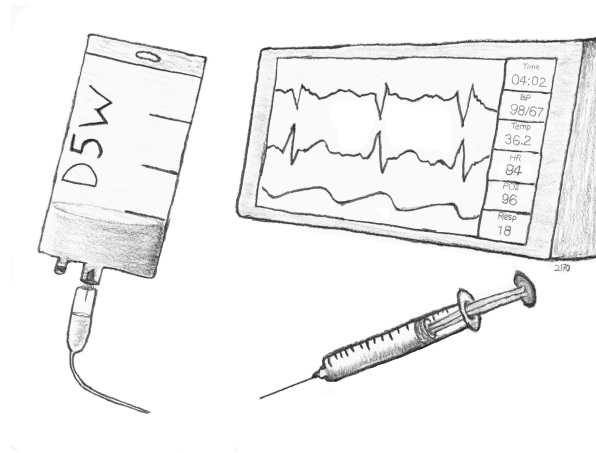


# Restricted Territory



## *Time to Wake Up*

[Where Am I?]

04:00, Wednesday, 29 Nov 2017.

The ambient light, a mixture of luminance cast from the medical equipment monitors and the glow of streetlights through the window, provide a silhouette of Austin sleeping in the bed of a private hospital room in Susan's hospital. He is connected to several monitors, is wearing an oxygen mask, and has a set of IVs feeding him. The primary monitor shows his vitals are within normal ranges: BP 98/67, Resp 18, HR 84. The monitor beeps with every heartbeat; the rhythm is a comforting sound to Sam, who has been here with Austin for the entirety of his stay, this being the second night. Other family members come and go as their schedules permit.

On the other side of the curtain partition, Trish and Sam quietly go through the folder Special Services gave them. It contains documents about Austin's life from birth through the present day—all fictitious but official. In a separate email from a source claiming to be part of the Special Services witness protection division, Trish was told to regard the documents as authentic. The email expired three days after she read it.

In the email, it strongly suggested that they use the following narrative to explain the sudden appearance of Austin: Austin's parents were killed in a traffic accident. An investigation found that his mother was a cousin to Sam and that he was deemed the 'closest of kin' and the only surviving relative they could locate. Austin had no siblings, was raised on a small family farm, and attended charter schools. Over the years, those schools have been bought and sold many times, making his school records unreproducible. All photos and class records are undiscoverable except those provided. The included pictures are deep-fakes using age regression AI and ambiguous names. It also mentioned

that Austin's newly found wealth could be converted to a trust in his name with Sam and Trish as the trustees. A follow-up email will be sent after the property case is settled.

Sam and Trish are suspicious about who the Special Services are and how they can be so forward-thinking about what complications Austin would encounter when he arrived in 2017. Also, how could they know he would even be here? How did they know he would meet Sam? How did they know about the gold from Ren? The level of the 'Special Services' proficiency is scary.

After discussing the pros and cons of the Special Services 'assistance,' they decided that they would use the documents as authentic and also use the suggested narrative; however, they would remain skeptical and alert for signs of danger. The primary factor in their decision was the lack of malice. Every encounter with them was positive, and no conditions were ever stated or implied. And they never suggested he be put in Foster Care or be placed as a candidate for adoption. Whoever Special Services was, they appeared to be on Sam, Trish, and Austin's side.

"BEEEEP, BEEEP, BEEEP," the primary monitor flashed red. Two nurses were at Austin's bedside before Sam could get the dining tray full of papers out of his way. The first nurse quickly looks at the monitor and then at Sam, who is now standing with Trish at the foot of the bed. She holds her hands up to have Sam and Trish calm down. Then, holding up the dastardly object that caused the terrifying warning, the pulse oximeter from Austin's finger, she smiles and says, "It's just the pulse Ox. It fell off. I know that machine can scare the bejeebers out of you. It's loud and obnoxious so that we can hear it anywhere in the ward, and it can't inadvertently be ignored. This could be a good sign, though. These don't usually fall off unless there is movement. It's possible he knocked it off himself."

Sam's pulse is racing, and he can feel the thumping in his chest. He feels silly for getting so worked up over such an everyday event. It has only been a year since he retired, so he should know better. Then he realized it wasn't the alarm that caused the rush in adrenaline but who it was connected to that made him panic.

Trish was scared by the alarm, too, but what frightened her more was Sam's totally uncharacteristic panicked reaction. After the cause was identified and order restored, she and Sam slowly relaxed back into their chairs. As she replays Sam's panic at the alarm in her mind, Trish smiles, understanding through Sam's response that he genuinely cares for Austin.

Ever since she got the folder, which was over a week ago, Trish felt her connection to and fondness for Austin building each time she read through it. Strangely, the connection she feels is not just with Austin, but the connection to Austin's family deepens as well. The closeness she feels may be from immersion into the case files; nevertheless, Trish believes Austin must be pretty special to have Sam care for him so deeply in just one week, and she is confident she will also fall for Austin when they finally meet.

06:00. The night shift is over. Susan, Tylor, and CJ arrive for the day shift. They bring Sam a breakfast sandwich and a tall coffee. Susan inconspicuously slips Sam a note as Trish hugs each of them on her way out. She has a court filing for the Creighton Valley property at 10:00 and needs to shower and change quickly. The commute will take an hour in each direction. If it were any other case, she would pass it to one of the others in the office, but this case, for Creighton Valley, requires special handling, which only she is qualified for.

In turn, Susan, CJ, and Tylor quietly greet Austin by taking his hand and offering words of encouragement. After the update from Sam, they take their usual places, like the day before. Tylor takes a minute to view Austin's chart before taking a seat. CJ intentionally averts his gaze from peaceful, lifeless Austin, lying in the bed.

15:00. The primary monitor shows Austin's vitals are within normal ranges: BP 110/74, Resp 12, HR 70. Sam's watchdog and pacifier, the heart monitor, is beeping with every heartbeat. Susan, Sam, Tylor, and CJ are in the room, watching, hoping, worrying, praying, and waiting for Austin to wake up.

As she does every hour, Susan holds Austin's left hand, the one without the IV, while looking at Austin's chart. Sam, who is holding the thick folder, stares out the window while thinking deeply about the folder's contents and the note Susan gave him. How did all this happen, and why?

The prior week's events have taken a toll on CJ and Tylor. Physically exhausted and mentally confused, the events swirl in their heads like dust devils, making it difficult for them to sleep when away from the hospital, away from Austin. Finding comfort in being with their fellow time travelers, the boys finally get a much-needed nap and sleep soundly in the recliners of this VIP suite.

Unnoticed by all except Susan, Austin moves his left hand.

Susan draws attention to Austin's movement in a gentle, hushed tone: "Sam."

Sam breaks his concentration and turns to see what Susan wants. Susan motions with her eyes for Sam to look at Austin. Austin's eyes move under the closed eyelids. Then, slowly, he begins to open his eyes.

Austin sees a bright room and a kind-looking lady he doesn't know. Thoughts race through his head - did he die? Is this heaven? Who is the lady? As he can focus better, he starts seeing the myriad medical equipment. Then he notices that he is attached to some of the equipment and has a tube coming out of his hand. He is weak, confused, and frightened.

Sitting up as best he can, Austin rips the oxygen mask off and calls for his family, "Victoria? Mom? Dad?"

Sam springs to the bedside and holds Austin's hand to calm him down and protect the IV. CJ and Tylor wake instantly and dash to the bedside, too.

"Hey buddy, it's me, Sam."

"Bro!" CJ then remembers, due to Austin's new ID, that there has been a change in their relationship. "Oh, sorry. Cuz, it's me, CJ. I'm here, and so is Tylor."

Austin starts to come to his senses. He was hoping that his waking up would reveal the events of last week were just a terrible nightmare, but when he sees Sam, he knows the tragedy and trauma he recalls really happened. Disappointedly, he looks directly at Sam, "Guess it's not a dream, huh?" He looks around slowly, taking in all that he can. There are machines, contraptions, and objects that he

never imagined could exist. “Where am I? What’s going on?” He notices the heart monitor wires. “What’s all this stuff stuck on me?”

“You’re okay, son,” Sam says calmly. “You’re right; it’s not a dream – I understand your disappointment. Take a couple of slow, deep breaths and try to relax. We’ll answer all your questions. Right now, you’re in the hospital. You had a high fever and probably don’t remember how you got here, but we’ll fill you in on all the details. The lady next to you is Mrs. Davis, CJ’s and Tylor’s mom.”

Although he is still confused about where he is, his trust in Sam, CJ, and Tylor reassures him that he is not in danger. Rattled as he is, he does his best to be polite. “Mrs. Davis, it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

She tells him, “No need to be so formal, Austin. You can call me Susie or Aunt Susie. Since I’m a nurse here, I’ll ensure you are well cared for. If you need anything, anything at all, I’ll do my best to make sure you get it. And if anyone gives you a hard time, just let me know - It will only happen once.” Susan has an excellent bedside manner; most patients think she is one of the best nurses in the hospital. However, she is also one of the most respected and influential staff members that one should avoid upsetting.

Austin smiles at Aunt Susie as she pretends to punch someone. “Thank you, Aunt Susie,” Austin says in his weak voice. “I prefer Aunt Susie. I’m not used to calling a grown-up by their first name. CJ sure is proud of you. He told me about how you work at the hosp –.”

Austin suddenly remembers that Susan works with terminally ill patients. The monitor beeps rapidly as his pulse climbs to over 90. He is mortified, knowing that he is going to die soon. He looks at Sam with wide, questioning, sad eyes. Sam is a bit confused by the look that Austin has on his face. CJ sees the look, too. After a second, CJ realizes the connection Austin is making with his mother and steps in front of Sam to correct the misunderstanding.

“No, no, no. It’s not like that. It’s not like that at all. You’re not in her ward. You’re going to be fine. You’re just a little sick, not dying.” He bends down and gives Austin a big hug. He then explains to Sam, “He thought he was in Mom’s ward – the terminally ill – no wonder he was scared.”

Gently moving CJ out of the way, Sam gets down on one knee to be close to Austin’s height. “Sorry, CJ. You can have him in just a minute. I need to get him updated.” In the background, the time between the heart monitor’s beeps is getting longer; Austin’s adrenaline overload is slowly wearing off. Tylor helps to calm Austin by stroking his forehead a few times.

“Austin, son,” Sam whispers, “Just a couple of things before the doctor comes in. First and foremost, you are going to be fine. Your infection has been taken care of, and you are getting better all the time. Now, about your family, you once knew this, but due to the fever, you may have forgotten – your sister stayed in 1877. We know she safely arrived in Ohio. While you’re in here, do not mention your sister or the rest of your family. I know this is not what you wanted or even imagined, but you are in 2017 with your new family. You should call me Dad. You should call her,” Sam points with his head toward Susan, “Aunt Susie. CJ and Tylor are your cousins, not your brothers. You haven’t yet met my wife, Trish, but you’ll need to call her Mom. Okay?”

Austin accepts the information as an order, "Yes, sir."

Sam continues, "And you got your back injuries from falling off a horse. You don't know how you got the other injuries. Are you alright with that?"

Austin's face looks determined as if he were getting lines to memorize in a play, and his eyes are focused. "Yes, sir. I can remember that." Then, he looks at Sam, intending to ask a question, but pauses to find the right words. He doesn't want to sound disrespectful or ungrateful, but asks, "Would calling you Captain or Sir instead of Dad be okay? It just doesn't feel right."

"Of course," Sam agrees with a smile. "If that makes you more comfortable, I don't mind at all; however, remember that when anyone here asks you about your dad, they're talking about me, not your real father. There's so much more we have to talk about when we have time, but now that you're awake, we can expect the doctor at any moment. Oh, and Aunt Susie and Uncle Bill know everything that happened last week." Sam gets up and kisses Austin on the cheek. "Love you."

Austin gives a slight nod of acknowledgment. He likes Sam, but since his dad died just a week ago, he feels like it would be a betrayal to his father to love Sam so soon. Austin knows he will feel the same about Trish but doesn't know if she has a title like 'doctor' or 'captain' that he could use instead of 'Mom.' He figures he'll have to resolve that when the time comes.

Discretely, Sam tells CJ, "He's all yours. I'm countin' on you and Tylor to bring him up to speed on his new identity." He hands CJ the file folder with 'R, Aj. #17-099a-01 Sensitive' on the cover. "And help him adjust to being a kid in the twenty-first century. Be patient; he's gonna have a thousand questions. Your topics will include celebrities, musicians, cell phones, and computers, just to name a few. Remember also that he tragically lost his family last week. Give him time and space to process that."

CJ pats him on the back and speaks quietly to Sam: "We'll help him through his grief as best we can and keep you updated." Then CJ smiles broadly, "Tylor and I will have a blast catching him up." He shows his hand, rubbing his fingers to indicate he will need some money. "It's a given that we'll have to go to movies, concerts, and stuff." CJ reverts to his normal voice so Austin can hear. "Of course, he's so smart it won't take long, but it may cost a bit."

Sam concedes that he will foot the bill for CJ's, yet to be revealed exhaustive list of activities. "Whatever it takes." Sam contemplates revealing the note's contents but decides that information can be disseminated later. At this juncture, disclosing that Susan traced her genealogy and found Austin is her and Sam's great-great-great-uncle would cause more confusion than clarity.

Just then, someone knocks on the door and briskly enters the room. Extending his hand, a man in a business suit walks up to Sam and states, "You are Sam Reynolds, father of Austin Jeremiah Reynolds, correct? Hi, I'm Dwane Everett from Child Protective Services." He shakes Sam's hand.

CJ and Tylor are initially amused to hear Austin's middle name but then become concerned when Dwane announces his title.

Sam expected a visit from CPS, but not quite so soon. Dwane's aggressive entrance suggests that trouble might be ahead. "Yes, I am Sam Reynolds. Is there a problem?"

Dwane continues, "I'm sure you know that, by law, if a child has signs that might indicate abuse, we have to investigate. The paramedics were doing their job when they saw the different stages of healing that Austin's injuries presented. I'm here to let you know the investigation concluded that this case was deemed non-abuse and is now closed. After hearing all of the accounts and reading the medical reports and the reports from Special Services, we found nothing to indicate abuse. I certainly hope Austin makes a full recovery soon. He seems to be surrounded by a lot of good people."

The onlookers, nearly in unison, breathe a sigh of relief.

Also relieved to hear the investigation results, Sam agrees with Dwane's assessment: "I believe you're right; Austin is surrounded by many good people who love him dearly."

Sam adds, "I'm unsure if you have a way to do this, but can you pass back down the line that I am grateful the paramedics brought this to your attention?" Dwane looks a bit surprised. More often than not, he gets negative responses from people he meets. Sam continues, "All too often, people look the other way to avoid all the paperwork, but it would break my heart to have someone as precious as Austin continue to be abused due to laziness or jaded compassion."

Dwane finds Sam's attitude both refreshing and unique. "I certainly will get the message passed down the line," states Dwane. "It was a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Once again, I hope he makes a full recovery soon. Have a good day, Captain Reynolds." He shakes Sam's hand again. Dwane turns and leaves as quickly as he had arrived.

Sam noticed that the ring on Dwane's hand had a similar stone to the pendant Wac ih a' wears. He also found it strange that Dwane called him Captain. This information wasn't in any of the paperwork that Sam submitted.

Bill comes into the room, wearing his turn-outs. The radio in his chest pocket squawks: "Truck 61 responding from Folsom and Olsen. Truck six one."

While Sam and Bill greet each other, CJ quickly gets down next to Austin and whispers in his ear, "That's my dad. You should call him Uncle Bill. He's a fire captain, and he's wearing turnouts. You should ask him, 'What's up with the turnouts?' It'll make a good first impression." CJ Smiles at Austin and deftly retreats from Austin's ear, acting as though he's just sitting there.

Bill approaches the foot of Austin's bed. He hugs Tylor, then directs his attention to Austin.

"You're awake!" Bill happily observes. "Looks like I have perfect timing. How are you feeling, Buddy?"

"Hi, Uncle Bill." Bill is a little surprised by being called by name. "I'm feeling a lot better, thanks for asking. What's up with the turnouts, Cap?"

Bill, forgetting that Austin is right out of the 1870's, begins his monologue. "Well, we just dropped off a kid we had to extricate from a car. My paramedic has to finish his report, so with the extra few minutes, I thought I would come up and see how things were progressing." He now realizes that Austin



shouldn't have known him or what turnouts are. "Wha? . . . How?" Bill sees CJ and Austin start chuckling. Everyone in the room begins to laugh.

Chuckling as well, Bill says, "You. . . you guys are good. I can see we'll be getting along just fine. You know Austin, I know quite a bit about you. For the last two days, the only thing I could get from these two was, 'Austin did this, and Austin told us that.' From everyone's account, you're very impressive." After the laughter quiets down, he adds, "When I told the boys at the station I was going to see my nephew, they almost fainted. The questions just kept coming - Sam has a kid? When did that happen? - and a lot more. Anyway, Buddy, I'm glad to see you're feeling better. When are they gonna break you outta here?"

Austin looks at Sam for an answer.

"The doctor hasn't seen him since he woke up," Sam tells him. "My guess is it will be a couple of days. His white count is still pretty high. They'll want a significant improvement before they'll let him go. Why don't you see if we can get him a ride home on the truck if you are on duty? I'm sure he'll get a kick out of it."

Bill is pleased to see Austin awake and looks forward to getting to know him better. He points at Austin, "Even if I'm off duty, I'll make it happen, Buddy." Then he turns to Sam, "Keep me posted." Without thinking about it, he puts his fist out to get bumped by Austin. Austin bumps it with an explosion. "I better get back to the truck. Hey Hun, why don't you walk me down?"

Susan gets out of her chair, crosses to Bill, and gives him a quick kiss. Then, she hangs the chart at the foot of the bed. Bill puts his arm around Susan as they head toward the door.

Knowing Bill will inform her of some inconvenience, she teases him, "What is it this time? Another overtime?"

Just as they get out the door, bewildered, Bill looks over his shoulder toward Austin, then back at Susan. His voice fades as they move away. "Did he just bump me?"

Austin, as inconspicuously as possible, feeling something uncomfortable, reaches for his groin. He looks under the blankets and then motions CJ over to him. He whispers something in CJ's ear.

CJ motions Tylor over, "Tylor, this one's for you. You're the one thinking about medical school."

Tylor makes his way over to CJ and Austin.

When Tylor gets to them, CJ whispers in Tylor's ear.

"Really, bro, you couldn't field this one?" Tylor snickers. He then speaks reassuringly to Austin. "No big deal. That's so you don't wet the bed while sleeping. It's also used to measure your body's output versus your intake, ensure you're not passing blood, and help monitor infections."

Tylor points to the chart now hanging on the foot of the bed. "When I showed Mom your chart earlier, she agreed that your liquid balance looked perfect. They'll take it out when you can get yourself to the

bathroom. Speaking of which, I'll have to show you how to work everything in there when you're ready. It's not hard, just a bit different than an outhouse."

Tylor stares at CJ to let him know he's silly for being embarrassed by such simple questions, then returns to Austin to finish. "I'll answer all the questions CJ is too embarrassed to tackle. Oh, I almost forgot your second question. The answer is yes! I think it's like an unofficial requirement for firemen to call everybody 'Buddy.' When you visit the fire station, nobody will call you by your name, just Buddy, except Tracey, the paramedic, who'll call you 'Hun.' Just go with it."

Dr. June Skylet enters the room. Greeting her, Sam shakes her hand, "He woke up just a few minutes ago - still a bit groggy."

After leaving Austin to Sam and the doctor, CJ and Tylor return to their chairs and text their friends to say Austin is awake. Their friends have heard so much about this new kid that they created a chat group to keep everyone informed. In two days, Austin has become the topic of interest in both CJ's and Tylor's circles of friends.

Dr. Skylet is delighted to see Austin awake. When he was first admitted, she thought he might not make it another hour, but he responded to treatment almost instantly and has had steady progress. She takes the chart from the foot of the bed and goes to Austin's side, where Tylor had been standing.

"Almost didn't recognize you," announces the doctor as she shuffles through the chart. "You look much better than when you came in two nights ago." Austin looks at Sam for confirmation of 'two nights ago.' Sam nods. Dr. Skylet puts her hand on Austin's forehead and then uses the stethoscope to listen to his lung sounds. "You were dehydrated and septic. Your chart shows you've not had antibiotics before; maybe that's why you responded so well." After poking and prodding him for minutes, she finally asks, "So, Austin, how are you feeling?"

[Never Alone]

19:00. Austin wakes from one of his short naps. Sitting in a chair beside the bed is a kind-looking gentleman in his forties. In his hands is a Bible. His head is bowed as he prays. Austin stirs as he wakes, causing the man to finish his prayer and focus on Austin.

"I hope I didn't startle you, Austin," says pastor Caleb Thurman. "I heard you woke up this morning, so I stopped by to introduce myself. The Davis and Reynolds families attend the church where I pastor. I'm hoping you will attend, too. Sam asked me to speak with you about your beliefs. Don't worry; I'm not here to challenge you or try to convert you to some strange religion. I am simply here to offer myself as someone you can confidentially talk to and, if you like, to pray with you. Are you okay with that?"

"Pastor Caleb, thanks for visiting me, but I don't know what to talk about," Austin politely replies. "My thinking isn't very clear yet. I suppose we should pray for my new family – especially Tylor – he's been a bit sad lately."

"That sounds like a good idea, Austin." Pastor Caleb takes Austin's hand and prays for Austin and his new family. After the prayer, the pastor stands to leave: "I've kept you awake long enough. Feel better soon."



Austin sees a familiar emblem as the pastor transfers the Bible from one hand to the other. “Wait. Pastor Caleb, what’s that on the end of your bookmark?”

Caleb returns to Austin’s bedside and offers the emblem to Austin for a closer look. “This is a gift I received when I was in seminary. I’m not sure who gave it to me; it was gifted anonymously. The note with it explained: “The three lobes represent the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The colors of red, blue, and green are known as the primary additive colors of light.”

Caleb can see that Austin is utterly confounded. “That means that if you add red light to green and blue, you get white light. That’s why the center is white. You might think that red, blue, and green make a dark brownish color, and you’d be right if they were paints; light is different. Why do you ask?”

Austin tries to remember where he saw similar symbols, but his mind is still foggy. “I think I’ve seen the same symbols before, but I can’t remember where. Thanks for explaining it to me.” The explanation sounds familiar, but he can’t quite place it in his still foggy mind. He’s sure he will remember when the foggy subsides.

“My pleasure, Austin,” Caleb says. “I’m glad you asked. I’ll send Sam back in. He left so you could have privacy. Have a blessed day.”

“You, too, Pastor,” Austin tells Caleb. “Thanks for visiting. Even though we didn’t talk much, it really meant a lot. Maybe in a few days, we can talk more.”

[When You Are]

23:00. Austin wakes in a dark, quiet room, startled by his dream. He is still connected to an oxygen cannula and machines that beep with ever-changing colored lines. He is lonely and afraid.

A comforting voice emanates from a dark chair near the wall. Sam asks, “You okay? Another nightmare?”

“Yeah,” confesses Austin. “Every time I close my eyes, I dream about what happened. I miss my parents and Victoria, and I want to cry all the time.”

Sam goes to Austin’s bedside. In one hand, he takes the call button, pressing it to call the attending nurse, and in the other, he takes Austin’s hand. When the nurse arrives, Sam asks, “He can’t sleep. Can you help us out?”

“Sure,” responds the nurse. “The doctor thought that might be the case. I came prepared.” He injects something into Austin’s IV line from a vial he had in his hand and states, “It should start working in a few minutes.” The nurse then checks the oxygen flow rate and examines the IV site. While looking into Austin’s eyes to see a reaction to the medication, the nurse distracts him by gently straightening his hair and softly telling him, “You are one tough kid. I’m glad you’re getting better.” After observing the reaction he was looking for, the nurse looks at Sam, gives him a nod of assurance, and leaves the room.

Sam calmly tells Austin what to expect during recovery: “You will get better with time. I won’t say it will be easy, and I will not brush it off like it’s nothing because it’s something. We have a name for it - Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD for short. It’s real, and it’s treatable. Trish and I have already contacted someone who will help us all overcome this, CJ and Tylor included. What is important is that you keep us informed about your feelings. You can tell us anything that is on your mind. We won’t judge you or get angry. Even if you think it’s silly, we need to know so we can get better together.”

Concerned about his future, Austin shyly asks Sam, “Will I ever be normal again?”

Sam chuckles, “You are normal. You would be *abnormal* if the things you went through didn’t affect you. Will you someday forget all about what happened? Probably not. Will it affect you less and less? Absolutely. You will be able to live a happy, healthy life despite the events of last week. The person we visit will help us men process what happened and help the rest of our family understand the support we need. As a family, we will work through this together.”

Sam leans closer to Austin and softens his voice: “You may not remember, but I already told you I love you. I didn’t plan it or consider the ramifications; it just happened - naturally. It kind of surprised me when I told you because it’s not a phrase I throw around carelessly. I never thought telling you how I felt could be so easy or how it would change my life. Becoming your dad is one of the best things to happen to me. In respecting your father, I will do my best to fill in for him but not replace him. He must have been a great man. Sometime in the future, you’ll have to let me know more about him. I hope you understand that I mean it, with all sincerity, when I say ‘I love you.’”

Tears slowly roll down Austin’s cheeks. He knows that his feelings for Sam differ from those for CJ, Tylor, Ren, or his uncles. He loves them all, but his love for Sam is more profound, very much like his love for his father. Although conflicted, he believes his connection with Sam is unbreakable. Austin stutters an ambiguous, “Mm - Me, too.” Sam knows it will take time for Austin to sort out his feelings, so he doesn’t press for clarification.

Hoping to help provide Austin with some framework for his toppled life, Sam explains, “The boys still have a week before they start school again. They’ll be with you a lot—maybe too much—trying to catch you up on today’s culture. In their excitement about bringing you into their life, they will bombard you with information. Don’t let it overwhelm you; be sure to let them know when you need a break. They’ll also introduce you to younger friends your age.”

Sam can see Austin’s eyes start to glaze over, but he continues, “Of course, just because they are a friend of CJ or Tylor, you don’t have to make them your friend, too. I trust your judgment in making connections that suit you.”

Noticing that Austin’s breathing is becoming deeper and slower, Sam softens his voice to just above a whisper: “Special Services, whoever they are, have made arrangements for a tutor at the charter school CJ and Tylor attend. Of course, the boys will be in different grades than you, but you can rely on them for anything.”

Unable to keep his eyes open any longer, Austin drifts into a peaceful sleep. Sam adjusts Austin’s blankets and returns to his chair, hoping his monologue will infiltrate Austin’s subconscious and stop the

nightmares until morning. Adjusting the recliner, Sam readies himself for another restless night at the hospital.

⇒ CH 16