

Restricted Territory



Restock & Reload

[Slipping Out]

Thursday, Nov 22, 1877

Victoria has fallen asleep in the cabin's front bedroom on Austin's bed. Even though she was awake and had enough energy to argue with Sam earlier, her body is not fully recovered from her ordeal in the snow. Emotionally drained and physically exhausted, she falls asleep on top of the covers, holding onto Austin, who's wrapped snugly in the blankets. The bedroom is tranquil except for Austin and Victoria's calm, unsynchronized but rhythmic breathing.

Sam enters the room as promised, carrying a bowl of hot beans and a cup of water.

"This –" Sam starts to talk normally as if Victoria is awake, but his voice trails off to a whisper as he sees Victoria and Austin asleep. "– this is about all we have left." He reaches down and feels Austin's radial pulse, watches his breathing, and checks his capillary refill. Not wanting to wake either of them, he quietly leaves the bowl and spoon on the chair and a cup of water on the floor by the bed.

Austin's eyelids move slightly when Sam checks his temperature by touching his forehead. Sam smiles at the first signs of Austin's stimulus response. That small response reinforces that Austin's condition is progressing positively. He is also pleased that Victoria can relax enough to get the sleep her body needs. Sam takes a blanket from the other bed and puts it over Victoria.

Concerned about the cabin's lack of supplies, Sam devises a plan to get supplies from the ranch house. The weather will make traveling outside the valley difficult for at least a few days, so they must obtain food to hold them over. He plans to discreetly go down to the ranch house and get supplies while Victoria and Austin continue to recover; the whole trip should take less than an hour. The fact that nobody has come to the cabin searching for the kids gives him confidence that, at least for today, nobody will be in the valley.

He leaves the bedroom to stoke and feed the fires and adjust the dampers. He puts the kettle near the warming plate on the cook stove. From the back bedroom, he takes a pillowcase and a sheet. Then, taking his jacket and hat from the kitchen table, he quietly slips out the back door.

[Scene of the Crime]

Outside, Sam stands on the back porch, watching the snow come down steadily. The clouds and snow conceal any evidence of the time, but Sam thinks it is around ten-thirty or eleven. Recalling advice from Wac ih a', he unfolds the sheet he was carrying and puts it over his head. His head sticks out of a hole he had previously cut in the middle. Sam hopes this makeshift poncho will help keep him dry and maintain his cover during his clandestine trip. He's unsure who or what he might find, so he wants to be as stealthy as possible.

Near the woodpile, Sam looks through the trees toward where the ranch house should be to see if there is any sign of activity; however, the snow is too dense to see that far into the valley. He continues away from the cabin, carefully making his way down the hill. Concerned about his lack of familiarity with this area, he stops every hundred feet or so and looks back so he will know what his return path should look like.

Introspectively, Sam figured a ninety-five percent confidence level that Hank's men would not be looking for the kids in the storm. He still jumps every time the snow breaks a branch or falls off a tree with a thud: five percent means there's still a chance. He looks around often and deftly moves from tree to tree for cover.

Once at the creek, he surveys the waterway to find the best crossing point. Intent on staying hidden and dry, he looks for a crossing with cover and dry rocks. He finds a suitable crossing in the trees, a few yards from the trail or what looks like the trail. The deepening snow hides most clues Sam would use to find a trail.

Following the tree line around the meadow, he constantly looks for threats. Finally, the ranch house becomes visible about halfway across the large meadow. Using any available object, rock, stump, or tree, as cover, he makes his way to the house.

The dark interior suggests it is vacant, but he waits briefly near a window to listen for activity. The only sound is the wind rushing past the ranch house. Carefully, he peers into a window. He then slinks his way around the house, looking into any window that presents itself. During his canvass, he finds that the window where he saw the men last night is still open. He continues to carefully make his way around to a point where he can see the front of the house. Sam feels his hands losing dexterity because of the cold, but he remains patient in his survey for safety.

There are no horses in front, and the door is closed. The new snow has obscured any older tracks, so there appears to be no one in the cabin. Even with all evidence pointing to the building being vacant, Sam doesn't want to let down his guard, as this may be a trap set for the kids if they return.

Balancing the perceived risk (low) versus the possible gain (high), he decides to sneak into the house and retrieve the supplies as planned. He also realizes that he needs to get out of the wind for a while to rewarm his hands and feet.

He goes back around to the open window and quietly climbs through it. He sees the straps at the corners of the bed. Both anger and sorrow hit him at the same time as he imagined Victoria's ordeal. Silently, he unties the straps to erase from his mind's eye the evil they suggest.

Sam is beginning to feel this scenario is too familiar. Two days ago, this house was nothing but a foundation. The names of Victoria and Austin, the murders on November 21, and the – R – ranch are too much of a coincidence. But how can this be happening again? He shakes his head to clear his thoughts. He will have to figure it out later; now, he must focus on the mission.

The house is dark and quiet. He removes the poncho, sneaks into the doorway, and stealthily peeks into the main room. No one is there, and there is no trap. His training and habits keep him from touching things unnecessarily, but in the back of his mind, he knows that this murder scene will never be investigated.

As he checks the main room, he finds the four dead people. He checks the carotid pulse of each corpse as he makes his way around the room. There is a lot of blood around one of the ranch hands near the end of the table. He has a bullet wound to the head. The other ranch hand, by the bedroom door, also has a bullet wound to the head. The two people, whom Sam guesses are the kids' parents, have bullet wounds to the chest.

He checks for heat from the stove. It is cold, indicating it hasn't been used since yesterday. Sam takes that as an indication Hank's men did not stay after they committed the murders. Since they didn't wait, Sam concludes they wanted to return to Hank's ranch before the storm arrived, a sign that the storm will delay their return.

Sam reasons that Hank's men must have thought the kids would die in the storm or that the kids wouldn't be able to escape the valley due to the storm. Either way, Hank's men figure the kids won't be an issue until after the storm clears. Sam hopes the storm will give the kids a chance to recover and give him time to devise some sort of defensive strategy.

He continues to check the rest of the house in the same careful manner. Once satisfied that no others are in the house, he lights a lamp and keeps it trimmed low. The bodies of the parents lie lifeless in the golden glow. Sam knows that the trauma of seeing their parents gunned down will affect Victoria and her brother for the rest of their lives. Respectfully, he covers the parent's bodies with sheets from the bedroom.

Since Sam was in the fire service, he has seen countless dead bodies, but this is somehow different than most. Of course, the murders, especially of children, that he has encountered angered and even repulsed him; as a professional, he had to distance himself from the emotional aspects of the scene and deal directly with the physical and medical aspects. Here in this remote ranch, he does not have the professional restrictions of his previous career. The stifled emotional response of thirty years on the line has reached its limit. Sam sits on the floor near the parents and weeps.

After a few minutes, Sam is able to pull himself together. In a calm voice, he vows to the parents that he will protect Victoria and Austin. He refocuses on his original mission of getting supplies.

Sam looks through the kitchen and pantry for food to take back to the cabin, placing what he considers essential for the next week on the table - smoked meat, fresh vegetables, and canned goods. Quietly and rapidly, he moves through the cabin.

He stops in his tracks when he hears a horse bluster. Quickly dousing the lamp, he takes cover and listens intently to determine the direction of the sound. After a long silence, Sam decides to investigate the source of the sound carefully. As he moves in the darkened house, he kicks a large frying pan on the floor, making a loud noise. He once again sits silently, listening for possible intruders.

When he is confident that no one heard him, he peers out the front door, straining to see through the heavy snow, waiting for a rider to appear on the road. Yet, no one shows. While he is still looking, the horse neighs again. It has been a few minutes since he turned off the lamp, and his eyes have finally adjusted to the contrastless darkness of the storm outside. He can see just enough to make out the large building south of the ranch house. It's the barn. Sam feels foolish for having been too narrow-sighted and not noticing the very large barn; a very possible source of danger.

Sam quietly releases a big sigh and a slight chuckle. He saw the barn when he got to the house but forgot about it after he saw the crime scene. He makes a mental note that the horses are still at the ranch, then gets back to work.

Sam relights the lamp and continues collecting the supplies for the cabin, putting them into the pillowcase he had brought. Looking for anything else that might be useful in the cabin, he begins a more thorough search. The dead men have no holsters or guns, but Sam takes their ponchos that were left on the floor.

Searching the loft, he finds a letter on the small table between the beds. Sam would usually disregard the letter, but he deems there is a greater need for information that could shed light on their current situation than the respect for personal privacy.

It reads:

Dr. Frank Dell, First day of November, 1877
Director of Admittance,
Youngstown Medical University
420 Wick Avenue
Youngstown, Ohio

To: Miss. Victoria Creighton
Harmony Flats, California

Dear Miss. Creighton,

As Director of Admittance, on behalf of Youngstown Medical University, I am pleased to inform you that your application for Resident Nurse has been accepted.

The formality of a personal interview will be conducted upon your presentation of this letter of introduction to Dr. Peter Du Reax, Dean of Nursing.

I shall wait with anticipation for your wire confirming your receipt of this letter and acceptance of the position.

Best Regards,

Dr. F Dell, M.D.
Director of Admittance

Sam carefully takes the letter and puts it in his shirt pocket, then tosses down a bundle from the loft that contains extra blankets and clothing for Austin and Victoria. With the two bundles of supplies placed outside by the window, he puts on one of the ranch hand's ponchos and leaves through the window he came in through.

Cautiously, he makes his way to the barn. Sam stashes the bundles near the corner of the barn to better assess it. Using the same technique as he did for the house, he circles the barn, looking for any evidence of unwanted guests. He goes inside once he is sure no one is in the barn and finds four horses, tack, feed, and a buckboard, among other things typically found in a barn.

Sam calmly approaches the horses, trying to keep them quiet. He speaks softly to one of the horses as he pets its nose. "I bet you guys are pretty hungry. I'll get you properly fed when we get back to the cabin. Right now, I think it's best to get out of here quickly."

Sam grabs one of the four saddles neatly lined up on the saddle rail to put on the horse. The first saddle is Austin's, with a scabbard and a lever-action rifle. He checks the rifle for ammo. Nothing is in the chamber, but the full magazine has fifteen, 44-40 cartridges. Surprised at the 'old' gun's excellent condition, he thinks, "Just like a fire extinguisher: It's better to have it and not need to use it, than not to have it when you need it."

Hoping to find more useful items, he checks the other saddles, but no other items of interest are found except a pair of work gloves, which he promptly puts on. He finishes saddling up the horse he was talking to and puts the two bundles he recovered from his stash site across the saddle. Fortunately, Wac ih a' re-educated him on the proper way to halter and saddle a horse, so Sam gets all four horses ready.

He reasons that if the three of them, Sam, Victoria, and Austin, need to escape on horseback, they will need both the horses and the saddles. Bareback is not an option for Austin due to illness, but in reality, Sam is not confident he can even ride a horse bareback.

Once the horses are ready, he secures some large saddle bags on a couple of them, stuffs hay into feed bags, and slings those over the saddles. After stringing the horses together, he leads them outside and ties them to the hitching rail outside the barn. Looking around, he takes a mental note of the equipment and supplies that are in the barn. Satisfied that he has taken enough for the week, he

closes the barn door, mounts the lead horse, and heads down the road, past the ranch house, to where Wac ih a' had pointed out the remains of the other ranches in the valley.

[Mistaken Identity]

Later, back at the cabin's barn, Sam finishes feeding and watering the horses. The saddles and bags of hay are put away, and the tac is hung on the wall. It took him a little longer than he expected, but he also got more than he thought he could.

Sam hopes to return to the house without Victoria or Austin waking up. He sneaks out of the barn door, carrying two bundles and the rifle, careful not to make a sound. He steals up the back stairs, removes his newly acquired poncho, and quietly enters the house.

Just as he closes the door, wham, he gets hit in the head with a bucket. Sam is knocked to the floor. During the bucket onslaught, the rifle is slid under the kitchen table. Sam doesn't know who hit him or why. Maybe it is one of Hank's men. While protecting himself as best he can, he realizes that the voice he hears is Victoria's.

Victoria yells while she hits him with the bucket. "You aren't going to get us this time! You son of a bitch, bastard!"

Fending off the bucket blows, Sam yells, "Hey! Victoria, wait! It's me. Sam!"

Victoria, like a freight train once started, is hard to stop. She continues to attack Sam. "You son-of-a —"

To Sam's relief, she now understands what Sam said. She stops beating on him and non-verbally indicates that she will stop the assault by dropping the bucket. In an exhausted, quiet but angry voice, her admonishment is direct, "You son of a bitch. Why didn't you tell me you were leaving? I thought you just ran off. And then someone in a poncho, like Hank's men were wearing, rides into the barn and sneaks into the cabin. What am I supposed to think? Why didn't you tell me you were leaving or where you were going."

Still on the floor, Sam sits up, "You fell asleep with Austin. You both needed the rest and —" He starts becoming indignant about her criticism. "— As I told you earlier, we needed food."

He gets up, picks up the bundles, and puts them on the table. "So I went down to the ranch, got some supplies, and fed the livestock."

Sam sees Victoria's expression subtly change from anger to concern, and then to fearful anticipation. She fears Sam's activity will give away their hiding place, and someone will find them. Moreover, Victoria fears the news Sam may bring back to the cabin. She is afraid to ask because the answer is obvious.

Sam stops, takes a deep breath, and continues empathetically. "I'm sorry, but there was no one there alive. I found four bodies."

Victoria slumps into the chair at the kitchen table.

Sam finishes, “I won’t go into details, but it looked pretty bad for what appeared to be the ranch hands. They were beaten up pretty badly. The other two seemed to have passed quickly.”

Victoria is unable to hold back the tears but manages to respond clearly. “It’s my mom and dad. The other two were the ones that tried to kill us. I guess Austin killed them when we escaped.”

Sam gets down on his hands and knees to get the rifle. Skeptical that a young kid could do that much damage, he asks, “Austin?” After looking it over, he places the rifle on the table: “How is he?”

As she puts the buckets back near the door, the concern in her voice is palpable. “He hasn’t moved at all . . . and now he’s starting to get a fever.”

Sam puts his hand on the back of his head and then checks his hand for blood. He isn’t bleeding, but that doesn’t make him feel any better. He responds calmly to Victoria’s concern. “That’s normal for such a big system shock. He’ll be pretty sick for a couple of days. When he wakes up, we should keep him resting for as long as possible. Even from the very little I know about him, I’ll bet keeping him down won’t be easy.”

Victoria is surprised that Sam knows so much about medical stuff and is a little embarrassed that he had to tell her what she already knew. At the same time, she is proud that someone who never saw him awake has already acknowledged her little brother’s tenaciousness.

Sam is fully aware that emotions sometimes cause even the most disciplined medical professionals to forget their training when family members are the patients. His simple prognosis is as much intended to reduce Victoria’s concerns as it is to acknowledge her fears.

As he walks from the kitchen to the main room, his movements reveal that Victoria’s attack left some painful insult to his body. Intentionally downplaying his concern for Austin’s health for the sake of Victoria’s anxiety, he nonchalantly checks the heating stove while asking her, “Have you checked his pulse lately?”

She plops into a chair: “Yeah, just a few minutes ago. It’s still pretty rapid, though his color looks better.”

“That’s good. The color coming back is a good sign, but the pulse concerns me just a little.” He pours himself a cup of coffee and wraps his hands around it to warm them. “He’s probably very dehydrated. His metabolism probably used all the water he had to warm him up. We need to get some liquids in him pretty soon. It’d be much easier on all of us, especially Austin, if he woke up in the next hour or so.” He holds his coffee cup up toward Victoria, gesturing if she would like some.

Victoria shakes her head, declining the offer. Impressed by his expansive medical knowledge, she asks, “Are you a doctor?”

“No, but I’ve got some medical training I used in my previous job.” Sam sees that he piqued some interest but doesn’t want to get into that discussion just yet, so he changes the topic. “We can talk about it over dinner. I’ll fix something to eat while you check on Austin. If you would, please check his responsiveness.”

“Okay. I’ll be back to help soon.” Victoria gets out of the chair and walks toward the bedroom.

Sam remembers what he brought in the second bundle, “Wait!” Victoria stops and turns toward Sam. He picks up one of the bundles and tosses it to her. “I grabbed some clothes for you and Austin while I was there. You should, at least, put a nightshirt on him before he wakes up. He’ll feel less vulnerable. Poor Austin has had too much trauma already.”

She catches the bundle. “Thanks.” She smiles at Sam. “That was thoughtful.”

Victoria goes into the bedroom and closes the door.

[When am I?]

Victoria has returned to the dining room and is seated at the kitchen end of the table. She is now wearing the clothes that Sam brought from the ranch. Sam has already started putting dinner on the table: biscuits, coffee cups, butter, salt and pepper shakers, and three dinner settings. To complete the meal, Sam delivers a hot bowl of stew to the table.

The flavorful aroma of the stew reminds Victoria that she hasn’t had anything to eat since yesterday. “Mmm. Smells good.” She hadn’t noticed how hungry she was until now.

Cooking is almost mandatory in the fire station, so Sam has plenty of experience making tasty meals. However, he is not used to the limited ingredients and a wood-fired stove, so he offers a disclaimer: “I’m not real good with stew, but I hope it’s good enough to fill the void.” He places the stew on a trivet on the table and sits down.

Victoria bows her head to pray. Sam sees her and follows her lead. “Lord, we thank thee for thy bounty that we receiveth. We ask that you look upon Austin and give him strength. We pray this in Jesus’s name. Amen.”

“Amen.” Sam is pleased that Victoria is a Christian. Since Sam is also Christian, it can provide a common reference when dealing with issues.

He starts dishing stew for Victoria. “I know that you have some reservations about my sanity. After today, I also question my sanity based on what I’ve witnessed and gone through. It would really help me out if you’d answer some questions for me. They may seem strange, but please humor me with accurate answers as best you can.”

Victoria senses that this is going to get weird. “Okayyy. I’ll try –?”

Sam starts his questions: “What is today?”

She slowly responds as if she were talking to a small child: “It’s Thursday.” She looks at him as if he is acting strange.

Not satisfied, Sam asks more precisely, “Okay, Thursday. But what’s the date? The whole date?”

Victoria obliges, “Thursday, the twenty-second of November.” Sam moves his hand in a circular motion to encourage her to continue. She finishes with what Sam was afraid of, “Eighteen hundred seventy-seven.”

Sam drops his head in exasperation. “Damn. I knew it.”

Victoria, as a lady, is offended by the casual swearing. She stares at Sam in retribution.

Looking up and seeing the stare, he realizes his error. “Oh, sorry.” Sam sits back in his chair, both relieved and confused. He is relieved because the evidence around him proves that he is at another time and that his sanity may still be intact, and he is confused about how he could be there now.

Sam sits back upright, determined to set things straight in his mind, and attempts to ‘set the stage’ for his current situation: “Let me know if I make an error here: Your full name is Victoria Elizabeth Creighton. You were born May, Twenty-second, eighteen sixty. You are engaged to Colin Fauntleroy Owens. Correct so far?”

A little concerned he would know so many details about her, she trails her response. “Well, Yess...”

Sam continues with a little more confidence. “Your brother is Austin Jeremiah Creighton, born on February Third, eighteen sixty-seven?”

Now that he is talking about her brother, Victoria is more concerned. She tries not to show it, but her defensive response belies the indifference she tries to project. “Of course, so?”

Sam, feeling like he is on a roll, continues, “And the Harmony Flats town marshal, who’s been under the control of Hank Wilson for the past fifteen years, is Pete McGinn.”

Victoria suggests that his detailed knowledge is general information. “Yes. So? Everybody knows that.”

Knowing that Victoria will not believe him, he is still obligated to tell her what he thinks has happened. He speaks deliberately to help convince her of his hypothesis: “I can’t explain how or why, and I know that what I am about to tell you will certainly not help my sanity case, but here it goes.”

Sam takes a sip of coffee to distract himself and reduce his nervousness. “My name is Sam Reynolds. I was hired by Robert Owens, from Prescott Memorial Pediatric Medical Research Center in Ohio, to look into some shady real estate deal about this property. He says that this land was falsely claimed by a large land interest, namely the Bar R Bar ranch.”

In a manner that makes his ‘unbelievable’ explanation seem dull, Victoria blankly states, “I don’t know a Robert Owens, but that’s not so hard to believe.”

He ponders, ‘So far, I haven’t crossed the line of no return yet, but I’m not sure how she will take this next part.’ Sam delves deeper into his hypothesis, distancing himself from current events using a third-party source. “This is the story I was told before coming here.”

Sam’s tone changes into a storytelling tone: “One hundred forty years ago, a band of outlaws murdered the family that owned this land and had fake deeds drawn up. Even though one family

member survived the attack and produced the real deeds to a district court, the outlaws also produced deeds and bills of sale. There was, supposedly, no way for the district judge to tell which deed was real and no way to verify the authenticity of the bills of sale. Because of that, the judge ordered the disputed land to be held in trust for up to one hundred fifty years. If not enough evidence were produced to prove either side was the lawful owner within that time, the land would be ceded to the state of California.”

Victoria interrupts, “My family got this land with a government grant. That couldn’t happen if there were a title dispute.”

Sam continues the story, ignoring Victoria’s statement: “The murders were never proven. The houses were burned for,” Sam puts up some ‘air’ quotes, “‘public health’ reasons, destroying any evidence. Years later, a diary turned up saying that the outlaws had paid a traveling doctor to falsely claim that the families died as a result of smallpox. That’s why the buildings were burned.”

Because smallpox is contagious and almost always fatal, Victoria takes this news seriously. “Small Pox? Here?”

Sam verifies, “Yep. Right here.”

Victoria starts to find holes in Sam’s story. She questions the date of one hundred forty years that Sam had said. “When? This land was all Indian territory just fifty years ago.”

Sam is about to go beyond the point of no return. He even finds this hard to believe, but the facts are irrefutable. “From what I’ve been told and have seen today, – This is the beginning of that story. It started yesterday with the murder of your family.”

In disbelief and irritated that Sam would think she was that gullible, she snaps at him, “What? Us? What do you mean? You’re saying you can tell the future? How could you know what’s going to happen?”

She replays Sam’s story in her mind, then realizes that Sam said only one person survived. She becomes scared and very concerned about Austin. “Wha, what about Austin?”

Her tone becomes quiet and direct. “You said only one person survived. Does that mean –”

Understanding that she now thinks she is being told that Austin will die, Sam backtracks slightly to explain the uncertainty of his story better. “No. I mean, I don’t know what it means. To me, it’s a one-hundred-forty-year-old story. It can and probably does have a lot of errors and omissions.”

Victoria still has a very concerned look on her face.

Trying to calm Victoria’s fears, without making a promise about Austin’s survival, he expands his explanation. “Look. Just two days ago, I arrived here expecting no one to be here. But a native American man named Wac ih a’ showed me around the property on horseback.”

Insulted that he is using unfamiliar terms again, Victoria mocks, “Native American?”

Recalling that PC wasn’t even considered back then, he changes the term, “Um, an Indian.”

Victoria sits back in her chair and crosses her arms; her contempt for the information is obvious.

Sam continues, “He showed me a lot of beautiful land, the power line easement —” Agitated at the continual use of unfamiliar terms, Victoria’s anger returns. She sits upright again to display her distrust of a story filled with made-up terms. Sam gestures to her to hold on. “— the boundary fences and three ranch sites with nothing left but foundations.”

Victoria’s posture relaxes a bit, and she starts to look confused.

“Wac ih a’ is the one I suspected of stealing my stuff. Anyway, when I got up yesterday morning, he was gone. All my stuff was gone, and even the horses we rode were gone. Everything that I had, everything that didn’t exist in 1877, wasn’t here.”

“When I went down to the ranch this afternoon, the fences and the power lines were gone, but where I saw just a foundation yesterday, there was a ranch house and a barn today. You can say I’m crazy; right now, I might even agree with you. I don’t even know how to explain what’s going on, how I ended up one hundred forty years in the past, or even where to start looking for answers.”

“What I do know is that I’m here — now. And that I’ll have to make the most of the situation. And even though I can’t explain how I got here, I swear to you that I do not want to harm you or your brother and that I do not work for the Wilsons.”

Victoria is finished listening to a crazy man who thinks he’s from the future. “Mister Reynolds, you are dead right.” Sam looks a little relieved and surprised. “I do think you’re crazy—crazy as a bat.” Sam is no longer relieved. “You think you can predict the future?” Victoria becomes increasingly agitated. How do I know that you are not working for Wilson and trying to trick me?”

Sam takes a deep breath before he responds. “You don’t. I have no proof of anything I just told you. I also don’t expect you to think I can predict the future. The most unbelievable part, even to me, is that I don’t predict the future,” He pauses, “I’m from the future. 2017, to be exact. To me, everything I just told you is one hundred forty years in the past.”

There is no way Victoria can believe his fantastical story. Teasingly, she mocks him, “Well, future man.” Unprovoked, Victoria kicks him under the table.

He jumps when he gets kicked. “Ouch! What the heck was that for?”

Victoria’s tone is very argumentative, “Why didn’t you know I was going to do that? Huh? You think I’m some kind of idiot?”

Sam is still trying to convince Victoria about his time displacement. “I don’t know everything that’s going to happen. In fact, I don’t know anything that is going to happen. I can only relate to what I read when researching this case before coming here.” He tries to downplay the single survivor information. “And a lot of that is probably wrong. Especially about Austin.”

Victoria is unconvinced. “So far, you could be just making stuff up. Tell me something you can’t make up.”

He thinks briefly, then speaks sincerely, “I don’t know I can. I learned you go to Ohio and become a nurse at your husband’s hospital.” He reaches into his pocket and pulls out the letter he found in the loft. “Here,” he hands her the letter. “Here is the letter I found at the ranch.”

She glances at the letter. “That doesn’t prove anything . . . except that you read other people’s mail.”

“True, but I know you leave next Tuesday and arrive in Ohio on Saturday, where you meet your husband-to-be, Dr. Colin Owens, at the train station.”

Victoria tilts her head slightly to indicate that Sam just got caught in a lie. She demands, “I arrive on Friday!”

Sam corrects her, “No. You’re supposed to arrive on Friday, but your train will be a day late due to the snow.”

Victoria is fully adversarial. She is angry that this madman is trying to get her to believe something impossible; she is worried that he might be telling the truth, with all of the details correct, including what happens to Austin. As her confusion and frustration increase, so does her voice. Victoria is almost yelling, “Nothing you’ve said can be proven. There’s no reason for me to believe you.”

Sam sits back in his chair. “I don’t know how to convince you.” He pauses to reflect on his words and the implications of telling her too much. “Or even if I should try. There’s stuff I’m sure I shouldn’t tell you.”

“Like what?” Victoria retorts.

Sam quickly thinks of a couple of examples. “Like if you have any kids or the date of your death. Maybe all that changes because I’m here now. I don’t know. I just don’t.”

Victoria begins to believe that Sam *thinks* he is telling the truth; however, she still is unconvinced he can be from the future. “Well, I don’t believe you about being from the future. That’s just absurd. But I can trust you about not wanting to hurt us. You’ve had plenty of chances to do that already.”

She takes a big breath, holds it for a second, and then lets it out. “I don’t know what to do with you. You saved our lives. I can’t just throw you out in the snow, but at the same time, I can’t have you messing up our lives either.”

Sam feels slighted that his predicament of being thrust into 1877 is being ignored. Letting her know that this time displacement is not a one-sided deal and has significant consequences for him, he tells her, “Don’t for a moment think that this doesn’t mess with me, too. I have a wife and friends that I will likely never see again. I have no idea how I got here, if I can return to my own time, or if I’m stuck here forever. I don’t know if it matters whether you believe me about *when* I’m from or not. I just know that I’m here now. So, if you want my help, just let me know. I’ll be happy to do whatever I can. If not, I’ll leave the first chance after the weather clears.”

Victoria takes a couple of seconds to consider her options, weighing their need for safety against the fact that Sam seems to be considerate of their best interests and that he can help care for Austin. As far as she knows, he hasn’t attempted to locate a deed or money. He hasn’t done anything to suggest

that he is in any way a threat to them. “Okay, you can stay here for a few days, then we’ll see how things are. But if you start acting crazy, I’ll have no choice but to send you on your way.”

Sam begins to get up from his chair. “I can live with that. I’ll move my stuff to the middle room.”

A couple of weak coughs emanate from the front bedroom. Then Austin calls out in a raspy voice. “Victoria? – Victoria!”

Sam and Victoria both get up and rush into the room. Sam stays at the door so as not to startle Austin too much.

Victoria goes to the head of the bed and holds Austin’s hand. “I’m here, Squirrel. I’m right here.”

Austin sees Sam, then looks only at Victoria. He speaks weakly, “I had a terrible dream. I dreamt that something happened to Mom and Dad and that we had to run away. It was real cold and –”. Sensing that something is different, he stops in mid-sentence. “And –” He realizes that he is not in his bed at the ranch; however, it is very familiar. “Where are we?”

Victoria’s motherly voice reassures him, “We’re at Ren’s cabin.” She points at Sam in the doorway. “And this is Sam.”

Austin looks at Sam, and Sam smiles warmly. He looks back at Victoria, ignoring Sam as if Sam was intruding.

Victoria sees that Austin is confused about the situation, so she adds, “He lives here.”

Sam greets him using his least aggressive tone, “Hi, Austin. You had us scared for a while.”

Austin ignores Sam, looking only at Victoria. “Where’s mom and dad?” Austin’s voice becomes harsh. “Why is he still here?”

Obviously, Austin is uncomfortable and distrustful of Sam. So Sam excuses himself to keep Austin from getting more upset: “Victoria. Make sure you get some water in him. Like I said before, he’ll be very dehydrated by now. I’ll leave you two to talk for a while. I’ll just be in the other room.”

Victoria nods as she picks up the water cup. Sam steps out of the room and closes the door partway.

As Sam walks to the table, he overhears Victoria explaining more about their situation. “Austin, you really shouldn’t be so mean to him. He saved your life – and mine, too.”

Sam is sitting at the table, sipping his coffee, planning various courses of action for the myriad of situations he can imagine they will face. The voices heard from the bedroom form indistinguishable sentences.

The shutters on the back and front windows are partially open to watch for Hank’s men. Sam looks across the room and out the front window. The snow still falls heavily; no one would travel in such conditions. He feels that they will be safe at least until tomorrow morning.

The voices coming from the bedroom have transitioned into crying.

Sam feels he is starting to empathize with Victoria and Austin, clouding his thoughts and making him less alert. Hank can; no Hank will send his men here, so Sam designates himself as the person who must keep a clear head and avoid unnecessary emotions. He gets up and starts clearing the table to get his mind off the conversation in the bedroom. He'll do the dishes and begin preparing a light meal for Austin.

[Not Guilty]

About a half hour later, Sam is sitting at the table, cleared of everything except two mugs. His pensive stare out the window reflects his concern about the future of the kids and himself. Victoria comes in from the bedroom. The bedroom and house are again quiet.

As Victoria approaches the table, Sam quietly asks, "How is he?"

Victoria sits at the table where Sam placed her coffee cup; her red, puffy eyes reveal her and her brother's deep sorrow. She speaks softly to keep her voice from reaching Austin, "He's doing better. He's taking it pretty hard, though." She sips from the cup. "He blames himself for the whole thing. I don't know where he gets it, but he's always taken on the responsibilities of the world. He makes friends with everybody, and whatever problems his friends have, they become Austin's problems, too."

Victoria takes a break from the conversation, losing herself in thought; the room becomes silent.

She can't help but explain more about Austin and breaks the awkward silence. "He's been teaching English to a Chinese prostitute, who he calls Dragon Fly, while learning Chinese from her."

Sam is surprised that she uses the term prostitute casually and that Austin is even allowed to talk to someone in her line of work.

Victoria continues, "He's been learning the Miwok Indian language from his half-breed Indian friend Falling Leaf. He plays a treasure-hiding game with his friend, Paul, from the livery. He befriends almost everybody, especially those that most people ignore or disparage. He knows the printer, the rail station manager, the bartenders, the blacksmith, and nearly everybody else. The only people he doesn't like are from Wilson's ranch, the Bar R Bar."

She takes a break and looks out the window, watching the snowfall. Then she continues apologetically, "I was surprised by how mean Austin was toward you. He never acts like that. After I told him what you did, he said he was sorry for being rude and just got scared and mad when he saw you again. He doesn't know why."

Sam is confused: "Again? I never met him before last night."

Victoria explains, "He said he saw you here last night before Hank's men came to the house. He doesn't remember a lot about the attack. He's scared and confused."

Now Sam knows whose footprints he saw that night: "I never saw him, but the footprints I saw in the snow last evening must have been his. I'm sure that the trauma of last night has a lot to do with his

anger and distrust. What I saw in the ranch house tells a story that would scare and confuse anyone. He must have been terrified.”

Austin’s drive for survival is the only way a kid his size could do so much damage to those bastards. Because Victoria is a nurse, he has no reason to filter the condition of the two culprits he found at the ranch. One had a depressed skull fracture, and the other had a cut across his groin, probably lacerated the femoral artery.”

She looks down at the coffee cup to avoid eye contact as she admits that her brother is a killer, “So you think Austin’s upset about killing those men?”

“I’m sure he’s traumatized; who wouldn’t be? But – ” Sam is interrupted.

Victoria blurts out, in defense of Austin, “They were going to rape and kill us!” Victoria starts crying.

“Hold on. I know. I know.” Sam pauses while collecting his thoughts. “I saw the ropes in the bedroom and can guess the kitchen situation.” He puts his hand on her shoulder. “You don’t have to defend him or his actions. He could have done much more to them, and I wouldn’t think it was enough.”

He removes his hand from her shoulder. “What I was going to say is that what killed them was a bullet to the head. They may have eventually died from the other injuries, but there was no surviving the headshots.”

Still defending Austin, she counters, “He hit one with the frying pan and cut the other, but he didn’t shoot those bastards!”

Sam recalls Austin’s scorching stare. He saw not malice but anger, fear, and uncertainty in Austin. “Austin doesn’t seem the type to go around shooting people in the head. I guess that the two men I saw in the window last night shot the two that attacked you. You” – correcting himself – “I mean, we won’t have to worry about those two anymore. But I’m pretty sure we’re not out of trouble yet. I expect they’ll return to find us tomorrow when this storm lets up.”

“They don’t know we’re alive.” Victoria tries to downplay their chances of a re-encounter, “And they don’t know you’re here. We can hide out here until we catch the train next week. With as much snow as we’ve had, it’ll be a few days before they can come back around.”

Sam has learned to accept and rely on local knowledge whenever he can. In this case, Victoria’s estimation of how long it will be before Hank’s men return extends the timeline he guessed when imagining possible situations.

He also wants to let Victoria know that he expects them to return and plans to be ready for them: “Of course, we’ll do our best to keep a low profile; however, from everything I read, Wilson will ensure that there are no loose ends. They will come looking for you. They won’t have any qualms about killing a stranger (pointing to himself), especially if they think I may have seen anything or know what they’ve done. We’re going to need to make some plans for their return.”

“I know that what I’m going to say will meet with some resistance, but after careful thought, I believe it is something we must do,” Sam says. “We have to meet with the district judge before you leave. You must present your case, or this whole valley goes to Wilson.”

Making her priorities known, Victoria disagrees, “I don’t even care anymore. I just want to take Austin and get out of here.”

“Of course, your brother and your safety are our top priorities.” Sam doesn’t want her to think he’s being reckless, “At the same time, it would be wrong to have your parents die for nothing. And we both know, until Wilson is sure you and your brother are dead, the Bar R Bar will be watching every route out of here. He may even track us down after we leave.”

The truth of the situation builds fury within her. Her anger indirectly indicts Sam for making her realize their danger. “I know –, I know – I know –, damn it! I know. I feel like no scenario has Austin and me leaving alive.”

Looking for possible solutions to ensure their safety, Sam suggests, “Maybe the district judge will be able to help. If the judge rules in your favor, Wilson will be imprisoned for fraud. Once he’s in jail and can’t retaliate against the townsfolk, we could get him convicted of the murders as well. I read that the townsfolk won’t even consider convicting him if he’s free. I’m sure that’ll change if he’s behind bars.”

“That means an extra trip to town.” Victoria is correct in her belief that too much exposure is dangerous. “I don’t like it.”

She sees Sam with a determined look and knows he is right about seeing the judge, but it needs to happen without extra trips to town. Victoria thinks about it for a bit before offering a solution. “There’s no reason we can’t see the judge on Monday, the day before Austin and I leave for Ohio. We’ll need to be in town that night anyway.”

“That would be a great solution,” Sam admits, “but it will be too late. Our research showed that Wilson set a special court date on Sunday. I’m not sure how he managed that, but it’s clear that he didn’t want anyone who could contest his claim to attend .”

“‘Our’ research?” questions Victoria.

“My wife and I.” Sam clarifies, “She’s a real estate lawyer. She did a lot of digging to get this information. We should be grateful for all her hard work.”

“Oh, sorry. I forgot.” She quips sarcastically, “You’re from the future.”

Sam gets weary of the continual confrontation while doing his best to help. “That’s not helping.”

“Okay.” She makes it clear that the future-man issue is not resolved. “I’ll drop it—for now.”

“About this hearing, since Wilson will be there, he’ll find out you’re still alive. I’m concerned that Wilson will try something when we return to the cabin on Sunday. I don’t know how I’ll keep you safe after that. Do you have any ideas?”

Victoria informs Sam, "Austin can tell us how to get in and out of town without being seen. He does it all the time. We should be safe in town during the day, but the nights concern me greatly! And, on Sunday, he'll know we'll need to return to the cabin because we know he's bound to get to us if we stay in town for two days straight. Our return here after going to town is an opportunity he'll certainly not want to miss."

"I don't have enough information about this area and the people to develop a trustworthy plan," Sam confides. "When Austin wakes up again, we will see how he is progressing. We can then decide how best to do this. He may have ideas that can help."

[The Elephant]

Victoria is noticeably uneasy and asks, "Sam?"

"Yeah?" He knew this next question would surface but wasn't looking forward to it.

"I –" Victoria pauses as she composes herself. "I've been afraid to bring this up because I'm afraid I know the answer. What happened to my Uncles and Aunt Gwen?"

"I'm sorry." Sam pauses to let her take in the meaning. Victoria's eyes begin to well up. "When I got the supplies, I checked on the other two ranches. The others were murdered last night, too."

A couple of tears make their way down her cheeks. She has about reached her limit regarding how much crying she can do in a day. The few tears she produces in no way reflect her immense sorrow.

Almost apologetically, Sam continues, "With all that's been happening, I couldn't find the right time to tell you." Sam gives her some time to grieve. They sit in silence for a few minutes.

Sam quietly tells her, "Wilson hired a doctor to say that you all died due to smallpox. That way, they can get rid of all the evidence of the murders without suspicion. They will burn the ranches the first chance they get. I'll have to move the bodies before that so that we can give them a proper burial."

Wednesday, Nov 22 2017

[Government Visit]

Trish is in her office, sitting at the desk, working on the main computer. Trish's office is large and well-organized. Her expansive, solid wood desk is high-class executive style and tidy, with three comfortable, stuffed guest chairs in front and a high-back office chair for Trish. The desk has three computers. One computer is for law reference, one is for general reference, and the main computer, which has two screens, is for documents and communications. Several file cabinets, a full-wall bookshelf, and three tables match the desk. Each table is for a different case. The case files are neatly placed on each table for easy access. Trish uses the tables for her pressing, active cases. There are signs above each table with the case names Weber vs. CA, Simons vs. Simons, and Creighton vs. Bar R Bar.

The desk phone rings. Trish answers it.

The voice over the phone: "Mrs. Reynolds, Mr. Philips from Special Services is here to see you. He states it has to do with the Creighton case."

Trish, into the phone, “Sure, show him in.”

The door opens, and a man in a black suit enters, carrying a briefcase. His tie pin resembles the amulet worn by Wac ih a’. Trish greets him halfway to her desk.

Roger extends his hand. “Mrs. Reynolds. I’m Roger Philips from Special Services, specifically witness protection.” He shows her a gold badge with Special Services across the top and Supervisor across the bottom. He also has a Special Services ID card with his picture on a lanyard around his neck.

Roger puts his briefcase on the desk, opens it, and takes out a thick file folder. The folder is labeled ‘R, Aj. #17-099a-01 Sensitive’.

Trish is surprised by both the name of the governmental office from which he came and the division of witness protection. She says quietly to herself, ‘Special Services? This case just got a lot more interesting.’

Roger hands her the folder. “I suggest you read through this a couple of times. It’ll make more sense if you give it some time. I understand that this person will help with what you’ve been looking for.” Pointing out the word sensitive on the folder. “As you see, this is considered sensitive. You may want to limit the number of people with whom you share this information. You will find everything in here is up to date.”

Trish received the heavy folder: “I’ll look through this tonight. Thank you very much.”

Roger stands upright like a soldier. “My pleasure, ma’am.”

Trish indicates one of the chairs in front of her desk and offers him a seat. “Have a seat. Can I get you something? Coffee?”

Roger, still standing straight up, “No thank you, ma’am. I have to be going. Good luck!” He shakes her hand, turns, and leaves.

Trish starts looking through the folder and gets a confused look on her face after reading a little bit. She thinks to herself, ‘Special Services? Which Special Services? What branch of government? Is it governmental?’ She then quickly scans the file, looking for a business card. Finding none, she goes to the office phone and presses a button.

A voice on the phone: “Yes, Mrs Reynolds.”

Trish asks, “Shelly, is the guy from special services still there? If not, did he leave a business card?”

Shelly, “No, ma’am. He left right away and didn’t leave a card. Sorry.”

Trish disappointedly responds, “That’s fine. Thank you.”

Trish hangs up the phone and returns to her seat behind the desk. She removes the stack of documents from the folder and starts to read them carefully.

[Help arrives]

CJ and Tylor drive up in their snow-track-equipped UTV. They are dressed in winter riding gear, including heated riding suits, gloves, and helmets with communications.

CJ speaks with Tylor over the helmet comms, "This must be it."

Tylor: "Yeah. Looks pretty good. A lot better than I thought it would."

They take off their helmets and switch off the comms power as they approach the door. Walking, they remove their gloves and start shaking off snow from their riding suits, which the UTV tracks kicked up.

Tylor, brushing snow from his shoulders, tells CJ, "I saw some smoke from the chimney as we rode up."

CJ kicks snow from his boots, "Knowing Uncle Sam, it'll be pretty toasty inside."

The boys step onto the porch.

[Humbling First Impression]

Sam and Victoria are seated at the table, continuing their conversation about her uncles and aunt.

"Um..." Sam pauses but then continues uncomfortably. "I don't mean to be nosy or disrespectful. Did your uncle have someone living with him? A male?"

"No!" She becomes very defensive. "What are you insinuating?"

Sam, defensively, "I'm not insinuating anything or making judgments of any kind. It's just that there's one extra body that I can't account for. Since he's not supposed to be there, one of 'em must be from Wilson's crew, just like the two in your ranch. I'm sorry, but you'll have to tell me which one to bury. I don't want to make a mistake."

Taking a deep breath, Victoria calms herself down. "Okay, Okay, I'm sorry for getting angry. With this weather, we only have a few more hours of light before —"

She doesn't finish her sentence before the door bursts open; snow, wind, and two naked teenage boys come flying through the door. Victoria instinctively rushes toward the bedroom to protect Austin. The boys fly into the room as if pushed, rolling, and tumbling onto the floor. They are CJ and Tylor. They get up while Sam rushes, rifle in hand, to close the door. Sam looks out the door before closing and latching it.

When the boys are getting up, they see that they are naked and that not only Sam is there, but a girl they don't know. They try their best to cover themselves and turn away from Victoria. She chuckles at the embarrassing site.

Sam points her to the bedroom. "Victoria, could you throw some blankets out here?"

Victoria retreats to the bedroom to get the blankets.

Tylor, confused and embarrassed, “What happened? We were just outside, and then this.”

A blanket comes flying out the door, then another. Sam gets the blankets and hands them to the boys while talking. When they are wrapped up, they turn around to face him.

CJ defends their appearance as if they were being accused of being naked on purpose. “What the – I swear we didn’t come up here naked.”

“I believe you.” Sam laughs a little at the embarrassed boys. “Who would come up here in the snow without any clothes?”

Sam motions them toward the table. Tylor, attempting to discover the cause of their embarrassing entrance, goes to the door and opens it just enough to see outside. Seeing nothing of interest, he closes it. They continue talking as they move to the table. The three of them, standing, congregate at one end of the table.

Tylor tries to explain his side of the story, “It wasn’t snowing just a couple of seconds ago. It didn’t even snow the whole trip.”

Understanding what may have just happened, Sam continues to tease them. “So you planned this? Thinking I was the only one here, you thought bursting into the cabin would be funny?” After thinking about it, Sam confesses, “Actually, that might have been pretty funny if I had been the only other person here.”

Sam calls to Victoria, who is still in the bedroom. “They’re covered up now.”

Tylor adamantly denies planning to burst into the cabin naked. “No. Really, we didn’t!”

Victoria comes out of the bedroom and returns to the table. The boys step behind Sam.

Victoria tilts her head accusingly, “Sam. Do you know these boys?”

Sam explains, “These are my nephews. They were supposed to meet me here, and, to my knowledge, they usually don’t run naked in the snow.”

The boys hang their heads in embarrassment.

Sam seizes an opportunity to show that he is from the future; he asks Tylor, “What is today?”

Tylor responds confidently, “It’s Wednesday, November twenty-second. That’s when you said to come up. Right?”

Sam, now addressing CJ, “Year?”

CJ can’t see the reason for the questions, especially stupid questions like the year: “Duh, two thousand seventeen.”

Immediately after saying it, CJ knew he was rude. Tylor is embarrassed by the rude answer and gazes at him, surprised by the comment. Sam gives CJ a stern look.

CJ looks at the floor apologetically. "Sorry for my disrespectfulness." He then revises his answer, "Two thousand seventeen, sir."

Sam, although not completely satisfied by the apology, continues his questioning. "Okay. And when was the last time we saw each other?"

CJ speaks in a formal and respectful tone: "Before Thanksgiving. It was Sunday morning, sir, before you came here a week ago."

Sam looks at Victoria to validate his claim of being from the future. "Thank you, CJ. You can drop the sir. But I expect you and your brother to respect our host and her home properly."

CJ respectfully responds, "Yes, sir." Realizing that he forgot to drop the sir, "I mean, I understand."

Sam tells the boys, "There is a boy in the other room. His name is Austin. He's not feeling well right now, so let's keep it down." Sam directs his attention to Victoria. "Please introduce yourselves to the owner of this cabin, Victoria."

The boys carefully position themselves near Victoria, ensuring they don't expose themselves again.

CJ carefully extends his hand, "I'm very sorry about our entrance. I'm Sam's nephew from El Dorado Hills, CJ Davis, sixteen. It's a pleasure to meet you, ma'am."

CJ Gently takes her hand and makes a slight bow before releasing it.

As CJ steps back, Tylor steps forward. "I'd like to apologize for our entry as well. I'm Tylor Davis, fourteen, from El Dorado Hills, Sam's favorite nephew." Tylor smiles at Sam for approval. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, ma'am."

Tylor Gently takes her hand, makes a slight bow, and releases her.

"Gentlemen, I am Victoria Creighton, Nurse. And as already mentioned, Austin Creighton, ten, is resting in the other room."

Due to the calamity of their entrance and the impossibility of Austin and Victoria being from one hundred forty years ago, the boys do not immediately recognize the names as those in the report.

Sam, addressing the boys. "I'm both happy and horrified to see you." The boys get a quizzical look on their faces. Sam has always greeted the boys with open, loving arms. 'Horrified' to see them is not what they expected to hear. "I'll have to explain later."

Tylor recognizes the name but fails to understand that he is the same Austin in the report. He whispers to Sam, "Austin Creighton? Must be a popular name in the family."

Sam nods yes, then diverts the conversation to delay the time discussion. “There’s a bundle of clothes in there.” He points to the bedroom. “Austin isn’t well, so very quietly find something to wear and then come back out to the table.”

Tylor points toward the front door, “But our –” Sam looks sternly at him. Tylor then remembers that the UTV wasn’t there when he looked earlier. “Yes, sir.”

The boys leave to find some clothes.

Victoria confidentially addresses Sam so she is not overheard. “Very well-mannered young men. Where did they come from?”

“The same place I did.” Victoria gives him a look of ‘Not that again.’ “Looks like a lot more explaining ahead.” Sam continues uncomfortably, “Not sure how they’ll take it.”

Victoria goes to the front window and looks out. “How did they get here? There are no tracks, no horses.”

Sam is unhappy that Victoria doesn’t even try to believe that he is from the future, “Victoria, as I said before. I have no idea how I got here, so I have no idea how they got here, either. I love them very much, so I’m happy to see them. At the same time, this– this is not where they belong. I’d rather that they stayed in their right time than to see them here.” His voice shows his agitation. “I’m so angry and frustrated I don’t know whether to scream or cry. But the bottom line is that neither will help.”

She sees Sam's frustration and does her best to console him. “I’m sorry, Sam. I truly am. I don’t know what to say.”

Tylor comes out of the bedroom dressed very much like Sam.

Looking at his bare feet, Tylor says, “Uncle Sam, nothing fits CJ, and I don’t have any shoes.”

Sam nods his head in acknowledgment of the information. “Okay, Tylor. Come here.”

Tylor walks over to Sam. Sam stretches out his arms, and Tylor walks right in. They have a long embrace. Tylor senses trouble and that his uncle has had a rough time. After the embrace, Tylor steps back.

Tylor senses an emotional need from Sam. “You okay?”

Sam smiles at Tylor, knowing that he can accurately sense the situation. “I’m just a little emotional, I guess. It’s good to see you.”

CJ walks out, still wrapped in the blanket. His tone is informational, not complaining, “There’s nothing my size. Is there somewhere else for me to look? By the way, I’m sorry, but Austin woke up. He wants some water. Can I get him some?”

Sam is pleased to hear that Austin has woken up again and is thirsty. “By all means, he can have as much water as he wants, but only in small sips. We don’t want him choking. I’ll work on getting you some clothes.”

CJ is unfazed by his immediate lack of clothing and begins to take the role of caregiver for Austin. “Okay. Where’s the fridge?”

Shuffling in his blanket, CJ passes by Sam as he walks toward the kitchen. Sam grabs him and gives him a big hug. CJ, carefully keeping the blanket wrapped, returns the hug.

Sam tells him plainly, “No fridge. Get the water from the pump in the kitchen.”

CJ is used to ‘primitive’ accommodation from his many sailing and camping trips. “Cool. Haven’t used one of those in a while.” CJ shuffles over to the pump and fills the cup. He then shuffles back to the table and puts the cup down.

Victoria glances out the window, “The snow seems to have slowed for a bit, but we don’t have much time left for light.”

Wording it like a suggestion and responding to Victoria’s concern, Sam informs everyone what will happen. “Right. Okay. How’s this for a plan? Tylor will go with Victoria and me to handle the chores. CJ can stay here with Austin.” He looks at Victoria to give her confidence about Austin’s care. “CJ has had some medical training and is good with kids. He’ll take good care of him.”

Tylor is surprised by the flurry of activity and complains in his most-mannered tone. “We just got here.”

Victoria, covertly, is quick to point out a possible snag in Sam’s plan. “The extra pair of hands will be a big help, but it’s not an easy chore.” Signaling to Sam that it may be inappropriate for Tylor to have to deal with dead bodies and murder scenes.

Sam gets the jist of Victoria’s comment but seems to feel he can make it work without negatively affecting Tylor. “You’re not wrong. It’ll be tough on him, but it won’t be too much.”

Tylor resigns himself to the fact that he is going out again, and whatever the chore is, it won’t be easy.

Victoria informs the group, “I know where we might find something to fit CJ during our trip.”

Tylor looks at his feet, addressing Sam in a tone that suggests Sam forgot about his lack of footwear. “Um, I can’t ride the UTV without shoes.”

Sam knows that Tylor has no idea what is going on, but he would like Tylor to stop finding reasons for not going out. His voice becomes noticeably stern, “There is no UTV. We’re riding horses.” Tylor looks surprised. “You can wear these.” Sam takes off his boots. “I’ll just get some boots at our first stop. And, by the way, no more talk of UTVs.”

Tylor is taken slightly aback and wonders why the UTVs are gone and out of the vocabulary list, but he knows now is not the time to question it. “Oh. Okay. So, where are we going?”

In a no-nonsense manner, with a slight nod to indicate the mission's importance, he states, "We are going to visit some ranches. I'll explain more on the way."

"Oh." Tylor looks at the floor. He understands that the timing is unsuitable for asking more questions and knows he will find out more when needed. "Okay."

Victoria walks toward the back door. "I'll start getting the horses ready." She stops to face Tylor. "Tylor, when you get your boots on, come on out and help me, please."

Tylor is not too confident in his ability to help with the horses but knows better than to complain about it, especially in the current atmosphere. "Yes, ma'am. I'll be right out."

Sam hands the boots to Tylor. Tylor puts on the boots and a jacket Sam pointed to, then goes out the back door.

Sam speaks to CJ in a low tone to keep Austin from hearing, "Make sure you keep Austin from getting too excited. He's recovering from extreme hypothermia."

Sam pulls CJ closer to him and speaks in a whisper. "There shouldn't be anyone here but us. When we come back, we will be coming from that road," Sam points through the front door to the road the boys came in on. "And we'll have six horses and a couple of wagons. I'll be in the front." Sam takes the rifle from the table and goes to the front window. He motions CJ to follow.

At the front window, Sam points to a location on the road. "See that stump out there?"

With Sam holding the rifle and being secretive, CJ worries that something terrible will happen. He answers hesitantly, "Umm – Yeah."

Sam carefully instructs CJ: "When we return, we'll stop and holler at you." CJ nods in understanding. Just open and close the door once, and we'll come on in. If there is any trouble in here, open the door and wave us in, keep the door closed, open it twice, or give any other signal."

CJ is still trying to understand why the code and security are needed but figures Sam must have a reason. "Okay?"

Sam continues, "We'll take those other signals to mean that you need help and someone is in here that shouldn't be. We'll take appropriate action to keep you safe." CJ nods in understanding, but he is feeling scared.

Sam cycles the rifle action to chamber a round and carefully lowers the hammer. He then looks CJ in the eyes. Sam's tone changes from instructional to deadly serious. "If anyone else comes up here and doesn't stop there or if they come up from the back, shoot them."

"What?" CJ can't believe what he just heard. He raises his voice in objection and disbelief at the order as he steps back, trying to hand the rifle back to Sam. Sam rejects the rifle and holds up his finger in front of his mouth to make CJ quiet down. Looking at the rifle, he objects in an excited but hushed tone. "I can't just shoot people for nothing!"

Whispering emphatically, Sam takes CJ's face between his hands and keeps CJ looking into his eyes. "Keep it down. Don't upset Austin. And it's not for nothing." Sam releases CJ's face but recaptures CJ by the shoulders. In as much of a calming tone as Sam can muster, he tells him, "I don't have time to explain it all. Here's the short version. There are some men out there that want to kill Austin and Victoria. They won't have any problems killing you, too. There's absolutely no reason for anyone else to be here in this weather except to kill us."

Sam releases CJ.

CJ is scared and uncomfortable with shouldering that much responsibility. He tries to put the responsibility of security and safety back on Sam. "Shouldn't you stay and protect him then?"

Trying to calm CJ down and let him know that this is just a precautionary step for an improbable event, Sam explains, "If Austin wasn't so sick, and you had clothes, we'd all go. Because of this storm, I don't expect the men I'm talking about to return for a few days, so this is the safest time to leave you two by yourselves. When I get back, I'll give you and Tylor the full rundown. Trust me, I am just being *way overcautious*. The chance of them coming today is like one in a million; however, I'd be wrong not to have you ready to protect yourself. Okay?"

CJ is somewhat relieved about the odds but still quite nervous. "Okay. You know, you're scarin' me pretty good."

Sam is now standing in the back doorway. The horses can be heard behind him. "I know, and I'm sorry. I wouldn't ask this if I had another choice. And don't be scared; just stay alert. I expect you to have a tranquil and uneventful day. Love you." Sam turns and heads out the door.

Before the door closes, CJ calls out to Sam, "Love you, too." CJ knows Sam would not intentionally put him in harm's way, but he looks worried.

Austin calls from the bedroom, "CJ?"

The discussion with Sam made him forget about his mission for Austin. "Oh, Right." CJ calls back to Austin, "Coming, Austin."

CJ grabs the cup of water, stops, and then looks at the rifle he is carrying. He puts down the water and carefully and skillfully checks to ensure the rifle is loaded and a round chambered. Satisfied, he picks up the cup and heads back to the bedroom with the cup and the rifle.

[Moving the Family]

Tylor, Sam, and Victoria are on horseback. Snow is lightly falling, and the wind has subsided. The three riders cross the creek and head into the meadow, heading to Victoria's ranch first. The riders are single-file, Victoria leading, Tylor in the middle, and Sam at the back. Sam is wearing only socks on his feet. All of the riders are silent and deep in thought.

Victoria is afraid that returning to the ranch will open the emotional wounds of last night's attack. She is not sure how she will handle it.

Sam has many thought vectors he is trying to wrangle. How can he help Tylor maintain some degree of youthful innocence when tasked with moving dead bodies? How does he tell the boys about the time travel? Knowing Hank's men will come for them, what preparations can they make to assure their safety? What will Austin's reaction be if he finds out that he and the boys are from the future? What impact will they have, if any, on Victoria's and Austin's future? Will he and the boys be stuck there forever?

Tylor's senses tell him that trouble surrounds them. He also senses that the report and his current circumstances intersect somehow. He knows that Austin will become his lifelong friend without knowing why; he also senses an emotional connection to this area. Above and beyond those feelings, there is a sense of deep sorrow, anguish, and hate. Never has he felt the pain of sorrow so strongly. Unexpectedly, tears begin to stream down his face. The tears are short-lived as an ominous feeling of danger overrides the sorrow.

Sam breaks the silence. "Tylor. Did you read the report we received about this place?"

"Yes. It was really tragic ." Tylor gets a shiver up his spine. He feels this might be the same Austin from the report but knows that's not possible. "I suppose that Austin is like the great-great-grandson of the one in the report."

Victoria looks back at Sam. Each tries to figure out how to break the news to Tylor when the first ranch house comes into view, providing a reprieve from the inevitable difficult conversation.

Tylor sees the first destination. "Is that one of the ranches? I can't believe it is still standing. I thought it was burned down."

Sam subtly hints at where they are in time: "It will be. That's why we have to go there now."

Not having the whole story, Tylor is confused. His senses and his logic conflict: "I don't get it. Why are we going to burn it down?"

"We aren't. Wilson's men plan on doing it to hide their crimes." Sam throws out another clue, hoping Tylor will figure it out on his own. "Times are a lot different than what you think. I'll get into the details later, but you'll have to trust me for now."

"Okay." Tylor agrees. "But trust you about what?"

Sam searches for the best explanation. "What we are going to do is going to seem wrong, but when I finally get to discuss it with you and CJ, you'll see that what we are doing is right."

Timidly, Tylor tries to ask a very delicate, profound question: "Uncle Sam, you know I trust you, but are we going to go to jail?"

Both Sam and Victoria laugh a little. They see the irony in Tylor's faith in Sam and the uncertainty of the legality of the task.

"No. Not for this," Sam claims. In Tylor's mind, Sam leaves the question unanswered.

He's not entirely confident about doing something unlawful, but Tylor is relieved that he will not get arrested tonight. "What, exactly, are we going to do?"

"We need to get some supplies." Sam lets Tylor decipher his response, hoping it will be less impactful. "We also need to save whatever Victoria wants to keep from getting burned and move her parents, aunt, and uncles to a proper burial area."

"Oh." It takes a second for Tylor to figure out what he means. Aghast, he sputters, "We're moving dead people?" He is visibly troubled. "I don't know if I can do that. I haven't even seen a dead person before."

Trying to calm Tylor down, Sam reassures him, "I'll make it as easy on you as possible, but I will need some help. It's too much for Victoria to deal with right now. I hope you can understand. It'll be tough, but we can do it."

Tylor still hasn't convinced himself that he can do it, but he trusts Sam to make it possible. "Okay. I'll do my best." Tylor is starting to see the parallels between the report, the people he has met, and the context in which he now finds himself. He now knows why he can sense the deep sorrow he's never felt. "I do understand. I'll try. Victoria, I don't know what to say except I'm sorry you lost your loved ones."

Victoria turns to Tylor, "Tylor. I know we are asking a lot from you. I want to ..." Her voice starts to break. "... thank you. It means so much to me."

Tylor responds in a tone reflective of duty. "Ma'am. If my uncle says we should do something, then I'm sure we should. And I will do my best to help. I'm sorry for complaining."

Sam reminds Victoria about protection, "Victoria, we need also to get whatever we can to help with any visitors we may have soon. As much as we can get."

Victoria has no problem reading between the lines: "I'll make sure we get what we need."

As they approach the barn, Sam uses signals from their paintball games to gesture to Tylor to keep an eye out and look for tracks. He points to his eyes and then to the ground in a sweeping motion. Tylor nods in acknowledgment.

They reach the barn quietly with no sign of visitors.

Hushed, Sam tells Tylor, "Tylor, you help Victoria with the wagon, and I'll get things ready in the house."

Hushed, Tylor asks, "Okay. Why are we being so quiet? The horses and wagon will make much more noise than us talking."

Feeling silly, Sam nods in acknowledgment. He now speaks regularly. "Habit, I guess."

Victoria and Tylor get off their horses and head to the barn. Before Sam rides off toward the ranch house, he calls to them, "Hey! Keep an eye out for trouble."

Victoria and Tylor nod in acknowledgment as they tie their horses to the hitching post at the front of the barn.

Tylor opens the barn doors. Victoria knows the barn like the back of her hand, so she gets the lantern-lit quickly and retrieves the tac to hitch the horses to the wagon. Tylor helps wherever he can under Victoria's direction.

Meanwhile, Sam goes into the ranch house to prepare the bodies for transport. But before that, he finds a pair of boots and puts them on. His feet are getting so cold that he wonders if he will be unable to finish the chores.

He wraps Ben and Marsha in the bed sheets he used to cover them earlier so Tylor doesn't have to see them. He then finds more clothes, food, and supplies to take back to the cabin. He puts on Ben's gun belt and revolver, which were hanging under a coat in the bedroom.

Victoria and Tylor have finished hitching up the buckboard wagon and are feeding the livestock. Tylor puts hay in the feed bins for the cattle, and Victoria puts corn in the chicken coop. Before leaving the barn, they collect more feed for the horses and put it in the buckboard. Victoria moves the buckboard out, and Tylor closes the barn doors.

On the short drive to the house, Victoria teaches Tylor the basics of driving the buckboard. Once at the house, Victoria and Tylor split up. Victoria goes to get the hidden guns, ammo, and cash. Tylor goes to help Sam put the two bodies in the buckboard.

As Victoria completes her tasks, she is bombarded by memories. Every corner of the house holds memories that attach to Victoria's consciousness. Without bias, happy times, sad times, times of struggle, and times of victory all present themselves. The Creighton family lived in the house for only a couple of years, but that was a time of their most significant growth and the beginning of fulfilling their dreams.

Tylor, on the other hand, does not find memories, but rather, he makes them. Sam has Tylor help carry the bodies, but he puts Tylor at the foot end just in case the body becomes unwrapped. The physical aspect of moving the bodies is not an issue for Tylor. He is strong and agile, so the work is relatively straightforward. Conversely, Tylor's sensitivity is empathetic to the deceased. He can feel the fear, pain, and anger of each victim he moves. This part of the job is heartwrenching. He realizes that this is not a night he will soon forget. He also understands the unexpected tears on the trip over.

Contrary to what people may think, Sam's professional manner does not protect him from the emotions this chore invokes. He has not become numb to or ambivalent to the feelings surrounding injury or death. Instead, he has learned to isolate his work from personal feelings. He understands that those who grieve need stable support, not emotional instability, and he intends to provide that stable support to Victoria and Austin.

Together, the trio works like a well-oiled machine. As Victoria locates various needed items, she hands them to Tylor, who then takes them to Sam to pack. On the surface is an image of efficiency, but each struggles to complete this critical chore internally.

Victoria takes a final look around the house. She takes the family portrait off the wall, turns off the lamp, and slowly closes the door behind her.

The activity at the following two ranch houses is similar. Victoria knows the location of the hidden objects in the houses and how to access them, so she focuses on getting the supplies and hitching the horses to the cart or buckboard. Bryan Creighton used a cart and one horse, Greg and Gwen Hill had a buckboard and two horses.

The bodies were transferred to the cart at Greg and Gwen's place. Sam and Tylor took them to the abandoned explosives shack off the road, in a depression several hundred feet north of the cabins. Victoria decided that the location would be a safe place to store the bodies until they could be buried. The miners used the explosives shack for the now-abandoned *Ladybird* mine behind the cabin. The shack was forgotten when *Ladybird* shut down. Few knew it existed, and the shack could not be seen from the road.

Leaving the last house, Sam drives the cart, Tylor drives the next buckboard, and Victoria drives the last buckboard. One horse is tied to the back of the last buckboard. The cart and buckboards head back up the road to the cabin.

[Intense Return]

Still wrapped in a blanket, CJ sits on a rocking chair in the cabin's front room. Austin, wearing his nightshirt, socks, and a cap, is asleep on his lap, wrapped in another blanket. The rifle sits in a chair next to them. Outside, the night quietly chases the evening away.

CJ's heart starts to pound when he hears a faint sound from the front of the cabin. He carefully gets up, gently places Austin back in the rocker without waking him, and then quietly picks up the rifle. He turns off the lamp on the table which was trimmed low. He walks to the door and stubs his toe on a chair. The impact causes the chair to move and make some noise.

CJ is frustrated with himself for being so clumsy. In a shouted whisper, trying not to make too much noise: "Son of a . . ."

With a slight limp, he reaches the door. Opening the shutter just enough to peer out the front window, he sees something coming up the road toward the cabin. Sweat starts forming on his brow, and the pounding of his heart can now be heard in his ears. With trembling fingers, he cocks the hammer back on the rifle. The blanket is more a hindrance than helpful; he places it on the floor as a mat for a prone shooting position.

He is visibly upset while keeping a keen eye on the approaching unknown. His breathing gets labored. As the sound draws nearer, CJ can make out the shape of a carriage with a single rider. CJ carefully unlatches the door, opening it just enough to put the barrel out. He lies down in a prone position with the rifle pointed in the direction of the carriage. CJ takes a deep breath, holds it for a few seconds, then lets it out. There are other vehicles behind that one, but the dim light and heavy snow make it unclear what follows.

The carriage stops at the stump. CJ listens carefully. He sees the carriage driver wave his hands and yell, "CJ! CJ! It's Sam, Victoria, and Tylor. Can we come in?"

CJ knows that no one else would know all those names. While still lying on the floor, he opens the door fully and then closes it. He rolls onto his back and, after taking a huge breath, lets out a large sigh, relieving himself of all the tension. He carefully drops the rifle's hammer to half cock, and wraps himself into the blanket once again.

Remembering Austin, he glances over to see that Austin is still sleeping. He then gets up, latches the door and moves over to the window on the north side of the cabin to watch the parade of horses and vehicles go by.

The second buckboard stops by the back door, and the driver gets off, grabs a stack of clothes, and heads to the back door. The back door opens, and Victoria steps in. She hands CJ the bag of clothes and tells him, "CJ, see if these fit. Sam wants you to help him with the buckboards. I'll get dinner started. How's Austin?"

"He's fine." CJ points into the front room. He adds, "He's out on the rocker. He drank a lot of water. I put some ointment on his back as he asked. Those are some pretty big cuts. I'm surprised he didn't complain when I put the ointment on. It was nice that we got to talk a little. Man, is he smart."

Victoria smiles and nods in agreement and pride. CJ heads off to the bedroom to get dressed.

Victoria lights a lamp and then checks the state of the fire in the cook stove. After filling it with water from the pump, she puts the pot on the stove, walks over to Austin, and puts her fingers through his hair.

CJ goes out the back door.

Austin wakes slowly. In a hoarse, soft voice, Austin asks, "Hi, Victoria. Did you get CJ some clothes?"

Victoria laughs a little. "We sure did."

Austin's voice is still hoarse. "Why didn't he have any clothes?"

Victoria skirts the question, "I'm not sure. I guess they got wet or something. At least he has some now. Right?"

"Yeah. I really like him." Austin's soft voice is barely audible. "He's real nice and likes to talk to me."

While she talks to him, she checks his pulse and forehead temperature. "His brother is pretty nice, too. You can talk to him more tomorrow. How are you feeling?"

Trying to sound more natural, he says, "I'm feeling a lot better." His voice returns to hoarse and weak when he confesses, "Just a little weak."

Victoria smiles at his attempt to sound normal. "I'll have something for you to eat in a little while. You just stay here 'til I call you." She heads back to the kitchen. "Okay?"

Austin mustered enough energy to say, “Okay,” so Victoria, in the kitchen, could hear him. Austin adjusted the blanket, curled onto the chair, and struggled to open his eyes. He soon gave up and fell back to sleep.

Tylor quietly enters through the back door and puts a bundle of food items on the kitchen table. Keeping his voice down, he tells Victoria. “Sam said you would need this for tonight’s dinner and that we should be done in about fifteen minutes. Where should I put the firearms?”

“Um,” Victoria looks around, “Put them in that room there.” She points to the anteroom right off the kitchen. “They’ll stay warm and dry in there tonight. We will find better places in the morning.”

Tylor nods his head. “Okay, I’ll start bringing them in.”

Tylor heads back out the door.

[Everyone Up to Date]

Five places are set around the east end of the dinner table. The steaming stew of meat, potatoes, and carrots is a welcome change from the canned beans served for previous meals. Seating is clockwise: Sam, Tylor, Victoria (at the head), Austin, and CJ.

Austin has changed from his nightshirt into regular clothes. At his sister’s insistence, he is still wrapped in a blanket.

Sam takes a deep breath and smiles. “Sure smells good.”

Victoria surprises CJ and Tylor by taking their hands and bowing her head: “Austin, please.”

The others follow suit and take each other’s hands.

Austin’s voice is hoarse and weak, “Oh, God. We thank thee for thy bounty before us and our new friends.” He starts to tear up. “Please tell Mom and Dad that Victoria and I are okay. Amen.”

CJ’s eyes gloss over in a sympathetic reaction to Austin’s tears.

Everybody else finishes the prayer with a somber “Amen.” They release their hands.

CJ is hungry but unable to eat because he feels troubled, although he’s unsure what he’s troubled about. Lost in thought, he rearranges the food on his plate with his spoon.

Sam picks up a piece of bread and dabs it in his stew. Breaking the somber atmosphere, he speaks softly. “Well, we better get everybody up to date, so to speak. We’ll start with when we are.”

CJ rests his spoon and corrects Sam, “You mean where.”

“No, CJ,” correcting CJ’s correction, “Unfortunately, I mean *when*. Did you get a chance to read the report on this place like Tylor did?”

"I skimmed through it," CJ sheepishly answers. "Not knowing there would be a quiz, I didn't look too much into the details. Why?"

"In the report," answers Sam, "There was a tragedy where the family was attacked, but one person survived. The survivor mentioned was Victoria Creighton. Right?"

Austin looks directly at Victoria. Tylor nods his head in the affirmative.

CJ gets an uneasy feeling, as though everyone is watching him. "Yeah." His eyes dart about the dining party. "I think so."

"What report?" Austin asks excitedly, "Was I in it?"

Sam, Victoria, and Tylor all get very nervous about the question. The fact that he isn't mentioned as one of the survivors makes them anxious about his recovery.

CJ starts, "Sorry, Austin." Sam is about to stop him from answering, but CJ sees the look in Sam's eyes and interprets the sensitivity of the question. He changes his response mid-sentence. "I didn't read it all. But it was mostly about this place a hundred and forty years ago."

Austin is confused. This place wasn't even built just five years ago. It was just an empty valley until the mine opened in forty-nine. Why would there be a report written about an empty valley?

Sam informs everyone, "That same Victoria is seated at the head of the table. As we sit here, today is Thursday, November twenty-second, 1877."

"No way!" CJ adamantly rejects the statement. "That's impossible!"

Austin is confused further by CJ's adamant refusal of the date. It may not be Thursday the twenty-second, but it is undoubtedly November 1877.

"And losing all your clothes," Sam says, throwing out something just as impossible but an experience they know well. "Just by walking through the door – I suppose that happens to you every day?"

CJ and Tylor, both looking down in embarrassment, "Nooo."

Sam presents evidence by questioning Tylor, "Tylor, how many cell towers, power lines, or airplanes did you see when you were out with Victoria and me?"

Austin quietly asks CJ, "What's a cell tower?"

Tylor hasn't paid much attention to or noticed their absence until now. When he thinks about the day's travel, he doesn't remember any towers—"I wasn't looking for any, but I can't remember seeing any either, so none."

Sam continues the questions. "What about earlier, on your way up?"

Tylor clearly remembers those on the way up. "We saw a few power lines and a couple of towers."

Sam: "And if you are lost, what can guide you back to civilization at night?"

Tylor recites information from the survival training camp he attended last summer: "The glow from the city."

Sam points through the front window, even though the shutters are closed. "We were about forty miles from town. There should be quite a glow from right over there amid the blackness. Yet, it is totally dark."

Softly, Tylor doesn't question the result but the method. His senses tell him Sam is correct, but he questions the method that made this happen. "How did we get here?"

"I have no idea. None," Sam answers bluntly.

Sam now turns his attention to CJ, who is still in denial. "CJ, I know it is unbelievable; however, if you can come up with a more plausible explanation, I would really like to hear it. Really. Even though I'm trying to convince you about the date, I'm still struggling with it myself." Gesturing toward Austin. "You can ask your new best friend what year it is. I wouldn't ask about the day since he's been sick for a few days."

CJ looks at Austin, hoping for an answer of '2017'. "Austin?"

Austin answers confidently, "It's 1877." With much less confidence, he guesses the day, "I don't know if it's Thursday or Friday."

CJ has only known Austin for a few hours but trusts him to be truthful. His stomach sank. He didn't get the answer he was hoping for. Now, he must deal with a concept that is unexplainable and unreasonable. He looks at the ceiling and then, with a sigh, puts his head in his hands: "This is going to take some time to sink in."

To reassure CJ, Austin puts his hand on his forearm. Addressing his new best friend, he asks, "What are you guys talking about?"

CJ looks at Sam for approval. Sam looks at Victoria for approval. She gives CJ gives a nod.

CJ takes Austin's hand off his arm and puts it on the table, covering it with his hand. Speaking clearly and carefully in a soft tone, "This is going to be hard to believe, but Uncle Sam, Tylor, and I are from the year 2017."

CJ senses that Austin is not quite sure what he is saying. He restates it with more clarity. "We are from the future."

Austin thinks about it carefully. Energized by the information, he asks, "Are you really from the future?" He looks into CJ's eyes. CJ nods. Austin becomes excited about meeting someone from the future. "Can you tell me stuff like if I get to see San Francisco? Am I going to be rich or famous?" In his excitement, Austin starts talking too loudly and breathing too fast, which causes him to start coughing again.

“Take it easy, Austin.” Sam tries to calm Austin down. He speaks in a caring and concerned tone, “Whether you like it or not, you are still sick.” After Austin calms down, Sam continues, “To be honest, Austin, even if I knew all those things, I’m not sure I should tell you or if it will still be accurate. It’s possible that, in fact, it’s likely that by CJ, Tylor, and myself being here, we might change the future. So what I know of the past, you know, the stuff we keep referring to that we read in a report, may not be your future. If that makes sense.”

“Kind of.” Austin’s answer is unconvincing, “I guess.”

Sam takes a sip from his cup. “And to tell you the truth, I’m not too happy about coming to this time.” He sees that Austin becomes disappointed and offended. Sam clarifies, “Not that I don’t like you and Victoria, quite the contrary,” Austin becomes more relaxed. “But we had lives from which we had just disappeared. I had or have? a wife. Ty and CJ had parents and girlfriends.”

Teasing CJ about the girlfriend, Austin hits CJ with an elbow and a big grin. Victoria can see the sadness creeping in on the faces of CJ and Tylor. She offers consolation by placing a hand on each of their arms.

“They had college plans.” Sam continues, “Now what? We know very little about how to live in 1877. And Austin, please don’t feel bad. I’m not trying to lecture you; I’m just letting you know our perspective. The three of us,” Pointing to CJ, Tylor, and himself, “will have a hard time here.”

Hoping for a good response, Tylor asks the next obvious question, “How do we get back?”

“I’m repeating myself; I have no idea. I have no idea how we got here, and I have no idea how or if we can get back.” Rhetorically, Sam Asks, “Where would we even start to try to figure that out? We’ve nothing to go on.” Pressing his point, he asks, “Tylor, what did you do to get to this time?”

“I just stepped,” Tylor points at the front door. “through that door.”

CJ points out, “Actually, we didn’t even open the door. We were just standing on the porch, then bam, we were rolling on the floor with no clothes.”

Shaking a finger at the door, Sam looks at Tylor, “And I went through that same door, maybe a dozen times, and I was still in 2017. I got here sometime in my sleep. There’s nothing in common.”

Austin feels the impact of his new friends’ predicament and has mixed emotions about them being here. He looks down at his plate. “I know you don’t want to be here, but I’m glad you got here when you did.”

Austin lifts his head and looks at Sam with mixed emotions of gratitude and apology.

Victoria has been mostly quiet during this conversation, letting the boys soak in what Sam has told and explained to them without adding confusion from a third party. However, the importance of the timing of their arrival should not be overlooked. “Austin’s right. We wouldn’t be having this conversation if Sam arrived one day later.”

Sam dodges a hero’s credit. “I suppose, but I still don’t understand it.”

"Maybe there's a reason for you to be here," says Austin, throwing yet another concept into the pile of confusion.

"Let's just say we are in 1877." CJ reasons, "That means we know what's going to happen. Right?"

Tylor tries to explain what Sam said earlier: "Maybe not. As Uncle Sam said, since we're here, we may do something to change what will happen." He increasingly confuses himself as he speaks, "Or maybe by us being here, it makes the future the past that we knew or will know have known?" He stops because he realizes that he is not making any sense. "This is too weird."

"One thing's for certain," Victoria cautions, "You can't let anybody know you're from the future. You're going to have to learn how we do things in 1877. I've noticed that you mention many things we don't have, like UTVs, cell phones, and power lines. It could bring trouble if you mention that stuff to anybody else."

Noticing a role he could fill that would give him more time with his new friend, Austin offers to help. "I could teach CJ how to fit in."

Victoria corrects him, "And Tylor."

Trying to recover from showing favoritism, he looks at Tylor, "Sorry. Yes, and Tylor, too."

Sam redirects the conversation: "We have no control over the time change. I think we should address a more pressing issue. Wilson is still planning to kill Victoria and Austin and then burn the ranches."

The mood turns somber, and the cabin gets quiet. Austin shivers as he gets a chill up his back, remembering his last encounter with them. CJ now understands better why he was asked to shoot anyone approaching the cabin.

The stark acceptance of the time travel cements Tylor's apprehension and fear of their predicament. He knows that there will be more deaths, but he also knows that help and understanding are part of their future. Unable to articulate his feelings without causing more concern, he remains quiet.

"Wilson's men would have chased after us if they thought we had any chance of surviving the night, so they think we're dead." Victoria puts her hand on Austin's. "But I know Wilson. He'll send his men out to find our bodies to make sure. Since the storm stopped this evening, we should expect them to come looking for us in a few days."

Austin angrily lashes out, "I bet he wants to put us in the house so nobody will know how we died."

"That's exactly what he wanted to do," confirms Tylor. "According to the report, the town marshal will claim it was smallpox. That's how they're going to justify burning the houses."

Austin confides to CJ, "The town marshal works for Mr. Wilson, too."

"That's another reason we moved the family," explains Sam. Austin, surprised, looks at Victoria, who nods to him. She puts her hand on his arm to confirm the statement and reassure Austin that it was

done with her permission. “If, in 2017, Wac ih a’ shows them the burial site, they can determine the cause of death and bolster Mr. Owens’ case for rightful ownership.”

Victoria is slightly confused and slightly hopeful, “Colin Owens?”

“No. Robert.” Sam didn’t see a family tree to know exactly. “I don’t know the relationship, but it must be at least a five-generation gap, but I’m not sure.”

Victoria nods, “Oh. Of course.”

Out of nowhere, Austin blurts out, “I didn’t mean to kill those two guys.” The thought that he might be considered a murderer was planted in the back of his mind. There was no opportunity to clear his name earlier, and the pressure of hiding this from CJ was too much to contain.

CJ is shocked that his young friend would be involved in killing anyone. Victoria was hoping that it would take longer for Austin to remember what happened in the ranch house, so she didn’t tell Austin that the ranch hands were shot. Sam is slightly off guard but understands that Austin wants to clear his name.

Sam reaches across the table, takes Austin’s hands, and looks him in the eye, “You didn’t kill anybody. Those two men were killed when they were shot in the head. It must have been another of Wilson’s men that shot them. Of course, none of us would be upset with you if you had killed them. So don’t let it bother you. You did what was necessary. You and your sister are alive because of your quick thinking and decisive action.” Sam pauses for a second to let it sink in. He pats Austin’s hand. “You did well – very well.” Sam glances at the others at the table, “Now, where was I before Austin became a hero.”

CJ gives Austin a one-armed-side hug, and Victoria slightly squeezes his arm.

“Oh, yeah,” Sam continues, “I was thinking it’s kind of curious, though; Wac ih a’ said he was a caretaker on behalf of the Creightons, not Robert Owens.”

Austin chuckles, “Wac ih a’?”

“Yes. That’s the guy in 2017 that showed me around.” Sam asks, “What’s so funny?”

Austin sounds like a teacher, saying, “Wac ih a’ is Miwok for fox. Indians know foxes as tricksters. He might have been tricking you.”

Everyone gets a big smile at Sam’s expense. Austin’s explanation lightened the mood at the table. It also started CJ wondering what else this smart little kid knew.

Also amused by the meaning of the name, Sam chuckles, “I guess he was pretty tricky, but he was also accommodating.” He is internally wondering if he was given any misinformation. “I think.”

Sam becomes re-focused and re-directed. “Back to our top priority. Victoria and Austin. How are we going to keep them safe?”

Victoria offers a solution: “I’m leaving next week for Ohio. I’ll just take Austin with me.” Austin nods in agreement. “Wilson shouldn’t follow me there. Besides, I’ll have a new name soon, Lord willing.”

Sam: “That sounds fine, but we’ll have to keep you two out of sight ‘till then. We also need to get to the district judge before you leave. And we know Wilson will eventually look for you here.”

Brightly and straightforwardly, as if everybody knew what he was talking about, Austin chimes in, “If he comes here, we can hide in the mine.”

“The mine’s been closed off for years.” Victoria shakes her head. “I don’t know if there is even a way in anymore.” She is surprised that Austin would have forgotten something as openly factual as the mine being closed off.

Excitedly, Austin corrects her, “There’s a secret door behind the pantry shelf. Ren and I played treasure hunt in there all the time. I’ll show you. We even made maps.” He becomes more somber, “He gave me a special key that I was supposed to use after he died, but I never felt good about coming up here after that, so I still haven’t used it.”

Trying to keep the tone from getting sadder, Sam smiles at Austin. “Sounds great, Austin. You can show us as soon as we’re finished here.”

Sam now addresses Victoria, “We need a cover story for the boys and me to be here. Wilson will probably bring the marshal when they burn the houses. They’ll be looking for you and Austin, as well.”

“Why can’t we be caretakers for Victoria’s dad?” CJ asks, “ – I’m sorry, I forgot his name.”

Austin becomes easily irritated because he lacks rest, has been on an emotional rollercoaster, and is sick. He scolds CJ, “Ben. My dad’s name is Ben. My mom is Marsha. You need to remember that.”

CJ feels badly about upsetting Austin, “Yes, I know. I’m sorry. I’m really sorry.”

As soon as Austin blew up at CJ, he felt sorry. He couldn’t believe he had just scolded his new friend. The room got quiet as everyone settled down.

Softly, Austin apologizes, “That’s okay. Didn’t mean to get angry.”

CJ responds to Austin but apologizes to everybody for his lack of preparation and inattentiveness. “No, I should be more attentive. I didn’t read the report about you guys as well as I should have. I’m the one that’s sorry.”

Sam refocuses the group by talking strategy, “Wilson’s men will be snooping around and probably coming from both sides. We’ll have to make it overwhelmingly clear that they’re not welcome here. Any show of weakness puts all our lives in jeopardy.”

Tylor can sense the evil Hank and his men possess just by the mention of his name. He would prefer to disappear and avoid Hank’s men altogether, as opposed to developing a defense plan. He suggests, “Can’t we just load up the wagons and ride away?”

“Non-confrontation should always be considered the first option,” Sam agrees. “However, the weather makes that option impossible. Wilson and his men will be here as soon as the roads are passable. Our only way out is west, into trouble. Eastern trails won’t be passable ‘till spring.”

Voicing his concern, CJ asks, “That means we stay here and wait for ‘em? We’ll be like sitting ducks!”

Sam knows about people like Hank, so he’s been trying to guess what Hank will do. “I hope that’s what they’ll think. Fortunately, we have three things in our favor. First, they don’t know we’re here. That will surprise them. They won’t have a plan for us when caught off guard, but we’ll have one for them.”

CJ is not comfortable so far and presses for a more secure solution. “Second?”

Sam continues, “They don’t know if we know about Victoria and Austin yet. That means they won’t know if they’re alive or if we’ve seen anything. That will put them in a quandary: Can we provide them with information, or have we seen too much? Adding things for them to ponder might cause them to lose focus and make mistakes.”

Victoria interjects, “Why yet? How will they find out?”

“I’m sure Wilson will have somebody secretly check the ranch houses.” Sam explains, “Once they see we’ve been there, they’ll know something’s up. They won’t know for sure if we know where Victoria and Austin are, but they will know that we know about the murders.”

Tylor was waiting to ask, but Austin beat him to the punch, “What about the third thing?”

Sam takes a breath before telling them the third thing in their favor. “They don’t know how many of us there are. Hopefully, sitting ducks, or, better yet, one sitting duck, is what they’ll expect. We’ll use the next few days to make plans for their arrival and make them the sitting ducks.” He pauses, knowing that the next part will be tricky to hear. “The tactics you learned over the last few years playing paintball will come in handy, but don’t start thinking, for even a split second, that this is a game.” Sam finishes in a chilling tone, “We’ll use whatever force is necessary to keep us – all of us – safe.”

The tone of their uncle's voice and the choice of his words made the boys' stomachs fall. CJ and Tylor lose all skin color. Neither of them has killed a person before, and they are not sure if they will freeze when they should act. The thought of planning a scenario where they might actually shoot someone – not just shoot but possibly kill someone, is frightening and foreign.

Each of the boys has a subtly different take on the possible conflict. CJ tells himself that if it’s either them or me, I will defend myself, friends, and family, without guilt, by whatever means necessary.

Tylor fights with the thought of killing another person, but he is willing to lay down his life for the safety of the rest. If he needs to kill to protect, he will, but he is not out to cause trouble or start a fight if it can be avoided.

Sam stares into CJ's eyes. CJ feels as if his soul just left his body. “Do you understand?”

CJ tries to swallow but can’t. He dryly answers, “Yes, sir.”

Then Sam stares into Tylor's eyes.

Apprehensively, knowing the whole meaning of Sam's words. "Yes, sir."

Austin sees that CJ and Tylor are struggling with the thought that they might have to kill someone; his misgivings of that choice are still fresh in his mind. Trying to take some pressure off CJ and Tylor, Austin offers an alternative, "But they don't even know Victoria and I are alive. Can't you just say you don't know where we are?"

"Of course, we'll start with that." Sam shows that he is also using psychological tactics, "Even if they don't believe me, it will still put some doubt in their minds. One more distraction for them to deal with."

Victoria suggests a hole in the plan, "They'll insist on searching. No way will they take your word for it."

Austin: "That's when Victoria and I could hide in the mine. I know lots of places in there to hide."

Sam concurs with Austin, "Right. With no sign of you, they may believe I don't know where you are – at least for a little while. They will know I'm not alone when they find the horses and wagons."

"They'll kill anyone in their way," Victoria warns. "Sam, you and the boys don't need to be a part of this. I don't want you to get hurt just because you showed up at the wrong place and the wrong time."

"I don't think we are here at the wrong place or time," asserts Sam. "This might be exactly why we're here. We will not abandon you and Austin." Sam looks at the floor as he thinks. "For everyone's safety, I will be the only person they will see. And, as Austin suggested, I'll start by trying to convince them that I do not know Austin and Victoria's whereabouts."

"I don't think that will work; you know what he's like," says Tylor, fearing for Sam's safety. "Wilson won't come up here alone; he'll have four or five men with him. He'll think it's just you here, which will put you in danger."

"We'll have to persuade them to think differently," replies Sam. "Even a tiger looks for an escape if he thinks he's surrounded."

Sam has played paintball with Bill, CJ, and Tylor for years. Together, they make an invincible team. Sam now specifically addresses CJ and Tylor. "We'll have to outnumber them. We've done it many times against other teams five times our size. We'll do it here, too." CJ and Tylor nod in understanding.

He pauses as he collects his thoughts. "The next item is watchkeeping. CJ and Taylor, we should take turns keeping watch tonight. Victoria told me it would be almost impossible for them to come here tonight. Unfortunately, if Wilson has any doubts about Victoria and Austin making it through last night, he'll send his men, even in these conditions. It's a long shot, but we don't want to be caught unprepared. If they don't come tonight, then it should be a few days before they come up. Understood?"

CJ is now in tactical mode: "Understood." For CJ, tactical mode is like a light switch, on or off. Anyone who knows CJ can immediately tell when he is switched on.

Tylor is also in tactical mode; however, you would never know, “Yeah.” His behavior remains on an even keel, regardless of his current task.

Sam starts issuing orders. “Victoria and Austin need to stay away from the windows at all times, and we’ll keep the shutters closed on all the windows not being used for watch.” He addresses Victoria, “And I hate to impose, but tonight, we should all sleep in the same room. Communication will be easier if we are all in the same place.”

Victoria agrees without hesitation. “Yeah, Okay.” Alluding to the nakedness in the last two days, “We already know each other better than we should.”

Putting the possibility of a reprieve on the horizon, he tells everyone, “If they don’t come tonight, then we can stand down the watch until the weather clears.”

Austin is still very much in psychological shock and is fearful of being alone. He quietly asks Victoria, not wanting to sound like a baby, “Can CJ or Tylor sleep with me when they’re not on watch?”

Understanding the embarrassment Austin might feel if he asked directly, Victoria addresses the boys, “If it is okay with you, Austin would prefer not to sleep alone tonight.” At first, Austin looks for reactions from CJ and Tylor. But then he looks down in embarrassment and doesn’t want to see them reject the idea.

Tylor, nodding, “Sure. It’s okay with me.”

CJ is also nodding. “I don’t mind either.”

Sam announces, “I don’t want the anxiety of waiting for Wilson to interfere with the rest we may need if things get out of hand, so I think we need some early warning devices to keep the tension down. We’ll develop systems tomorrow, so we won’t have to be so wary.”

Knowing that Austin will likely fall asleep better with CJ by his side, Sam issues the watch order, “I’ll take the early morning shift. Tylor, are you good for a few hours now?”

“Sure,” says Tylor. “I have a lot on my mind and won’t be able to sleep for a few hours, even if I tried.”

Sam is pleased with how easy that was. “Okay. In a few hours, or if you start getting sleepy, trade with CJ.”

Tylor points toward one of the front windows while looking at Sam. “Is that okay?” Sam nods in acceptance of the selected lookout spot.

Sam addresses Austin, curious about the hidden mine entrance: “Austin, if you don’t mind, this would be a good time to show us the hiding place.”

They get their dishes and head to the kitchen. They are all wearing sidearms except Austin.

[Into the Mine]

Austin leads them into the pantry. He holds up one finger, "This is how you get to the mine."

The cabinet has several knot holes in the back, which are marked with letters. Austin puts his finger through the hole with the letter P around it and pushes down on a lever behind the cabinet. He then pushes the cabinet open to reveal a well-maintained mine.

Austin points to the hole with the P. "Ren said only to use this one. The others set traps for people trying to steal his gold. He found a lot of gold in here."

The mine has many shovels, picks, hammers, and drills. Some small casks of black powder and rolls of fuse are also present, along with a rifle, a shotgun, and two revolvers. Along the wall are various rods, leavers, and animal traps.

"Wow," exclaims Sam, "This is a big mine. You never would have guessed it from outside."

Victoria thought she knew all of Austin's secrets, but she now believes there is much more he hasn't told her. She looks at Austin with umbrage, "Why didn't I know about this?"

"That's really cool." Tylor looks at the equipment in amazement. "Look at all the mining stuff."

On the other hand, CJ is more interested in the mine's potential pitfalls: "What kind of traps do the other holes set? Do you know where the traps are?"

"I don't know." Austin's tone becomes serious, "They must be dangerous because he said never to use them. Ren only showed me this one and the R."

Sam asks, "What does the R do?"

"You need a key." Austin's tone becomes somber, "I was supposed to use the key after Ren passed away, but I didn't feel like coming up here."

Austin addresses CJ and Tylor, "Maybe tomorrow if you're with me, I might feel like it. Ren said it would be our last game. That's kinda why I didn't want to –."

Seeing how hard it is on Austin to talk about it, Victoria interrupts, "How far does this go?"

Mentally returning to the present, Austin leaves the memories for another time, "It goes all the way through the mountain. It runs into a cave that looks into Harmony Flats."

Tylor read that it was abandoned due to low production and now wonders, "Why did he keep it a secret? I thought it didn't have any gold."

"Ren was an excellent prospector," Austin explains, "This is the mine he was working on. He would get supplies in town, head out of town at night, and circle back here to the mine. When his supplies got low, he'd sneak out at night and return to town in the morning from another direction. He said it was to keep from gettin' robbed."

CJ is Impressed, "Pretty smart. He never did get robbed, did he?"

Proud of his old friend, Austin answers, “No, not once.”

“The mine must have been mishandled for it to be closed so easily,” Sam reckons. “Ren must have been a good miner to find gold where others couldn’t. You said he did pretty well here. Do you have any idea how much he got out?”

Austin likes talking about the happy things he remembers of Ren; his face lights up when he can tell people about his friend. “He never said directly, but he said she, meaning the mine, was good to him. He showed me a stack of gold coins once.”

Sam can see that the day’s events have taken their toll on the group. He tells them, “It’s been a long day for everyone. Austin, especially, needs his sleep. He can show us the rest tomorrow. For now, if we see anyone approaching the cabin, this is where Victoria and Austin will hide. Okay?”

Everybody answers, almost in unison, “Okay.”

[Getting to Know You]

As the night deepens, all is still, and everybody except Tylor has settled into their beds. Victoria is in a single bed along the wall, Sam is in the single bed he used last night, and Austin and CJ are in the larger double bed along the wall.

CJ is lying on his back, staring at the ceiling. Due to his back injuries, Austin is lying on his stomach, staring at the wall. Austin and CJ talk quietly with each other.

Austin turns his head from the wall to CJ. “You must think I’m a baby for wanting you to sleep with me?”

“Of course not!” CJ turns to look at Austin. “After all you’ve been through, you shouldn’t be alone. I’m just happy to be here for you.” He stops and thinks momentarily, trying to imagine Austin’s emotional status. “This whole mess must be difficult to deal with. If you need anything at all, just ask. I think you’re one of the bravest people I know. I’ve only known you for less than a day, but I can tell by your character that you had good parents who truly loved you.” CJ takes a deep breath and slowly lets it out. “I bet your parents would be proud of you. I’m not even related, and I’m proud of you. You’re one tough hombre.”

“Thanks for sayin’ so, but I don’t feel tough.” Austin confesses, “I feel like crying – a lot.”

“You can cry all you want,” CJ assures him. It doesn’t mean you’re weak; it just means you loved your family. Even though you know they went to a better place, and you can be happy about that, you also lost people you loved, and it’s okay to be sad about that. In fact, you should be heartbroken about that, even devastated.”

Wanting to know more about his new friend, Austin gathers the courage to ask CJ about his parents. They weren’t killed, but he lost them as if they were. “Tell me about your mom and dad. You must miss them too.”

“Of course I do,” explains CJ, “But it’s a little different for me. I can’t believe I’m sayin’ this, but we’re a hundred years before my parents are even born. Still, I know they’ll be heartbroken when my brother and I just disappear without a trace. Everything that’s happened today makes me miss ‘em – and it’s only been a day. I usually don’t miss ‘em this much, even after a few weeks.”

“What were they like?” Austin asks. “I bet they were kind, like you.”

“They were kind –” CJ remembers that they aren’t born yet. “or will be kind. Anyway, my parents met in college, fell in love, and were married in 1997. Three years later, they had me; a couple of years later, they had Tylor. My dad is a fireman like Sam used to be. I don’t think you have ‘em yet, or at least firemen today aren’t like my dad.”

Misinterpreting CJ’s remark, Austin is slightly miffed that CJ would look down on people who live in 1877. “What do you mean?”

In explaining himself, CJ tries to use terms that existed in 1877. “Dad and Sam spent the last thirty-plus years helping others, especially in dangerous situations. It was their job. They would go into burning buildings to rescue people and put out the fires. They also rescued people when they would get stuck on cliffs or tall buildings or when there were floods or earthquakes. They also helped people when they were sick or injured. They were called paramedics and did all kinds of medical stuff.”

Feeling like CJ was boasting a little, Austin defends people of his time. “We have people who help when there’s trouble.”

Sensing the defensive comment and trying not to be confrontational, CJ explains as best he can. “I’m sure you have lots of people that help when there is a problem; it’s different, though, it’s not their job. They’re good people helping the best they know how, and I think that’s great. I think the main difference is that Dad and Sam were professionals. They had special training to handle almost any problem. They would be quick and safe. They didn’t just try to help; they did help. They saved a lot of people.”

Austin, unconvinced there is a difference between the people of 1877 and those of 2017. He demands some supporting facts to be convinced. “How many? How many people did they save?”

“I don’t know, exactly,” CJ answers, “But lots. Both of them got awards for saving people. They didn’t talk much or brag about their saves. To them, it was just what they were supposed to do. They probably didn’t go a week without saving at least a few people. Oh, that reminds me, you should never ask Sam about his worst call. You don’t want to hear it, and Sam doesn’t want to think about it.”

“Wow, that’s a lot of people. Awards, too. They must have been good, and I guess they saw a lot of bad stuff.” Austin is convinced there is a difference between what CJ’s dad did and the people of 1877 who help others when they can. He was initially impressed, but thinking it over, maybe saving him would be no big deal to Sam. “I guess Sam was just being a fireman when he saved Victoria and me. Like a job.”

“Yes and No,” states CJ. He would assist even if he weren’t a fireman. “I’m sure he used his training, but he would have helped anyway - that’s how Uncle Sam is. I think that’s just the way firemen are. My dad is always helping others, too. It’s in their nature to help. My mom says it’s a mental problem that should get its own name.”

Austin giggles at the joke, then asks, “What else can you tell me about your dad besides being a fireman?”

CJ smiles as he thinks of his dad. “He was smart and funny. He took Tylor and me on adventures. Usually, with Uncle Sam, but sometimes on our own, just the three of us. He would teach us about survival, how to shoot, what plants to eat and not eat, how to use a map and compass.” CJ starts to tear up as he realizes he may never do those things with his dad again. “How to start fires –”

CJ’s emotions contagiously spread to Austin. Trying not to cry, Austin interrupts CJ to change to a hopefully happier topic. “What . . . What about your mom?”

CJ wipes a tear from his cheek. After composing himself, CJ answers, “Um, yeah. She was a nurse at the hospital.”

To demonstrate their closeness, Austin points out the commonality, “Like Victoria’s going to be?”

“Yeah.” CJ continues, “My mom is in charge of the terminally ill treatment wing at the Children’s Hospital. I don’t know how she does it. I’m sure it’s difficult. I couldn’t do it.”

“What do you mean?” asks Austin.

CJ turns to look at the ceiling, trying to control his emotions. “Every patient she sees will die soon. There’s nothing they can do to stop whatever disease the kids have. She becomes friends with most of them, but then she has to watch them get worse and die.”

Austin closes his eyes, and his voice becomes sad. “That would be hard.”

CJ continues, “She was also very kind and thoughtful. To me, she was the best mom in the world.” CJ can’t hold back the tears any longer. He looks away from Austin and takes a few seconds to wipe away the tears.

CJ is unable to continue to talk about his parents. His voice breaks, “Tell me about your parents.”

Austin immediately tears up. “I... I can’t yet.”

CJ looks at Austin again. “That’s okay. Tell me later. I want to hear about ‘em, though.”

Austin, still wiping his tears. “Your parents were like mine. I bet they miss you.”

CJ thinks about Austin’s statement and what would be happening in his 2017 time. “You know, they probably don’t even know I’m gone yet.”

“Why?” asks Austin.

“Because Tylor and I are supposed to stay in this cabin with Uncle Sam for four days. They know we’re safe with him, so it may be a week or more before they look for us.” CJ takes a breath to compose himself. “Of course, we’re here now, so they’ll never find us.”

Austin waits a few seconds for their emotions to recede. "I know you'd rather be at home. And it's selfish of me, but I'm glad you're here. What do you think will happen to us? Do you think Sam will take care of us, I mean, like a family, you, Tylor, and me?"

CJ answers confidently. "Don't worry. Uncle Sam will definitely take care of us, including you and Victoria."

"He won't have to worry about Victoria," replies Austin, "she's getting married soon."

CJ maintains his confidence. "He'll take care of all of us for as long as we need or want him. You can be sure of that."

Hesitantly, Austin tells CJ, "I don't know if he even likes me after all the trouble I put him through."

"Don't be silly!" laughs CJ. "First of all, none of this was your fault, and secondly, of course, he likes you. I can tell by the way he talks to you. He's always asking me how you're doing. You probably don't notice it, but he keeps a very close eye on you. He watches how you move, respond to questions, and how quickly you get tired. I heard him talking to Victoria about your recovery. He cares about you, not just physically, but emotionally too. Who knows, you might replace Tylor as his favorite nephew."

Austin is happy to hear that Sam doesn't hate him. He chuckles as he responds, "I know you're teasing about me becoming Sam's favorite. But really? You're sure he likes me."

CJ, matter-of-factly, "Yeah, really. They said we'd have to become a family. I think that somehow makes you my little brother."

"Do you think so?" Austin asks, envisioning the four of them riding to town as a family like he did yesterday.

CJ reassures him, "I know so. You're like his third nephew. And I, for one, couldn't be happier." Then, in a softer but instructional tone, CJ tells him, "Let's get some sleep. I have to get up in a few hours. By the way, do you want Tylor to sleep with you or in Sam's bed?"

Austin answers shyly, "With me . . please. Just for tonight. Do you think he'll mind?"

"I'm sure he won't mind a bit," CJ adds, as they both turn away from each other. "He would even get his feelings hurt if you didn't ask. Good night, Austin."

"Good night, CJ, and thanks for talking with me." Austin takes this chance to solidify the brotherhood, adding, "Big brother."

Austin quickly gives CJ a peck on the cheek and turns back away. He is unsure what CJ's reaction will be or even why he felt compelled to do it.

CJ is surprised. "What was that for?"

Austin's tone is serious and from the heart, "For caring."

CJ chuckles, "That's what brothers are for, silly."

Austin gets a smile on his previously concerned face. As they settle in, due to the back injuries, Austin makes a little noise and wrinkles his face in pain as he rolls onto his side. With their backs toward each other, they adjust the pillows for sleeping.

During the night, a few hours after CJ had gone to bed, Tylor goes to the bedroom and carefully wakes CJ. It's time for them to exchange places. CJ and Tylor have swapped watches many times while sailing, so they are proficient at making swaps without disrupting others. CJ carefully lifts Austin's head off his arm and slips out of bed. He shakes his numb arm to bring it back to life. Tylor slips into bed with his arm in the same position as CJ's.

Whispering, Tylor tells CJ, "Nothing to report." CJ nods and goes to the front room.

⇒ CH 9