

# Restricted Territory

## *Victoria Makes an Appearance*

04:00, Sunday

[ Explosive Start ]

At the north end of Creighton Valley, the freezing air is still, and the forest is quiet. The moon is starting its fourth quarter, so the moonlight is barely bright enough to see Creighton's cattle standing in the pasture. Hidden beneath the snow, through the northwest saddle, is a narrow, rocky, seldom-used trail that leads to town. Five riders are coaxing their horses through the fresh layer of snow toward the saddle a few hundred yards west of the summit.

In the cabin at the south end of Creighton Valley, the warm stillness of the bedroom is scarcely disturbed by the muffled sounds of breathing and the occasional crackle of the wood in the heating stove. The new family sleeps peacefully. Sam and CJ are in one bed, Victoria is in another, and Tylor and Austin are in the third.

Boom! An explosion can be heard in the distance, and a shock wave rattles the cabin's windows. Sam reckons the explosion is too distant from the main road to be one of the EWDs there and too small to be one of the houses in the valley set up for unwanted visitors. He sits up, recognizing it as one of the early warning devices set at the north trail. CJ and Victoria also sit up. They all look at each other. Sam holds his finger to his lips to indicate they should remain quiet.

The warning device's echo slowly fades as the five riders struggle to calm their startled horses. Arthur looks up the hill at the small crater where the warning device went off, his ears still ringing: "So much for a quiet mission."

On the lead horse, Harry brushes off some of the snow thrown on him from the device. "Even if they know we're coming, we still hav'ta to get this done. The boss said: 'Burn the houses, or don't come back.' We still have the upper hand here, so stick with the plan."

Fred mutters, "We should've done this when we killed 'em."

Arthur argues, "Idiot! We had to wait for Wilson's Doc to get in town t' say it was the pox. You don't know anything!"

Harry, aggravated, interrupts them, "You two, shut up. We're going to split here." He tells Fred, "I'll give you ten minutes to prepare. After you light off Ben's place, ride back here." Harry turns to Arthur, "When he rides by, start yours, and we'll start ours when you get back here. Questions?"

Fred asks, "What if we see one of 'em?"

"Don't be a fool," Harry snaps. "Shoot 'em and toss 'em into one of the houses. If there are any other problems, just start the fires and high-tail it back down this trail. But don't leave without starting the fires."

[ Ready for Company ]

Back at the cabin, the family puts into action the plan they developed for a possible attack.

Sam, in a forced whisper, "CJ, no lights. Just get in the front room so you can watch the front entrance. I'll cover the back. Victoria, you can wake the two sleepyheads and have them get ready for company. Let's do this quietly."

Both CJ and Sam take a rifle from near the bedroom door and exit into the front room. Victoria gets up and wakes Tylor and Austin. Tylor wakes with a start, which causes Austin to wake with a start. Tylor senses trouble, and it can be heard in his voice, "What is it? What's going on?"

Austin is slower to wake due to his body's need for recuperative sleep. He drowsily asks, "What?"

"One of the warning devices went off along the north trail," Victoria quietly informs them. "Sam wants you to get up and be ready. But do it quietly and with no lights, just like we practiced."

Victoria peeps out of the shuttered bedroom window and then verifies that they are closed tightly.

[ Light 'em Up ]

Two riders stop a couple hundred feet from Ben's ranch house. The only sound is of the horses breathing and stepping on the snow. Fred and Albert dismount as quietly as possible. The creaking of the saddle leather and the rustling of coats add only insignificant sound to their movements, but to them, every squeak or groan is as loud as a hawk screech. They are nervous to the point of losing small muscle coordination. The mystery of the man and his troops encountered during Hank's first visit, and the explosion of the EWS escalate their fears. As Fred turns to speak to Albert, he steps on a branch that cracks. They both jump.

Fred, in a forced whisper to Albert, "Leave the horses here. We don't want 'em spooked when we light this. I don't wanna walk home."

Albert nods as he ties the two horses to a tree branch. They both creep toward the cabin, looking for signs that Captain Reynolds or some of his men may be waiting for them. Fred sees the lamp on the step and, with a shaky finger, points it out to Albert as they approach.

Meanwhile, Arthur's horse is tied to a tree along the road, a couple hundred feet north (toward the exit trail) of Bryan's ranch house. Arthur, standing near the ranch house, lights a match. He holds it in his cupped hand while its flame stabilizes, then slowly brings the match to the end of a cigar he puffs to get it lit. Once satisfied, he drops the match in the snow, where it fizzles out. Arthur's foggy breath combines with the cigar smoke allowing him to create smoke rings, impressing himself.

Harry and Oscar are on the front porch of Greg's ranch house, relaxing on the rocking chairs that Greg and Gwen would use in the evenings. They casually lit one of the lamps Sam had left on the porch. It is turned way down low and sits on the porch floor between them.

Back at Ben's cabin, Fred and Albert are at the front door, anxious to get the job done and off the mountain before Sam and his men arrive. Fred removes the lamp's filler cap to use the lamp fuel to start the fire. After drawing his weapon, Albert stealthily unlatches the door. Unseen by them is a bundle of matches tied to the bottom of the opening side of the door.

At Bryan's house, Arthur picks up the lamp from the porch and opens the lamp glass to light it with his cigar. Sparks start flying as the black powder ignites as soon as the cigar touches the wick area. The lamp explodes, almost vaporizing Arthur. The explosion rings throughout the valley, loud enough to be heard in Harmony Flats.

Fred and Albert are ready to enter Ben's house when the loud explosion startles them. Albert rocks into the doorway, pushing the door open. The match bundle ignites as it scrapes across the floor. In the fuel vapor created by CJ and Sam, the flame expands quickly, erupting in a bright flash. The ranch house explodes, sending Fred and Albert from the doorway, across the road, and into the trees that line the roadway. Their lifeless bodies stare into the now tranquil valley.

The trespassers at Greg's place, Harry and Oscar, are also startled by the explosions. Hearing the other blasts, Harry and Oscar, without a word between them, figure out something is wrong at the ranches, so they scramble out of the rockers and run off the porch. In so doing, Harry knocks the lamp over. The burning oil goes under the front door and drips into the root cellar filled with kerosene vapor. Greg's house explodes, throwing Harry and Arthur into the air. They land on the road with a heavy thump, their hair and clothing smoldering an unpleasant stench. They remain motionless as the echoes of the commotion fade.

#### [ Uneasy Relief ]

Victoria, Austin, and Tylor are seated at the table, each with a rifle next to them. CJ is peeking out the front window, and the shutter is opened just enough for him to look out. Sam is at the window in the back bedroom. He also has the shutter open just enough to see out. The sounds of three different explosions are heard in quick succession. The valley echoes as the sounds of the explosions bounce from one valley wall to another. As the echoes fade, the valley becomes eerily silent.

Austin, in an excited, forced whisper, "Wow! Sam was right about them coming for the houses."

"Don't be too happy," Victoria reminds him in a sad, distant tone, "That used to be our home."

Austin feels embarrassed about his comment. His overly focused view of the events caused him not to understand their overall impact. In the awkward silence, Tylor puts his hand on Austin's shoulder to console him in his loss. "Thanks," whispers Austin. "I'm not happy about our ranch, but I think there will be fewer people trying to kill us."

"I get you. It's emotionally confusing," Tylor compassionately agrees. "Sometimes you need to talk it out – I will listen. We'll be friends for many years; let's help each other often."

CJ, in a forced whisper to Sam, “Now what?”

“We wait,” responds Sam with just enough volume for CJ to hear. “It could be a diversion to get us out of the cabin, or some survivors may be waiting for us. I’ll check it in a couple of hours. If there’s anybody left, they’ll either have attacked us by then or gone home to tend to their injuries.”

Tylor is adrenaline-filled and needs to do something besides sit and stare at the walls. He knows Sam, and likely CJ, will be awake for a while. “Should I make some coffee?”

“Sure,” answers Sam. “Then I want you, Austin, and Victoria to go lay down but stay dressed and ready. Today will be another long day, and we’ll need to get rest wherever we can.”

Clearing his throat, Austin asks, “How can anyone sleep after that?” Austin starts coughing weakly.

“Sam’s right,” agrees Victoria. Worried about Austin’s declining health, she uses Sam’s suggestion to sway Austin into getting some much-needed rest. “We should at least lay down for a bit. If not sleep, at least close our eyes.”

Sam and CJ sense Victoria’s worry about Austin. As he heads to the kitchen, Tylor’s eyes show as much concern as Victoria’s: “I’ll get you some water.”

An hour later, CJ is asleep in a chair by the table. Sam taps him on the shoulder and signals that he is going out. Sam takes two of the rifles and quietly exits through the back door. Minutes later, Sam rides Ben’s horse past the cabin and down the road to the ranches with Bryan’s horse in tow.

CJ intently listens as he imagines various scenarios playing out at the ranches Sam is investigating. After about twenty minutes, which to CJ seemed like hours, he hears three gunshots: Bang – Bang, Bang. The code that CJ and Sam agreed on to indicate that the threat is neutralized.

CJ has second thoughts about the three-shot signal he proposed. The gunfire just ramped up his adrenaline again. As he tries to calm down, this thought drifts through his mind: ‘Sam’s suggestion of returning to the spot out by the tree, as he did with the wagons, would have been better.’

#### [ Collecting Trash ]

Sam is riding south along the main Creighton Valley road. Behind his horse is a string of six additional horses, each with a body slung over their saddles. He travels slowly to keep the ‘cargo’ in place.

To Sam’s left are the remains of Ben’s ranch house, which was destroyed by the explosion. Some small pieces are scattered across the snow for over eighty feet in every direction. Further inspection reveals that the blown-up ranch house is not on fire but has some smoldering. All the windows are blown out, and the walls are blown out at the bottom, yet they are still mostly attached at the top. Nearly all the siding boards are blown off, leaving a skeletal framework for the walls. The ranch house is about half as tall as it used to be due to the angles of the walls. Juxtaposed to the damage of the ranch house is the barn one hundred feet south of where the house stood. The barn is fully intact.

Sam lights a lantern as he continues up the road toward the intersection of the main road and the road to the cabin. The lamp signals to the rest of the family that Sam is approaching.

### [ Round Up and Head Out ]

In the early morning, about a half hour before sunrise, in front of the cabin's barn, four mounted riders ready themselves for a cold trip to town. Victoria, CJ, Tylor, and Austin are wearing sidearms and have rifles in their scabbards. They are all well-bundled for the cold weather; however, Austin is exceptionally well-bundled. A lamp comes into view on the road in front of the cabin. The four riders pass by the cabin and meet the rider at the road junction.

Sam turns off the lamp and hangs it on the signpost that reads 'Creighton Valley.' He points to CJ and then holds up six fingers, indicating that CJ is to 'take the six,' which is the last position in the line. Establishing the Six position is a familiar practice for Sam and the boys. It was regularly used when they went out on the UTVs. Six is responsible for watching behind for approaching riders that travel faster than their group and also not letting anyone fall behind.

CJ nods, accepting the responsibility. Sam takes the lead spot. Victoria, Tylor, Austin, and CJ follow his string of horses. In performing his duties as Six, CJ looks around and behind the group for danger before he follows the rest.

### [ Split ]

About twenty minutes later, at sunrise, Sam leads the group along the main road from Placerville to Harmony Flats. They cross a small trail just outside of town. Sam and Victoria continue on the main road while Austin turns from the main road and heads northeast along the trail into the trees. CJ and Tylor follow Austin.

Sam sees the departure. He and Victoria stop. Austin now takes the lead for the boys. Sam reaches up and taps the top of his head, requesting status. CJ returns the signal, indicating that all is well.

The two parties continue on their diverging paths.

### [ Meeting the Sheriff ]

Daybreak. Sam and Victoria arrive about two hundred yards short of the train station. They can see the sheriff, Andrew Hawkins, and three deputies, Will, Howard, and Lewis, waiting for them. Sam politely raises one hand to signal Victoria to stop. With his string of horses, Sam rides up to the sheriff alone.

From Victoria's vantage point, she can see Sam as he speaks with the sheriff. She can not hear what they say but watches Sam's movements to understand the atmosphere and general topics. She notes that Sam is relaxed. When he motions to the string of horses with the dead men, there appear to be no issues, and when he points to the town, the sheriff nods in agreement.

Sam turns toward Victoria and motions for her to join them. He introduces Victoria to the sheriff, shakes his hand, and then rides toward town briskly with his string of horses and dead men. Victoria, the sheriff, and the deputies follow at a leisurely pace.

### [ Visit to the Salon ]

The three boys reach the Harmony Flats Livery, which has yet to open. They covertly dismount and tie their horses to the hitching post outside the stables. Leaving their horses behind, the boys continue on foot, carrying three heavy saddle bags.

They navigate a furtive, circuitous route to Falling Leaf's house. Austin knocks on the door using his code. The door opens partway. As soon as it opens, the three of them quickly enter the dark house. The door quietly closes behind them.

[ Dropping off the Dead ]

Sam arrives in town with his string of horses and corpses. The town is quiet due to the early hours. Confidently, Sam rides up the main street to the town marshal's office and dismounts. He ties each horse in the string to the hitching post.

He pulls the man on Bryan's horse to the ground and drags him up to the boardwalk, leaning him upright near the steps. Leaving the rest of the dead men on the other horses, Sam takes the reins of Bryan's horse and remounts his horse. With a final glance at the dead men, he turns his horse and heads off to the livery.

A very short ride later, Sam arrives at the house next to the livery and rings the triangle as Victoria had instructed. Several seconds later, he sees a man looking out of one of the windows. The man waves, acknowledging the bell, and Sam waves back to signal the acknowledgment. Soon, Robert Sanford emerges from the house, pulling his coat on as he approaches Sam. Robert immediately recognizes the horses and becomes suspicious.

Robert carefully approaches Sam, reserved and guarded; he asks, "What can I do for you, mister?"

"Mornin' Robert," replies Sam. Robert is surprised to be called by name by a stranger, especially on Ben's horse. Sam continues, "A friend of mine, goes by the name White Squirrel, said you were the one to see about puttin' up the horses for the day. He's the one that left these here." Sam gestures to the horses the boys left tied to the hitching post. "Of course, with the current circumstances, he'd like to keep his presence in town very quiet."

Robert still needs to be convinced that everything is on the up and up, so he tests Sam: "So, what do you hear from Ben?" Attempting to hide his suspicions, he opens the stable door to let Sam in.

When Robert is finished opening the barn door and looks at Sam, Sam shakes his head. Robert hopes the news about the family is incorrect, but his fears are confirmed; he lowers his head in sadness and respect.

Sam dismounts and leads his horse into the stable. In a subdued and respectful tone, he tells Robert, "It's just the two of 'em—White Squirrel and Victoria. I'll refrain from using White Squirrel's English name. And as far as anyone else needs to know, it's just Victoria."

"Damn!" cusses Robert. He suddenly remembers the rumors and thinks Sam might be contagious with smallpox. He steps away from Sam, saying, "The pox don't care who it takes."

In a calm, quiet voice, Sam tells him, “Wasn’t the pox – it was Wilson.” Robert’s attitude changes from sorrow to anger. Sam continues, “He just made up the pox story to cover his tracks.”

Robert yells, “Fuckin’ bastard!” He picks up a bucket and throws it at one of the walls, startling the horses. Turning away from Sam, he yells again, “Shit!” He doesn’t know Sam and is unsure whose side he’s on. He looks at Sam accusingly, “Where were you during all this?” Robert aggressively approaches him as Sam calmly ties his horse to the hitching post inside the stable.

“I was in the old miner’s cabin.” Sam explains, “When I went out to check on the commotion, I found the kids in the snow.” Sam’s demeanor and the information he has given Robert are starting to allow Robert to believe him and become more comfortable around him. Sam adds, “They managed to escape Wilson’s gang but were in terrible condition. I thought we were going to lose Squirrel.”

Taking the Saddle off the horse, Robert asks, “You told the sheriff all this?”

Sam helps Robert get the saddle on the rack, “Victoria’s with him now. He knows the whole story, but it’ll be hard to prove. It’s Victoria’s word against Wilson and McGinn. Wilson also paid a Doctor to claim it was the pox. They have a pile of fake evidence: Victoria’s just got her word. With a jury too scared to convict Wilson, she is fighting a losing battle in this town. Of course, Wilson’s looking to make it a one-sided story when he gets the chance.”

Robert understands what Sam is implying and is impressed with Sam’s understanding of the town’s politics and corruption. He’s also angry at what Hank has done to his friends: “That scheming bastard.” Robert kicks the dirt floor in the barn and takes a long, slow breath before asking, “What can I do to help?”

“Right now, just keep our visit quiet,” Sam confides. “Victoria will be visiting with the judge this morning. That’ll be like stirrin’ up a hornet’s nest. Things could get a bit crazy around here.”

“Townfolk here are generally pretty nice,” suggests Robert. “But they spread rumors faster than wildfire. Once Victoria gets spotted, the whole town ‘ill know within five minutes. Thing is, ya’ never know which way it’ll go. Some folks might be thinkin’ she’s carrin’ the pox. Others will start figuring’ that Wilson has somthin’ to do with it. Either way, most folk’ll be steerin’ clear of her ‘till they know more.”

“That’s a good thing,” Sam reckons. “Wilson won’t take kindly to anyone helping her out. Knowing how dangerous he is, they should keep their distance.”

“Can’t fault them too much fer that,” states Robert.

Sam walks back to the horse, “Nope. That bastard is pure evil. Wilson and his men will be quite surprised – and upset, that Victoria’s still alive. His special, quiet court hearing will now be contested, and Wilson will be madder than a wet hen. Fortunately, the sheriff and his deputies have offered to ensure Victoria’s safety while she’s in town. We’ll likely be on our own getting back to the cabin, so we may need some help getting out of town quietly or quickly – maybe both.”

“Mister, I’ll help wherever I can,” Robert states. “I missed your name.”



"Name's Sam Reynolds." Sam crosses to Robert and shakes his hand. "I'm the new cabin tenant - just got there the day before all this started. Didn't know what I was gettin' into."

Sam pauses to compose his next sentence. He gives Robert just a bit more information to help keep him safe. "I should tell you: Wilson stopped by the cabin yesterday. We didn't exactly hit it off. Course, I tend to lose my manners when talkin' to a murderer. Then, while they were trying to burn down the ranches in the middle of the night," Sam's tone becomes sarcastic, "in a series of tragic accidents, he lost five of his men. He'll undoubtedly be blaming me for their carelessness. It may be a good idea to give me a wide berth so you don't draw any of the wrath cast in my direction."

Robert pats the shoulder of the horse, "So, you're the Captain. Townsfolk already knows about you and your men sendin' ol' Hank a runnin' scared. I've gotta say, Captain Reynolds, that's quite a grand way to introduce yourself to one of the most feared men in California."

"Suppose so," Sam smiles, "but it puts bullies like him off their game when they get serious resistance. By the way, please, just call me Sam."

"Okay, Sam," Robert looks at the horses, "What will you be needin'?"

At first, Sam doesn't know what Robert is asking, then realizes that Robert is looking at the horses. "Umm. Oh, the horses – They could use some feed and a good brushing. Squirrel says that Paul does excellent work."

Robert smiles, "I think that's a fair assessment." He shakes Sam's hand: "Good luck today."

Sam says, "Thanks; we'll need it." He then turns and walks out the door.

[ Anastasia ]

With the help of Falling Leaf, CJ, and Tylor, Austin has been transformed into CJ and Tylor's little sister. Austin is wearing a dress over pants, a heavy coat, and a bonnet-type hat with flaps to help hide his face.

The boys slip out of Falling Leaf's front door and quickly wind their way down the back streets. They want to distance themselves from the house and avoid any connection that might jeopardize the safety of Falling Leaf's family. Once they are over two blocks away, they continue more casually down the back street, CJ is on one side of Austin, and Tylor is on the other.

Austin, speaking normally, said, "I think we should go to the livery first to test the disguise. If Paul doesn't recognize me, the disguise will work for everybody else."

Hesitantly, to not upset Austin any further about being dressed as a girl, CJ mentions, "To me, it's a great disguise, but you have to watch your voice."

Perturbed by the criticism, Austin asks, "What's the matter with my voice?"

Tylor gently explains, "Well, not your voice so much, but it's more about *how* you talk. Your phrasing and tone are a lot more boyish than girlish."



Irritated that he is expected to know how to act like a girl, Austin asserts, "It's not like I practiced for this."

Calmly, CJ reassures him, "We know. We're just trying to be helpful. And you should practice, at least in your head, how to speak more girly. You're a guy, and this is your first time in a female disguise, but our lives will depend on your acting ability. Okay?"

Austin understands the importance of the disguise, but he feels unprepared for this role. A zero-rehearsal debut has him scared. Defeatedly, he agrees, "Okay. I'll try harder to say girlier stuff."

They arrive outside the livery. They reckon Sam must have already paid a visit since their horses are no longer tied to the outside hitching post. They walk through the large barn door into the intake area.

Robert is brushing one of their horses. "What can I do for you? You kids lost?"

CJ is surprised that someone would think they are lost, but then he realizes the times: Kids didn't just wander about places like the livery. CJ answers, "Lost? No, sir." He's still a little unconfident; since it's his first time in a livery, maybe he was in the wrong place. Austin nudges CJ to reassure him that this is right. CJ continues, "I don't think so, sir. We are looking for Paul. May we visit him for a few minutes if he's here?"

Robert thinks, 'This is going to be one of those days. First, some captain who challenges the most feared person in the area stops by. Now some strange kids he's never seen want to talk to Paul.' Robert responds to the unusual request, "Umm, sure, I guess. Who should I say is asking for him?"

CJ amplifies the strangeness of the request. "We haven't met yet." Clarifying that Paul doesn't know him, "Paul and I, that is - I -" He looks at the other two and then comes up with a plausible story. CJ stutters, "I, I mean, we just got into town and were told that Paul might be willing to show us around. We'd be willing to pay for his time." CJ takes a \$10 coin from his pocket and hands it to Robert.

Robert looks at the coin and is impressed by its value. He hollers out to the stall area, "Paul! I got someone to see you!"

Robert then addresses the kids, "So, who might you be?"

CJ responds in a tone befitting a well-brought-up young man: "Please excuse my manners. I'm CJ Davis." He gestures to Tylor. "This is my brother, Tylor. And this is my sister." He gestures to Austin with a slight delay as he tries to come up with a name. ". . . Anastasia."

"I'm Robert Sanford." Robert shakes CJ's hand. "CJ, it's nice to meet you."

CJ respectfully responds, "Mr. Sanford. My Pleasure."

Robert turns to Tylor and shakes his hand. "Tylor."

Tylor smiles, "Mr. Sanford."

Robert now addresses Austin, “Anastasia. That’s a pretty name for a pretty girl. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.” CJ and Tylor, now behind Robert, can barely keep from breaking out in laughter.

Austin is very nervous and is afraid of blowing his cover. He thinks about what CJ and Tylor said about his voice, so he does his best to sound girly, “Why, thank you, Mr. Stanford.”

Paul comes from the stables, carrying a pitchfork that draws Robert’s and the kids’ attention. Since Robert is blocking CJ visually from Paul, Austin takes this opportunity to hit CJ.

Austin quietly complains to CJ about the name choice, “Anastasia?”

Paul leans the fork against the wall and joins the group. Addressing his father, he says, “Yes, sir?”

“These youngsters,” Robert gestures to the kids, “have in mind hiring you to show them around town. They’re new here and were told you knew this town inside and out.”

“I don’t know it all.” Paul lowers his head and looks at the floor. “Only Austin knew everything. But—” Paul stops talking before getting too emotional. Austin struggles to hide his smile, happy for the distinction of knowing the town best and for Paul not having recognized him yet. Paul looks at CJ somber yet politely and agrees, “I suppose I could show you around a little.” Addressing his father, “If it’s okay with you, Pa.”

“Sure”, Robert replies. “I can handle the horses for a while.” He tosses Paul the \$10 coin. “They’re paying you rather handsomely, so do a good job.”

Paul affirms his diligence, excited about the \$10, “Yes, sir. I will.”

CJ crosses to meet Paul, extending his hand. “I’m CJ Davis,” he says, gesturing to the others. “This is my brother, Tylor, and my little sister, Anastasia.”

Paul shakes CJ’s and Tylor’s hands, then takes Austin’s (Anastasia’s) hand as a gentleman. Paul bows his head slightly. He releases her (Austin’s) hand and gives a short nod to his father, indicating that he has taken the job and no longer needs his father’s assistance. Robert goes back to work on the horses.

Paul addresses the kids, “Might as well start here.” He steps away from them, starting the tour. He puts his arms up in a grand gesture as if showing off the royal palace. He proudly proclaims, “This is the town’s only livery. We have twelve stalls and can handle well over double that many horses if need be.”

Since this is CJ’s first experience in a livery, as opposed to a barn, he is impressed. “Seems very orderly.”

“I haven’t seen one of these before – ” Tylor notices that he is making a mistake in saying that he hasn’t seen a livery before. He fumbles for words to change his meaning: “That was this well kept.” Austin and CJ look at Tylor in disappointment at his mistake. Tylor nods slightly in accepting their retribution.

Paul pridefully accepts the compliment, “Thanks. We work hard to keep it nice.”

Austin, in his most girly voice, tries to gloss over the awkwardness of the 'tour' by asking, "May we see the horses?"

"Of course", says Paul. "Right this way, miss."

Paul holds out his arm so Anastasia can hold on. Austin is hesitant. Tylor nudges Austin into Paul, so he has to take Paul's arm. They continue walking between the stalls until they reach an empty one with an open door. Austin pushes Paul into the open stall, and the other boys quickly duck into it, as well.

With a bewildered look, he demands, "What was that for?"

"Paul! It's me – Austin." Austin removes the hat.

Paul scrutinizes Austin/Anastasia to confirm the statement. "I thought you were dead."

Paul gives Austin a big hug. Fortunately, Paul's hands are around Austin's lower back, missing the injuries from the belt. Austin returns the hug.

Austin, still hugging Paul, "I almost was. If it weren't for their uncle, I would be."

"Okay, break it up, you two." Tylor separates them. "If someone sees this, they will surely get the wrong idea."

Paul confesses, "I didn't know it was you." Then he teases, "You're kinda cute dressed up like that."

More embarrassed than irritated, Austin feigns retribution, "I'm gonna punch you!" as he makes a fist.

Paul backs away from Austin, putting his hands up for defense, "I'm just a funnin' ya." Austin puts down his fist, and Paul steps back toward Austin, "I really am glad to see that you ain't dead."

Paul starts to put his arm around Austin to pat him on the back. CJ sees what's about to happen and quickly reaches up and stops Paul.

"Not up there." CJ moves Paul's hand to Austin's lower back. "He's got some pretty severe injuries. We all know Austin was just teasing earlier, but if you go patting on his cuts, he probably will hit you."

Paul takes his hands off Austin completely, "Oh, sorry."

Austin forgives him at once, "It's okay. You didn't know."

Over the shock of his best friend being alive, Paul starts wondering what's happening. "So, who are these guys? Why are you dressed like a girl? Why hire me when you know this town better than anyone?"

"These are my friends," Austin gesturing to each, respectively, "CJ and Tylor Davis. Their uncle is the one who saved Victoria and me."

“Victoria’s alive too?” Paul asks.

“Yeah,” Austin explains, “We escaped from Wilson’s men, then we almost froze to death. That’s when Sam saved us.” Austin coughs a couple of times, weakly.

Paul states, “The marshal said everybody in your family died from the pox, and we was t’ stay away from your valley. I’m so sorry about your family.” Paul touches Austin’s hand while offering consolation.

“McGinn is a liar,” Tylor professes. “Wilson’s men massacred Austin’s whole family.” Austin immediately puts his head down as he is reminded of his loss. “The pox was just a cover story that Wilson made up to keep everybody away so he could hide the murders.”

Tylor sees Austin’s pain and softly addresses him, “Sorry for being so blunt.”

Austin responds pitifully, “It’s Okay. It’s better just to say how it is, I guess.”

Changing the topic to bring up the mood, CJ reveals their plan: “Speaking of cover stories, that’s why we hired you. Austin has to go around town to make some deliveries. It’ll make it easier for him to do that if we just look like you’re showing us around. Austin has the errands to run; we’re just along for the tour.”

Tylor quickly adds, “And to keep him safe. Wilson will kill him —” A chill goes down Paul’s spine. “As soon as he finds out that he didn’t die in the snow, that’s why the disguise. And that’s why you can’t mention this to anyone. Also, at the first sign of trouble, you run away. Austin wants to keep you safe, too.”

“Don’t worry. I want nothin’ to do with Mr. Wilson or his men, so I won’t be stickin’ around if they come around. — What deliveries?”

“Ren left some things at the cabin for me to deliver after he died,” Austin tells him, “I just found out about ‘em. There’s one for your family, too. I’ll give it to your dad.”

Tylor interrupts, “I hate to break up this reunion, I really do, but we need to get your deliveries done as quickly as possible so we can get off the streets and get you some rest. The less you’re in the public, the safer you’ll be.”

CJ concurs, “He’s right. Let’s get this show on the road.”

Tylor sees Austin and Paul look at each other, confused. Ushering the boys out the door, Tylor explains, “He means, let’s go.”

They start to leave, and Paul looks back at Austin, “Oh. Austin, you better get fixed back up.”

The boys help Austin get back into disguise and leave the stalls for the in-take area. Anastasia gives Robert a key and a small, heavy gift box. Paul leads the group to explore the rest of the town.

Robert, using the key, opens the box. In it are a note, some cash, and two stacks of gold coins, each about four inches long. The note inside reads, 'Thank you for your kindness. This is not repayment but a gift of appreciation—some cash for immediate need and a few gold coins for your savings. Kindest Regards, R'

[ Touring the Town ]

The town is relatively quiet, as it is a Sunday morning. The boys are walking on the boardwalk of Main Street, Paul leading the way. Tylor and Austin follow close behind him. Austin holds Tylor's arm as a little sister should. This arrangement allows Tylor to block the view of most onlookers. CJ is following with a laden saddlebag. Although it is not apparent to most onlookers, CJ keeps a keen eye on all the activities along the street. His eyes darting about like marbles in a pachinko game. Since this is Sunday, most shops are closed; however, the proprietors are usually in their shops to accommodate families that travel a long way for church and use this as their weekly town visit.

Under his breath, Austin admits to Tylor, "This feels weird: holding your arm like this."

Hushed to Austin, Tylor corrects him, "Austin isn't holding my arm, Anastasia is. Keep in character, and it won't be such a big deal. You're doing a good job."

Although he is uncomfortable disguised as a girl, Austin can't help but smile at the praise. Paul stops the group in front of the printing office. In keeping with his tour guide character, Paul announces in a bold, showman-like manner, "This is the town's printing shop. Not many towns this size have one of these."

Austin, in his girl's voice, said, "We'd like to see the printer, if you please." And under his breath, to Paul, in his regular voice, "A little less dramatic. We're trying not to be noticed!"

Paul drops the grand theatrics, "Of course, miss." He gives Anastasia a wink. "Right this way." He opens the door for Anastasia. Anastasia leads in, and the rest follow.

Mr. Fry is at the setting table, getting a plate ready for Monday's edition. He looks over his shoulder and sees Paul. He smiles, turns toward the kids, and puts down his work.

"Mr. Fry," Paul steps to the front of the bunch, "I'm sorry to interrupt. I'd like to introduce my friends. They're new in town and would like to introduce themselves and get to know some folks around here."

Steven crosses to greet them, "Always a pleasure to meet new neighbors."

Paul gestures to each and introduces them, "This is CJ, Tylor, and Anastasia Davis. Everybody, this is Mr. Steven Fry. He is the newspaper editor and printer."

CJ shaking hands, "Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Fry."

Tylor shaking hands, "Yes, sir. A pleasure to meet you."

"Mr. Fry." Anastasia does a slight bow.

Steven speaks to the eldest, CJ, "So, from where do you hail?"

In his best old Western dialect, Tylor responds, "We're from all over, sir. Our parents got killed in the war, and our uncle took us in. We've been moving around ever since."

CJ adds, "He got a job workin' for Ben Creighton. We live in the old prospector's cabin."

Steven woefully offers condolence, "Sorry to hear about the pox."

Lowering his head, CJ speaks reverently, "Tragic indeed, sir. We never got to meet them, but we've heard that they were good people."

"That they were, lad," Steven agrees, "That they were."

"Mr. Fry," Anastasia changes the subject, "I've got somethin' for ya', but ya' gotta keep it t' yerself."

CJ reaches into the saddlebag and retrieves the box and key intended for Mr. Fry.

Surprised by the sudden gift from strangers but curious about the item, Steven graciously accepts: "I'm not used to accepting gifts from pretty, young ladies, but I guess I can make an exception."

Flustered and embarrassed about the comment, Austin is doing his best to stay in character, "Actually, it's from someone named Ren. He left a note sayin' to deliver this to you. The note also said it'd be best to keep it under wraps with Mr. Wilson's men around and all."

"Ren was a wise man," Steven states. "Only a fool would dismiss such sound advice. Thank you, Miss Davis." Anastasia hands the box and key to Steven. "My, that's heavy," he remarks. "It's no wonder you have your two brothers to help."

Tylor inconspicuously taps Paul to get him to hurry up.

"Mr. Fry," Paul says, "I'm afraid we have to move on now. There's the rest of the town to see, and we've used up too much of your time."

"Oh, yes. Of course", replies Steven. Turning to CJ in a hopeful tone, he suggests, "CJ, maybe you could stop by for an interview next week. I'm sure the townspeople would like to get an insight into their new neighbors."

To avoid the interview, CJ makes an excuse to delay an answer. In doing so, he unintentionally adds unwanted interest by mentioning the wrong person: "Thank you, Mr. Fry. I'll ask my uncle about it." CJ sees the wheels turning in Mr. Fry's head and realizes his error will extend their visit with Mr. Fry.

"Your uncle wouldn't happen to be Captain Reynolds, wouldn't he?" Steven asks. The kids look at each other in surprise, as the 'Captain' has already made an impression. "I'd certainly like to interview him, as well."

Trying to distance the group from the now-famous Captain Reynolds, CJ makes a fast exit, "It was nice to make your acquaintance, Mr. Fry."

“Thank you, Mr. Fry,” Paul also retreats.

“Thank you, Paul, and –” Steven bends down to take Anastasia's hand, “Thank you, Anastasia.”

Austin, in his girly voice: “It was nice to meet you, Mr. Fry.”

The kids go out the front door. CJ trails the group.

As he heads out the door, CJ speaks quietly and directly to Mr Fry, “By the way, I should let you know that it wasn't the pox that killed the Creightons. You should look into it – carefully.” Looking into Steven's eyes to make a strong point, “Oh, also, for everyone's safety, especially little Anastasia, don't mention we were from the cabin.” Steven nods in understanding.

CJ catches up with the rest. In the printing office, Mr. Fry takes out his notepad and starts writing.

Feeling like they just dodged a bullet, Tylor notes, “Luckily for us, we'll be in Ohio next week. It would sure complicate things to have any of our story written down.”

Using his regular voice, Austin dampens Tylor's impression of the visit, “Mr. Fry is a good man, but he's always lookin' for a new story. I'll bet ya that he's already started writing about us in his notebook.”

CJ changes the plan. “From now on, we don't tell anybody we're from the cabin. Everybody's already heard about yesterday. I think I convinced Mr. Fry to keep it quiet.”

“I guess we should be a little less chatty at our next stop,” Tylor suggests. “We'll just say we're passing through.”

“Okay,” Austin points out, “Like you said, we'll be in Ohio next week, so it don't matter what ya' tell 'em.”

CJ corrects him, “Doesn't.”

Austin says in his regular voice, “Huh?”

CJ repeats the correction, “It doesn't matter.”

Not recognizing it as a correction but thinking CJ is just repeating what he said, Austin, in his regular voice, accepts CJ's confirmation, “Oh. Okay.”

CJ shakes his head, wondering why Austin did not understand he was being corrected. Paul stops at the next stop: the mercantile.

In his role as guide, Paul explains, “This here is the mercantile.” Once again, Paul opens the door for Anastasia. Before Anastasia can get inside, kids from across the street take notice.

Trevor yells out, “Hey, Paul. Who's your girlfriend?”

Kenny teases, “♪ Pauly's got a girlfriend ♪.”



As he rushes Anastasia and Paul into the store, CJ says, under his breath, to Austin, “Just ignore them. We don’t want to draw any more attention.”

The foursome ducks into the mercantile. With adjustments to their story, the tour group visits the other recipients of Ren’s generosity, including the pastor, Mr. O’Brein, and the blacksmith.

[ Bullies ]

Except for the prostitutes, they have finished their deliveries. Their most recent delivery was to the blacksmith on the back street. The road is muddy from the melting snow. While they are walking, four of Wilson’s men come around the corner from an alley.

CJ and Tylor immediately identify the threat and seek an escape that will not draw attention, but nothing is available. If they just turn and run, that will definitely draw attention. So the kids try to walk by inconspicuously and hope trouble passes them.

The men are talking as they amble along the street. George notices the kids and decides to hassle them. He indicates to the rest of the thugs that they should follow suit. The thugs walk right into the kids’ path.

Carl starts the harassment, “Well, well. What do we got here?”

Both CJ and Tylor sense the danger of the encounter. Their pulses get fast and their senses become acute. As they were taught in their martial arts training, they examine their opponents for possible vulnerabilities.

Tylor notices Ralph’s gate is unsymmetrical – he must have had a previous injury. His lower left leg is a weak spot. Also, Carl’s breathing and position in the group indicate he is not a good fighter. He is unpredictable.

CJ notices Thomas is nervously moving his fingers; his weakness is his confidence. He will not be the one to make the first move. George is the mouth of the pack. With his backup of three other men, he feels entirely in control when dealing with two teenagers, a little girl and a preteen. CJ sums him up as a hot-tempered coward.

Knowing this is the start of an altercation, CJ pays due diligence to de-escalate the situation. “Sorry, mister. We didn’t mean to block your path.” He tries to step aside but is blocked by the other thugs.

Ralph joins the bullying, “It’s a little too late for that now, isn’t it?” The thugs start to form a semi-circle around the kids.

Paul knows the thugs’ reputation and knows they are in big trouble. Out of fear, Paul starts tearing up; he takes two steps back.

George pinches Anastasia’s cheek, “Who’s this little cutey?”

Repulsed by the dirty thugs, Austin/Anastasia instinctively reaches up and slaps his hand away. CJ rolls his eyes, knowing this will only end in a fight. He then nods, indicating to Tylor which of the thugs he will take.

George, angered by the rejection, pushes Austin down, “You little bitch!”

In one continuous motion, CJ tosses the saddlebag to Paul, and then Roundhouse kicks George, knocking him to the ground. Paul nearly falls from the bag's weight but manages to keep his feet. He remembers that he is supposed to run away, but his legs won't move.

Like his brother, Tylor also holds a blackbelt in Taekwondo and targets Ralph. After kicking Ralph in the gut and hitting him in the face with his elbow, Tylor breaks Ralph's arm.

CJ uses a front kick to Thomas's chest, knocking him to the ground. Thomas grabs his chest and begins to breathe agonizingly.

Carl starts to draw his gun, but CJ draws his first, stopping Carl with his gun half-drawn. CJ steps back, along with the rest of the boys, keeping the thugs under gunpoint.

CJ gestures to Carl to re-holster the weapon and keep his hand away. Then he tells Tylor, “Get their guns.”

Tylor draws his gun and hands it to Austin. Paul, shocked by the action, instinctively drifts behind Austin for protection.

Tylor tells Austin, “If they even flinch, shoot ‘em. Got it?”

Pulling the hammer back, Austin uses his girly voice, “I'd be happy to.” Carl smiles at the ‘little girl’ holding a gun on him – thinking she might not keep it pointed at him. Austin is not falling for it and is not amused: “Do I have t’ wait ‘til they flinch?” Carl’s smile becomes a grimace as he sees the determination in Austin’s eyes.

Tylor answers, “Yes, they must move before you shoot them. Otherwise, we would be despicable murderers like them. It’s self-defense if they move.”

Amused by Austin’s callousness, Tylor smiles as he collects the firearms.

Once Tylor has all their revolvers, CJ tells him, “Let’s remove the cylinder axles.”

Tylor opens the guns and removes the cylinders and axles. CJ motions with his head to a rain barrel nearby. Tylor throws the axles into the barrel, then looks at the cylinders in his hand and tosses them into the rain barrel, too. Tylor looks at CJ’s questioning expression and shrugs as if to say, ‘Why not?’ The guns are no longer a concern, so Tylor tosses them into the mud near the thugs.

CJ, suggesting Austin should have the final word in this encounter, asks, “Anastasia, do you have anything you want to tell these guys?”

Austin hands the gun back to Tylor. Tylor drops the hammer to half cock, spins the cylinder to place the hammer over an empty chamber, drops the hammer, and reholsters the revolver.

Austin walks up to Carl, the only thug still standing, and looks at him like he wants to tell him something. Using his girly voice, he chides Carl, "Keep your filthy --" Then, out of the blue, holding nothing back, he kicks Carl in the groin. Carl buckles onto his knees in the mud, grabbing his groin. Calmly, Austin finishes his sentence, "-- hands to yourself." Austin takes the opportunity to punch Carl on the left side of the face, knocking him to the ground and covering him in mud.

Excitedly, astonished at the action, Paul addresses Tylor, "Wow! That's some mighty fancy fightin'." Paul stops and reflects a little about the fight's consequences. He now speaks with concern, "Course, now they'll likely shoot you next time they see you."

CJ knows the thugs heard Paul, so by playing mind games and creating doubt in the minds of the thugs, CJ speaks loud enough for them to hear: "They might try. Even if they're twice as fast as that guy." He points to Carl, who is lying in the mud. "I'll have nothing to worry about." CJ raises his voice to ensure they listen as he addresses the thugs: "You boys might consider a career change if you want to stay alive."

Looking over the carnage. Paul sees that George hasn't moved since being kicked; he asks, "Is that guy dead?"

Tylor follows CJ's lead, keeping the mental upper hand. "It wouldn't be the first time."

Paul's jaw drops, and his eyes widen with shock as he and Austin exchange glances. Austin clearly had no idea that his big brothers knew how to fight like that. He's also surprised that his brothers were used to killing people in their fights.

In a voice and tone that suggests this is an expected outcome as in many previous encounters with miscreants and that he is not pleased about wasting time with such trivialities, CJ announces, "We've got stuff to do. 'Nough wastin' time here. Let's stop and get a drink, then we can finish our rounds."

CJ turns and walks off. Tylor follows him. Austin and Paul, totally in shock at the events and the suggestion of the (alcoholic) drink, look at each other and then at CJ and Tylor walking away from them. They notice that they will soon be alone with the thugs. They quickly decide to hurry and catch up with the older boys.

After Paul and Austin catch up, CJ, under his breath, tells them, looking straight ahead so the thugs don't know he's talking to the younger boys, "Don't act like I'm talking to you. He's not dead. I saw him breathing. He's just knocked out. We're not going to the bar yet. We have another mission to complete first. Also, when we meet Sam, we'll tell him what happened. He said to let him know if anything unusual happened."

Tylor snickers, "I think that qualifies as unusual."

Laughing, Paul agrees, "Yeah. That was unusual."

Tylor and Paul are both very excited and pleased - almost giddy, about the fight and, of course, the result. Not letting the thugs see their happiness, it is hard for them to contain themselves as they walk away.

CJ and Tylor, on the other hand, have lost all color and are nearly trembling due to the adrenalin and fear pumping through their bodies as a result of the encounter, understanding that they were in an actual life-and-death fight. They, too, hide their emotions from their adversaries as they walk away.

[ Decompression ]

They turn the corner into an alley between two buildings. When completely out of view of the thugs, CJ and Tylor quickly spin to face each other. They both lean over, put their hands on their knees, and take a deep breath to release the tension of the events before standing up and high-fiving each other. Tylor puts his hand on his chest, feeling his rapid heartbeat. Then, they turn to Austin and Paul.

Getting down on one knee to better look into Paul's face, CJ takes control of Paul by placing one hand on each shoulder, "Paul. You head back to the livery, tell your dad what happened, and stay out of sight for the rest of the day. He'll definitely understand. They probably ignored you since you were in the back and didn't do any fighting, but the less you're seen with us, the better." Trying to preserve Austin's dignity. "Oh, and please don't mention that Austin was Anastasia. We don't want anyone to know he's alive or – he looks at Austin in the dress – get the wrong idea about him."

Nodding in agreement, Paul breathlessly agrees, "Okay." He is starting to comprehend the seriousness of the incident and the danger his friends are in. Concerned, he asks, "Are – are you guys going to be okay?"

Reassuringly, Tylor smiles, "Sure. And thanks for everything. I'm glad we could meet you, and I'm terribly sorry about the fight."

Austin hugs Paul, "You've been a great friend. I'm gonna miss you." He releases Paul. Paul looks a little perplexed about the last comment. Austin speaks secretively, "Can't tell anyone." Paul nods in agreement and understanding. "We're going to leave on the train on Tuesday. Headed to Ohio. Don't know if I'll see you before then, so I guess this is goodbye."

Paul starts to tear up but holds it back, "I'll miss you too." Extending his hand in a manly gesture, he barely stays composed, "Maybe we'll cross paths again."

"I hope so." Austin shakes Paul's hand and then hugs him.

"Paul, you have to go." CJ turns Paul toward the street, "This is for your safety. You don't want to be seen with us again, so take care and stay out of sight."

"Okay," Paul looks over his shoulder as he walks away, "Bye." Just before getting to the street, at the end of the alley, he, uncoordinatedly, does his best to recreate a kick and a punch to an invisible opponent, like he witnessed in the fight. Entering the street, he turns left to go to the livery. The remaining three boys exit the alley a few seconds after Paul but turn right.

[ Court ]

The town of Harmony Flats is at the end of the rail line, except for the turning loop that extends the line about a half mile to the west. Because of that, Harmony Flats is the hub for most legal battles in the area. Lawyers and judges can access the town without using horses or stagecoaches for their cases.

The town's courthouse is not fancy, having only two attorney tables, one for each side of the case, a small table for the recorder, and a large desk for the judge. Several chairs along the side wall make up the jury box, and a dozen are in the gallery area where people can watch the trials. Behind the large desk is a partition that provides a space for the judge's 'office' where court business is processed. A rope barrier separates the gallery from the attorney tables. Two posts on the floor, about three feet apart, provide a 'doorway' that is a break in the rope between the attorney tables and the gallery.

Victoria is seated by herself at the right table, and Hank and his lawyer are at the other table. Sam, Sheriff Hawkins, and two sheriff deputies, Will and Howard, are in the gallery on the right. Marshal McGinn, two of Wilson's men, John and William, and Isaac (the gunman) are on the left side of the gallery. There is no jury and no other spectators in the courtroom. The honorable Judge Greenstone is seated behind the desk. The bailiff for today is the sheriff's third deputy, Lewis. Mr. Fry is sitting in front of, and to the side of, the judge as the court recorder.

Judge Greenstone is looking through the documents, shuffling them as he does so. He has divided the documents into two separate piles. Although the papers in each pile seem to adequately claim the property, as evident to the judge, the signatures on one stack do not match those of the same people in the other. All of the signatures are clean, without smudges or other markings.

There are no verifiable examples of signatures from Victoria's family. All documents that may have signatures of members of Victoria's family are either missing or unverifiable. Hank was thorough in his preparation.

Sam was also diligent in preparation. His 'Plan B,' which he mentioned to Tylor when the family was moved from the ranches, is intended for use later if they fail at trial. Unbeknownst to anyone else, a thumbprint made with the signatory's blood is on the back of each transfer deed. Fingerprint experts rely on verified prints, unavailable here, and DNA evidence is unknown now. Sam figured that if they couldn't win now, they could place enough evidence on the documents to prove their authenticity in the future.

Judge Greenstone is too engrossed in finding something tangible to verify one stack of documents over the other to care about activity in the gallery. Mr. Fry, on the other hand, doesn't let the little things go unnoticed. He watches the events unfold and records them in his notebook.

Wilson looks at his two men, then at Sam, and back to his men. Since Sam is in town, Wilson decides to take this opportunity to scout the cabin. Maybe Sam's platoon is in town, too, or they possibly left. Whatever the case, Wilson intends to find out more about Captain Reynolds and his men. He motions with his head for John and William to leave. The two of them acknowledge his order and silently get up and leave the courtroom. Sam takes notice of the action. He is sure they were sent to the cabin, as expected. Mr. Fry notes their departure in his notebook.

After an hour and a half, Judge Greenstone looks up in exasperation. "I have read both petitions carefully. Each presents a strong case for ownership. However, the evidence is inconclusive. There is

no way to distinguish the authenticity of these documents.” He puts a hand on each pile. “Each set of documents is complete and effectively lays claim to the property in question. Neither offers a preponderance of evidence. Both parties are interested in a decision before I leave town tomorrow; therefore, I’ll review relevant case rulings and return my decision later today. The court will recess and reconvene at one o’clock this afternoon. I will render my decision at that time.”

Lewis, the bailiff for today, announces, “All rise.”

All parties rise, and Judge Greenstone and Mr. Fry exit the courtroom through a side door.

Just before Judge Greenstone steps out the door, Sam pretends to address Victoria but intends to plant a thought in the judge’s subconscious. He speaks loud enough for the judge to hear: “I hope it’s not another two hundred fifty-year moratorium like the case in Washington. That seems to be the trend these days. The highest courts in the country seem to do that now.”

Walking along the rope toward the gallery entrance, Victoria is confused by Sam’s remark. “Huh?” she asks, “What do you mean?”

Walking parallel to Victoria, but on the gallery side of the rope, Sam answers, “Oh, nothing. Just thinking out loud.”

Victoria meets Sam in the gallery walkway, “Well, what now?”

Sam gestures toward the door, “I guess we go to church.”

Victoria, whispering, asks Sam, “Aren’t the documents going to be stolen?”

Sam whispers his reply, “The boys are going to take care of that. We need to stay safe but seen.”

Sam knows that he needs to secure an alibi for himself and Victoria. The more people that see them, the better the alibi. He asks the sheriff, “Will you join us at the service?”

Shrugging, Sheriff Hawkins agrees, “Sure. It seems as safe a place as any to wait for the judge’s decision.”

Trying to intimidate Sam and Victoria, Hank glares at them as they walk to the exit. Sam, continuing his mental assault, just smiles back. Wilson, in a huff, and McGinn, following like a hunting dog, quickly leave the courtroom. Although not tied to Wilson like McGinn, Isaac also leaves before Victoria’s group.

Calmly, Sam opens the door to the courtroom, allowing Victoria, the sheriff, and the two deputies to exit onto the boardwalk. Victoria takes Sam’s arm as they head to church. Lewis, remaining inside, locks the door behind them.

Sam and Victoria stroll down the boardwalk to the church, creating quite a spectacle. Many have heard of Captain Reynolds and his squad of soldiers staying at the cabin near Victoria’s ranch. Victoria is supposed to have died from smallpox but appears fine. Before they reach the end of the street, many townsfolk are already gossiping about them.

Lewis, alone in the courthouse, grabs Victoria's documents and quickly passes them through the back door to an unknown person waiting on the other side. He then quickly leaves through the side door that the judge left through. The time taken to complete his task and exit the courthouse is within a timeframe that draws no suspicion.

The person receiving the documents is Carl. He still has a lot of mud on him from the run-in with the boys. He skulks toward the corner of the building; his uneven gait evinces the damage from his encounter. Carl is unaware he is being watched through a knothole in the wall of the blacksmith's stall on East First Street.

Carl goes into the alley between the print shop and O'Brien's. In the shadows between the mayor's office and Duke's General Store, someone intently watches him as he crosses the street and walks down the boardwalk toward the Harmony Valley Inn. His progress is then closely monitored by someone watching through the window above the print shop.

Carl, pretending to adjust his saddle, puts the documents into the saddlebags of Cody's horse. It is one of the four horses tied in front of the Harmony Bath House. John and William, Wilson's men from the courthouse, come out of the bathhouse and meet up with Carl. The three of them get on their horses and ride down to South Street and turn east, out of town, toward Creighton Valley. They leave Cody's horse and the stolen documents behind.

#### [Court Part Two]

After church service and lunch, Sam and Victoria return to the courtroom. Lewis, Mr. Fry, Victoria, Sam, Andrew, Will, Howard, Wilson's lawyer, Wilson, and George are in attendance. George has a line across his face where CJ kicked him. Isaac sits in the back corner.

Lewis announces, "All rise."

The casual conversations among the attendees stop, and the room gets quiet as everybody stands up when Judge Greenstone enters from the side door. Greenstone takes his seat.

Lewis announces, "The honorable Judge Greenstone presiding. Come to order and be seated."

The attendees take their seats while Greenstone starts going through the documents. He keeps shuffling through the papers, searching for something.

Judge Greenstone calls Lewis to the bench, "Where are the documents submitted by Miss. Creighton?"

"I'm not sure," replies Lewis. "They were there when we went to recess."

Greenstone addresses Victoria, "Miss Creighton. Did you remove your documents from the court?"

Victoria stands to address the court, "No, your honor. We left and returned with the sheriff. We have no reason to withdraw our petition."

Sheriff Hawkins stands, "That's right, your honor. We were with Miss Creighton and Mr. Reynolds the whole time we were in recess." Sam's insistence on staying visible to witnesses proves valuable.



“Very well,” scoffs Greenstone. Victoria and the sheriff sit. He turns to Lewis: “Well, they must be here somewhere. When you find them, make sure they are placed in the record. Since I have already reviewed them, it’s not necessary to have them on the bench right now. We’ll find them later.”

Greenstone briefly stares at the documents on the bench. He then addresses the courtroom: “Will the petitioners please rise? “

Victoria and Wilson stand.

Judge Greenstone begins his ruling, “The court has deemed that it is impossible to determine the authenticity of the documents presented and additional evidence provided by each side is determined to be of equal and offsetting value. The court has, therefore, determined that it can not validate the ownership of the property to either party.”

Greenstone continues, “Since both parties seem to have a keen interest, the property will be held by the court, in trust, as restricted territory for up to one hundred fifty years, not to be used by, or sold to any other party. During that time, either party may request additional court hearings to present new evidence that may sway the court to a decision in their favor or to present the court with a settlement agreement. If no evidence is produced to sway the court after one hundred fifty years, the property will be deemed to belong to the state. The state will then offer the property for sale and divide the proceeds to any surviving heirs of the petitioners.”

Greenstone adds, “A note of clarification: Of the exhibits, deed one, in both sets of documents, had a perpetual easement right. The management of the easement and tenant assignment will remain with the Creighton party. The area not covered by the easement will be considered restricted territory. This court is adjourned.”

Victoria stands to address the court, “Your honor, what about murder charges against Hank Wilson and his crew?”

“Miss Creighton,” replies Greenstone, “That is a different matter altogether. A criminal trial will be held if the prevailing authority officially brings charges. And, to date, there has been no indictment. I’m sorry.”

Victoria turns and storms out of the court, closely followed by Sheriff Hawkins. Sam stares at Isaac, then calmly puts on his hat and exits the court. Sam is not pleased with the judge dodging his responsibility, but he is happy that the one-hundred-fifty-year moratorium was implemented. They did not win, but they didn’t lose any ground either. Also, Victoria’s outburst, although unscripted, may help in the future. Her remark will be in the official record and may give weight to the claim of the attempted unlawful acquisition.

Wilson and George walk down the aisle to the exit. Because there is no indictment and they have other plans to force the transfer, they both have smiles as they saunter toward the door. Halfway down the exit hallway, Isaac warns Wilson: “Watch yourself! This isn’t over. Captain Reynolds won’t be backing down.”

Wilson sneers confidently, “It will be – soon.” He puts on his hat and exits through the door being held open by George.

### [Ghosts in the Cabin]

During the trial, three of Wilson's men, Carl (now with a black eye), John, and William, arrive a hundred yards from the cabin and tie their horses to the trees. Foremost in their thoughts are the stories of Captain Reynolds and the ghost stories surrounding the Ladybird Mine. (Stories developed by Ren and spread by Austin and friends to keep people away.) Unwilling to express their fears to others due to embarrassment, they barely maintain control of their adrenaline-charged minds and bodies.

Stress prevents them from moving gracefully toward the cabin. Their movement could hardly be called sneaking as they approach an observation point. Once they've bungled through the trees, they settle in and watch the cabin for several minutes.

The cabin's windows are shuttered, and the only sounds they hear are from the forest. After Carl, their leader is sure that no one is in the cabin, they cautiously creep around to the north side of the cabin and peer through the side window with both the interior and exterior shutters open. The table is set with eight settings. The three thugs make their way around to the back door and find it unlocked.

Carl motions to the barn, "I'll check the barn; you two check the cabin. I'll get back to you here in a few minutes. Remember, shoot anybody you find." Carl turns and heads for the barn. The other two thugs, their revolvers drawn, enter the cabin. They first check the bedroom off the kitchen. It has clothes folded on both beds. William follows John through the kitchen to the second bedroom. It also has folded clothes on each bed.

The two thugs move to the last bedroom. There are clothes on each bed; however, one has female garments. Finding no one on their first pass, John returns to the dark alcove they initially bypassed, the anteroom.

John and William enter the anteroom and discover the pantry in the back. William lights the lamp conveniently near the pantry door. Now, with plenty of light, they are ecstatic to see the entrance to the mine—a secret that they can't wait to divulge to Mr. Wilson.

Led by John, they go in about five feet, make a hard right, and continue for another fifteen feet, where John steps on a board that moves down while making a slight clicking sound. Out of sight of the interlopers, the pantry entrance door closes and latches behind them.

John continues through the mine several hundred feet. As he walks, he passes a few of Ren's traps. Those traps require the manipulation of equipment. So far, he hasn't touched anything, so the traps remain set. John sees a sign with arrows and names. He steps closer to read the sign. As soon as he gets both feet on the floor section, the floor section moves forward, causing John to fall backward.

John lands hard on the floor, "Damn it !"

A split second later, before John can get up, two rows of three spikes shoot up from the floor, impaling John. Pools of blood start to form under him, and his attempt to speak is unsuccessful. He struggles for a few seconds before he coughs up blood and dies.

A section of wall near the entrance, unnoticed by the thugs, swings into the pathway between the men and the exit, blocking the exit while exposing another horizontal shaft.

William sees John's demise and becomes terrified. He now realizes that entering the mine was a colossal mistake. After carefully slinking his way to grab the lamp, William turns to go back to the entrance. He dashes back toward the exit but unknowingly goes down the newly exposed shaft.

He steps on a wire strung across the path. Two arms with cables stretched between them swing down from the ceiling, pinning him to the wall. The cables hold him in place and restrict his breathing. A ratchet click is heard at each breath. Like a constrictor python, the ratcheting cables capture the space relinquished with every exhale. Soon, his breathing becomes strained. Each breath is more difficult than the last. He struggles but can not get free. He finds that yelling only speeds up the process. Alone, he quietly takes his last breath.

Carl exits the barn and starts looking for William and John. He looks through the house, calling their names, but gets no response. At one point, he thought he heard someone calling for help, but it sounded more like an echo than a natural voice. The hollow sound of the voice may be from one of the ghosts that live in the haunted mine. Since the mine entrance through the pantry was closed by the first trip panel John stepped on, Carl does not know about the mine's entrance.

Not finding anyone in the cabin, he then checks the outhouse. When he opens the door, one of the small EWDs gets tripped, sounding like a fired shot. With his partners vanishing into thin air and gunshots coming from nowhere, he panics. A fast-moving apparition flies toward the outhouse and blows up on contact, completely disappearing. He scampers to his horse while looking in all directions. Carl's heart has probably never beat this hard and fast before. Once mounted, he rides off frightfully, leaving his fellow thugs and their horses behind.

#### [ Setting the Stage ]

This Sunday afternoon, activity is still light on Main Street of Harmony Flats. Victoria has gone with Hawkins to the sheriff's office to discuss what can be done about the murders. Sam sees the boys across the street. CJ makes eye contact with Sam, who takes off his hat, signaling to them that he wants to talk. Using different routes, they meet in the alleyway behind the general store.

Sam, speaking secretly, "This might be our only chance to corner Wilson. It looks like he's down to the bottom of the barrel, as far as men go. The one in the court looked like he got on the wrong side of a cougar."

In an apologetic tone, CJ takes responsibility, "Sorry, Uncle Sam. That was me."

Sarcastically, Sam replies, "So much for a low profile."

CJ looks down and responds timidly, "Yes, sir."

Defensively, Austin pipes up, "It wasn't his fault. They started it."

Sam calms Austin, "Easy tiger." CJ and Austin look at Tylor, then each other, exchanging knowing

smiles. Sam puts his hand on CJ's shoulder, "I know it must have been unavoidable. CJ would only fight as a last resort. Is everybody okay?"

"We're okay," Austin reports, "but Doc Farrell still has two of Wilson's men at his place. I heard the men from the Lazy J tellin' Mr. O'Brien that one has a broken arm and the other has some busted up ribs. They also said that two more went missing. They went up to the cabin and just disappeared. People are startin' t' think it's haunted."

Sam smiles, "Good. Let them think that."

"I can guess where we can find 'em," suggests Tylor.

Sam admits, knowing what Tylor is eluding, "You're probably right." Sam wants to keep Victoria and the boys far away from the men killed in the mine.

Everyone agreed that the only reason Hank's men would go to the cabin was to murder them. As Sam sees it, using the traps in the mine for protection should be considered remote self-defense. Morally, Sam sees no issue in using the boobytraps for protection. His more significant concern is the moral and mental trauma that the kids may experience as a party to killing a person. Seeing the bodies may cement in their minds those traumas they shouldn't have to deal with, so he doesn't want the others to find the dead bodies.

Sam asserts, "I'll check it out when we get back. You guys stay out of the mine. Right now, we have to figure out how to pin Wilson with the murders. I'm thinkin' our best allies will be his arrogance and ego. I'll be playin' it from the hip, so pay attention and watch your backs."

[ Payoff ]

Lewis is on the boardwalk, walking south toward O'Brien's. George is walking north toward him. George intentionally runs into Lewis, making a scene.

Lewis shouts, "Hey! Watch it!"

George pushes Lewis, "Next time, stay outta my way!"

The men brush themselves off in disgust of the other and continue on their way. Lewis reaches into his pocket to find a roll of bills. Lewis smiles as he continues into O'Brien's, where he meets up with the other two deputies sitting at one of the tables. Victoria is sitting nearby at another table with the sheriff. There are a few families scattered throughout the dining area having supper.

Victoria laments, "We'll be leaving on the southbound Tuesday. There's not much else we can do here. Sheriff, thank you and your deputies for your efforts today."

"Not at all, Miss Creighton," Hawkins consoles her, "It was our pleasure to help. I just wish we had more to go on with the murders. We've been askin' around. Nobody in this town will testify against Wilson. I'll see what I can do with the US Marshal. He may get an indictment that can be tried in the Capitol. If that happens, you'd be asked to return to Sacramento for the trial."

"Of course," replies Victoria, "even if I didn't need to testify, I wouldn't miss the trial."

Sam enters O'Briens, looks around expectantly, sees Victoria, and politely crosses to her while removing his hat. "Ahh, Miss Creighton. Sorry to keep you waiting." he then addresses the sheriff, "Sheriff," and waves at the deputies, "Boys."

Victoria says, "Don't mention it. We were just having a chat."

"That's great, actually," Sam puts his hat back on, "I still have to take care of a few chores. Why don't you treat these fine gentlemen to some coffee and pie? It'll be another twenty minutes before I can get ready to leave."

Thinking they were about to leave, Victoria gets taken aback. She knows Sam would have a good reason to stay longer, so she remains flexible and doesn't question it. "Oh,. . . Okay. That sounds like a good idea. She calls to the deputies at the other table, "Pie and coffee - my treat."

"Great," says Sam. "I'll see you in a little while." He turns and leaves.

Lewis is eager to accept the free food before Victoria changes her mind. He greedily waves down the waitress to order the coffee and pie.

Meanwhile, the boys are helping Sam with his next plan. CJ and Tylor buy a pitcher of tea at the back door of the diner, and Austin 'buys' a bottle of rum from O'Brien. (He takes a bottle from the O'Brein's cellar and leaves a coin where the bottle was.) Austin then meets with CJ and Tylor at the back of the diner, where they replace nearly all of the rum with the tea. The rum smell overpowers that of the tea, making it seem as though the bottle is filled with rum. Tylor pushes in the cork while CJ puts the pitcher back on the kitchen counter. The boys dash off to Harmony Valley Inn with their bottle of 'rum.'

Sam doesn't rely on one plan but simultaneously puts several irons in the fire. He enters the print shop and hands Mr. Fry a document and some coins. Of course, Mr. Fry wants to interview Sam, but Sam declines due to pressing matters. He leaves the print shop and waits outside, watching down the street by The Harmony Valley Inn.

Austin, still disguised as Anastasia, is at the back door of the Harmony Valley Saloon. He waits and watches Eric behind the counter, wiping down the bar. He steps from behind the counter to the main saloon floor, giving Austin the opportunity he was waiting for. While Eric goes from table to table, collecting glasses left by his customers, Austin slips the 'rum' bottle onto the counter behind the bar and scurries off to meet up with Tylor and CJ.

The boys step out of the alley onto the boardwalk across from Harmony Valley Inn. Sam is startled to see the boys on his side of the street. They were on the other side of the road getting the props ready for Sam's next play. He never saw them cross. Austin's reputation for sneakiness seems well-earned.

Sam walks down the block to meet with the boys. All four cross the street together and enter the saloon. Within minutes, they are all in position.

## [ The Trap ]

Two cowboys are standing at the bar enjoying drinks, two more at a table, talking up prostitutes, four cowboys are gambling at one of the tables, and Isaac, with two pistols and a rifle, is seated across the room in a front corner.

Sam and Austin (Anastasia) are sitting at a table in the poorly lit back corner. Sam has his back to the corner so he can see the entire bar area. The rum bottle sits in the center of the table, half full. CJ stands by the piano while Tylor plays *Hotel California* by The Eagles. The boys have their 'drinks' on top of the piano. Sam has a highball glass in front of him with what appears to be rum. Austin, still in disguise, has a glass of water. The booths under the mezzanine all have their curtains drawn.

In a hushed voice, Sam tells Austin, "Shouldn't be long now." Austin nods in acknowledgment.

The mood in the bar is upbeat, and the noise level is moderate.

Wilson walks into the saloon with Cody, Carl, and George. Carl and George look nervously around the saloon. A closer look at the thugs shows they have been in a fight and have likely lost. George is not using his left arm. CJ and Tylor stop playing the piano. The saloon gets quiet.

Carl and George approach the card players. Without a word, Carl motions with his head for them to leave. As they collect their stuff, Tylor plays softly - *The Gambler* by Kenny Rodgers. The card players leave.

Cody goes to the bar and gives each of the two cowboys a coin. The cowboys finish their drinks in one gulp, turn and leave. With the cowboys gone, Wilson walks halfway to Sam's table, stops, and waits for Cody to join him.

Cody systematically checks behind the curtains of the booths as he calls out to Eric, "We'll have what they're havin'."

"Sorry, that's the only bottle of rum I had," Eric replies. Under his breath, he says to himself, "I didn't even know I had that one."

Angrily, frustrated by looking foolish and not wanting to get into small talk when trying to look important, Cody orders, "Whiskey then."

Tylor stops playing. Looking calm and collected, he and CJ position themselves for possible action. Their acting is outstanding because, inside, they are incredibly nervous.

Eric quickly brings up a bottle and two glasses and puts them on the counter. Finished looking into the booths, Cody turns toward Isaac and glances at him. The glance is a request for him to leave. Isaac slowly shakes his head no and stays in his chair.

Carl and George have been watching the silent signals and feel it is their turn. They look at Cody silently, asking if they should forcefully remove Isaac. Cody chuckles a little, realizing that even the three of them are no match for Isaac. He finds it funny that the two thugs, who were beaten up earlier, think they have any chance at all of getting him to leave. He shakes his head no.

So no one else can hear, Austin whispers to Sam, identifying the prostitutes: “That’s Miss Bai and Miss Niki.”

Sam whispers to Austin, “Sneak the sheriff in when I send you out. Remember to react like a girl.”

“I know,” Austin says dejectedly, pulling at the top part of the dress to show Sam that he has enough reminders. “You don’t have to remind me.”

Calling to one of the prostitutes, Sam holds up two fingers and gestures them over. “Bai. Could I see you, and Niki, for a moment?”

Bai does not know Sam, but rumors of his identity have spread rapidly. As a professional, she takes the hint of familiarity and acts like they have met previously.

Bai and Niki walk toward Sam’s table, leaving the two cowboys. As Bai and Niki make their way to Sam, the two cowboys realize they’re exceedingly outclassed by the ‘Captain.’ They feel the tension increasing in the room and decide to leave.

Bai and Niki walk to Sam’s table and stand between Wilson and Sam. Cody, who picked up the glasses and whiskey from the bar, now put them back on the bar as he watches events unfold between Sam and the prostitutes.

Sam takes out several gold coins and puts them on the table. He puts his hand over the coins.

Bai exclaims, “Seem to be getting a little tense here.” To verify her suspicion that Sam is the person the town has been talking about, she asks, “Captain?”

Sam gives a slight nod of affirmation. Bai continues in her broken English, “What is your pleasure?”

Directed at Austin in a cold tone, Sam blasts at him, “You get lost. This is man stuff.”

Austin gets up and runs out of the bar, acting as if he were a girl with hurt feelings. Bai is displeased at the demeaning treatment of the ‘little girl,’ but regains a pleasant smile and continues speaking with Sam.

“Where were we?” Sam continues. The bar becomes completely silent, except for Sam’s conversation, which everyone is focused on. “Oh, that’s right. Pleasure.” He gestures to CJ and Tylor: “My nephews there sure could use some attention. A lot of attention. Perhaps more than one person can provide – each.” Sam adds credibility to the request: “Although young, this isn’t their first rodeo.”

This is too much machismo for Bai. She cocks her head slightly to infer, ‘Really?’ Sam responds to her unspoken disbelief, “Just this morning, my friend, White Squirrel, mentioned that they might be able to get that kind of attention here.” He looks at everyone listening to him, smiles, and then continues with sarcastic humor, “Discretely, of course.”

Out on the street, while all the attention is focused on events in the bar, Anastasia secretly gets the stolen documents from Cody’s saddlebags and then disappears to secure them.



Back inside the bar, Sam's use of Austin's Miwok name convinces Niki that he can be trusted. She is unsure where this is headed but is curious to find out, so she plays along. "Since your friend sent you here, I'm sure we can help your nephews. Are you sure you won't be needin' anything else?"

"No. That's all for now. Thank you," Sam politely answers.

Niki looks directly at Eric, "The stairs will be closed for about ..." She now looks at Sam for direction.

Sam is happy that Niki decided to help, and he reasons since we mentioned White Squirrel instead of Victoria, she probably knows this is a ploy. For safety, he needs to clear out the boys and the prostitutes, just in case his plan goes south. Although Sam figures his conversation will take less than ten minutes, he suggests a generous time frame commensurate with the generous payment.

Sam asserts, "An hour and a half, maybe two hours. They need a bath, too." The boys look at each other, offended by Sam's attack on their hygiene. Tylor discretely lifts his arm a little to check for odor and finds no reason for Sam to monster them publicly.

Niki stares at Sam, but the comment is directed back at Eric, "About two hours." She looks at the boys, then back to Sam. Niki can tell that the boys are just boys and that Sam is not actually sending them up for the 'normal' activities, so she plays a bit with the boys' emotions. Seductively directed at Sam, she coos, "They're cute." Then she tells Eric, "Better make that three hours; don't want to rush things."

Sam moves his hand to show all the gold coins, "Thanks for the hospitality."

Bai slides the coins off the table into her hand, "The pleasure is all ours." She looks seductively at the boys, "Let's go, boys. We have a lot to do and only three hours to --." She chuckles, "*Do it.*"

Sam smiles broadly and plays along with the women at the boys' expense, "I'm sure it will be an experience to remember."

Sam gives them a nod. They both shoot down their "drinks" and begin to leave with the prostitutes. The boys are doing their best not to show their nervousness; this is way beyond their experience level. Neither is sure how far to take the ruse, afraid it may be 'all the way.' Sam gave no boundaries to this caper, putting the boys light-years out of their comfort zone. Niki slaps CJ's butt, just for fun. She can see his anxiety and is having fun playing with his mind.

Outside, another branch of the stratagem unfolds. After securing the stolen documents, Anastasia goes to O'Brein's and finds Victoria in the dining area. He whispers to Victoria, "They're ready for us now. But Sam says to send Lewis to the livery to prepare the horses. He can't be trusted." Austin gives her a few coins to pay for the horses. Then Austin speaks, in his girly voice, at a normal volume so the sheriff and deputies can hear. "This is to give the deputy to pay for the horses."

Victoria tells the sheriff, "Sam would like us to follow this little girl." She hands the sheriff the money for the horse care at the livery. "If it's not too much to ask, maybe Lewis can pay the livery fee and prepare the horses."

Hawkins agrees, "Sounds good." Hawkins calls over to the deputies, "Will and Howard, you come with me. Lewis, you settle the bill at the livery." He tosses the coins to Lewis, not allowing him to question the order.

The tension at Harmony Valley Inn is high. Like in a high-stakes poker game, each player carefully studies the others: Every move is intentional, and every expression is deliberate.

Niki hasn't had this much fun in a while. To stir the hornet's nest a little more, she looks at Carl and George as if they were nothing compared to the two boys. Referring to the suggested exciting activities planned for CJ and Tylor, Niki suggestively tells Bai, "This should be fun."

Niki takes CJ by the hand and rotates into him, wrapping CJ's arm around her waist. Bai pulls Tylor's arm around her waist as well. The foursome starts toward the stairs.

Embarrassed by the prostitutes, Carl and George move to a position between the boys and the stairs in defense of their pride. The foursome, unimpressed by the antics of Hank's men, continues toward the stairs. As the boys and the prostitutes get near the thugs, George starts to reach for his gun. CJ anticipates George's movement and quickly grabs George's gun. He does a foot sweep that puts George flat on his back. When George hits the ground, CJ stomps on George's hand, likely breaking a few bones.

While that was happening, Carl started for his gun but stopped when he saw that Tylor had already outdrawn him. Seeing the action by the stairs, Sam had also drawn his revolver and trained it on Wilson. Cody started to draw but stopped when he saw Sam's gun already pointed at Wilson.

In the fast draw competitions that Sam and the boys participated in, the speed was measured from when the light came on to when the blank shot was fired. Tylor was always on the podium at the competitions. He was relieved he could refrain from shooting Carl out of the habit of pulling the trigger like he did at the fast draw competitions.

Very calmly, Sam instructs Hank, "Mr. Wilson. Call off your dogs."

Hesitantly, trying to project an image of calm control, Wilson acquiesces, "Okay, boys, that's enough."

Carl slowly re-holsters his half-drawn weapon.

He does his best to reduce the opponent's firepower, but knowing that he can't push it too far, Sam decides to remove the threat of the less predictable George and Carl. Taking control of the scene, Sam tells Wikson, "If Cody can keep his hogleg tightly put away, he can keep it, but those two (Pointing in the direction of the thugs) are too sketchy. They lack the maturity and self-control to use those tools properly, so we'll relieve them of that burden."

Sam changes to a polite tone when speaking to the prostitutes. "Girls, would you be so kind and hold on to those revolvers? Those two lads don't know when to keep their guns to themselves."

Niki takes possession of the thug's guns. The boys holster their weapons. Tylor turns toward Carl, "You just don't know when to quit, do you?" Tylor then knees him in the groin. (Carl was the one Anastasia disciplined earlier.)

Carl falls to the floor, holding his groin, "Shit!"

CJ bumps fists with Tylor, "The sheep should sleep a little more soundly tonight." They both snicker.

"That's enough now," Sam orders. "I'm sure he's learned his lesson." Sam glares at the thugs: "Isn't that right, boys?"

Hank's men respond painfully, under their breath, "Yeah."

Sam motions for the boys to approach the thugs again. The boys stand behind Carl and George lying on the floor.

Sam vents more aggressively, "I'm not sure I heard that!"

Carl and George are intimidated by the boys and Sam. They have never been challenged or beaten like this before. They understand what Sam expects and correct themselves to avoid further pain and humiliation. "Yes, Captain."

Wilson's anger builds as his men kowtow to someone besides him. The fact that it is Sam intensifies that anger.

Sam orders Tylor, "That will be all – for now."

Tylor comes to attention and responds, "Yes, sir." The two thugs are left on the floor as CJ and Tylor reunite with the prostitutes at the base of the stairs.

"You boys stay on track and have a good time," Sam tells them. "If I don't see you when you're finished here, I'll catch up to you soon."

CJ and Tylor respond to their commanding officer, "Aye, Captain."

The boys leave, going up the stairs with the prostitutes. Bai stops and puts the rope across the stairs. Cody collected the bottle and glasses from the bar several minutes ago. Finally, Cody puts them down on a table near Sam's table. Sam makes a mental note that Isaac made no moves for or against the –R– men: He just watched.

[ Reserved Seats ]

McGinn saunters into the saloon with an air of arrogance, utterly unaware of the recent events.

"The third wheel graces us with his presence," Sam calls out to McGinn. "You missed all the excitement."

Carl and George pick themselves up off the floor. George is holding his injured hand and is obviously in a lot of pain.

Julia calls down from the mezzanine to Eric, “We’ll need hot water in our bunk room.” She tosses a gold coin to Eric. Since customers are not allowed in the bunk room, Eric feels more is happening here than meets the eye. He is impressed and pleased with the large payment. “I’ll send the Chinaman right away.”

Wilson, indicating the table where Cody put the glasses, asks Sam, “Why not join us where there’s a bit more light?”

Wilson’s table would disadvantage Sam, but Sam has no problem seeing the set-up. He gets up and takes his glass with him.

Maintaining the position of alpha and using the seating to his planned advantage, Sam declines, “I don’t normally associate with men of your character, but I do have some things I need to clear up. I’m guessing you have a proposition of some sort.”

He walks past the table where McGinn is standing and sits at a table closer to the center of the room. As scripted, he sits in the lighter part of the saloon, facing the center of the room and the booths under the mezzanine. His back faces no openings. He has a good view of the room, including Isaac.

Sam informs Hank, “This has even better lighting; I’ll be sittin’ here.” Sam knows that his arrogant attitude and demeaning tone irritate Hank. That puts one more thing on Hank’s mind, helping to confuse and defocus him into making mistakes.

Wilson, Cody, and McGinn walk over to Sam’s new table. Cody pulls out a chair for Wilson and himself, leaving McGinn to get his own chair. Hank sits directly opposite Sam. Cody and Pete sit to either side of Hank, facing Sam.

Sam sits a couple of feet away from the table, facing them. He is the only one with a good view of the enclosed booths under the mezzanine.

“You two,” Wilson grunts at George and Carl, “This is a private meeting.” He points at the double bi-swing doors. “Get out there and keep it that way.”

George and Carl obediently follow the order, their movements restricted by the injuries accumulated through the day. George laughs to himself, thinking of the ridiculousness of the order - they are beaten up and injured to the point of not being able to fight, and they have no guns. How are they supposed to keep people out?

Acting as a chairman for the meeting, Sam maintains control of the room, “Now that we’ve got the seating arrangements taken care of, what’s next on the agenda?”

Wilson starts, “Mr. Reynolds, I’m a...”

Sam curtly cuts him off, “Captain Reynolds – It’s Captain Reynolds.”

Pondering the title, Wilson attempts to elevate his standing with familiarity, “Captain Reynolds? Now, is that military or ships?”

“It’s both service and maritime.” Sam uses the ambiguity of either Fire Service or Military Service to his advantage and uses the correct terms to establish an intellectual higher ground. He tries to use as much truth as possible in his conversations to help hide any deception his face may otherwise reveal. Also, to belittle Wilson, he politely talks down to him. “We’ve made a lot of effort to get to this point. I’m sure you have questions more pressing than that.”

Since the conversation is above his pay grade, McGinn cannot contribute, so he makes his presence felt by ordering a drink. “Eric, Whiskey.”

Sam and Wilson stare at each other, sizing each other up. The saloon is quiet as Eric removes a cork from the bottle, fills a glass, and brings it to the table, placing it in front of McGinn.

Sam knows that Wilson is a cunning person who can usually spot a trap, so he tries to let things happen organically, guided by situations he predicts are human nature, like the two cowboys leaving when things get tense. However, sometimes, he has to be more direct: “Eric, why don’t you take a well-deserved break? We can pour our drinks for a little bit.” He tosses Eric a ten-dollar gold coin.

Eric looks at Wilson, who gives a nod of approval. Eric goes through the bar and out the back door. The men wait, listening for the back door to close. Sam now has the room cleared enough for Hank to confess.

#### [ Fun Upstairs ]

Inside the ladies’ bunk room, the ladies surround the boys. The boys, intimidated, are herded like sheep to some chairs where they are, more or less, forced to sit.

“What’s up?” Julia asks. “We know you boys aren’t here for the usual business transaction. Two each? That’s not a skill level we see around here.” Seductively adding, “Not that we shouldn’t try.”

The boys are not ignorant about sexual matters, but due to their complete inexperience, they are confused about the meaning of the innuendos, and they are not able to tell when the girls are teasing or serious. They are almost at their breaking point: hearts racing, sweating, narrowing of vision.

Of course, they know the mechanics of human reproduction, but they have no clue about the customs and etiquette one should employ, especially in 1877. What is expected before, during, or after? Is protection provided? Should they have brought their own, or is it not used? With that many people, is everybody active at once? Is there an order? Are you expected to watch others or be watched? With so many questions, where does one start?

“Where’s White Squirrel?” Bai makes a welcome, if not needed, change in topics, forestalling the boys from overload and meltdown. “We heard he was killed with the rest of his family.”

CJ stammers, “Hi, I’m CJ and this—” He nervously and awkwardly points to Tylor. “is my brother Tylor.” CJ happily confirms they are not there for sex. “You’re right. We are not here for the usual activity.” In a more dutiful tone, he reveals, “We’re here to help Victoria and Austin. They escaped Wilson’s attack and are here in town.”

The ladies are all pleased to hear that Victoria and Austin are alive. CJ continues, "They might need to hide here for a couple of hours."

Without hesitation, Julia remarks, "That's easy enough."

CJ states confidently, "Sam, our uncle, is going to get Wilson to confess to the sheriff about the Creightons' murders. Wilson had his men kill the Creightons and then said it was smallpox."

Niki states flatly, "That's not going to happen, captain or otherwise! Hank is too cautious to do that."

Surprised that everyone has heard of Captain Reynolds, Tylor says, "You don't know my uncle!"

"Is Victoria okay?" Liz inquires. "This must be terribly hard on her."

"She's doing okay, for now," responds Tylor, feeling less intimidated. "Of course, they're both shaken up by what happened. She should be here soon. Austin went to get her and the sheriff."

Liz, playing against the boys' innocence, tells them, "You boys had better get your clothes off. The bath water will be coming up soon."

"Umm," Tylor mumbles, "We don't need a bath. That was just to make the time longer."

Drawing her hands across CJ's chest, Bai starts to undo his shirt button, "Don't be embarrassed. We've seen it all before."

Very concerned, CJ mutters to Tylor, "This was just supposed to be a tactical distraction."

Both boys are very embarrassed and nervous. They slowly start undoing the buttons on their shirts, and the women begin putting their fingers through the boys' hair.

After a few seconds, but what seems an eternity for the boys, Julia waves the girls off, saying, "They're just joshing ya'. We can make the water carriers think everything is fine, even with your clothes on. Don't worry."

The boys get a couple of seconds to laugh nervously, button their shirts, and let some stress out. Knock, knock – knock, knock – knock. The sound comes from behind the mirror.

"That should be them," CJ's voice publicizes his stress, "Austin and Victoria."

A rapid knock comes from the hall door, startling everyone. Standing closest to the mirror, Bai quickly knocks three times on the mirror. When the room is settled, Liz opens the hall door to let the water carriers in. The boys both have their weapons drawn.

"Relax, gentlemen," Julia exhorts. "It's just your bath water."

The boys re-holster their guns. Two Chinese men nervously enter with two large, steaming water pails each. They pour the water into the tub, cautiously observing the boys due to the armed greeting.

When they had finished, Julia excused them. "Thank you. That will be enough."

The two Chinese men go to the door, turn to face Julia, give a quick bow, and hurriedly leave the room. Julia closes the door behind them and locks it. Bai knocks three times on the mirror again. The mirror opens, and Victoria steps into the room. She has a heavy saddlebag with her.

Victoria tells the boys, "Austin's waiting for you at the bottom of the stairs."

The boys are relieved to be free of the aggressive prostitutes and eagerly head to the open mirror. CJ and Tylor are not afraid of sex, per se; instead, they have a healthy interest and curiosity in the topic; however, neither one imagined that their curiosity would be satisfied at a house of prostitution. They feel fortunate that they left with their innocence intact.

Victoria sees the relief on the faces of CJ and Tylor. She knows how playful the ladies can get, so she can imagine what they went through and why they are hurrying to leave. Quelling their zeal to escape, in a hushed tone, as the boys enter the secret hall, she reminds them: "Slowly, carefully, and Quietly." The boys take a deep breath and follow Victoria's instructions; they proceed stealthily down the stairs. The mirror closes behind them.

All of the ladies warmly greet Victoria. When the room settles down, she reaches into the saddle bag and retrieves four small wooden boxes, each with a unique rose inlay on top and a key. Victoria reads the name on each box as she distributes them. "These are from Ren," Victoria informs the ladies. "He left them to you in a will we found a few days ago."

#### [ Confession ]

A sliding panel closes at the bottom of the stairs. With Austin's assistance and using the noise of the water carriers as cover, the sheriff and two of his deputies quietly sit in the dark booth behind Wilson, Cody, and McGinn. Separated by only the thin curtain, the sheriff can clearly hear the proceedings in the bar.

Wilson confidently starts the conversation: "It seems I underestimated you a bit out at the old miner's shack. Fortunately, since we're not at that shack, the tables are turned here in town."

Sam mocks him, feigning surprise, "Oh? How so?"

Trying not to let Sam's confidence undermine his, Wilson talks in an unnaturally lower register and adds gravel to his voice: "For starters, McGinn here has absolute authority. The best you can hope for is a cell with your two gunmen. But that's not a likely scenario. I'm sure the report will say it was a matter of self-defense – where you lose."

"Two?" Once again mocking Wilson, "Only two? I'm sure I had more than that. It's unlikely you were able to cowardly murder 'em like you did those families."

Sam sees Wilson as a type 'A' person who needs control and stature. Attacking Wilson's ego undermines that personality: "I find it even more cowardly that you sent your henchmen up the hill to kill those hard-working families while you sat around in that oversized ranch house and waited, anxiously, for the grim news to arrive."



Wilson side-steps the accusation by throwing up a veiled defense that anyone could see through. “I heard they all died from smallpox. Except for the one girl trying to steal my land. She’s probably a pox carrier.”

Sam keeps the discussion controlled and on track by categorically dismissing any false alibi or narrative. “Oh, cut the crap, Hank.” To loosen Wilson’s tongue, Sam gestures around the room to make Wilson think that no one in the room doesn’t already know what happened.

Angering Wilson so he speaks openly, Sam spurs him on, “We all know what happened. And I’m sure Cody here was part of what happened.” Again, attacking Wilson’s ego and stirring up his arrogance, Sam also identifies Cody as a co-conspirator.

Sam continues his assault: “What I don’t know is why you killed three of your men at the same time. Was there a sale on murder that night? What makes that property so important to you that you would murder three of your men and wipe out three families, including children?”

Wilson tries to get the upper hand in the discussion by showing an emotionless path to a goal and minimizing lost lives. He becomes careless, stating flatly, “It’s nothing personal; it’s simply business. They had the land I needed and wouldn’t listen to reason.”

Hank continues to incriminate himself, “As a by-product of that – umm – tragedy, I think future land transactions around here will go much smoother. Don’t you?”

Sam restates the facts in a concise, clear statement, “So you had three families killed, including kids, just for some land?”

“Sure,” admits Wilson. “Like I said, it’s not personal; it’s just business.”

“Not to prolong this discussion unnecessarily,” Sam adds, “I just want to be clear about this whole scheme. Since McGinn has been on your payroll for, well, years, he helped to cover up the murders. And, you even hired a quack to (Sam uses air quotes.) ‘legitimize’ your smallpox sham. Very well thought out. It is almost a perfect crime. So, what do you plan on doing now? I’m not about to let this go unpunished.”

“You don’t seem to understand,” growls Wilson, “You’re not in a position to do anything about it.”

Sam pushes back defiantly, “Really?”

“You did cause a couple of loose ends,” acknowledges Wilson, “but those are about to be taken care of shortly. For example, I feel terrible that poor Miss Creighton will not make her trip to Ohio.”

Wilson stops his monologue to drink some whiskey. Then restarts, “I’m just curious, Mr. – pardon, Captain Reynolds, what compelled you to get in the middle of this? There’s nothing in it for you at all.”

“I just don’t like bullies, Hank,” confesses Sam. “I suppose I’m curious, too. Who made up the phony transfer papers for you, anyway? They were pretty good.”

The sound of a rifle cocking is unmistakable as it propagates from Isaac's direction. Isaac is now standing with his rifle trained on Wilson. He counsels Wilson, "I'm sure Mr. Wilson has nothing more to say."

With their guns drawn, the sheriff and his deputies step out from the stall. Isaac slowly puts the rifle on the table and raises his hands. The two deputies circle to better vantage points. Sam looks behind Wilson to see Mr. Fry beside the door, taking notes. Sam then looks out the front window. George and Carl are tied up, sitting on the boardwalk. Mr. Fry steps through the double doors with his notepad, still writing. The livery owner, Robert, enters through the back door with his gun drawn. The boys are behind Robert, guns in hand, peeking in.

Sheriff Hawkins has his shotgun trained on Isaac. "I'm not sure who you are, but it would be best if you stayed uninvolved. Slowly, very slowly, remove your gun belt and put it on the table. Sam, I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't mind watching Cody."

Quietly, Robert tells the boys, "We got this. Thanks for the backup."

The boys holster their weapons and leave the doorway to meet with Anastasia at the corner of the building. They don't want to leave the area until the culprits are secured.

Sam lifts his already-drawn gun from under the table and trains it on Cody: "My pleasure, Sheriff." Cody slowly raises his hands higher.

Hawkins directs Robert, "If you could watch our friend over there, that would be helpful."

Robert adjusts his stance slightly to better align with Isaac. Isaac, complying with the sheriff's previous order, slowly removes his gun belt and puts it on the table."

Hawkins tells Isaac, "I'm not fool enough to think that's all you got, so just keep your hands where I can see 'em and have a seat at that table over there." Hawkins points to an open table. "Once we're gone, you can get your guns back." Isaac sits at the indicated table, all the while staring at Wilson. Robert moves around behind Isaac to better keep an eye on him.

Isaac's behavior triggered an idea for Sam to ponder. Isaac seems to be keeping an eye on things for someone. When Wilson started to give too much detail, Isaac was forced to stop him. Sam begins to think that Wilson is not the top dog; maybe he's just the local top dog.

"It's rather obvious," Hawkins smiles, "but I'll say it anyway, 'cause it's kinda fun: Hank and Cody, you are under arrest for murder. And, McGinn, you're under arrest for conspiracy in committing murder. Now, one at a time, startin' with you, McGinn, put your guns on the table and step over near the door."

[ No More Sister ]

Once CJ saw that the perps were disarmed, the boys wound their way through the backstreets and alleys to reach Falling Leaf's house. The door opens as they approach.

Falling Leaf gives Anastasia a hug: "Welcome back." She knows that the mission they have just completed is dangerous and frightening, so she greets them with a cheerful disposition.

Gus and Yellow Feather join the group and welcome the boys.

CJ and Tylor stand behind Anastasia and gently push Anastasia forward to Falling Leaf. CJ requests, "Falling Leaf, we'd like our little brother back, please."

"The sooner, the better," Austin adds. "If I hear 'pretty little lady' one more time, I'm going to scream."

Everyone, except Austin, begins laughing. After a few seconds, Austin also breaks out with a big smile.

Tylor, wanting to get Austin back to being Austin, gently pushes him further toward Falling Leaf, "We'll wait here."

Falling Leaf and Austin step into the next room. Yellow Feather motions for them to sit. She gets them a glass of water. Tylor takes a drink and hands it to CJ, who takes a drink. Footsteps approach. Falling Leaf and Austin enter the room.

CJ: "That didn't take long."

Falling Leaf presents Austin, "You now have your little brother back – good as new."

Tylor, first addressing Falling Leaf, "Thank you so much for all you've done for us." Then, turning his attention to Gus and Yellow Feather, "All of you."

"No," urges Yellow Feather. "I am thanking you. You have done so much for my friends, and I will be forever grateful."

"It seems as though we're all thankful for each other," smiles CJ. "And there's nothin' wrong with that. One more thing." CJ reaches into the saddlebag and retrieves some documents. He reads a name printed on the document: "Mr. Fox." He then hands the documents to Gus. "Since we'll be leaving on Tuesday, Victoria had these papers drawn up, and the sheriff witnessed it. It gives your family tenant rights to the cabin."

"There are some maps you'll need for the mine," instructs Austin. "It has traps that you need to know about. The livestock at the ranches is yours, and three horses are yours. You can get the horses from Robert on Tuesday. I gave the rest to Robert. And last –" Austin seems to have lost his train of thought.

Gus has no clue what Austin is talking about but offers hints to help Austin, "Maps? Traps? Mine?"

Austin gets back on track: "Oh, yeah. Ren did a lot of work up there that nobody knew about." Austin points to the documents. It's all there." Austin starts coughing and gets sweaty.

CJ is concerned that Austin was overworked today. He takes the box and key from the saddlebag and hands them to Austin: "Are you Okay?"

Austin stops coughing. Assuring CJ as he takes the box and key, "Yeah, I'm fine." He hands the box and key to Yellow Feather. "This is from Ren. He left it for your family."

Yellow Feather, speaking softly in Ren's memory, "Ren was a kind-hearted, sweet man. We will cherish any gift from him." Without opening it, she places it on the table behind her.

"I'm sorry that we have to keep this visit short," apologizes CJ. "Maybe we'll see you on Tuesday."

Falling Leaf takes one hand each of CJ and Tylor and looks them in the eyes: "I am glad that we were able to meet. I know you will help care for White Squirrel when you reach your destination. I will write Victoria often."

CJ is a little troubled, not by what she said but by how she said it. He knows there is more significance to what she is saying than the words at face value. He stumbles a response, "Um, okay. Yes, we will. We'll take good care of him."

Through her touch, Tylor felt a future of peace, love, and understanding. He is still determining if that is about tonight, until they get on the train, or after that, but her message gives him hope that things will work out. He just offers her a knowing smile, and then he remembers something, "Falling Leaf, have a Happy Birthday. We should be well on our way to Ohio by Thursday and will miss celebrating with you."

"Thank you, Tylor." Then Falling Leaf hands Austin a note, "Please give this to your sister. She should open it when she gets to Folsom."

CJ opens the door to leave, turns to Gus, and shakes his hand, "Gus, it was a pleasure to meet you and your family. I would be happy if our paths crossed again."

"Likewise", Gus says. "I wish you safe travels."

Austin, speaking in Miwok to Yellow Feather, <Miwok>"eyya manay kanni."</Miwok>[Trans. "Don't forget me]

Yellow Feather responds, <Miwok>"Hama."</Miwok> [Trans "no"] Meaning that she will not forget him.

The boys leave the house and proceed down the back road to the livery, careful not to be seen.

"I said it before," avows CJ, "But I just have to say this again. I like Falling Leaf; I really do. In fact, if she wasn't your best friend and a little older, I might even consider asking her out." Austin gives him a piercing glare. Tylor takes delight in seeing CJ squirm under the pressure of Austin's very realistic but fake glare. CJ reacts to the glare, "I said might, maybe – Anyway, sometimes, though, she says the weirdest things."

[ The Lock-up ]

Sheriff Hawkens and his three deputies, Victoria and Sam, are near the desk talking in the town marshal's jail. McGinn, Wilson, Cody, Carl, and George are behind bars.

Deputy Howard is looking over the two thugs, Carl and George. "What happened to you two? Looks like you got the wrath of a mother bear."

"It's his –" Carl points at Sam, "hired hands. They ambushed us. Must 'ave been half a dozen or so."

Sam laughs, "Really? Half a dozen? And, by the way, they aren't hired; they're volunteers. They like what they do."

"Yeah, at least a half dozen," Carl demands. "We've seen where you've been eating and sleeping. I counted eight, but there could be more."

Victoria starts to deny, "Could be. But ."

Sam interrupts to keep them guessing their actual numbers, "But, you see, I've only given two of my men permission to make contact with you. And they're only boys, sixteen and fourteen. If any of my other men were involved, you wouldn't be standin' there. Better count your blessings."

The boys come through the front door. Austin keeps his face hidden and his back to the jail cells.

"Speak of the devils," Sam welcomes them. Then he discretely asks CJ, "Did anyone see Austin?"

CJ responds discretely, as well, "No. Not until now."

"So," Sam asks in a big way, pointing to Austin, "Who's this rascal?"

Austin understands from Sam's comment that he is still not to be identified. He excitedly shakes Sam's hand while keeping his back to the others: "Peter Blackwell, sir. It's an honor t' meet you, Captain. I've heard so much about you."

Unsure what to expect as the impromptu story unfolds, Sam asks, "Oh, really?"

Peter Blackwell expresses excitedly, "Yes, sir. I read it in the paper an' everything."

He puts a freshly printed paper on the marshal's desk. The headline says: 'Famous guerrilla war officer, Captain Reynolds passes through.' Peter continues, "I came in on the stage yesterday, 'an I'll be catchin' the train south, day after tomorrow. I heard you was here, so I had t' actually meet a real war hero. Anyway, my parents'll be wonderin' where I'm off to." He shakes Sam's hand again, "It's been a pleasure to make yer acquaintance, Captain."

"It was very nice to meet you, Peter." Sam ruffles Peter's hair, "Maybe we'll run into each other again."

Austin quickly leaves. CJ sees, under a minor heading on the front page: "Investigation into suspicious 'Small Pox' outbreak to begin Monday."

Sam tells Victoria, "Miss Creighton, we should also be on our way." He then looks at the boys: "Will you bring up the horses? The deputy should've already addressed the charges."

Maintaining character, CJ accepts the order, "Aye, Captain."

CJ and Tylor leave. After shaking the sheriff's hand, Sam and Victoria leave. Sheriff Hawkins sits down to read the paper.

⇒ CH 12