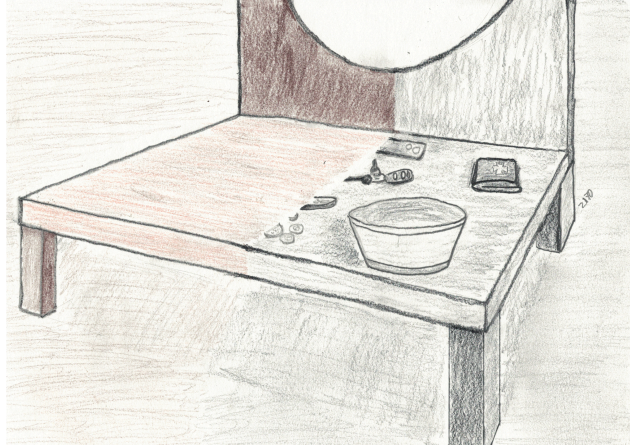


Restricted Territory



Change of Scene

[Trip to Town]

Wednesday, 21 Nov 1877

It's early morning at the B – C (Bee Bar See, Ben Creighton Ranch). Austin is asleep under a thick layer of blankets in the dark loft of the ranch house. Dim amber light from an unknown source, down and out of sight, glows from a doorway. A light from a lantern moves quietly, throwing shadows here and there as it sways to and fro. Boots on the rungs clearly sound as someone quietly climbs a wooden ladder.

"Austin. Austin." Ben, in a half-whisper, wakes his son Austin. "Time to get up, son. We have a long day ahead of us, and we need to get back before the storm sets in."

Austin's eyes open slightly as his waking brain interprets the information, then, as if electrified, his eyes open wide, and in a voice too excited to be called a whisper, he springs to life, "Is it really going to be just me and you?" As he gathers his senses, his voice becomes even less of a whisper., "I like it when we have our *own* adventures without the girls."

In a sleepy, semi-sarcastic voice, Victoria, his eighteen-year-old sister, the other occupant of the loft, bemoans, "It would have been nice to have been left out of it completely."

Austin realizes that he's been too loud and woke his sister. He scrunches his face a little, then apologizes in a soft whisper, "Sorry."

Ben gently shatters Victoria's hope of getting a few more minutes of sleep, "Hurry up - both of you. Mom's got your breakfast ready. Victoria, you're going too. You need to sign some things, and since

you'll be leaving next week, you should probably make some final medical visits and let the ladies know what's going on."

Annoyed by the early hour and her dad's correctness about making some final visits, she grumbles, "Okay, Dad. It's been two weeks since I last visited the ladies, so I planned to visit them today, anyway, but later, much later."

Austin is disappointed that the 'Men's Trip' became a family trip. "Awe, Dad. I thought it was just going to be you and me."

Ben starts down the ladder. Feeling badly about Austin's disappointment, he stops and comes back up a rung. He reassures Austin, "It will be just you and me after we get to town. Your mom and sister have other errands. We'll go our separate ways when we get there. We won't have to mingle with the girls until later in the day when it's time to head home."

Austin's spirits are lifted, and his smile is returned by the clarification, "Good. I like our men-only adventures."

Ben musses Austin's hair and kisses him on the cheek, "Me too. I'll get the horses ready and meet you on the back porch." Ben climbs down the ladder and turns to leave when something lands with a loud thud right next to him.

Excited about the trip, Austin had sprung from his bed to the floor below without the benefit of the ladder, nearly landing on his dad. He looks up at his father, half-expecting a scolding due to the near miss. He offers his father an apologetic 'Oops,' which is met with an understanding smile.

As they both stand there, Ben scans Austin head to toe. As expected, Austin is only wearing his long Johns. Without a word, Ben's facial expression is clear as Austin hears his father's voice in his head: 'Are you just going to stand there all day in your underwear, or maybe get dressed and ready to go?'

Austin has no problem deciphering the expression and starts getting dressed, "Okay, Dad. I'll be right out."

Ben leaves the room to prepare the horses. He can't help but shake his head and laugh at his beloved son's antics.

[Manners Matter]

After getting dressed, Austin hurries to the kitchen, where his mom, Marsha, sits at the table, finishing her biscuit and tea. Victoria follows just a few seconds behind him. Two plates on opposite sides of the table, each with generous portions of eggs and potatoes, await the children. Another plate sits centered on the table with several warm biscuits piled upon it.

Austin sits at his usual spot and starts to gobble up the breakfast, unaware that his mom is quietly watching him. Marsha finishes her tea and then goes to the counter to finish cleaning the dishes she had previously placed there. She exercises restraint as she watches her unmannered son show disrespect, wolfing down his food.

Victoria can feel the tension in the room as she takes her place at the table. She is intuitive and attentive. With her mother's demeanor and her brother's obliviousness to the atmosphere, she can see the train derailing as Austin incorrectly prioritizes speed over manners.

Sitting across from Austin, Victoria bows her head for a short prayer before eating politely. On one of the few occasions he looks up from his plate, Austin sees Victoria pray, something he neglected to do before eating. He feels embarrassed about his omission, so he lowers his head for a quick prayer and continues his rapid eating.

Austin finishes his breakfast and cheerfully pops out of his chair, "Thanks, Mom." His remark intended to express gratitude for the meal and announce that he had finished.

Marsha turns toward Austin and positions herself aggressively, arms-crossed, "Yes, son, you may be excused from the table, but stay right where you are." Her tone and stance let Austin know he is forgetting his manners - again. Austin freezes his movement, then drops his head with a sigh, knowing that he is messing up.

Marsha takes Austin's plate to the counter while rebuking him, "To appreciate the care and effort that goes into making a meal, you'll be helping me in the kitchen every morning for the next week." She carefully observes his reaction to see if additional action is required to make her point.

Austin's first thought was to complain about the extra workload; however, with his eyes still looking down, he realized he was showing poor manners and disrespect. In a sincerely sorry manner, he accepts his sentence: "Yes, Ma'am. Sorry." Austin's mood elevated to guarded excitement: "I'm just a bit too distracted, I guess."

In an instructional tone and condemning stare, Marsha reminds him, "That's no excuse to forget your manners. Is it?"

Contritely, Austin answers, "No, ma'am, it isn't."

With Austin's sincere apology coupled with his one-week sentence, Marsha is confident that Austin has learned a lesson about better manners, so she releases him from her matriarchal reformatory to enjoy the rest of the day, "Okay. On your way."

Austin finally takes his eyes off the floor and smiles at his mom, "Thank you, ma'am."

Marsha smiles at her son's exuberant energy. Austin puts on his heavy coat, grabs a biscuit from the table, and puts it in his pocket. Heading out the door, Austin turns to his mom and says, "I'll help Dad with the horses." He turns and scurries out to help his dad.

Marsha calls Austin just before the door closes, "We'll clean up and be right out."

Marsha glances at Victoria, and they both laugh a little at Austin's excitement. Victoria, her plate cleared, looks at Marsha for permission to leave the table. Recognizing the look, Marsha nods approval, and Victoria rises and clears her plate from the table.

[Something's Different]

The light from the window is gray and gloomy, and the caretaker's cabin is cold, dark, and quiet. The wonderful aroma of yesterday's breakfast is disturbingly absent. Outside, light snow is swirled by small gusts of wind buffeting the house. The foot or more of snow that blanketed the cabin and surrounding areas yesterday is down to barely an inch. A cold draft that was not felt before puffs as the breeze outside erratically dances around the compass points.

Sam sits up and turns to drop his legs off the bed. He can see his breath as he warms his hands by briskly rubbing them together and breathing on them. Sam pauses, motionless, to gather some energy, then, with a determined fervor, quickly gets up and gets dressed in the cold room. He is cold and concerned about the lack of heat in the building. In his haste to check on the stoves, he doesn't notice the two additional beds as he exits his room.

He moves quickly into the main room. His voice slightly cracks as he calls to Wac ih 'a, "Wac ih a'. Wac ih a! Are you okay?... Are you here?" There is no response, just the occasional whistle of the wind as it squeezes its way into the cabin through unseen but unmistakably present passages to the outside.

Concerned, Sam goes to Wac ih a's room, at the other end of the cabin, to see if he may have overslept. There is no sign of Wac ih a'. The room is bare except for the bed with folded linens at the foot, a dusty dresser, and the rug in front of the bed. The interior shutters are closed, but oddly, they seem different from what he thinks he remembers about the shutters he saw last night.

Sam turns in the doorway to face the rest of the cabin. He calls for Wac ih 'a again. Nothing returns but an eerie silence.

Sam begins to scrutinize the cabin more closely. The cabin is less refined than he remembered it last night. He looks back into his room and notices that his wet clothes are no longer hanging out to dry. The clothes and the ropes are all gone. Further examination of his room reveals that all of his bags are gone. The dresser containing all his pocket treasures was cleared of his items, but the dust was untouched. The oil lamp he used last night is missing, and he finally noticed two additional beds in his room.

Sam is getting colder. He walks over to the Franklin stove and quickly and ever so briefly touches it. Then he pats it and finally lays his hand on it. It is freezing. He looks inside the stove, where he sees kindling and carefully placed small fire-starting sticks for an easy fire start. He goes to the kitchen and finds a box of wooden matches by the stove/oven. While there, he checks the stove for heat as well. It is also cold. It also was set up for a quick start with wood and kindling already in place.

Sam starts speaking to himself. "Humph! There's no way these could both be this cold."

Sam starts the fire in the cooking stove. Once the fire is started, he uses a small stick from the cooking stove fire to light one of the oil lamps on the wall. Moving to light the other lamp, he stumbles over a small pile of cook-stove wood stacked near the stove. It wasn't there yesterday.

Sam goes into the living/dining area to the heating stove and lights it. He puts his hands in his pockets to warm them as he walks over to the window, looking at the front porch. What he sees outside is similar but different from what he remembers yesterday.

He starts to wonder if Wac ih 'a was a scammer who stole his stuff and took off in the night. Sam reckons it would be almost impossible to take all his belongings: the wet clothes, the ropes, and the things from his pockets and clear out the other bedroom in one night, especially without waking him. But to also clear out the ashes from the stoves and make them cold by morning, he concludes, it just can't be done ... Unless it was more than one night?

A puff of freezing air hits Sam in the face, ending his personal conspiracy theory session. He places his hand near the window and feels the breeze coming through the small gap between the window and the casing. He closes the inside shutters to the western windows and then begins to go around the rest of the cabin, closing all the shutters to help keep the cold out.

Sam returns to the kitchen to check the stove's fire and warm himself. The cook stove is a large iron oven and stove, so it takes a while to get heated. As he tries soaking up whatever warmth might radiate his direction, he, again, starts to investigate the weird situation. He notices that the plates and utensils differ from those used last night. And, on the stove, is a large cast iron pot, a coffee pot, a kettle, and a skillet. Sam remembers the skillet and kettle, not the large pot.

Sam realizes that he is not just cold but hungry, too. He looks through the cupboards for some food but finds only small amounts of dry beans, sugar, salt, coffee, and flour. The eggs that were on the counter yesterday are gone, and an old wooden icebox has replaced the propane-fueled refrigerator in the corner.

After finding the icebox empty, he remembers about the pantry through the anteroom. Sam goes to the pantry, hoping to find something appetizing. As he searches the pantry, he comes across several cans of soup, a few cans of meat, some jars of peaches, and pickled vegetables. Some old but still useable potatoes and onions were in the vegetable box on the floor.

One of the cans Sam takes from the shelves had obscured the cupboard's back where a few knotholes were marked. A kid appears to have put the letter R near one of the knotholes. There were letters around some of the other knot holes, too: H, J, and X. He figures it must have been some sort of game kids might have played back in the day.

There is dust on everything the shelves hold. It looks as if it hadn't been touched for several months. The cans do not have conventional labels, and the jars are hand-labeled. Not sure of the contents' safety, Sam cautiously examines every item he might use. Taking a few items from the pantry, he heads back to the kitchen.

The stove is finally heating, so Sam warms his hands. He speaks out loud to himself, "What the heck? Even if Wac ih a' stole all my stuff (Sarcastically), if that's his real name, there's no way he could change everything overnight. Maybe if I return to town, I can get some answers."

Sam bundles up as best he can. His jacket and hat are missing from the hooks, but other jackets and hats are there. He puts on one of the coats, grabs a hat, and heads out to the barn. On the way to the barn, he passes a large pile covered by several canvas tarps. He is sure it wasn't there yesterday. Sam looks under the tarps and sees that it is firewood. He looks at the woodshed and sees that it is nearly empty. He shakes his head in disbelief at the overnight changes and continues to the barn.

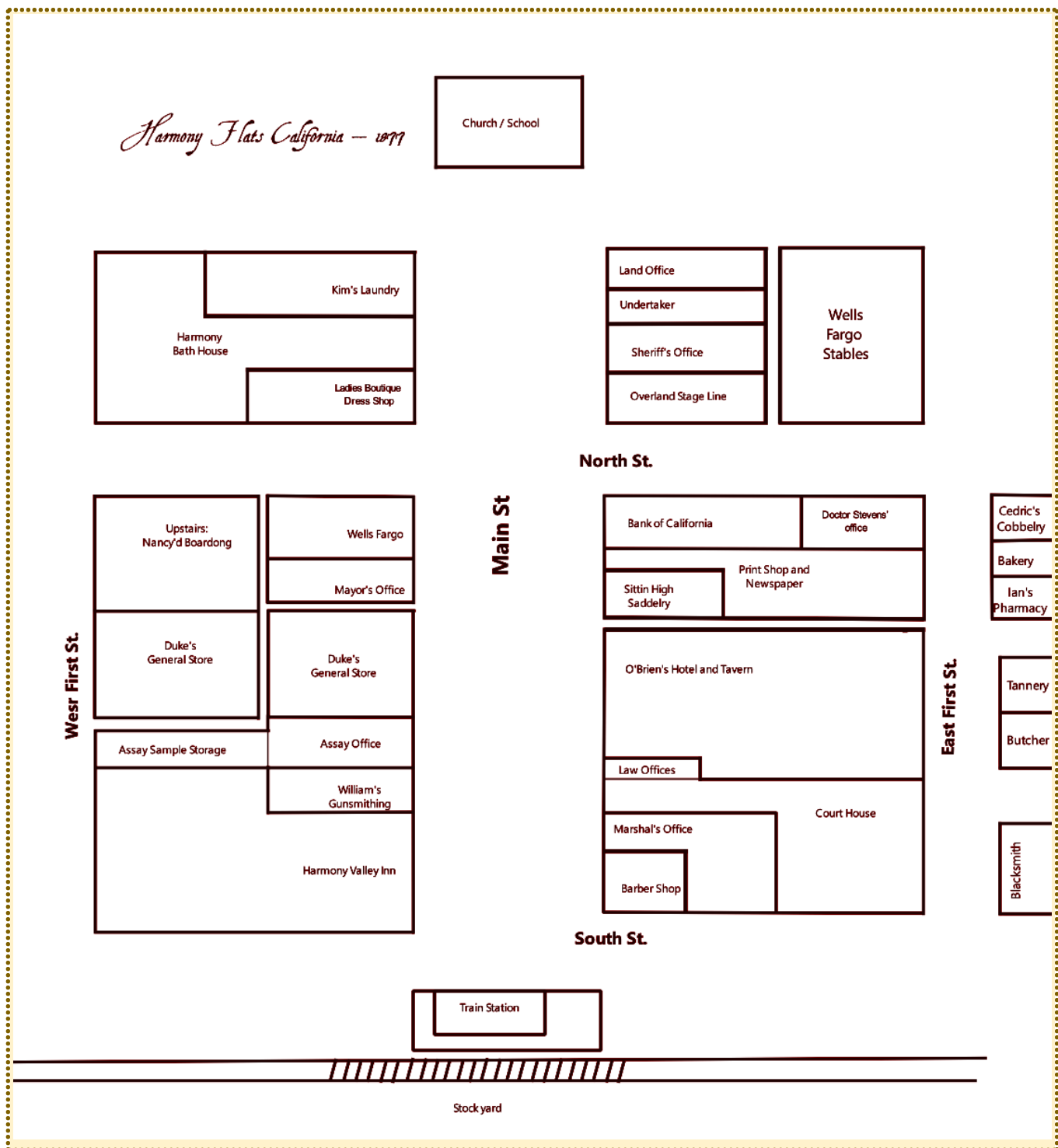
Opening the big barn door brings yet another surprise to the already perplexed Sam. The barn is empty. There are only a few piles of hay and another stack of firewood. His UTV is gone, and there is no sign of the horses. He looks out the barn door and sees that the only tracks in the snow are his. There is no sign of how the horses or the UTV left the barn.

Without the horses or the UTV, Sam is unwilling to take the risk of walking several miles back to town. He is upset and feels defeated. His little vacation in the hills is not at all as he had planned. Sam continues to talk to himself, "Boys'll be here in a couple of days, might as well get comfortable. Not like I've got much choice in the matter."

He takes some of the firewood back into the house. After putting the firewood by the cook stove, Sam hangs up the hat and coat, then, as if the answer to his question was just outside the door, he opens the back door and stares at the barn and forest behind it. The quietness offers him nothing but solitude. He gently closes the door and postpones his quest for answers until more information is available. Outside, the snow falls silently in light flurries.

[Harmony Flats, California]

In good weather, a horse at a walking pace takes about half an hour to travel the two-track road from Creighton's ranch to the small town of Harmony Flats. After winding down the mountain and entering the valley, the trail intersects the main north-south road that parallels to the railroad tracks. Near the south end of town, the two-track road splits into a delta of several two-track 'lanes' that eventually become a wide single road known as South Street.



The town is typical of the 1870s West, with at least a dozen commercial and governmental buildings on the main street and the surrounding buildings being residential or service. The south end of Main Street terminates at the train station. The train station houses the ticket office, the main telegraph (a remote receiver is in the printing office), and the office that oversees the stockyard south of the rail line. Harmony Valley Station is an end-of-line, full-stop train station that provides fuel, water, cargo, stock, and passenger service.

Main Street is a wide carriageway that runs from the train station on South Street to the school/church at the north end of town. It can accommodate wagons with horse teams on both sides and still has

enough room for two lanes of through traffic. The town's buildings are two-story wooden structures, except for the bank and the jail, which are brick and single-story. The offices and stores are fronted by a covered boardwalk that varies in width between four and five feet. Shop owners or building owners use the second story of most of the buildings as residential space.

On the northwest corner of South and Main is a saloon/hotel, the Harmony Valley Inn. Continuing north, on the left side, are William's Gunsmithing, the county assay office, Duke's General Store, the Mayor's office, and the Wells Fargo Stage line office at the corner of Main and North. Nancy's boarding house is on the second floor above Wells Fargo and the mayor's office. The boarding house is accessed via stairs through the Wells Fargo office. On the other side of North Street are the 'Ladies Boutique' dress shop, Harmony Bathhouse, and Kim's Laundry.

On the northeast corner of South Street and Main is a barbershop, the town marshal's office with a jail cell, the court house with law offices, O'Brien's Tavern, 'Sittin High' saddlery, a printing shop (newspaper), a branch of The Bank of California, and around the corner is Dr. Stevens office. Overland Stage sits on the northeast corner of North and Main, a cater-corner from Wells Fargo. That block also has the sheriff's office, the undertaker's office (Mr. Burns), and the land office.

The town's streets are named for their relative position to Main Street. The first street parallel to and east of Main is East First Street (E 1st St.). The next street would be East Second Street. The same pattern applies going west: West First Street, West Second Street, etc.

The dirtier services and lower-class housing are on the east side of town. The butcher, livery, and blacksmith are near the corner of South and East First, conveniently near the town's primary entrance and the train station. Homes of the wealthy are northwest of the town center, away from Harmony Valley Inn and the livery.

The church/school is a large wooden building, set apart from the other buildings, at the north end of the main street. On Sundays, it's a church; Monday through Friday, it is a school; and on most Saturdays, it serves as a meeting hall. The bell in its steeple signals the town of important events - the start of school, church service, a call to a meeting, and a fire alarm. The town square is the large empty area in front of the school. Town events like summer barbeques and celebrations are held in this area.

There are two taverns in the town. Although the venues would typically be expected to compete for business, that is not true in this town. The clientele for each is as different as the owners, and they rarely mix.

O'Brien's, near the middle of town, is owned by Sean O'Brien. His family settled in Harmony Flats during the gold rush of 1849 when he was a youth. He worked in the tavern for over twelve years before becoming the owner when Mrs. Pratt sold it to him. O'Brien's has a hotel on the second floor and a restaurant and bar on the first floor. The bar and gaming tables are partitioned off from the restaurant, allowing for a family-friendly environment in the restaurant. O'Brien is the owner and main barkeep. Jessie is his assistant and manager of the hotel and restaurant. Of the two taverns, O'Brien's is by far less rowdy. Because of this, O'Brien's is frequented by travelers, local families, ladies, and gentlemen.

The other tavern is the Harmony Valley Inn, owned by Hank Wilson. Hank owns a large cattle ranch, the -R- (Bar R Bar), just a few miles north of town. Six years ago, Hank and a couple of rough-looking

ranch hands arrived by coach. He told folks that he hailed from the South but had a Midwestern accent. Hank bought the ranch and tavern cash on the barrel head. His quick temper, profanity-filled speech, and aggressive, oppressive actions are well known throughout the region. The townsfolk have regretted every day since his arrival.

Harmony Valley Inn is neither harmonious nor an Inn. Hank runs the 'Inn' upstairs for prostitution. By design, most clientele are cowboys from the -R- or surrounding large ranches. The patrons' manners are left at the door if they ever possessed such. Drunkenness, rowdy behavior, and loud, profanity-riddled language set the atmosphere. Fights are commonplace. Hank is an unscrupulous and shrewd businessman; by catering to cowboys and ranch hands, most of the money he pays his workers is returned to him through this tavern.

The Harmony Valley Inn barkeep is Eric, a large and burly man who can be polite but takes no abuse from the cowboys. If they step over the line, which Eric subjectively draws as he sees fit, he reminds them to straighten up in compelling and painful ways. Eric is also the security for the second floor. He decides who can and cannot ascend the stairs. Of course, some gold coins can help Eric make a 'completely unbiased' decision.

The Madame is Julia. She runs the second floor and has three workers: Liz (Elisabeth, English), Niki (Nichole, Greek), and Bai (Chen Bai, Chinese). Victoria and Julia have a mutually beneficial arrangement. In exchange for the medical procedure practice required for her nursing education, Victoria uses her medical skills to help keep the girls healthy.

[Easy Ride In]

Since today is a business trip, not a trip for supplies, the Creightons have left the wagon at the ranch and ride into town on horseback. The four, clad in hats and heavy coats, form a square as they ride down the two-track road to town. Ben rides in the left track and is followed by Victoria. Austin rides in the right track and is followed by Marsha. The family appears at ease riding in the light snow flurries, but their silence reveals that each is deep in thought at what the day will bring.

Ben is wearing a holster with one revolver on his right hip. Austin has a rifle in the scabbard on the right front of the saddle. The ladies are unarmed, but Victoria carries her doctor's bag on the saddle in front of her.

Along the route, Ben notices three sets of horse tracks in the snow and quietly points them out to Austin. Austin nods and holds up three fingers to indicate his understanding that the rest of the family is ahead of them. They pass by the vacant train station at the south end of town. Today, the station is quiet and has no activity. There are no expected trains, and the stockyard is empty, so no one needs to be there in the cold.

The Creightons ride up the town's main street, passing Harmony Valley Inn and the shops and offices on Main Street. A few people run errands and tend to business, but the town is relatively quiet overall. They wave at a few of the people they know as they ride through town, eventually arriving at Duke's General Store.

[Man-up]

Marsha and Victoria dismount and hand their reins to Ben and Austin, respectively. The women then use a set of stairs to get up on the boardwalk where ‘the civil’ people walk. Although Marsha and Victoria are capable and tough Western women, they carry themselves as proper ladies in manner and speech, not pretentiously but out of pride and self-respect. To meander the muddy streets without reason is to disrespect oneself.

Ben, speaking to Marsha and Victoria, “The boy and –.” Ben feels the heat of Austin’s stare on the back of his neck, glances back at Austin, and sees Austin’s intense glare. A few months ago, Austin had made himself perfectly clear that he did not like being referred to as ‘the boy.’ He felt it was belittling and made him appear immature. Austin’s glare causes Ben to realize his error of calling him ‘the boy,’ and he corrects himself, “Um, Austin (Austin smiles at the acknowledgment of respect), and I will take the horses to the livery. We’ll meet you back here in a few hours. Saw some tracks on the way in. Bryan, Gwen, and Greg should already be here.” Teasingly, he adds, “When you find Gwen, you should be able to catch up on your gossip.”

Marsha and Victoria satisfy Ben’s expectations with a smirk. Ben accepts their smirks as an acknowledgment of a successful harmless jab and returns a smile. Austin is clueless about the meaning of the smirk, gives it a half-shrug, and quickly puts it behind him.

To appease Austin’s manliness, Ben speaks in a bravado tone, “So, if you ladies will excuse us, we men have some manly stuff to do.”

Austin tips his hat, and in his most manly manner and voice, he excuses himself, “Ladies.” He turns his horse and rides off toward the livery with Victoria’s horse in tow. The rest of the family laughs behind his back to see him act so grown-up. Ben follows Austin with Marsha’s horse.

[Parking the Horses]

Austin is no stranger to the livery. It is one of his favorite nocturnal haunts. He, Paul, and Falling Leaf would act out their made-up-as-it-evolved stories of castle conquest or battles with rouge outlaws. Paul is a year older than Austin, and Falling Leaf is a year older than Paul. The trio spent summer nights romping through the sleeping town.

Familiar as the livery is to Austin, he is always impressed by its size. The livery is three stories high. The ground floor is two stories high; the upper (third) story is the hay/feed loft. It is all wood construction with massive beams and columns that he can barely encircle with his arms. The west end of the stable has a large open area with large barn doors for intake and outtake. The rest of the building has stalls on each side, and a center corridor continues to the other end. There are a few windows, but most of the light comes from the huge vented roof over the open area and Dutch-style exterior stall doors. The exterior stall doors open into partially covered pens on each side of the barn.

Ben and Austin ride up to the open barn door. Robert, about Ben’s age, is the owner. He is brushing down a large horse while Paul, his son, is cleaning out a stall down the corridor.

Ben calls inside to Robert, “Got room for a couple more? Just need to keep ‘em out of the snow for a few hours.”

Robert stops brushing the horse and walks to the doorway. Pleased to see his friend, he greets Ben happily, "Ben! Sure. Bring 'em in."

Ben and Austin ride in and up to the hitching post. Hearing the announcement of Ben's arrival, Paul comes out of a stall he was cleaning and into the intake area. Paul is happy that Austin is with Ben; they don't see much of each other in the winter. Paul and Austin have been great friends since Austin's family arrived over two years ago. Robert and Paul approach the riders to assist.

Taking Marsha's horse, Robert ties the reigns to the hitching post. Paul takes Victoria's horse to tie it to the rail as well. Austin tips his hat toward Paul, "Thanks, Paul." He then dismounts his horse and hugs Paul, "Good to see you."

Paul, returning the hug: "You too."

Ben dismounts, and then he and Austin tie their horses with the others.

After shaking hands, Robert and Ben wander off to the horse Robert had been working on. Austin and Paul hang out near Austin's horse, Blaze.

Robert gestures to the four horses, "Brought the whole gang in, huh?"

"Yeah." Ben nears the horse Robert was working on, "We have a little business to tend to before the storm sets."

Robert, pointing to some stalls further down, "Must be a family thing. Bryan, Gwen, and Greg got here about half an hour ago. Said they'd be waitin' at O'Brien's for ya'."

"Okay, thanks." Ben is looking over the horse Robert has returned to work on, "By the way, isn't this Dave Mc Daniel's horse?"

"Was." Robert stops brushing the horse and looks it over as if to show it off. "Mine now. They sold it to me when they left."

"Left?" Ben is surprised by the news, "Thought he was doin' just fine up there."

Robert starts brushing again, "Yup. Was . . 'till Wilson started houndin' 'em. After a bit, them an' the Weston's sold out to Wilson, packed up, and left. Heard they only got about six bits on the dollar fer their land. On their way outa' town, you could see they's both angry and scared. But if ya' ask'd me, I'd say more scared than angry." Robert glances around to see if anyone is near; in a forced whisper, he confides, "Told me they'd be headed up to Whiskeytown, just a bit out from Redding. Said Wilson didn't need to know where they went, so don't be spreadin' it around."

Knowing Hank Wilson and his men's malicious nature, Ben nods in agreement: "I certainly understand that. If I were to leave, I sure wouldn't let him know where I was head'n."

Austin and Paul are still hanging out by the horses. Paul is admiring the rifle in Austin's scabbard. Austin is proudly standing by his horse as Paul examines the rifle.

Austin explains to Paul, "It's a Winchester 1873, but not really mine . . . yet. Dad said I could start carrying it when I could shoot the pine cones at 40 yards. I got four out of five of 'em. He said it'll be mine after I shoot and dress my first deer."

Paul repeats the impressive distance, "Wow! Forty yards, that's pretty good."

"Yeah," Austin tries to modestly hide his pride: "Dad's a good teacher." He glances over at Ben, then back to Paul. "I don't get to practice much, though. Dad says killin' pine cones costs too much."

Paul nods his head and agrees, "s'pose so."

Austin continues excitedly, "After the storm clears, he's gonna take me up to Pilot Hill to get a buck."

Paul is impressed by his friend's maturity. He recalls himself and Austin playing in the hay loft as little kids not too long ago. Now, Paul tends to livestock while Austin is learning to shoot. Before long, they may find themselves riding the ranges, collecting strays for the ranchers.

Ben adjusts his hat, indicating they're leaving. "Reckon we'll be 'bout three hours." He puts his hand on Robert's shoulder. "They can have some oats if you have some, and if you don't mind, check their shoes. The snow and mud have been causein' 'em t' slip a bit. I'd hate for something to come loose on our way home."

Robert nods, "Yeah, no problem."

Austin regularly gives his horse a little extra attention, so pointing to his horse with a tilt of his head and slightly under his breath, he requests that Blaze gets a little treat, "Paul, if you could find Blaze a carrot, I'd be much obliged."

Paul, stroking Blaze's neck, "I'll see what I can do."

Austin smiles and gives Paul a nod as he heads to the door where Ben is waiting. Just as Austin reaches Ben, Ben flips Austin's hat off and onto the ground, then rushes out the door while Austin grabs his hat and chases after him.

[On the Boardwalk]

Victoria and Marsha walk up the boardwalk, past O'Brien's. They stop at a window display in front of the saddlery shop. Gwen steps out of the store as they admire a pair of riding boots.

Gwen is smiling and pleased to see them. "Well, good morning, ladies. What a sight for sore eyes." She gives them each a hug. Even though they live less than a quarter mile apart, ranching takes a lot of time, so they don't get a chance to visit each other very often. In the winter months, it may be weeks between visits.

Victoria is very fond of her aunt and greets her with a hug, "Good morning, Aunt Gwen."

Marsha also gives Gwen a hug, "Morning, Gwen."

"I'm glad you came," declares Gwen. "I hoped you wouldn't make me do my errands alone."

"We weren't sure you would be down today," Marsha replies. "This is all rather last-minute. I didn't even get a chance to check the pantry before we left."

"Oh, well. This might be a blessing in disguise", suggests Gwen. "I had hoped to get some chores done at the house, but this may be the last time I'll be down here for a few weeks. With the storm and the winter cold and all. What about y'all?"

"Same with me," Marsha replies. "Figured I better make the best of the weather while I can. Besides, Ben and Austin were coming down to take care of the family business discussed last night, so I do appreciate the escort."

Victoria starts to talk, "I thought —" Clair Greenborough steps out of the shop and approaches the trio. Victoria interrupts herself to prevent Clair from hearing what she is about to say. The trio makes way for the passerby to continue down the boardwalk. "Oh. Good morning, Mrs. Greenborough."

Clair Greenborough is a charming lady with good intentions; however, if she hears something, the town hears it. She pleasantly smiles at them as she passes through, "Good morning, ladies."

Marsha and Gwen answer in unison, "Good morning, Clair."

Marsha, Victoria, and Gwen watch as the woman continues down the boardwalk.

When Clair gets far enough away, Victoria continues, "I should be on my way. I need to talk to the ladies at Hank's place. It may be a while before they get to see the traveling nurse. It was nice to see you, Aunt Gwen." Victoria starts to leave but turns to add, "Hopefully, we will have time later to catch up." She goes down the steps to the street, then turns and waves to her mom and Gwen, "Bye." She continues across the street to the opposite boardwalk and down toward Hank's place.

Gwen waves at Victoria, "Bye." She then turns to Marsha and matter-of-factly states, "I hope those girls realize how much Victoria is doing for them. It's almost unheard of for a bordello to have a private nurse."

Marsha links arms with Gwen, "I'm sure they do, but the exchange is even. Victoria has an opportunity to keep her skills up. Not many people go all the way up to our valley to get treated by her." The two ladies continue talking as they walk down the boardwalk to complete their errands.

"Greg said that the business wouldn't take very long." Gwen cautions, "If we don't get our errands done before the boys finish, we'll never hear the end of it." They both chuckle.

"That's for sure," agrees Marsha. "Where do you want to start?"

"How 'bout the butcher?" queries Gwen.

"Sounds good," agrees Marsha. "I could use some stew meat. We're nearly out of venison."

Gwen and Marsha continue talking as they step off the boardwalk and head over to the butcher.

[Closed]

As Victoria makes her way down the boardwalk, she is greeted by the few town folks busily getting ready for the snowstorm predicted tomorrow. Cowboys and ranch hands give Victoria a wide path as she passes them on her way to the saloon. Her disdain for the uncouth and her stubbornness in principle have become legendary, so much so that her charismatic glare can instantly emasculate any ruffian.

As soon as Victoria enters Hank's place, the bar becomes quiet. The sudden silence causes Eric to look up from behind the bar, past two patrons standing there, to see who just came in. Recognizing that it is Victoria, he offers a nod of acknowledgment; the stifling of the racket is an expected result of her presence.

Hank's place is a bar with eight gaming tables. Three of the tables are currently occupied by cowboys and ranch hands. One of the tables has three cowboys drinking and talking. Another has a single ranch hand eating boorishly. At the table in the back corner is a single cowboy, Isaac Wells, watching the place and keeping an eye on the clients. He has a rifle across the table and is wearing two handguns. Two cowboys are conversing while standing at the bar in front of Eric.

The second floor's stairway is on the room's right side. The straight flight of stairs leads to a mezzanine over the bar, with five rooms. Four are for entertaining; the other room is the ladies' private dormitory. A prostitute is available if their 'entertainment' door is open. Patrons are not permitted in the ladies' private dormitory. That room is reserved for the ladies when they are off duty. An opulent-looking red rope hangs at the base of the stairs, keeping patrons out when the upstairs is closed.

Victoria calls across the room to Eric, "The ladies will be busy for a while. I'm guessing about an hour."

Eric nods and waves his hand to indicate for her to go up.

Cody, one of the three cowboys seated at a gambling table, complains to Eric across the room, loud enough to draw Victoria's attention, "Bout an hour, I was just about to ..."

Perturbed at the cowboy's whining and visibly disgusted with the men who visit the prostitutes, Victoria interrupts Cody, "Maybe two or three hours." She stares at Cody and says with disdain, "Could be longer."

Cody looks down in defeat and sits down, knowing that another word from him will result in additional time.

The influence Victoria has over the availability of prostitutes is absolute. Jasper, seated at the same table as Cody, slugs Cody on the arm, "You Idiot! You know she could have Eric keep you off them stairs for a long time." He includes the third cowboy, Frank, seated at the table with a glance, "And maybe us too."

Now understanding the gravity of the situation, Frank, seated on Cody's other side, punches Cody's other arm, "Idiot!"

Victoria turns away from the cowboys and heads up the stairs. She stops at the foot of the stairs and puts the rope up after her. She then proceeds up the stairs and knocks once on each of the four open doors, returning to the first room at the top of the stairs, which is the dormitory. After knocking and getting no response, she enters, leaving the door open. Each of the prostitutes leaves their room and heads to the dorm, closing their doors behind them. The last prostitute to enter the dorm, Bai, closes the door behind her.

With Victoria no longer an influence in the room, the silence in the bar is slowly consumed by the ruckus of the motley men resuming their previous activities.

[The Check-Up]

The private dormitory has four beds, two chests of drawers, a vanity with a wash basin and pitcher, and a large mirror on the wall. Victoria is seated in a chair by one of the beds. As the ladies enter the room, they find comfortable seating so they can see and hear her. This is the customary meeting procedure for the medical check-ups provided by Victoria.

"I am so sorry for the unexpected visit," starts Victoria. "I hope you're all feeling well."

Three of the ladies, Elisabeth, Nichole, and Chen Bai, begin talking over each other in response to her statement.

Elisabeth: "Don't be silly."

Nichole: "It's nice to see you."

Chen Bai: "It is not a trouble for us."

Julia waits for the cacophony to subside before speaking. Her tone and diction are of an educated and mannered person: "Nurse Victoria, you are always welcome here, at any time. And to answer your question, we all seem to be doing just fine." The others nod in agreement. Julia continues, "If it weren't for you and your nursing skills... well, who knows? We may all have been dead by now." Again, the ladies nod in agreement.

"Let's not exaggerate." Victoria modestly replies, "We've all helped each other over these past couple of years, and I am grateful for all you've done for me. You've challenged me to improve continuously and encouraged me to follow my dreams. I can't thank you enough."

Julia stands up while Victoria is talking, goes over to the whisky bottle on the table, and gestures to Victoria with an offer for a drink. As expected, Victoria declines by shaking her head. Julia pours herself a drink and takes a sip: "Sounds like a goodbye speech."

"Well, it kind of is," confesses Victoria, surprising the ladies. "This will be your last examination from me."

"What's the matter?" pries Julia.

Nichole echos the sentiment, "Did we do something to upset you?"

"It's that son of a bitch, Hank! Isn't it?" Elisabeth scowls as she stands in protest.

Victoria calmly dismisses the errant reasons, “No, No, No... I’ve accepted a nursing position back in Ohio. I applied for it last summer and finally got a response. I’ll be working in the same hospital as my fiancé, Colin. I’m so excited.” Her voice changes to a wishful, secretive resonance, “I think we’ll get married by summer.”

The ladies get up and give Victoria congratulatory hugs, pleased at her good news. The jovial atmosphere is dampened when Victoria reveals, “My train leaves Harmony Flats for Roseville next week. From there, I take the Intercontinental to Ohio. Of course, I’ll keep in touch.”

The ladies are genuinely happy for Victoria but are surprised by her short notice of leaving. Nichole takes Victoria’s hands and steps back, envisioning Victoria wearing a wedding dress. “You will certainly make a beautiful bride.” Victoria shyly smiles at her.

Julia takes another sip of whisky, “We’re very happy for you. Congratulations. Of course, you’ll be missed.”

Chen Bai asks in her broken English and Chinese accent, “What does your family think of this? Will they also not be missing you?”

Victoria retakes her seat while speaking calmly, “Well, yes, of course. We’ll miss each other, but we’ll keep in touch by wire and mail. And I’m sure I can come back and visit in a few years.” The ladies nod as they gain a better understanding of what to expect.

Victoria’s tone changes from light-hearted to professional, “Oh, that reminds me. Don’t think I’m leaving without someone to take my place.” Chen Bai and Nichole reseal themselves while Victoria fills in the details of their medical care, “There’s a new nursing student from San Francisco that’s supposed to start ridin’ the train to visit towns like this and help out.” Victoria takes the medical records from her saddlebags and hands them to Julia. “I’ll leave your medical records here so the new nurse can reference them when she visits.”

Elisabeth retakes her seat, waving off the concern, “Now don’t go worrying ‘bout us. We’ll be fine.”

“Of course you will,” Victoria confidently states. “But since I won’t be around, I’ve arranged for you to get some non-medical help as well, *confidentially*. I believe you’ve all met my little brother, Austin, at least once, right?”

They all nod their heads.

Nichole responds, “Sure, we always see him around town. He’s the cute one with the green eyes. Is he going with you?”

Bai confusedly chimes in, “I thought his name was Peter.”

Victoria finds Bai’s remark a little surprising; only a few intimately close people know his alias. While wondering exactly how close Bai is to Austin, she offers a correction to keep his alias confidential by clarifying, “No, his name is Austin, and he’s staying here. That’s why I mentioned him. If you need to contact me for any reason, or you need any kind of help, you can tell him in confidence. Just put this in

one of your windows.” She hands Julia a wooden cutout of a squirrel. “He’ll know which adults to trust, and that can help. He also knows which ones to keep everything from.”

Nichole protests, “I ain’t sayin’ nothin’ ‘bout trustin’ him, but he’s just a kid. This ain’t no place for him.”

Victoria agrees, “You’re right. It’s no place for a kid, but he won’t be hangin’ around here; he’s just a great messenger if you need one. Austin will only show up if you need him. Besides, even though I have no idea how he knows what he knows, he knows just about everything about everyone in town. And, being a kid, no one would suspect him of assisting you.”

Victoria chooses her words carefully while still addressing the concern that he is a kid. “He’s certainly not so naive that he doesn’t know what happens here. But at the same time, you don’t need to tell him unimportant details.”

Chen Bai says in her broken English, “He always show respect when he meet me on street. I think he be a good message boy.”

Elisabeth nods in agreement.

Victoria directs her attention to Julia. “He’ll know where I am and how to wire me better than anyone else. Austin can also get around town without anyone noticing him. He’s pretty sneaky.” She points to the mirror, “In fact, he found the hidden entrance to the back stairs over a year ago.” Julia and the other ladies are both impressed and surprised at the revelation.

Chen Bai adds to the certification of his sneakiness: “He knows every secret place in town. I don’t know how he find them, but he does.” Everybody stares at Chen Bai, surprised that she would say that. Bai feels uncomfortable and feels the need to explain further: “Every time I find a new place, he already knows where it is.” Instead of smoothing things over, Chen Bai’s explanation added more depth to the oddity of her extensive communication with Austin.

Everyone’s curiosity about Chen Bai’s relationship with Austin is blanketed by Victoria’s admonishment of Bai, “Bai, for his sake, please keep that a secret. If the wrong people find out, it could get him hurt or worse.”

Chen Bai covers her mouth, realizing she just revealed a secret she was supposed to keep. She directs her eyes to the floor in submission, “Very sorry.”

Bia’s sincerity calms Victoria’s concern slightly; however, she must emphasize the importance of keeping Austin safe: “It’s okay. Just don’t ever repeat it. If you so much as chirp about his capabilities, his safety could be compromised.”

Chen Bai gives an abbreviated nod in acknowledgment.

Victoria takes a deep breath and changes topics: “Anyway, I told him to sneak up here in a few weeks to see if you are doing okay. He’ll use my knock (she demonstrates on the table nearby as she explains—knock, knock, (pause), knock, knock, (pause), knock) two, two, and one, so you will know it’s him.” Looking at Julia for approval: “If that’s okay with you.”

Julia takes another drink of whisky, “Yes. Like you, he is always welcome here.” Looking at the other ladies, “For talking only –” Stressing to make a point, “ – even when he’s older.” Victoria smiles in the reassurance of the implied protection of innocence.

Victoria stands up, “Well, we better get started. Like usual, I’ll come to each of your rooms, one at a time.”

The ladies get up and file out the door to their respective rooms, closing their doors behind them. Julia has the room next to the dorm, Nichole has the next room, and Chen Bai is next. Victoria follows Elisabeth to the farthest room and closes the door behind her.

[Meeting of the Men]

In an alcove of O’Brien’s saloon, Bryan and Greg are seated opposite each other at a dimly lit table, each with a beer in front of them. Some chatter is coming from the rest of the saloon, but the conversations are not distinct enough to make out.

Sean puts two glasses on the bar, one tall, one short in front of Ben and Austin who are waiting at the bar. Sean explains as he slides the glasses to the patrons, “One sarsparilla (Tall glass) and one whiskey (Short glass).”

Sean nods when Ben thanks him and puts a couple of coins on the bar. Ben and Austin each grab their glass and walk toward the alcove where Greg and Bryan are seated.

Austin smiles and glances at Ben as compensation for the treat, “Thanks, Dad.”

Patting him on the shoulder, Ben teases Austin, “Next time, you buy.”

Austin feigns acceptance of the responsibility of being an adult, but knowing, full well, that his dad would continue to buy the beverages until he becomes old enough to start drinking himself, “Yes sir, next round’s on me.”

Ben can’t help but laugh at Austin’s playfulness. They arrive at the table and put their glasses down. Greg and Bryan stand up to greet them.

Austin wants to be respected as a person, not treated like a little kid; however, he finds difficulty in establishing a balance between acting mature and showing respect for his elders. As a result, he sometimes comes across awkwardly in social interaction.

In a mature, manly manner, Austin shakes Greg’s hand, “Hi, Uncle Greg.”

Surprising Austin, Greg grabs his hand and pulls him in for a hug. The macho, manly Austin, unprepared for this affectionate attack, is unmercifully defeated. The loving nephew, Austin, recognizes an opportunity, rises to the occasion, and hugs his Uncle Greg. Greg finally releases Austin to recompose himself into the macho, manly being he wishes to portray. Unintentionally but effectively putting Austin back into the ‘kid zone,’ Greg musses Austin’s hair: “Not going to get away with just a handshake from me.” Greg then shakes Ben’s hand, “Ben.”

As recomposed as a 10-year-old can get in just a few seconds, Austin reaches out to Bryan, “Uncle Bryan.”

Bryan offers Austin a firm handshake, “Great to see you, Austin.” Grateful that the exchange is a simple handshake, Austin relaxes with a smile.

Bryan then greets Ben with a handshake, “Ben. He sure is gettin’ big!”

“Of course he is.” acknowledges Ben. “He eats enough for the three of us.” They all get a chuckle and take their seats.

Ben starts the meeting, “Got your documents?” He reaches into the saddlebag and grabs a set of papers, which he puts on the table.

Bryan slides the documents he has in front of him toward the center of the table. “Yeah.”

“Me too.” Greg opens his coat to show documents in his pocket. “Right here.”

“Okay.” Ben offers a plan, “Let’s finish our drinks, and then we’ll head up to the land office to get the new papers drawn up.”

Ben looks at Austin. “When we go to the office, you can disappear like always, but keep an eye out for the door. When everything is in order, we’ll change the sign from ‘closed’ to ‘open.’”

Austin confirms, “Okay. So I’ll bring Victoria then?”

Greg, speaking secretly, “Yep. Don’t be too obvious, though.”

Austin is noticeable only when he wants to be. He responds confidently, “Okay. That won’t be hard. No one will ever know we were there.”

Bryan is uneasy about bringing up the subject, especially since it involves his nephew, who, incidentally, is seated at the same table, but feels he must voice his concern: “I certainly don’t hope for problems, but there should be at least two people who know where the new deeds will be hidden until Victoria leaves. If Austin forgets where he hid them, or —” Not wanting to reveal the elephant in the room that Austin may get hurt, he carefully chooses his words, “— or for some other reason can’t tell us, someone else should know where they are.”

Greg agrees, “It’s not that I’m doubting Austin’s abilities; to the contrary, I agree with Bryan because of his great abilities. I just think having a backup plan for something this important would be good.”

Ben is concerned about including another person in the plan, “Maybe it’s a good idea, but how can we do it safely without compromising our main goals of keeping Austin safe and the deeds a secret?”

The table goes quiet as the men begin to analyze the situation. Austin stares at his drink, and after a few seconds, his eyes shift right and left as he devises a plan. Less than a minute later, Austin reveals, “I have an idea, but it’s a little complicated.”

Ben is well-versed in how complicated Austin's plans can be. "Okay, let's hear it. But remember who you are talking to. Tell us so we can understand it." All three men stare at Austin, making him a little nervous.

Austin takes a deep breath and looks at the table to avoid eye contact and to keep his train of thought. Bryan starts to drink his beer.

After another big breath, Austin begins, "I'll write down the location in a letter so only one other person in town can read it. Then, I'll give the letter to someone else who doesn't even know what to do with the letter." Bryan stops drinking his beer but still has it up to his mouth. He is listening intently.

Austin continues, "I'll give you each a notice you can put on the town's notice board that makes sense only to the person with the location information they can't read. When the notice gets posted, the person with location information will know to give it to the person who can read it. Then, the person who can read it will read it to the person who knows the codes for the location. He then only tells the person who put the notice on the board where the 'item' can be found. None of them knows what it is that's hidden. I play this game with my friends all the time. Of course, I'll tell them it's not a game this time."

Bryan notices that he has stopped drinking his beer, so he puts it down, "Uh, what?"

Greg summarizes Austin's plan, at least how he understands it, "Yeah. I think I got it. So nobody knows the hiding spot until we post the notice. That starts the process of getting a coded message to the right person, who can then tell us the location. Right?"

Austin is pleased that at least one person understands him: "Right. Even if someone could read the location somehow, they still couldn't find it because the location name is a code for somewhere only my friends and I know. And since neither of my friends knows what this is about, they can't accidentally reveal any secrets."

Ben takes a sip of whiskey while contemplating the plan. He nods and says, "It sounds complicated enough to keep the deeds secure and Austin and his friends safe. It meets the requirements – let's use Austin's plan."

Greg agrees that the plan will secure the deeds and keep everyone safe, but now the concern is how long it will take to make this happen, "When can you get all this clandestine work finished?"

Austin thinks for a couple of seconds, "About twenty minutes." The men look at each other in surprise at the short time frame. "I'll get started right away." Austin finishes his sarsaparilla and leaves in a hurry.

A frown of confusion possesses Bryan's face as he tries to wrangle the plan into a cohesive thought. After inattentively taking another gulp of beer, he puts down his glass and questions Greg, "Greg, did you really understand all that?"

Greg shakes his head, "No. But I think I got most of it." He turns to Ben: "Damn, Ben, I think your kid's too smart for us."

Ben proudly concurs, "If he's too smart for us, then I'm sure he's way too smart for Wilson and his henchmen."

Bryan lifts his glass in approval, "Agreed! Bottoms up, boys, let's get this done so we can get home."

They all raise their glasses to Ben's toast, "To the future."

Greg and Bryan clink their glasses with Ben, "Here, here."

They finish their drinks and leave the table. Clumsy would be a gracious description of the manner in which the three men 'unobtrusively' made their way to the land office.

[Unreadable Letters]

Austin is in the printing office finishing up the last of six letters. The three letters are almost identical except for two significant differences: a number written on the back that can be seen when the letter is rolled up and a name on the front that tells the decoder to whom he should give the location information.

These letters are written using Chinese characters that Austin learned from Bai Chen. Austin's interest in other cultures brought him close to Bai as his Chinese tutor. She is one of the many people Austin has befriended in the town. Bai's reference to all the hiding places she mentioned to Victoria was about the hiding game Austin told the men and the hide-and-seek they would play in the wee hours of the morning. Sneaking around quietly through the town at night and watching the townsfolk behind-the-scenes activity while hiding is one of the ways Austin learned so much about the town.

The other three letters are coded in Miwok hieroglyphics. These are also the same, except for a small number by the owl that indicates which letter is to be decoded. Austin's interest in Miwok stems from his friend Falling Leaf, who is frequently part of the covert playgroup.

Finished with his letters, Austin yells into the printing room, "Thanks, Mr. Fry!"

Almost before Mr. Fry could say, "Any time, Pete. I mean, Austin," Austin was out the door to complete his mission. Mr. Fry, Ren, Mrs. Pratt, and his sister Victoria are the only adults (Bai is seventeen) who know Austin is also Peter.

Austin hurriedly dashes out the door and up behind the buildings. He continues up the back street, dodging from cover to cover, until he reaches a small shack home. He quietly makes his way to the side of the house, where he taps on a window with his knock code: tap, tap, pause, tap, tap, pause, tap. The window opens.

Falling Leaf, a beautiful mixed-race, twelve-year-old Native American/European girl, sticks her head out.

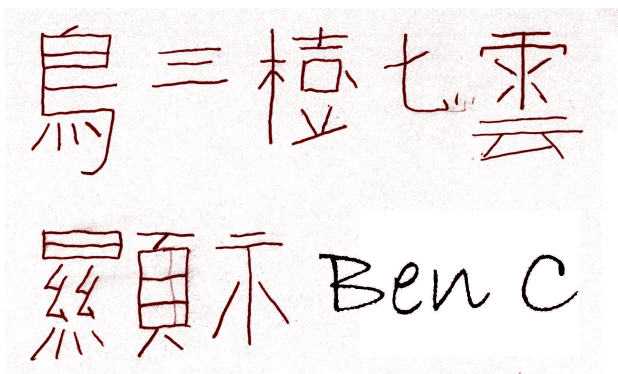
Austin hands her the letters and whispers, "Do not read these. If needed, there will be a notice on the town's notice board of what to do. This is not a game."

Without a word, Falling Leaf raises her index finger to her lips, indicating to Austin that she will keep it a secret.

Austin smiles at Falling Leaf, then gestures – putting his hand to his chest and then pointing to Falling Leaf – Love You. As he leaves, he sees Falling Leaf repeat the gesture.

Austin's letters he delivered to Falling Leaf.

It translates to: Bird (Short for Ladybird, the name of the mine by Austin's ranch), 3 (3rd corridor), Tree (column), 7, Cloud (high), Show, Ben C.



Miwok Letters—These are given to Ben, Bryan, and Greg as backup if Austin cannot tell them where the documents are hidden.

The Miwok letter is a little more ominous. Owl = Message (Literally, a messenger from the afterlife), Circled one = letter number (take the letter numbered 1), Tracks = Directed to (deliver to), Dragonfly (Austin's Miwok name for Bai Chen), White Squirrel dead, (Austin's Miwok name is White Squirrel, upsidedown is dead). If something happens to Austin, this notice is placed on the town's notice board. It tells Falling Leaf to give the letter with the number 1 to Bai Chen. Knowing the usual game flow, Bai Chen will read the letter to Paul. Paul understands the location codes. Paul will then get whatever is at the coded location and deliver it to Ben C.

[Obviously, a Discrete Entrance]

At the Land Office, someone flips the sign from closed to open.

The gray, cold sky and buffeting breeze herald the storm's slow invasion. Austin and Victoria discretely enter an alleyway from the secret back door to the brothel. Victoria notices that Austin has a satchel that he did not have earlier. Although she wonders where he got it, she is not surprised by his resourcefulness.

Austin leads Victoria up the dark alleyway between the backside of the Main Street businesses and the back of the businesses on West First Street. Victoria is unfamiliar with this passageway, so she tries to move cautiously, putting her several paces behind Austin, who knows this route like the back of his hand. Austin reaches the end of the narrow alley and turns to tell Victoria the next move; however, Victoria is lagging several paces behind.

When Victoria catches up with him, Austin quietly informs her, "You have to keep up. People will notice you more if you look lost or like you don't belong. Just act like you own the place, and most people won't give you a second thought. Come on, let's go."

Before Victoria nods, Austin starts walking across the street to the side of the Lady's Boutique. Victoria, a bit annoyed by Austin not waiting for a complete response but also a bit proud of his boldness, quickly follows.

Together, they cross the street and follow along the side of the Overland Stage Line office to another narrow alley that separates the Main Street offices from the staging stable used by the stage lines. Victoria has never noticed this alley before but follows her brother without hesitation.

Over halfway through the alley, Austin comes to a complete stop. Victoria runs into him, almost knocking him over. Austin turns to look her in the face. His frown more than adequately conveys his disappointment in his sister's sneaking ability.

They have stopped at the back door of the undertaker's office. There is a bell on the wall to notify the undertaker that a body is being delivered discretely. After glancing at both ends of the alley, Austin reaches up and takes the clapper from the bell. It is a key. Austin uses the key to open the door and replaces it.

He quickly steps into the small foyer, grabs Victoria, who is awe-struck and amazed by all that is happening, pulls her into the foyer, and closes the door. Austin is not happy with Victoria's lack of stealth. Almost scolding her, he whispers, "You're not very good at this, are you?" He takes out his pocket knife and faces the north wall.

Victoria whispers and stammers, "How did you? .I'm ..." and then confesses, "I guess not." She is not used to being scolded by her little brother and is taken aback. She knows his skills are beyond measure compared to hers; however, she tries to protect her pride and status: "Regardless, is that any way to speak to your older sister?"

Concentrating on his immediate task, he replies without conviction, "I suppose not." There is a click from the area behind the boards that Austin has placed his knife between. Without a word, he opens a hidden door and enters the next chamber. He looks back at Victoria and places his finger on his lips. She acknowledges and covers her mouth.

He looks through a small keyhole in the wall to verify that no one is there and then opens the door. He and Victoria step out of the closet into the back storage and file area of the Land Office. They move to the front of the room, through a curtain door, into the front vestibule.

Austin unlocks, then quickly opens and closes the front door of the office building to ring the bell attached above the door. He re-locks the door, then turns the sign back around to show 'closed' to

people outside the office. He slides open another curtain that leads to the lit office area where the men are gathered. Victoria looks at him, puzzled by all of the extra action. After thinking about it for a second, she realizes that Austin wanted to keep his ability to enter the office undetected a secret.

Bryan is surprised by the quick response to turning the sign: “Well, that didn’t take long. I only changed the sign about two minutes ago.”

Greg is also surprised, “How’d you get in? I locked the door.”

This is not the first time he’s been asked this question, so he uses the tried and true response, “Um. I guess it wasn’t closed all the way. Right, Victoria?”

Still shocked by Austin's tricks for getting around town, Victoria mumbles her concurrence, “Uh, yeah. Not closed all the way.” She looks at her brother, amazed at his skills. In response, he just gives a little shrug.

Chuck, the public recorder, is seated at a large desk. He stands and extends his hand, “Victoria, I presume.” Almost like a shadow, Austin quietly steps back and behind Victoria to limit his exposure to Chuck. “I’m Chuck Knowles, the public recorder for this area. You’re now a major property holder or, at least, will be when we’re finished. Only the railroad and Hank Wilson own more land in a thirty-mile radius of here. Congratulations to the new land baroness.”

Victoria was not fully informed about what was going to happen today. Thinking that Mr. Knowles had somehow made a mistake, she was about to clarify things. “Thank you, Mr. Knowles. But I’m –” She sees her dad motion not to say more. She quickly rephrases: “I’m no baroness, just a regular person.”

Mr. Knowles points out the areas that need Victoria’s attention, “Well, ‘regular person’ Victoria Creighton. You just need to sign and date these three transfers and complete this notation in the register, and it’ll all be final.”

Victoria sits down and signs the documents. When she is finished, Ben stands up to shake Chuck’s hand, “Thank you, Mr. Knowles.”

Mr. Knowles suggests a less formal atmosphere, “Chuck. Just call me Chuck.”

Accepting the change in atmosphere, Ben said, “Thank you, Chuck. It was a pleasure working through this with you.”

Chuck, modestly declining attribution, “Oh, no. The pleasure is all mine.”

Chuck turns to each person in the room as they stand and shakes their hand: “Greg – Bryan – Miss Creighton.” Victoria offers her hand as a lady. Chuck politely holds her hand, gives a partial bow, and releases it.

Chuck turns to Austin with an outstretched hand, “And, young man, your name is?”

Austin hoped to be ignored but knew this situation might arise. There is a distinct separation of people in town – Day People and Night People. Most games Austin plays are in town at night; therefore, Austin uses an alias to keep his night activities confidential, especially concerning his parents.

He is torn between two scenarios. If he gives his real name, then someone hearing that he was in the office might catch on that he knows about the documents. On the other hand, his family will learn about his summer night activities if he gives his night-time alias. The latter, of course, will put an end to his nighttime adventures. Ultimately, he reckons his safety is more important than playing: “Peter, Peter Blackwell. I was just helping Miss Creighton find this office. I’m not really part of their group.”

Greg, Bryan, and Bill glance at each other quizzically. Victoria is not surprised by the name; she is one of the few who knows his nighttime alias. She is surprised that he used it in front of the rest of the family.

Chuck shakes Austin’s hand, “Mr. Peter Blackwell. It was nice to make your acquaintance.”

Austin smiles and responds with a firm handshake, “Likewise.”

Chuck starts packing his materials: “I’m afraid it’s time for me to get ready for supper. I hear that O’Brien’s makes a wonderful brisket. If you’ll excuse me.” He picks up his recorder book and puts it in a large leather bag, puts on his hat, grabs his coat, unlocks the door, and then exits to the street.

The office is quiet until after the bell rings, the door closes, and Chuck is seen through the window walking on the boardwalk.

Looking at Austin in disbelief, Ben breaks the silence, “Peter Blackwell? Where’d that come from?”

Thinking he may have made the wrong decision, Austin lowers his head, “Sorry for lying, Dad. I thought that since this was a secret, the less he knew about me, the better.” He looks up at his father, “Should I apologize to him?” Austin starts toward the door.

Bryan interjects, “No!” Halting Austin in his tracks. Bryan looks at Ben to indicate that he is about to explain why. “That was actually excellent thinking. Not that I support you lying. *This time*, I think it was the right thing to do.” Bryan tries to relieve Austin’s pressure and looks for Ben’s support, “Right, Ben?”

Ben sees the logic in Austin’s reasoning, and given Bryan’s perspective, he is inclined to agree but reluctant to endorse casual lying. Speaking seriously, “I don’t like it, but I’ll have to agree - this time. But don’t make a habit of it.” Ben lightens the mood, “Peter.”

They all have a little laugh.

Greg shifts the focus from Austin to the women: “Let’s go meet the women folk. I asked Gwen to meet us at O’Brien’s for supper. My treat.”

The three men start shuffling around the papers on the desk, trying to get organized.

“Sounds good. But what about Peter here?” Ben remembered that Chuck was going to O’Brein’s for dinner, too. “If we want to keep Austin clear of this, then Chuck probably shouldn’t see him there with us tonight. It would invite too much attention.”

Austin sees an opportunity to visit friends, almost as if he planned it: “If you just have them make a couple of plates for me in the back, nobody would see me. I was hoping to eat with a friend today anyway. Is that okay?”

“Your mom will be disappointed,” remarks Ben. “But, under the circumstances, I think it’ll be alright. Who’s the friend?”

Being the stealthy person he is, Austin tries not to release too many details of his activities around town. Besides, if he were to let them know it includes a girl, he may never hear the end of it.

“Can I tell you when all this is over?” asks Austin. “It should probably be a secret until then.” He quickly changes the topic, “Oh, almost forgot. Here are the notices.” Austin hands out the rolled notices, paying attention to the message number. (#1), “Dad, this is yours, (#2) Uncle Greg, and (#3) Uncle Bryan.”

The men look at the message, then at each other, baffled, not understanding what is on the pages. They each put the messages in their respective saddle bags.

Ben resigns to Austin’s request, “If I can trust you to secure the documents, I guess I can trust you to pick someone safe to eat with.”

“Thanks, Dad.” Austin doesn’t wait for a retraction, “I’ll take the papers with me and stay out of sight.”

Ben puts the documents in Austin’s satchel. “We’ll meet you at the train station in an hour. Be safe.”

Austin puts the satchel over his shoulder, “I will.” He then disappears behind the curtain.

Bryan looks around and picks up his papers, ensuring they are in order. Then he starts heading for the door: “If ‘Peter’ has a special way out, maybe we should follow him.”

Ben and Greg finish getting their things together.

Victoria reports, “Good luck with that. He’s already gone.”

“Huh?” Greg looks behind the curtain and into the empty adjoining room. “How’s that?”

Victoria unlocks the front door, “Don’t ask. I’m not even sure I can remember how I got here.” She looks out the window to verify that the street is empty. As she opens the door, the bell rings, something that did not happen when Austin disappeared. Ben holds the door while Victoria, Greg, and Bryan quickly exit. Ben looks one final time into the empty adjoining room, shakes his head in disbelief, and then locks and closes the door.

[Dinner with Friends]

Falling Leaf is sitting on her bed, reading a book. She stops when she hears a noise at her window - tap, tap, (pause), tap, tap, (pause), tap. She smiles at the sound of a welcome friend. She opens the window and sees Austin holding two large plates of food. He tilts his head toward the front door, indicating she should let him in. She closes the window and leaves her room.

Austin sneakily goes to the front door, where Falling Leaf awaits him. He looks around to verify that he was not seen, then enters the home.

It is a small home. One room incorporates family, dining, and kitchen functions, while a short hall leads to two bedrooms. After Austin is safely inside, Falling Leaf closes the door and stands beside him. Falling Leaf looks at Austin with deep concern. Austin knows Falling Leaf can sense hidden emotions and know things yet to happen. With that look, he realizes her question.

Austin discretely answers, "I can tell you next week."

Although she feels she will never get an explanation, Falling Leaf accepts the answer with a slight nod.

Falling Leaf's mother, Yellow Feather, gets up from her chair to greet Austin. She is beautiful and considered tall for a Miwok woman, at around five feet ten inches. Her long dark hair and dark complexion give her a mysterious aura. Although considered slender, like many Miwok women, she is strong and capable. Once, about six years ago, a drunk ranch hand made an inappropriate move to Yellow Feather. She gave him a beating the whole town remembers and still talks about.

In a half bow, Austin offers the dishes to Yellow Feather. She gratefully accepts the gift and crosses to the kitchen area of the room to divide the food into four plates. She soon returns the two empty plates to Austin. He takes the plates and places them by the front door, along with his satchel.

His curiosity is piqued when he sees Yellow Feather's amulet again. Austin has always been curious about the amulet Yellow Feather wears but, out of respect, has never asked her about it. The amulet is a rounded triangle made of what appears to be one lobe ruby, one emerald, and one sapphire, with them melding in the middle to a diamond. A gold ring encircles it. He had heard that when the sun shines through it and is held a certain distance from an object, the three colors merge to become one white light.

Falling Leaf leaves the room through the hall, returning shortly thereafter with her father, Gus, following her. Gus approaches Austin, hand extended. They greet each other with a firm handshake, "Austin. It is good to see you. Thank you for the gift." Gus gestures to the food.

Gus is a German immigrant drawn to California during the gold rush. He was not a prospector but knew other opportunities would develop from the rush. Gus is a big man, standing over six and a half feet tall. Because of his size and strength, he had no problem finding work on the railroad after arriving in California. Gus still works for the railroad but does not lay track anymore; instead, he runs the operations at the train station.

Austin is pleased to offer and receive a manly handshake, "It is good to see you, too. I am honored to share with my friends. Thank you for your hospitality."

They release their grip and sit around the small square table, one person on each side. Falling Leaf sits to the right of Gus, Yellow Feather sits to the left, and Austin sits opposite Gus. Gus bows his head to pray.

Austin instinctively reaches up and holds Falling Leaf's hand. Gus takes notice and looks at Austin. Falling Leaf is amused by the unnecessary tension between her dad and Austin. Although they are friends as close as siblings, they know that their love for each other is based on mutual respect and thoughtfulness, not romance.

Gus is protective of Falling Leaf and sees the bond between his daughter and Austin as a potential bridge to a romantic relationship neither is ready for. Gus likes Austin, but not as a son-in-law – yet. Maybe in fifteen years or so, he'll consider letting someone marry his baby girl – maybe.

Austin feels the stare's disapproval. To remove the specter of a hidden romance, he reaches out and takes hold of Yellow Feather's hand, too. Gus approves of Austin's recognition of boundaries and smiles as his wife and daughter take hold of his hands.

Gus prays, "Oh, God. We thank thee for thy bounty before us. Amen."

Austin, Falling Leaf, and Yellow Feather respond, "Amen."

As they release their hands, Austin looks around the table. He notices that he was given a much larger portion than Yellow Feather. He stands, exchanges plates with Yellow Feather, and sits back down.

Austin politely addresses Yellow Feather, "Thank you for your generosity, but this," referring to the diminished portions on his plate, "is more than enough for me."

Yellow Feather nods slightly in acceptance and appreciation of the increased portion, then reaches and takes Austin's hand. She opens his hand and places a large coin in his palm, then gently rolls his fingers around the coin, saying, "White Squirrel, you have shown us nothing but respect and kindness. Please keep this with you. It was a gift from ancient tribes to the south. It will keep you safe in your travels."

Austin is not planning on traveling anywhere soon, so he is confused by the sudden gift. Not wanting to offend Yellow Feather, he graciously accepts, " <Miwok> tetkiju </Miwok>." [Trans: > "Thank you"] They begin to eat.

[Past Due]

Many families are in town today, getting supplies to hold them over if the predicted storm is more than anticipated. As a result, O'Brien's dining tables are full, and the noise level is higher than usual. The Creighton family is just finishing supper when Cody enters O'Brien's. The restaurant's sound level drops suddenly. It is common knowledge that Cody is one of Hank's errand boys. If one of Hank's men enters O'Brien's, trouble is sure to follow. Cody's footsteps replace the silence of the tavern as he walks up to where Ben is seated. Other patrons, including the children, dare not even whisper when Cody is in the room. Cody hands Ben a note, then turns and walks away; his steps are the only sound in the room. Ben watches as Cody leaves. The noise in the room slowly elevates to its previous level. Ben nervously opens the note. All it says is: "Time's up."

[Headed Home]

Behind O'Brien's Tavern are a set of footprints in the snow, leading from North Street to the back door of the kitchen, where two soiled plates were left on the counter. The tracks continue south to the corner of the building, where footprints transition to hoof prints that lead toward the train station.

It is now late afternoon. The sky is dark, and the snow has become less flurry and more steady. Three riders pass the train station, heading up the trail. A fourth rider approaches behind them and joins their formation as they head up the trail away from town.

[Eating Alone]

Sam finishes the dishes from a meal he concocted from things scrounged around the cabin. A couple of cans and jars are on the kitchen work table. He arranges the cans and jars neatly in a corner of the table. He would throw them out but could not find a trash can. Maybe he can find something for the trash tomorrow, but he refuses to get his hopes up.

Sam has closed all the outside shutters except for one on the front porch. He left that open to be able to see headlights, should they appear. Even with everything closed up, the cabin is still drafty, so he put a few large chunks of wood in the stove to keep the cabin warm and heat some water for a bath. Curious about the weather, he opens the interior shutter to the porch window, looks out, and sees that it is getting dark and the snow is becoming steady. He closes the shutter as he realizes, 'I could be here a while.'

He places two buckets of water on the cook stove and points to the tub in the anteroom, saying, "Those are for you, my friend. I may be stuck here for a few days, but I'll at least be clean during my stay."

He pours a cup of coffee that he takes with him to the front room. He feeds and stokes the Franklin stove and sits comfortably in the rocking chair. Looking around, he notices a small tan journal among a couple of other books on the coffee table. He doesn't recall the books being there yesterday, but by now isn't surprised by the changes. He picks up the tan book and reads the cover, "Wakefield's Western Farmer's Almanac 1877."

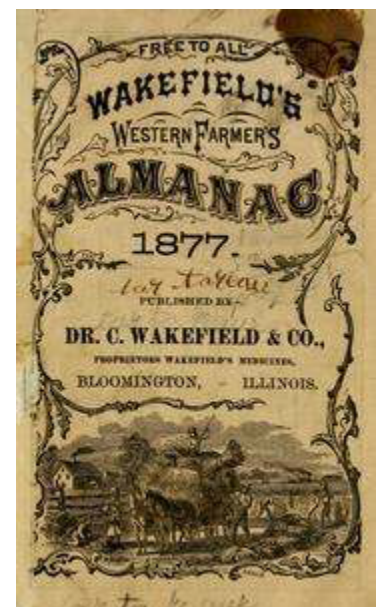
Sam is surprised to see such an old book lying around. Thinking it must be a reproduction, he opens the front cover to read the publishing data. There is no ISBN, and the print date is 1876.

Sam is impressed by the authenticity, "Wow! The real deal."

Sam starts carefully paging through the book as time passes. He gets about three-quarters of the way through the book when he gets up and goes to the kitchen to check the bath water. He takes the buckets of boiling water off the stove and pours them into the tub.

Speaking to himself, Sam figures, "One more time ought to do it."

He goes to the hand pump, fills the buckets, places them on the stove, and returns to the chair and book. The peaceful quiet, the warm, radiant



heat from the stove, and the long, confusing day take their toll as Sam nods off. On the stove, the buckets of water are starting to boil.

A loud whap startles Sam back awake. He laughs at himself, realizing that the loud noise was from the book falling from his hand onto the floor. He picks up the book and checks on the water in the kitchen.

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