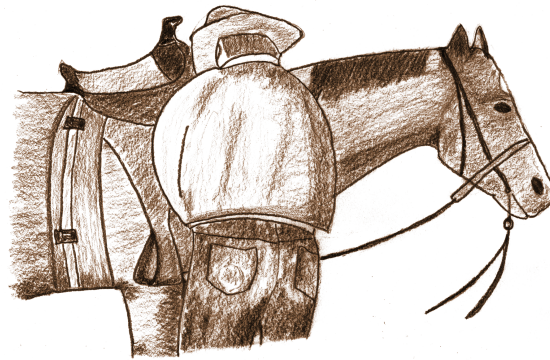


Restricted Territory



Night Ride

[Last Chance to Get Out]

Wednesday, 21 Nov 1877

The -R- main house is a large two-story mansion set apart from the wrangler's dormitory and other support buildings. A set of steps leads up to the covered porch and main entrance. Immediately behind the oversized double front door is the entry vestibule. The grand entrance to the dining room is to the right, through the tall hardwood doors. Directly ahead is a carpeted staircase with an ornate banister to the second floor and service doors on either side. To the left is the archway to the elegantly appointed parlor.

The brightly lit dining room is well-appointed, with buffets on each side of a double swing door that leads to the kitchen. A table that can seat sixteen is centered in the room. Gilded framed portraits adorn the white plaster walls. Hank Wilson, who has just finished eating, is sitting at the head of the dining table.

Hank is well dressed. His movement and demeanor suggest an upper-class upbringing. Although the table can seat many more, the only setting is for Hank. Eleven men are standing near the table, waiting for instructions from Hank and Cody. A Chinese manservant clears the table of the single setting onto a serving tray. He then, without a word, hurries off into the kitchen.

Hank lights a cigar, and after blowing a puff of smoke, he stands up: "This has to be done right. I want to take advantage of this storm coming in. It will keep people from venturing far from town for at least a few days. That'll give us time for our little scenario to play out without question. Our guest doctor arrived back in town this morning, so we shouldn't have any loose ends. Y'all know what's expected of

ya'. Anybody that feels like they want out can just ride off and never return. However, once this starts, there's no turnin' back."

The ranch hands nervously glance at each other to see how others respond. For a few seconds, it is awkwardly quiet while the hands weigh their options. Gary, one of the ranch hands, breaks the silence in a very nervous voice: "I ain't got no problem with the rest of it, but with kids, it's different."

As Hank steps up to face Gary, the other crew members step away. Hank asks in a quiet, menacing growl, "What about 'em." He pauses while slowly looking Gary up and down. "You got a problem shootin' kids?"

With Hank getting right into his face, Gary is even more nervous now. "Grown-ups is one thing –" he looks around for support from the others but finds none. "I just ain't gonna be a part of shootin' no kids." Hoping the offer still stands, Gary decides it's best to leave. "I'll just be takin' yer offer and ride out." His fear and nervousness cause him to stutter, "Dis . . disappear like you said."

Hank reaches up and straightens Gary's collar while talking to him in a calm but eerily discomfoting tone: "Sure. You can leave right now – but know this: You'll go through that gate for the last time. I don't even wanna hear your name. Understand?"

Gary, relieved that Wilson didn't change his mind, stumbles over his words, "Yes sir, I understand. I understand completely, sir."

Hank addresses the rest of the crew, "Last chance; same conditions. Anyone else having problems with your assigned duties?"

The ranch hands, most of whom are looking at the floor, glance around at each other, but no one else takes the offer.

Cody finishes the meeting: "Good. Then let's get ridin'."

The ranch hands begin shuffling toward the door. Hank pulls Cody aside: "Cody, I've got a couple details to go over with you before you go."

"Sure, boss." Cody steps back to speak with Hank, and the rest of the ranch hands go out the front door to saddle up.

Hank quietly tells Cody, "This might be a good time to thin out the herd. Dylan and Mark are gettin' to be more trouble than they're worth. Make sure t' leave 'em at Ben's place. And just to keep the rest of 'em in line, Gary might need a little help gettin' in his saddle. I'm guessin' he might like to stay at Greg's place until things *warm up*."

"Got it, boss." Cody turns toward the door while donning his hat. He grabs his coat from the rack and quickly walks to complete his first task.

[Out Forever]

Outside the ranch house in the dark, gloomy late evening, the men are getting their horses ready. The cold breeze moves the broken clouds across the sky, covering and uncovering the full moon. The ground is covered with dirty snow from all the horse traffic. The main house and the bunkhouse, separated by fifty feet, have hitching rails at their respective porches. Saddled horses are tied to both sets of rails. Oil lamps on both porches provide light for the ranch hands as they prepare for their sinister run.

Cody walks out the door, calling the crew, "Pay attention here!" The crew all stop what they are doing and look at Cody. "You all have your assignments. Rick an' me are goin' to be at the main fork by Ben's place to make sure there ain't no interruptions while you work. Everybody knows their job, Right?"

The crew dutifully responds, "Yes, boss."

Cody finishes his announcement, "Okay. We're on the trail in five."

Cody looks off to a quieter front yard area, where Gary is about to saddle up. He walks over to where Gary is getting ready to leave and sees that Gary is trying to go as quickly as possible. "Gary! Slow down. There's no need to hurry."

Gary looks at Cody nervously and hurriedly tries to finish getting his saddle ready to leave. Cody walks closer to Gary and holds up a small money pouch. Relief crosses Gary's face as he sees the familiar pouch that contains the week's pay.

Cody holds out the money pouch, "You might need this for your trip."

Gary stops what he's doing and approaches Cody.

Gary is pleased to receive the unexpected pay; He'll need it to travel. "Thanks. Wasn't expectin' nothin' but a kick in the ass as I left."

Just as Gary reaches for the pouch, a knife hidden in Cody's sleeve drops into his hand. Cody stabs Gary in the chest, and then he grabs Gary by the collar and gets in his face: "Just a little heartfelt goodbye." Cody menacingly whispers in his ear, "Boss says the offer's been revoked."

Gary falls to the ground dead. The knife is still in Cody's hand. He bends down and picks up the money bag, "Won't be needin' this."

Cody calls over one of the ranch hands who witnessed the murder, "Take him along. We'll leave him at Greg's ranch."

A second ranch hand motions to other ranch hands standing nearby, "You heard him. Leave his guns and saddle here and tie him on the back of his horse."

The other ranch hands take the saddle off his horse, remove the dead man's holster, and secure him to the horse. Then, they all mount up and ride to the gate with Gary and his horse in tow.

[Evil Rides]

The riders, all wearing dark clothing, head out the gate. The wind whistles as it passes through the entrance gates. The horses' steps splash in the mud, crunching snow and ice. The first pair of riders is Cody and Rick, then a group of three ranch hands, then Mark and Dylan, followed by another group of three with Gary and his horse tethered behind. The sound of the horses and the silhouette of the riders fade into the turbulent night.

[Terror at Home]

Two shots ring out in quick succession from behind the door to Ben Creighton's ranch house, followed by a scream and then sobbing. Inside, Mark and Dylan are standing in the main room of the ranch house with their guns drawn. Ben and Marsha have been shot and are lying on the floor, dead. Mark and Dylan now have guns trained on the kids who are crying at the side of their dead parents.

In a sly, malicious tone, Mark tells Dylan, "We don't have to kill these two – just yet. I think we might have a little fun with 'em first." Speaking more to the kids than to Dylan, Mark says, "I suppose that if they are really nice –" He glares at Victoria, "We could let them ride off and disappear like good ol' Gary."

Dylan, knowing Gary's current situation, smiles in acknowledgment.

Mark kicks Austin, "Okay, ya little brat. Stand up an' quit yer bawling."

Victoria and Austin stand up slowly, timidly, holding each other for comfort while still sobbing.

Mark addresses the kids, "Whatcha say, kids? You gonna do this the easy way or the –"

Austin, crying and yelling at the same time, interrupts Mark, "We aren't stupid, you son of a bitch !"

This is the first time Victoria has heard Austin use foul language. She is surprised at herself for being proud of her little brother's bravery instead of angry about the foul language.

Austin knows how vile Mark and Dylan are and figures he has nothing to lose in defying them: "Y'all are just gonna kill us anyway. We ain't making anything easy for you!"

Victoria looks at Austin in fear and agreement but does not say anything.

Dylan quickly steps forward and punches Austin in the stomach, "Ya little brat!"

Austin buckles to the floor.

Victoria grabs Austin to protect him, screaming, "Leave him alone!"

Victoria tries to assist Austin, but Mark steps forward with his gun and separates Victoria from Austin and Dylan. Mark motions her to step back. Victoria steps back slowly and starts to cry. Dylan rolls Austin over so he is face down. He takes a long leather strap from his belt loop and ties Austin's hands behind his back.

Dylan kicks Austin in the ribs: “Now that otta makes things a bit easier.” He now focuses on Victoria: “Yer next, sweetie.”

Austin rolls from his front to his side and raises his knees to his chest as a protective reflex. Dylan steps over Austin while taking another strap from his belt and grabs Victoria to tie her up. Not giving up easily, Victoria struggles with Dylan, repeatedly fighting off his attacks.

Mark is entertained by Victoria, who starts to get the upper hand in the struggle. After watching for a bit, and before Victoria actually defeats Dylan, Mark gets impatient, grabs Victoria by the arm, and puts her in an arm hold, pressing her onto the floor. Dylan uses the opportunity Mark provides to tie Victoria’s hands and then slaps her butt.

Mark steps between Victoria and Dylan, and speaking down to Dylan, he asserts his dominance: “Looks like ‘sweetie’ here is a bit too much for you. I’m takin’ her; you can have that stubborn scamp!”

Dylan protests, “I almost had her before you –”

Mark interrupts him, “Almost ain’t good enough.” He laughs, “You get the boy or nothin’. Talkin’s done. I got some business to discuss with the little lady.”

Mark grabs Victoria’s arm, jerks her onto her feet, and then shoves her toward the bedroom. Victoria looks at Austin and puts on a false front of propriety. Beneath the façade is her concern, not only for herself but also for her brother.

Austin, though young, understands what is about to happen – to each of them. He musters enough strength to hide his fear of what is to come and shows Victoria a face of determination and bravery. He is not so worried about Dylan’s plan of debauchery but more so about what is to happen to his sister and how they will die. Somehow, they must escape.

Mark pushes Victoria toward the bedroom. He looks at Dylan, “I don’t care what you do out here, but I better not get any disruption from ya’ ‘till I come back out. Got it!?”

Dylan, in a defeated tone, “Yeah, I hears ya.”

Austin feels a small victory and smirks at the two men fighting.

Mark pushes the struggling Victoria and forces her into the bedroom. Austin immediately loses the smirk. Mark slams the door behind them once he and Victoria are in the bedroom.

Dylan grabs Austin by the arm and jerks him to his feet. Austin has been crying, and the floor has ruddled his face. Despite the tear streaks and abrasion, he displays a look of bold confidence and defiance.

Dylan gets right in Austin’s face and, in a furious and demanding tone, seethes, “You listen up, boy, and you listen good. I ain’t in the mood for any trouble from the likes of some brat. You just do exactly what I tells ya to do. If ya don’t, I’m a-goin’ t’ get real mean. Ya don’t want me t’ get mean.”

Austin does not respond; he maintains his defiant glare.

Manhandling Austin, Dylan pushes him into a standing position, facing the table. Dylan stands close behind Austin, then slowly takes a couple of steps back and begins to undo his belt.

“Okay, boy, drop them breaches!” demands Dylan.

In the bedroom, Mark pushes Victoria onto the bed. She lands on the bed, face down. Mark starts undoing the top of Victoria’s dress.

Victoria screams, “Stop! Get off me, you pig!” as she rolls over and scratches Mark’s face. She starts squirming and thrashing. In the battle, she hits Mark in the forehead with the back of her head, leaving a cut on Mark that starts to bleed.

Mark stands up and wipes the blood from his forehead. “Looks like I got a feisty one.” He takes a couple of straps from his belt. “I’ll just have to take care of that.”

Back in the front room, Austin hears Victoria struggling in the bedroom. He knows that time is running out and that he must make his move soon. But for now, Austin does not move. He just stares straight ahead, trying to figure out how he and Victoria can escape.

Austin can hear Dylan removing his belt. As Austin expected, Dylan became very angry at his defiance. Dylan yells, “Boy, I said to drop ‘em!”

Dylan steps forward, raises his hand, and then hits Austin across his back with the belt. Austin flinches, and tears stream from his eyes.

Winning at the pain, Austin tries his best not to cry out loud as tears continue down his face and fall from his chin. The tears sting as they traverse the ruddy scrapes from the floor. His voice breaks as he screams at Dylan, “I can’t!”

Dylan growls, “Why the hell not boy?”

Even though the situation is worse than horrible, Austin gets a little satisfaction from making Dylan look like an idiot. Austin’s voice trembles with anger, fear, and pain, “You blind? Idiot! My hands are tied!”

In the bedroom, Victoria is fighting with Mark. He has tied her hands to one of the bedposts. Mark is struggling, tying one foot to the corner of the bed.

Victoria hits Mark in the stomach with her knee. “Let go of me! Get away! You stinky bastard! Don’t touch me!”

In the front room, Austin can hear Victoria’s fight with Mark, which is still ongoing, reassuring him that she is still alive.

Dylan is angry for being made a fool by Austin. Warning Austin, Dylan starts to untie him: “If you try gittin’ away or fightin’ back, I’ll break every bone in your body. You’ll be in so much pain you’ll be beggin’ me t’ kill you. You got that?” Because Austin has been so resistive and hasn’t buckled yet, Dylan is apprehensive about Austin being untied. Austin can hear the trepidation in his voice.

In a fury over Austin's obstinance, Dylan talks through his teeth, "When I'm done here, you drop them pants and put yer hands on the table. Hear me!?"

Austin does not respond. Though his tears won't stop, his cry is silent. He is focused on denying Dylan the satisfaction of seeing him break.

Dylan comes right up behind Austin and whispers in his ear, "You best not be any more trouble."

Austin just stares straight ahead as an evil chill runs down his spine. He decides to use advice Ren said could get him out of a tight spot: "Get 'em angry, and they might make a mistake." If Dylan gets angry enough to make a mistake, Austin plans to seize the opportunity and escape. Dylan pushes Austin in the back after untying him, purposely on the line of blood from the injury inflicted by the belt. Austin winces. Dylan takes several steps back, "Now get to it."

Austin does not move. He is doing his best not to cry out loud, but his lower lip is beginning to quiver.

Dylan: "Ya need another taste of the belt?"

With a loud slap, a belt appears from out of sight as Dylan strikes Austin with the belt a second time. "Get with it, boy!"

Austin is reaching his breaking point but is encouraged by the sounds of struggling coming from the bedroom. Victoria hasn't given up, so neither will he. He pretends to undo his belt, but instead, reaches into his pocket, pulls out his knife, opens it, and places it right in front of him. Trying to give himself courage, Austin roars.

Dylan approaches Austin, "Cry and scream all you want; It don't make no difference t' me."

Austin's tightly clenched fists are on the table, and the open knife is between them. Dylan drops his pants to his boots. The pain, fear, and apprehension of what is to come causes Austin's hands to tremble, and he sniffles due to the tears and runny nose. With time running out for a successful escape, Austin musters his courage and grabs the knife, clenching it tightly to control the trembling.

In the bedroom, because Mark is distracted by Austin's roar, Victoria manages to free one foot from Mark's grasp and kicks Mark into the door, causing a loud thud.

Just as Dylan takes another step, the loud thud causes the distraction Austin was waiting for. In an uncharacteristic, menacing manner, Austin screams at Dylan, "You can scream all the way to hell!" Austin spins around with his knife and slices Dylan in the groin.

Dylan is shocked by the attack and tries to grab Austin and his injury at the same time. Dylan's self-preservation instinct causes his injury to take precedence, so Austin evades the grab. Dylan falls to the ground, clutching his injury, and curls up into a fetal position on the floor, kicking and screaming. An ever-increasing pool of blood emanates from his hip area as it spreads slowly across the floor.

In a panic, Dylan yells to Mark, "Mark! Get out here! He tried to cut my pecker off! Mark, get in here! He's got a knife! He cut me! Shoot that little son of a bitch!"

While Dylan is yelling, Austin puts his plan into action. He throws open the front door, then grabs a frying pan from the stove and a chair from the table. He hides in the doorway of the pantry. All this while, Dylan is yelling obscenities and writhing on the floor.

Mark comes out of the bedroom. His shirt is unbuttoned, his belt is undone, and his gun in his hand.

“What the hell is all this caterwauling about!?” Mark complains, “Can’t ya even handle a little kid?”

From the bedroom doorway, Mark sees Dylan on the floor, squirming about. His attention is briefly turned to the front door, slammed closed by the wind. He does not see Austin, quietly standing on a kitchen chair with a frying pan held high in the pantry doorway, and assumes that Austin ran out the door.

Dylan is writhing in pain and holding on to his injury, “Find that kid and shoot him!”

Just as Mark steps through the door, Austin, using all his strength, hits Mark on the head with the cast iron frying pan, causing Mark to fire his gun as he is knocked to the floor, stunned. Due to the effort in swinging the pan, Austin loses his balance and falls from the chair, dropping the frying pan. He lands behind Mark, falling into the open bedroom door.

Victoria screams, thinking the shot hit Austin.

Mark tries to reach for Austin but cannot make any coordinated moves. He is stunned, confused, and nonambulatory. He tries speaking but can not form words.

Austin, dazed by the fall, stumbles as he gets up.

Dylan cannot see what’s happening: “Did you get ‘em? You got him, right?”

[Out of the Frying Pan, Into the Freezer]

Austin stumbles into the bedroom and slams the door behind him. He sees that Victoria has her hands and one foot tied to the bed. Her dress is half ripped off, revealing her petticoat.

Victoria is surprised and relieved that Austin is still alive. She does a quick visual scan for signs of a gunshot wound, and thankfully, she sees none.

With the situation at hand, Austin foregoes any thought of modesty for his sister with her torn dress but immediately starts cutting the leather straps off her wrist.

As Austin kneels to cut the strap at her wrist, Victoria sees the blood from the belt injuries seeping through his shirt: “Are you okay?”

Austin works quickly to free her hands. He doesn’t want to burden Victoria with concern for his injuries; he just wants to get away as fast as possible: “I’ll be fine.” He looks at Victoria with large green eyes filled with fear and sadness: “How about you?”

Victoria's response is delayed as she recalls her brother's happy, curious eyes just this morning. She snaps back to the reality of the situation, "Um, yeah. Hurry – before they come back." Victoria glances toward the door. She sees shadows and hears scuffling from the other side. As soon as her first hand is free, Austin gives her the knife to work on the other hand.

Austin moves to the other end of the bed and unties her foot. The cuts on his back alternate from throbbing to stinging as he moves his arms or twists his body. Austin wants to just lie on the bed and cry but knows he can't. Bravely, he hides his pain and holds back the tears – mostly.

Victoria gets to her feet and quickly adjusts her torn dress as best she can. She glances back at the door again. There are still shadows moving on the other side and sounds of movement. Looking around, she finds that the only other exit is the window.

Victoria opens the interior shutters, pushes up the window frame, and unlatches the outer shutter. As the outer shutter is opened, the brisk winter air rushes into the room. In a forced whisper, she directs Austin, "Let's not give them a second chance. Quick, through here."

Austin does not need to be told twice to escape. Any avenue of getting out of that room and away from the ranch is okay with him. Victoria helps Austin get started out the window. She sees the blood soaking through Austin's shirt and winces in empathy at the pain her little brother must feel.

Austin falls ungracefully to the ground, landing on his back. The impact causes him to release a muffled grunt; however, the cold snow helps to relieve his pain just a bit.

Victoria grabs her boots, quickly puts them on, and follows him out, glancing one last time at the closed door and the sounds of the moving shadows. Outside, Austin scrambles out of the way, leaving red streaks where he landed.

Victoria squeezes herself through the small window. Austin helps to keep her from falling like he did.

[Winter's Cruel Sting]

Outside, they face a cold winter night with falling snow and a strong breeze. The whooshing of the wind in the trees fills the valley. Clouds race through the dark sky. Occasionally, light from the full moon pokes through the broken heavy clouds, providing patches of brightness that dance across the snow.

Victoria and Austin are not dressed for the frigid environment in which they now find themselves. They have no jackets, gloves, scarves, or hats: The necessary protective clothing for outdoor survival in these winter conditions. They have only been out of the house for a few seconds, but the cold is already beginning to bite. Their breaths can be seen as they breathe and speak. They run, crouched down, to the corner of the ranch house to get a clearer view of the barn.

In a hushed but urgent tone, Victoria suggests, "Let's get the horses. We can ride to Uncle Greg's."

Austin is open to any suggestion that will effect an escape. His voice is made hoarse by the cold, "Okay."

They survey their route options for the safest and least visible path to the barn. Victoria points to a wood pile just a short distance from the house, about halfway to the barn, where they can briefly take cover. Without a word, she looks to Austin for agreement. He looks around for issues, then nods once.

Victoria leads, with Austin right behind her. They scurry over to the wood pile and take a moment of refuge. Victoria whispers, "I thought we would never see each other again." She gives him a carefully placed hug, avoiding his injuries. He gives her a big hug in return.

Victoria asks, "What happened? How'd you get away?"

Excitedly, Austin starts to recount the events, "When you made that loud noise, I was able to cut the one attacking me and ..." He is beginning to feel and understand the reality of what just happened.

His excitement becomes a confession. "... then I hit the other one with the skillet."

Austin becomes very serious as he thinks about what just happened and starts crying again. "I think, maybe, I killed 'em. I didn't want to kill nobody. I'm scared." Austin's face loses all color. "I don't feel too good."

Austin quickly moves to the end of the woodpile and vomits.

Victoria, unable to pat his back due to the injuries, runs her fingers through his dark hair to comfort him. She knows that his actions for survival conflict with the gentle and caring nature of her little brother.

After vomiting, he sits with his back toward the wood pile, puts his head between his knees, and sobs.

After a few seconds, Austin, still sobbing, wipes his mouth. "Sorry fer pukin'."

"Silly boy!" Victoria is sensitive to what Austin just went through. She leans over and hugs him around his neck: "You were just defending yourself and did what you had to. I'm thankful and glad you did."

To help him regain focus, she uses a more instructive tone: "Cept now you have to get yourself together. We're not out of this yet. Besides, at least one of those bastards is still alive."

Austin looks at her with surprise. She explains, "I could tell by the shadows under the door." She pauses just long enough for Austin to let that sink in. "You ready to get outta here?"

Austin quickly nods in the affirmative, wipes his face with his sleeve, and moves back to the center of the wood pile.

[Blocked Exit]

Two riders' silhouettes move against the winter sky. They are on the main road that goes by the barn and leads to the ranch house.

Cody interrupts the sound of the horses' footsteps, "They must be done by now."

In a calm, business-like tone, Rick is unsure if the task has been completed. “Maybe, but I only heard three shots. . . . Supposed t’ be four of ‘em.”

“Yeah, but I know what they’re up to,” Cody states, “and I ain’t gonna sit out here and freeze my ass off waitin’ for them to have some fun. Ev’rbody else is already headed back. Boss wants them two outta our way anyhow. Let’s just take care of the two idiots, finish whatever they didn’t get done, and get back to the ranch.”

Rick adjusts the collar on his coat to fend off the breeze. “Yeah. Weather won’t hold much longer.”

[Last Option]

Victoria, with Austin in tow, starts to run for the barn. Just as they clear the woodpile, Victoria sees the riders approaching. She immediately reverses direction, knocking Austin down. They both scramble back behind the woodpile.

Victoria is flustered. “Damn! We can’t get the horses with those riders comin’ in. We just need to get outta here – now!”

“Where we gonna go?” Asks Austin desperately. “They’ll see us tryin’ to run to Uncle Greg’s place. They’ll catch us for sure.”

Victoria, glancing in every direction, is trying to find a solution. Then, with conviction, she says, “There.” She points across the snow to the river.

The large meadow has trees on the far side, an open and steep uphill to the south, and a lake to the north. The meadow narrows as it passes between the slope and the lake, eventually reaching the creek and the trees beyond. The creek feeds the lake on its eastern side. The fastest way to the cover of the trees is straight across the meadow and through the creek.

Victoria explains to Austin: “They wouldn’t take the chance of following us across the crick tonight. Besides, it will be too dark to track us once we get in the trees, even with the snow.”

Austin, not wanting to waste any more time, grabs Victoria by the hand and starts running across the snow.

It is quiet in the snow-covered field, except for the crunch of the snow being compacted with each rapid step as Austin and Victoria race toward the safety of the trees. Once across the creek, they can go up the trail to the cabin just a few hundred yards farther up the hill.

Austin is running as fast as he can. In the forty-five seconds to a minute it takes them to cross the meadow, Austin has plenty of time to evaluate the dire circumstances they face. In a matter-of-fact tone, his sentence staccatoed by his labored breathing, he confides, “You know – we’re gonna’ likely – freeze to death.”

Victoria is also panting as they run across the snow. “I know – we don’t have much chance.” Her response is interrupted as she gasps for breaths, “But I don’t think we have any other way out.” She draws another deep breath. “I’d rather freeze than get caught by them again.”

“Me too.” He glances back at the ranch house to see if anyone is in pursuit.

Still, two hundred yards out from the creek, Victoria and Austin tire as they cross the snow toward safety.

The river is about thirty feet wide. Most of it is less than knee-deep this time of year. However, holes and debris compound the dangers of the current, the cold, and the darkness.

[The Unexpected]

The two riders arrive at the ranch house. They dismount, tie their horses to the porch rail where two other horses are tied, and head up the stairs. Moaning sounds are heard from the door as they approach.

Thinking the sounds are of the other ranch hands having their ‘fun,’ Rick grins at Cody, “Sounds like we might be interrupting something.”

Cody flings the door open, making a grand entrance as if to catch something ‘in the act.’ But he is immediately taken aback by what he finds - Ben and Marsha are dead, as expected, but Dylan is murmuring in a pool of blood, and Mark is lying on the floor with agonal respirations.

Cody and Rick draw their guns, expecting further action. Their attitude changes from casual to alert anticipation.

“Shit!” Cody looks at Rick, fuming, “Find those damn kids. I’ll finish off these two.”

[Cold Crossing]

Just before Victoria enters the water, Austin stops, grabs Victoria’s hand, and holds her back. He looks into her eyes to strengthen his resolve. In the distance, a shot rings out. Hearing the shot, the kids look back toward the ranch house. A few seconds later, a second shot breaks the stillness yet again.

Austin, still breathing deeply, shakes Victoria to regain her focus. When he has her attention, he tells her, “If we get separated, meet me at Ren’s place.”

“Okay.” Victoria knows that the water crossing they are about to undertake is the most challenging obstacle they must overcome to escape. The frigid water and unstable footing may erode their resolve to finish the crossing, and they may decide to turn back. To help keep a positive attitude, she introduces a friendly competition: “The first one there starts the fire.”

Victoria is very nervous. She knows they will likely not see the dawn of a new day once they enter the stream. She is driven to this action by the inevitable death that awaits them if they do not cross, but at the same time, she feels the responsibility that she might be leading her younger brother and herself to their doom.

Austin takes a deep breath in anticipation of the near-freezing water and bolsters his determination to get across. He quickly starts into the river first. Victoria is right beside him. The kids use each other for

balance while slowly making their way toward the other side. The river is less than knee-deep but very cold. Their legs become numb, and they start to lose coordination. Each step is a challenge because the river rocks are rounded and slippery.

[Search is Called Off, for Now]

Cody looks out the open bedroom window at the tracks left by the kids. The blood on the snow reassures him that at least one of them is injured. The clouds still block most of the moonlight, but the occasional break in the clouds allows Cody to see the kids' tracks leading to the other side of the meadow. He calls back into the ranch house to Rick. "Found em! . . . Least, where they went."

Rick, hearing Cody's discovery, quickly steps past the two dead men, through the door, and arrives at the window. He's carrying Mark and Dylan's firearms.

Cody points to the blood near the window and the footprints in the snow in the distance: "They won't be too hard to track."

The clouds break a little so the two men can see the kids in the distance struggling to cross the river.

[River Takes Its Toll]

With no feeling in his feet, Austin's footing is precarious at best. He slips and falls into the river. Victoria struggles to pull him back to his feet. His brief dunking completely soaks his hair and clothes. Victoria sees the chances of making it through the night quickly vanishing. She isn't even sure Austin will reach the shore, which is only ten feet away.

Austin begins shivering, his teeth chattering. With hypothermia starting to take its toll, his mind is no longer able to think of the future. Not the cabin. Not even the trail. His only thought now is to get out of the creek.

Victoria refuses to accept facts that will cause her to lose all hope. She shakes her head and splashes water on her face to clear her mind and get a stronger sense of purpose.

Under her breath, Victoria speaks to herself. "We're not done yet! One step at a time. We've got to get to the other side. Come on, Victoria, we're not going to quit here."

Upon seeing Austin fall into the water, Rick turns away from the window and walks back into the front room. "No point goin' after 'em tonight. They'll be dead by mornin'. We'll come back with a couple of dogs t' find 'em after the storm passes. Then put 'em back in the house before it gets burned."

At the creek, Austin and Victoria finally reach the other side. Austin is completely soaked, and Victoria is mostly wet.

Victoria is holding onto Austin's hand and leading him up the slope. She encourages him, "Not too far now, baby brother. It's just up this hill a little way."

Austin starts to lose the ability to speak and form sentences. He no longer feels the sting of the cold. His mind is telling him to lie down and take a nap. He tries to convey his thoughts to Victoria but fails to complete his sentence, "You go a . . . ahead. I'm tir . . .slee." Austin's eyes close.

Desperately trying to keep him moving, Victoria is steadfast in her resolve, “I’m not going anywhere without you. Victoria pulls Austin by the arm as they slowly go up the mountain. “Come on, you have to keep moving.”

In his mind, Austin is walking up the hill normally. But in reality, his steps are only inches at a time.

Victoria is now having spurts of shivers. They both have difficulty moving as they try to find the trail up the mountain to the cabin. They have managed to get about 200 feet up the trail from the creek. Austin is now shivering uncontrollably. His steps are uncoordinated, and the direction of his next step is unpredictable. He begins to take deep breaths, coughing each time due to the freezing air.

The darkness and snow hide all traces of the trail they seek. Only the lack of trees before them indicates a possible trail. Each step toward survival is a struggle with very little progress. The wind blows away the body heat that the wet clothes siphon from the decreasingly mobile kids. The pain in their hands, feet, and faces transitions to numbness as their strength fades. Soon, Austin’s speech becomes incomprehensible: “S - s - s o -o . . . t - t - tir - d -d. Nap.”

Their quiet steps become hollow when they reach a wooden bridge that crosses the creek. Austin’s babbling reveals his inability to reason, but Victoria knows this area well enough to understand the significance of the bridge. If not for the darkness and the snow, she could see the back of the barn from here. The familiar location gives her confidence to press on.

Austin falls, too weak to continue. Victoria pulls him by the arm, dragging him in the snow. She travels only a short distance before losing her footing and falling. Victoria gets back up and tries again. She manages to pull him a few feet, then falls again. She tries once more, but the cold has taken her strength. As her strength and will diverge, Victoria’s hope begins to falter.

Victoria starts crying. Out of frustration, she screams at Austin, “Get up! You can’t stop here. You’ve got to keep going!” She looks down at Austin. His eyes are barely open; he does not respond. Sobbing, she falls to her knees next to him. Gently brushing the snow from his face, she softly apologizes, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have yelled.”

Austin closes his eyes. His mind can no longer form comprehensible thoughts; his consciousness drifts into a gray fog.

Although he doesn’t respond, Victoria can see his shallow breath in the cold air, but reality erases her last vigil of hope. Victoria knows that Austin has only a few minutes of life left and that she will have only a few minutes after that.

Even though she is relieved to have escaped the evil that assailed them at home, she is sorry that they couldn’t make it to the old miner’s cabin for a chance of survival. With the end so near, she realizes that she is not afraid of death; she is just sad that life for them was so short.

Cruelly juxtaposed, the memory of her strong, fearless, and brilliant brother flashes in her mind as she looks at the scene before her: Austin lying on the ground in a fetal position. Victoria refuses to leave her brother to die alone in the cold.

Even without Austin, she knows that the cabin is unreachable in her current state. Accepting her fate, she lays down behind Austin, wrapping her arms around him. Tears run down her face as she embraces him.

In a weak and broken voice, she speaks softly into his ear. "I am so sorry, little brother – I just didn't know any other way." She begins to sob, "Austin – I'm so sorry."

Victoria feels around to find Austin's cold hand. Holding her brother's hand and looking into the sky, she prays, "Lord, forgive our sins."

The wind swirls the heavy snow as it falls. Austin goes still. Victoria kisses him on the back of the head, then closes her eyes as a shiver races down her spine.

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