showed up at the supply office to get their paperwork. Captain Crenshaw just shook his head and mentioned that the other driver, Sam Ballard, had been waiting for over an hour and their wagons were loaded and tarped.

They went to the freight yard where their wagons waited. Sam had her rig ready to go and was sitting on the seat with a wide grin on her face. They just gave her a slight wave or nodded toward her as they prepared to hitch their teams to their wagons.

A half-hour later, the wagons moved across the drill field where the army escort waited. There were eight men on horseback and four others afoot. Sergeant Parker was in command. He ordered the four standing men to ride as guards on the wagons. The mounted men were positioned four in front of and two behind the wagons. Parker and the other horseman rode a hundred yards in front of the small convoy.

The soldiers all had army-issued, Springfield rifles. They were equipped as infantrymen and carried bayonets and knapsacks. The horsemen looked very uncomfortable, so Washington called a halt and had them secure their packs in the wagons.

Carter and Crenshaw figured they would need about four full days of travel to reach Kearny. Once they arrived and fulfilled their contract, Crenshaw said the army might ask them to carry some of the supplies on to Fort C. S. Smith, about seventy miles farther along the Bozeman Trail.

Carter had not mentioned that possibility to the others. He figured on seeing what happened at Fort Kearny before tackling that problem.

Each night everyone gathered around a large campfire for a dinner of beans and bacon. Then everybody except the guards slept near the fire for warmth. Everyone took turns standing watch. The wagons were always parked in a circular formation with the animals in the center, while three guards patrolled and posted a short distance outside of the circle.

The second night on the trail, Sam was standing watch when Jim joined her. She had an old Spencer lever-action rifle, and when she heard someone approaching, she cocked the hammer.

When he heard the click, Jim said, “Sam, it’s me, Baptist Jim.”

Easing the hammer down, she said, “Oh, sorry. I wouldn’t have shot you anyplace serious. Just enough to get your attention.”

“Yeah, right,” Jim said.

“Are you checking up on me?” she asked.

“Nah, I just couldn’t sleep and wanted to talk a bit.”

“Okay, so go ahead and talk.”

Jim scratched at his beard for a few seconds and cleared his throat before saying, “You are a fine-looking woman when you let your hair down. Why do you go around making like you’re a man?”

Sam chuckled and said, “You have just been dying to ask me that, and now you finally got up enough gumption to do it.”

She just stood there for a minute staring at Jim, making him very uneasy. Then she said, “There is a log over here where we can sit for a spell, and I can still keep watch.”
When they sat side by side, Sam said, “So you think I’m a fine-looking woman. You must not have seen any women for a long time. My nose is pushed to one side, and my lower jaw is uneven. I ain’t skinny, and there are times I like a good chew of tobacco.”

“I never noticed any of those things,” Jim said.

“You had been drinking, and that saloon had poorly glowing lanterns. You ain’t seen my hair since then.”

Not to be put off, Jim said, “I’m surprised you are a single woman, or is there a man somewhere waiting for you?”

“I was married for a while. We were young and madly in love. John was a farmer, and we had a small place in Kansas where we tried to scrape a living out of the ground. Times were hard, and the war was tearing the country apart. We were always worried about raiders burning our farm. John taught me how to shoot a gun and showed me a few tricks about using a knife.”

“So that is how you came to be so handy with a gun?”

“I thought I could defend myself with one until some of Quantrill’s Raiders attacked us in 1864. I tried to help John fight them off, but I quickly discovered how hard it is to shoot someone riding a horse with an old musket.”

The attackers killed John right away. They must have shot him ten times after he fell to the ground. He had gotten two of them, and they were angry about it.”

“I tried to reload, but there was no time. The scum laughed at me as I sat there beside John crying and fumbling with the musket. When I picked up John’s pistol and fired the last two shots, they stopped laughing. I didn’t hit anything since my tears blinded me.”

“Two of them dismounted and grabbed me by my arms. After they dragged me into our house, they threw me onto the floor and said some vulgar things about what they were going to do to me.”

“Filthy bastards. They deserve slow hanging,” Jim said.

“I had a dagger that I carried in a sheath strapped to the outside of my leg. John always insisted I keep it there for emergencies. When the first man stood over me and dropped his pants, I stabbed him in the groin. He screamed as he turned away and fell to the floor, holding himself. Before I could move, his partner smashed my face with his rifle butt. He must have hit me several times.”

“After a while, I started regaining my senses. I was alone in the house with flames all around me. Blood covered my face and the top of my dress. Most of it was my own. I crawled into the kitchen and went down through an escape hatch in the floor. I made my way under the house and managed to escape through a gap in the baseboards surrounding the crawlspace.”

“The raiders were killing the livestock and setting fire to the barn. I was able to make my way into some bushes behind the house where I spent the night. The next morning an army patrol found me, and I spent several weeks recovering. They could not straighten my broken nose nor make my jaw like it was, but they did nurse me back to health.”

“I had no family, and John’s family was back east. They wanted nothing to do with me. I decided to leave Kansas and go into Missouri and Iowa, away from the war and old memories.”

“With my damaged face, men took little interest in me, and I was never closely examined. I quickly decided that I didn’t want to do any of the jobs offered to lonely, single women in the west.”
“I took to wearing men’s clothing. I kept my hair cut short, my face dirty, and my clothing oversized while speaking in a soft, husky tone of voice. I worked at odd jobs and found ways to survive. People thought I was either a weak man or a boy, and jobs were few and far between. Eventually, I discovered I was very good at poker and managed to win a stake from time to time.”

“For two years, I survived, even returning to Kansas for a while after the war. Then last year I won my freight wagon in a poker game and decided to go into business for myself. Jobs were hard to come by because my size was against me. I barely made a living and established freight companies were always causing me problems. I decided to head out to Nebraska Territory. The army was having trouble finding freight haulers due to Indian troubles, and I needed the work.”

“I’d made a few trips between Independence and Fort Kearny before taking on a load for Fort Laramie. Once I got to Laramie, I was able to get a small load for Fort Reno, where I joined up with you all. After we unload these supplies, I plan to continue into the Montana goldfields.”

Baptist Jim had listened carefully to everything she said. He could feel his emotions rising and falling as she told her story. More than once, Jim wanted to hold her but didn’t want to risk the possibility of a knife between his ribs. So, he just sat quietly still until she finished. When she sat back and stopped speaking, he said, “Those goldfields have been worn out for some time now. Maybe you’d like to stay on with us for a bit longer.”

“I’m not going there for the gold.”
“There ain’t much else there to attract a person,” Jim said.
“I got a good look at three of the men who raid our farm and killed my husband. I have been hunting for them since the war ended. One of them is living in Montana.”
“How can you be sure of that?”
“The other two told me that before I ended their lives.”
“Is that why you became so handy with a gun?”
“I am comfortable with most weapons. I am especially good with a pistol and knife. I practiced every chance I had while traveling around the country.”

“When I found the first man in Missouri, he was in a saloon. I followed him out of town, and that night I confronted him at his campsite. He had a friend with him. They both gave me some information before I shot them.”

“The second man I found in Kansas, living five miles from my old farm. He had a limp from where I had stabbed him back in ’64. I left him where John died, but only after he told me where to find Jack Rawles, the man who beat me with his rifle butt. He owns a general store in a small Montana town.”

Jim took one of Sam’s hands in his and said, “As a preacher, I have to tell you to leave vengeance to the Lord. As a bounty hunter, I have to say that I want to help you, especially since there is a bounty on the head of anyone who rode with Quantrill.”

“Why would you want to help me?” Sam asked.
“I planned on heading west after this delivery anyway. Hauling freight is only a temporary thing, and it’s keeping me from the Lord’s business. I might as well go through Montana since it is on the way to Oregon Territory, where I plan to build my new church.”
Before she could say anything else, one of the nearby sentries fired a shot into the surrounding darkness.

Sergeant Parker and two others hurried to his position half-dressed and ready for action. Jim and Sam avoided being distracted and focused on their area of darkness. Washington and Carter joined Parker as he questioned the sentry, who claimed he saw someone sneaking around farther out from the wagons.

Washington left the group and explored where the sentry claimed he saw someone. He found moccasin prints in an area of soft sand. When he reported that fact back to Parker, he doubled the sentries, and they discovered a man missing.

The guard on the side away from the disturbance was gone. Only his forage hat remained in the middle of a disturbed area. There were signs of a struggle. Parker, Washington, and Carter stood there as Parker rotated the cap in his hands.

Washington said, “The damn Sioux must have distracted us so they could grab a captive.”

“We have to go and get him,” Sergeant Parker said.

“That’s what they want. If we split our forces and weaken the defenses here, they’ll be able to take the wagons after ambushing anyone on the rescue mission.”

“Damn it all to hell. I can’t just let them torture him. I’ll make sure a strong guard is posted and go out there myself,” Parker said.

“I’ll go with you,” Washington said before Carter could respond.

Five minutes later, Washington and Sergeant Parker disappeared into the darkness surrounding the wagons.

The sun was appearing in the east as they returned. When they silently walked into the wagon circle and joined the men at the breakfast fire, everyone could see they had not been successful.

Parker announced to everyone, “Private Scragg has been taken away by the Sioux. We followed their tracks to where their ponies waited. There were ten or fifteen of them.”

“What now, Sergeant?” one of the men asked.

“We saddle up and move out. We won’t stop until we reach the fort. If we don’t have any problems, we’ll make it before dark.”

When the wagons pulled out, Washington’s just had a soldier on the seat. He was on the extra mount and scouting to the east of their route. Washington kept the wagons in view while scanning the horizon for uninvited watchers. From time to time, he spotted a distant figure sitting on a pony who might be watching their progress.

Once, he even saw a small group of Sioux approaching the wagons. They stopped outside of rifle distance and sent a single pony toward them. There was a strange-looking figure riding it. Washington hurried down to the column and arrived just as Scragg’s body fell from the pony.

He had been scalped, burned, and blinded by the Sioux. When they laid Scragg on the ground, a weak moan escaped from his lips. Sergeant Parker leaned over and placed his ear next to Scragg’s lips. Then he stood and took out his pistol. Without any hesitation, he shot him in the heart.

Parker holstered his pistol and got back onto his horse. He gathered the mounted men together and pointed at the group of Sioux sitting on their ponies several hundred yards away. He turned to his men and said, “Draw pistols.”
As the six men held their pistols aimed into the air, Parker shouted, “Let’s get those bastards.”

He led them toward the waiting Sioux at a fast gallop. The Sioux fired a few rifle shots at the men without hitting anyone and turned away. They rode out of sight behind a rise in the terrain. The soldiers were right behind them.

Washington directed two of the soldiers remaining behind to load Scragg’s body into a wagon for burial later. Then he shouted to the others, “We are on our own now. They won’t be comin’ back. Those warriors were bait just like was done to Fetterman last year.”

“We can either make a stand here, or we can make a run for the fort. It’s about ten miles from here,” Carter said.

“We’d better hightail it out of here while the Sioux are busy with Parker,” Jim said. If any of them survive, they can catch up to us.

“So can the Sioux,” Sam said. “Let’s open some of the crates on my wagon and give extra pistols and ammunition to the four soldiers still with us.”

“Good idea,” Washington said.

As they distributed the extra guns and ammunition, Washington said, “Make a spot for yourselves in the back of the first and last wagons. Two men to each wagon. Be sure you can stay behind some cover. The Indians will be coming from the rear. If things get too hot and heavy, the front wagon will swing wide, and all the wagons will stop wheel to wheel. Then we’ll add our repeating rifles to the shooting.”

Five minutes later, the wagons were moving out at a fast pace. They would vary from fast to slow intervals of speed to make good time while saving the horses and mules. They had barely started when the sounds of a significant fight came from the direction of Parker’s attack. The sounds only lasted a few minutes, but it was long enough to give the wagons a good start, especially since the overconfident Sioux took time to mutilate the bodies of the soldiers.

His command had been overwhelmed by nearly a hundred Sioux and Cheyenne. They had killed everyone and would destroy the army wagons. When they reorganized and approached their campsite, they were surprised to see it empty and a small cloud of dust in the distance. About half of the war party, mostly Cheyenne, immediately rode after them. The rest did not want to spend a lot of time chasing wagons. Red Cloud was planning a serious of attacks against the forts, and they did not want to miss out on the fighting. They headed toward the Bighorn Mountains instead.

The heavily loaded wagons had a substantial head start, and it took almost an hour before they came into view. When they did, the Sioux and Cheyenne swarmed toward them.

“Line up the wagons,” Carter shouted. “We got visitors.”

The wagons took positions beside each other, and everyone prepared to fight for their lives.

“Use your rifles until they get close. Then switch to the pistols when I give the order,” Carter said.

Once again, a party of Indians attacked a group of soldiers with breech-loading rifles. They expected to be able to run them over while they reloaded their muzzle-loading weapons. They were surprised at the rate of fire they faced from four soldiers and four civilians. The
repeating rifles were not commonly encountered on the Bozeman Trail and added to the overall discomfort of the attackers.

Six warriors were killed during the early stages of their attack, and several others were wounded. They stopped and milled about for a few seconds before deciding to press home their attack. They lost two more men before continuing the charge.

Yelling and firing, they came within pistol range and Carter gave the command to fire. The hail of bullets stopped the warriors cold. Each soldier fired six rounds in thirty-seconds from a pistol and then dropped it to take six more shots at the same rate. They were not very accurate shooters, but hits occurred, especially as the warriors came closer and closer.

The most aggressive men were leading the charge, and they suffered the most. The soldiers killed five more warriors with their pistols, and ten others were wounded and out of the fight.

The Indians turned away, picking up any of the wounded who showed signs of life. They stopped just out of rifle range and counted their losses. They had thirteen dead and almost as many wounded. This small party was not worth those kinds of damages. They were bad medicine on this day. The war party rode off to the south, intending to circle round to the Big Horn Mountains. They would join Red Cloud and win big victories with him.

Five warriors remained behind to watch the wagons. When they left, the warriors would gather the dead and take them back to their village.

Carter got the wagons moving again. They reached Fort Phil Kearny before dark without any further incidents. They parked the wagons in the fort’s freight yard for unloading in the morning. Carter met with the fort commander while the others set up camp near the wagons.

Dinner was sizzling on a fire when Carter joined the others. Jim and Sam were sitting close to each other talking while Washington stirred the beans and bacon.

Before Carter could say anything, Jim said, “I’m going to be taking my leave of you fellas. Being in the freight business was always a temporary thing for me, and now I plan to go with Samantha up to Montana. We’ll go partway with a cavalry patrol to Fort Smith. Then we’ll go the rest of the way on our own.”

“We’ll be getting’ our pay tomorrow from the army. You can take your share with you,” Carter said. “It has been a pleasure having you with us, but we will soon be back hunting buffalo anyway. I know you weren’t planning on doing that with us.”

“We hope things go well for the two of you,” Washington said.

“Tomorrow, we will go out of business. The fort commander offered to buy our wagons and teams. I told him I’d check with you all before I agreed to anything,” Carter said.

“What does the army want with them?” Washington asked.

“They need more wagons for hauling logs. We must deliver them to their woodcutters’ camp sometime tomorrow if we are willing to sell them. The camp is about six miles from the fort.”

“What about hunting buffalo this winter? We’ll need a wagon.”

“The army will pay a premium price and provide us with riding horses and saddles to boot. We’ll have enough cash to buy a new wagon in Independence and anything else we might want or need.”
“That does sound like a good offer. Besides, we’d be going back empty anyway,” Washington said.

Turning to Jim and Samantha, Carter said, “The offer would also apply to your wagons if you’d like to sell them for cash and riding horses.”

The following day, Jim and Sam rode fresh horses out of the fort with a packhorse trailing behind. They were traveling with a cavalry patrol. Carter and Washington had said their goodbyes, and they followed another patrol toward the woodcutters’ camp. They had tied their new horses to the backs of their wagons. The other two wagons remained in the fort for now.