

Restricted Territory

Prepare to Say Goodbye

[What to Do]

Thursday, 23 Nov 2017

Silence fills the early morning front room of the cabin. Sam is sitting in the rocker, staring out the front window. It is the only window not shuttered. He has a blanket over his lap and a cup of coffee. The rifle is sitting on a chair next to him.

Quietly, Victoria enters the room.

Sam, who is on watch, hears her light footsteps and turns to see who it is. He smiles as he holds up his coffee cup and forces a whisper, "There's some in the pot. Just made it."

While heading to the kitchen, Victoria speaks quietly, not wanting to wake the boys. "Thanks.... I'll make some breakfast when the boys start to get up."

Victoria pours herself a cup of coffee and puts a pot from the counter onto the stove to heat some water. She returns to the front room with her coffee. "Looks like Hank is pretty sure Austin and I didn't make it. He would've sent his men up here last night if he had thought otherwise." Victoria moves the rifle from the chair and places it on the table. She then sits in the chair near Sam. "With this much snow and being in no particular hurry, it may be a few days before he and his men come up here."

Sam speaks quietly, still talking to not wake the boys and with sensitivity about her family. "I agree. If he wants to use smallpox as the cause of your family's deaths, he'll have to wait at least a few days: You were seen in town Tuesday. That gives us some time to finish taking care of your family." Victoria lowers her head and stares at her coffee. Sam continues, "The boys and I can use the tools in the mine to dig the graves. Maybe while we're out, you and Austin can make the markers. It may be therapeutic for both of you. We'll understand if it's too difficult."

Victoria raises her head and noncommittally comments, "We'll see how things go. Austin's hard to read sometimes."

Sam asks, "Did you check on him yet this morning?"

"Yeah." Victoria's tone shows her concern about the continued low-grade fever, "His pulse rate seemed about normal, but he does feel a little warm."

Sam understands her concern, “We’ll have to keep a close eye on him. I’m sure he’ll want to do more than he should.” Victoria nods in agreement. “It could be a while before he’s back to full strength.”

Victoria half-heartedly complains, “He gets his stubbornness from my dad.”

“Same place you got yours, I take it.”, chimes Sam.”

Breaking a smile, Victoria agrees, “I guess so.” She expresses her and Austin’s need for closure while understanding the possible risks involved. “I know we have to be careful of being out in the open, but Austin and I need to be there for the funeral.”

“Of course you do. Both of you.” Sam agrees, “We’ll do what we can to keep your exposure to a minimum. I’m sorry that it has to be a secret burial site; however, it’ll make it much safer for you to attend. And we both know what would happen if Wilson found the site.”

“I know.” Victoria gets a cold shiver. “When it comes down to it, Austin and I are the only ones that need to know where it is.”

Sam senses an opportunity to find out what really happened while trying not to open up a healing wound. He cautiously brings up the topic, “Wac ih a’ told me about the ranches and the cabin, and I read what was written about what happened. But I’m sure that isn’t the whole story and probably not completely correct. What really happened?”

“There’s not much to tell.” As Victoria relates the events to Sam, her anger and grief slowly build. “Hank said that he wanted to put a train line through here, but he wanted the federal land given to railways as an incentive to build. Hank could start a lumber company with the rail line in place. Then, he would take the trees from the land he got from the government and use the train to transport them down to Pollok Pines, where the mill is. He also was talking about reopening the mine. Dad, Uncle Bryan, and Uncle Greg looked for a spot like this for years. Then, when they finally bought it, they put in over two years of hard work to make it the place of their dreams: we all did. Hank offered to buy the ranches, but they had no intention of selling, especially because of what Hank was offering. They transferred the land to me so Hank would have no reason to keep harassing them to sell. If I were in Ohio, controlling the land, he might stop harassing the rest of my family. They expected a hard-fought legal battle ... but ...” She stops to regain composure but continues with a broken voice. “They never thought he’d resort to murder.”

Sam begins to see the big picture. “But since the land is in your name, why did they kill everybody else? They had nothing to gain from that.”

Victoria explains, “Nobody knew about the transfer except the county recorder and us. We just made the transfer that day.” As if a light went on in Sam’s head, he gets a look of understanding. “Austin was supposed to hide the papers from Hank yesterday, and they were going to tell Hank about the change in ownership after I left Tuesday. When Hank’s men broke into our house, Dad refused to tell them that the property was in my name or that Austin had the documents. That’s when ... well, you know the rest.”

Sam sits back to assimilate the information. After a short pause, he asks for clarification, "So, Austin still has the transfer papers?"

With all that's been happening, Victoria is not quite sure what happened to the documents. "I think so ... He's too sneaky for me to keep track of. That's why he was chosen to hide 'em. Only my dad, my uncles, and I knew about him having the papers."

"If he still has access to them," Sam reasons, "We might have a fighting chance to save the property and maybe even get Wilson charged with murder. He just needs to keep them safe for now."

Victoria assured him, "Austin knows how important they are; I'm sure they're safe."

"Okay. Good." Sam is hesitant to bring this up but is compelled to mention it. "I hate to say this, but as much as we would like to think we can avoid it, I'm sure we'll have to deal with Hank before you and Austin leave town." Victoria did not want to hear it, hoping that if it were ignored, maybe it wouldn't happen, but she knew Sam was right. It's unavoidable. "It won't be pretty, but if we're going to survive, we need to be better prepared than he is. When the boys get up, we'll have a little chat to plan our next moves."

The cabin gets uncomfortably quiet as they sit and stare at their coffees.

A little too timid to ask on her own behalf, Victoria uses Austin's curiosity as a means to find out Sam's intentions about the move to Ohio. "There's something else you'll need to discuss with them. Austin expects you and the boys to come with us to Ohio. I overheard him say that to CJ last night. CJ assured him you would."

Sam admits, "With all the activity of keeping everyone alive, I never gave it any thought. Once the real estate issue gets resolved, nothing will keep the boys and me here. And if Wilson's still on the loose, it would be best to put a lot of distance between him and us. I suppose it's a possibility. I'll have to do what is best for the boys."

To make sure he is considering her brother's psychological needs, she asks, "All three of them?"

"Absolutely!" Sam understands that Austin's emotional trauma could be exacerbated by separating the boys too quickly. "All three . . . and you too. At least until you and Colin are married; then, it'll be you and Colin's job to take care of each other."

Victoria asks slyly, "When will that be?"

Sam remembers from the report that the wedding was in April 1878. "It's the ..." Sam stops himself, seeing through the attempt to glimpse the future. He waves his finger at her. "You almost got me!"

Victoria says playfully, "It was worth a try."

Sam cautions her, "I don't know how all this time stuff works, but remember, some things may change because we're here."

Grateful that her brother is still alive, she knows some things have already changed. "I'm sure they already have." She takes another sip of coffee.

A sound is heard from the bedroom that draws both of their attention. Austin comes out of the room in his long johns. He immediately walks through the kitchen, slips on his boots, grabs a coat, and exits out the back door.

Getting up from the table, Victoria heads to the kitchen. "It must be time to start breakfast."

More noise is heard from the bedroom.

Sam informs Victoria, "I'm sure the others will be right behind him."

Tylor comes from the bedroom fully dressed, except for boots. His hair is a mess, and he is not fully awake.

In his sleepy voice, "Morning, Uncle Sam. Morning, Miss Creighton."

Tylor moves to Sam and gives him a tired hug.

In an overly happy tone, Sam teases Tylor about his half-awake state. "Good morning, sunshine."

Tylor actively disapproves of the teasing, rolls his eyes, and releases the hug.

Sam returns to his usual tone, "How'd you sleep?"

"Not very well," says Tylor. "My body was tired, but my head just kept going and going. Are we really back in 1877?"

CJ walks out of the bedroom fully dressed, minus boots. He looks fresh. His hair is combed, and his face is washed. He wanders into the kitchen to see what is being prepared."

"I'm afraid so." Sam fully sympathizes with Tylor because he did the same thing. "Get yourself cleaned up for breakfast. Today will be another long day."

"Yes, sir." Tylor looks at the back door. "I've got to wait for Austin." He takes a seat next to Sam.

CJ appears much more refreshed than Tylor. "Good morning, Uncle Sam. Good morning, Miss Creighton."

"Good morning, boys." Victoria doesn't look up from her cooking. "We can drop the Miss. You're making me feel old. Please call me Victoria. We're nearly the same age."

Austin comes back in from the outhouse. His entrance includes a blast of cold air. Tylor gets up and heads toward the door.

Riding on Victoria's coattails, CJ tries to reduce the name formality further. "What about Vicky?"

Austin stops in his tracks. No one calls her Vicky, not even her parents. His newest best friend may become his late best friend if he continues to push that taboo. Tylor sees Austin's reaction and freezes, too.

"No." Victoria's tone says more than her words. "Only my fiancé can call me that."

The room gets awkwardly still.

Embarrassed, CJ apologizes, "Oh, um, sorry. I didn't know you were engaged."

A little snappy, Sam admonishes him. "You maybe should have read the information packet with a little more diligence." He instantly realizes that he is too snappy. "Sorry, CJ, I'm a little on edge. I'll see if I can slip a nap in somewhere." Trying to lighten the mood, he adds, "I suppose you never thought you might actually meet anyone mentioned in the report."

CJ addresses Sam, "Yes, sir. That possibility never crossed my mind. Now I'll know better." Then he addresses Victoria, "Victoria, again, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get out of line."

In a much less tense tone than before, Victoria forgives the unintended crossing of the line. "It's okay, CJ. I'm sorry for overreacting. It was a reasonable question. I'm just a little tense, too."

Tylor un-freezes and continues his walk to the back door. As he passes his brother, under his breath, he lets CJ know his feelings about the matter. "Knucklehead."

CJ drops his head in embarrassment. Austin continues toward the bedroom.

Austin takes this opportunity to make an easy exit from the tension: "I'm going to finish getting ready. I'll be right out."

CJ asks Austin, "Need any help?"

He is upset that his friend asks him that when he is nearly a man. "Of course not."

"Well, I do." CJ doesn't wait for a rejection, "I'm coming with you."

Now, understanding that CJ also wanted an escape, Austin smiles slightly and waves him to come along.

Austin remarks, jokingly and under his breath, "You sure do."

They both retreat to the bedroom.

[Same Team]

After the morning bathroom (outhouse) and washup routine, everybody is seated around the dining table in what has become their usual place. They are all holding hands as they finish their prayer.

Everyone says, "Amen."
Releasing hands, they begin to eat.

Looking primarily at CJ and Tylor, Sam informs them, "We have a lot to do today. Even though Hank's men will not likely be up here for a few days, we can't let our guard down, so everybody has to be on high alert. Got it?"

CJ and Tylor respond in unison, "Yes, sir."

Austin follows the other two. "Yes, sir."

Sam looks at Victoria, and she nods.

Sam addresses the tension of the morning. "The next order of business is just as important. We need to work as a team. No one here is intentionally trying to make things uncomfortable or insulting. There's a lot we don't know about each other. If we say something wrong or that you find hurtful understand that it is not intentional. Don't hold it to yourself; discuss the issue with the other party to form an understanding. We need to help each other understand our feelings without getting angry. Keep an open dialog so the same mistakes aren't repeated."

Tylor, CJ, and Austin nod to show their understanding.

Victoria feels there might be an unequal division of information, giving Sam some advantage in the group's balance of power. She addresses Sam: "You had an information package all about us. It seems like you know a lot more about us" She nods slightly toward Austin to include him: "than we do about you."

"No. Not really." Sam clarifies, "We read about some facts that, from our perspective, occurred around a hundred and forty years ago. We read that you are a nurse, that you intend to move to Ohio, and that you are going to marry Colin. We don't know about Victoria, the person. We didn't know how beautiful and resourceful you are. We knew you had a younger brother," CJ puts his hand on Austin's head and musses his hair a bit. "but we had no idea how smart, mature, and tough he was." Austin forms a shy smile. "So, you see, the boys and I really don't know you any better than you know us. It'll take some time, but we will get to know each other better. Open, honest, respectful communication will make it easier and faster."

"Does that mean you're going to stay with us?" Austin asks expectantly.

"Yes." Austin is thrilled to hear Sam say this. His excitement diminishes when Sam finishes his sentence, "For now, anyway. Your sister suggested that the boys and I go with you to Ohio." CJ and Tylor look at each other. Neither one had thought that far ahead. "I haven't discussed it with them yet, but when you two leave, there'll be reason for us to stay."

Austin can't hold his excitement, "Yes!"

Decidedly not happy with that idea, Tylor expresses his concern, "I don't know. What about finding a way home?"

Austin's excitement dwindles as he realizes the hardship that his new brothers and Sam will have if they stay in 1877.

Sam agrees, "That's a valid question. The three of us can bring up our thoughts and concerns while we're out this morning. ... On another topic, since we'll stay together for at least a little while, Victoria and I devised a cover story to explain our sudden appearance if the need arises." Sam, gesturing, hands the conversation over to Victoria. "Victoria?"

Victoria addresses CJ and Tylor. "Sam and I have discussed this, and we agree." She looks at Sam to confirm that they agree. "We need to blend into more of a family. She now looks at Austin for his response. He has a full smile. "And we all need to be on the same page. We ensured your cover has some ties to your real identities, so it should be easy to remember. It's like this: Sam is your mom's nomad brother. You lost your parents in the war when you were small, so as next of kin, he took you in."

Surprised that he is now close, time-wise, to a significant period in history, Tylor interrupts. "The Civil War?"

In a corrective tone, Victoria tells him, "Call it 'the war between the states.' Different names of the war mean different things to some very sensitive people. It's best to stay neutral on this, at least, for now."

"Okay, got it." Realizing that he was interrupting, Tylor yields back to Victoria. "Sorry."

Victoria continues, "So now you live with Sam, your uncle. You've been moving around since he took you in. You've lived in too many places to remember and have met too many people to keep them straight. As far as jobs go, he is a handyman of some sort. Give general, ambiguous, and confusing answers if asked anything specific. What you are sure of is that Ben Creighton asked your uncle to be a tenant of this cabin."

CJ wants to avoid mistakes, so he asks a question he thinks he already knows the answer: "What about you and Austin?"

Victoria's answer is pretty much what he expected, "Austin and I will keep hidden here until we move to Ohio. Until we are safely on the train, say you haven't even seen us if you get asked. What we do in Ohio depends on whether or not you, Sam, and Tylor move there with us."

CJ, Austin, and Tylor look at each other, unsure of her meaning.

Victoria sees the blank looks. "What I mean is, your move determines if Austin lives with Colin and me or with the three of you in Ohio. Either way, Austin is not staying here."

Austin enthusiastically nods in agreement. He has no intention of staying there, even if Sam and the boys remain. He will be sad to leave them here, but at least he won't have to worry about someone trying to kill him behind every tree or building corner.

Sam speaking directly to CJ and Tylor, "Since we shouldn't have visitors here for a couple more days, you have time to reinvent yourselves by being consistent with the narrative."

While Sam is talking, Tylor sees that Austin doesn't quite understand Sam's terminology, so he interprets for him. Whispering to Austin, "He means to make up stuff that fits with the story."

Austin nods to confirm he now understands.

Sam continues with CJ and Tylor, "Keep it all low-key—nothing to draw attention to us. And practice with Victoria and Austin to make sure it fits the times. Okay?"

CJ and Tylor both answer, "Yes, sir."

"Austin?" Sam asks.

Austin now responds to Sam, like CJ and Tylor, "Yes, sir?"

Sam tells Austin, "We'll rely on you to show the boys what chores need to be done and teach them how to do them correctly. They'll need to learn the lifestyle, habits, and customs of the 1870s to blend in." Now Sam looks directly at CJ and Austin, "Of course, they will give you their undivided attention." The boys nod in agreement. "I'll leave it to Austin to divide the chores fairly between CJ and Tylor. Until he's healthy, Austin doesn't do chores." Austin smiles at the thought of not having chores. "He just explains what needs to be done and how to do it, and then he is to come inside. Understood?"

All three boys answer, "Yes, sir."

Sam expects an adverse reaction to his next directive: "After breakfast and chores, CJ, Tylor, and I have some work to do."

Sam had guessed that Austin would be a little put off about being excluded, so he was prepared to give Austin a job he could do where he would stay warm, use his talents, and keep from doing something that was too physical. Before Austin can voice an objection, Sam tells him: "Austin, you have two jobs. First and foremost, is to get better. If it doesn't interfere with your first job, the second job is to develop some ideas on early warning systems."

Quickly accepting any job, he jumps at the opportunity, "Okay ..." Then he realizes he has no idea what Sam is talking about. "But, what's an early warning system?"

Sam starts to answer, but Tylor holds his hand up and stops him. Tylor knows that Sam has a habit of talking in a manner that is too advanced for most people to comprehend easily, so he takes it upon himself to 'interpret' Sam for Austin. "It's a fancy name for things that tell you when someone is coming, like a loud noise or something falling over."

With the simplified explanation, he eagerly accepts the challenge. "Oh. Okay. What can I use?"

Austin tends to get a little overzealous on the projects his parents would allow, so he is used to having restrictions placed on him to keep him reined in.

Austin corrects himself, "Or rather, what can't I use." He hopes that limiting the list of what he can't use will expand the list of what he can use.

Unexpectedly, Sam gives him no limits. "You can use anything you can find; however, safety first."

Tylor instinctively interprets Sam for Austin again, "He means don't get hurt."

Austin quietly whispers back to Tylor, "Oh, Okay."

Upon hearing the 'no restrictions,' Victoria knows Austin will be excited, so she watches his expression. Austin gets a big smile on his face and then sees Victoria watching him. He thinks the no restrictions clause will be revoked, so he loses the smile. Victoria smiles at him to show approval. Austin regains his smile.

"It's best if you can stay inside." Sam reminds him, "Remember, you *can not* be seen. You, your sister, and even the boys and I will be in danger if anyone sees you."

With the rest of the latitude bestowed upon him, Austin happily accepts the 'not being seen' restriction. Showing he is cognizant of the gravity of the limitation of not being seen, he responds in his most mature tone, "I understand." The wheels of Austin's unbounded imagination begin to conjure dozens of ideas at once. "I should be able to find some stuff in the mine."

Not quite knowing the talent he has just set free, Sam responds carefreely, "That would be great." Victoria looks at Sam, knowing that he is unaware of what he just did.

Sam continues, giving direction, "We'll need at least twice as many devices as the number of paths or trails that lead into this area. Also, it would be best to hear or see the warning when anyone gets within about a half mile from here. That would give us time to be ready for them."

Austin's expectation of what was acceptable went from firecracker size to dynamite size, and his smile did, too. "Okay."

Victoria realizes this is not a game but the balance of life and death. With that knowledge, she has no problem allowing Austin to use his intelligence and aptitude to fulfill his task fully. Besides, she secretly wants to see what her unbridled brother can do."

Victoria changes the topic. To help reinforce her position in the group hierarchy and help them understand the 1870s better, she addresses CJ and Tylor. "By the way, chores are usually done before breakfast."

CJ and Tylor are brought back to the reality of life - there's no free lunch or breakfast in this case. Tylor answers for both of them, "Yes, ma'am."

"Boys," Victoria addresses them as if she is their mother, "When you're finished, put your plates in the kitchen and get started. I'll bet those horses are hungry."

“Austin,” Sam reiterates, “Remember that you're in charge even though they are older than you. These boys have no experience in this. Teach them as if it was their first time because it is.”

“Yes, sir.” Austin is pleased to finally be in charge. Being the youngest, someone else was always in charge. He feels like his worth is finally recognized.

Still directed at Austin, Sam asks, “Do you still have the documents?”

Austin looks at Victoria to see if he should answer. After She nods, Austin replies, “Yes, sir.” Austin is concerned because he did not finish the job he was supposed to do. “Well, not with me. I hid them like I was supposed to, but I can get ‘em. It won't take too long.”

“No. That's alright.” Sam was hoping that they were not lost. “It's better to keep them hidden for now, but I'd like to look them over tonight.” Addressing Victoria, “If that's alright.”

After Victoria gives an approving nod, Austin agrees, “Sure. I'll get ‘em right after dinner.”

“Great.” Sam looks at his empty plate. He doesn't remember eating but must have because he feels full. He catches CJ's eye and looks at the other empty plates. CJ gets his meaning - it's time to get to work.

CJ starts the ball rolling, “Thank you, Victoria, it was delicious. We're all finished; may we be excused?”

“Yes, of course.” Victoria appreciates the manners CJ and Tylor display.

The three boys get up to take their plates. Sam catches Tylor's eye with a stare. Sam then looks at Victoria's plate. Tylor gets the hint.

Tylor reaches to pick up Victoria's plate. “If you're finished, let me get that for you.”

Victoria accepts the helpful act, “Thank you, Tylor.”

CJ, not to be out-mannered, offers to take Sam's plate: “Uncle Sam, let me take yours as well.”

Sam hands him the plate. “Okay, thanks, CJ. I'll prepare the tools and cart while Austin gives you your first lesson. By the way, he only teaches for ten minutes max, then comes in to get warmed up and a nap. I don't want him in the cold any longer than that.”

CJ gives Sam a thumbs-up, “Okay, got it. I guess we'll see you outside.”

Sam and the boys head to the kitchen. The boys continue to the sink. Sam goes through the kitchen and the pantry to the mine.

[Cold, Hard Work]

The work team (Sam, CJ, and Tylor) arrives at the grave site. It is no longer snowing, but the sky is still mostly overcast. Lighting is even, gray, and subdued. Sam and the boys are wearing holsters with revolvers.

Sam hands out the picks and shovels. “We better get started. There are five graves to dig, and the days are short. I’d like to finish this today so we can have the funeral in the morning.” He takes an uneasy glance around. “The sooner the better.” Sam surveys the area. “We may have only one more day, two at the most, before Wilson’s men make their way back up here. That means we only have tomorrow morning for the funeral. After that, it gets too risky to have Victoria and Austin out of the house.”

CJ looks around at the gloomy setting. “Why are we hiding the graves in the forest?”

“If we put them out in the open,” Sam explains, “We run the risk of Wilson’s men digging them up to destroy the evidence of the murders.”

Thinking of digging up dead people, CJ makes a face of disgust. “That’s gross. Can’t we just have the police get involved?”

Irritated, Tylor answers angrily, “No, we can’t. The local law is the town marshal, and he works for Wilson. Austin already mentioned that! And it was in the information packet, too.”

Letting Tylor know he is fully aware that he dropped the ball by not reading the report thoroughly, CJ confesses, “Okay, okay. I screwed up and didn’t read the packet like I should have. I can’t change that now.”

He understands how irritated Tylor is, but Sam tries to keep things from getting out of control: “Tylor, don’t be so rough on him. Remember what we discussed this morning? We’re a team. It’s like he missed a couple of practices. We just need to get him caught up on what he missed.”

Tylor looks at Sam, “Okay,” and then to CJ, “but it is a little irritating.”

CJ feels like he’s not doing his part, “Sorry. I get it.”

“Enough talking,” Sam steps on his shovel, pushing it into the cold ground. “Let’s get digging.”

Sam looks over the area. He then takes CJ’s shovel and starts to mark the graves. As he walks along, he shovels dirt and snow from each spot where he wants the graves. “We need one here and here, one here, and two—one here and here.”

They all start digging in the different spots.

With a shovel of dirt, CJ asks, “Where do you want the dirt?”

Between shovels of dirt, Sam instructs them, “Let’s put the dirt from each grave along the east side of the grave. That’ll make it easier to replace. “

Pausing, Sam looks around in a general survey. Standing upright, leaning on his shovel, he asks the boys, “We’ve been here about three minutes. Did you boys notice that the squirrels moved away and

started chattering, or the doe and two yearlings that passed just outside the trees, or that the creek drowns out other sounds from the east?”

Stopping and looking around, CJ tells them what he noticed, “I heard the squirrels but didn’t notice anything else.”

A little embarrassed, Tylor admits, “I didn’t notice any of that.”

Sam is worried that the boys don’t yet grasp their situation, so he intentionally sounds angry, “You both need to be more observant! “Think of yourself as a deer during hunting season. One mistake, and it’s over. It’s not a game.”

Penitently, CJ responds, “Sorry. I took it for granted that we were safe because you’re here. I’ll try not to let it happen again.”

“Me too,” says Tylor. “I just zoned out. I don’t mind if you keep reminding me; this is really scary.”

Sam believes he got his point across, “Okay. But as I said, this is not a game. Everybody has to be vigilant to keep us all safe. I’m relying on both of you to catch what I miss. Got it?”

“Got it.” CJ starts digging again. He stops, looks around, and begins again.

“Got it.” Tylor also starts digging, poking his head up like a prairie dog, every couple of shovels full.

As they are digging, Tylor asks, “Is this a good time to talk about getting home?”

Their discussion continues while they dig the graves. They are working hard. Nearly every sentence starts or ends with a scoop of a shovel or the swing of a pick.

Sam continues digging, “Yep. It’s probably the best time to have that discussion. Not only will time pass faster, but we will also have more privacy to say what’s on our minds without hurting anyone’s feelings. Tylor, why don’t you start us out? You seemed to have some reservations about moving to Ohio.”

“Well, yeah.” Tylor alternates shoveling and talking, “Since we got sent back in time by going through the door at the cabin, it seems to me that we need to stay by the cabin until we find a way back.”

CJ is unconvinced, “I hear what you’re saying, but I don’t think the cabin has anything to do with it. We tried going through that door a couple dozen times; forward, backward, running, walking, we even did it naked a couple of times.” Sam stops digging to look at the boys. CJ feels the look from Sam, then continues, glossing over the silliness of some of their attempts. “... when no one was watching. Nothing happened.”

The boys look at Sam as if to say, ‘It was worth a try.’ CJ finishes, “Whatever we tried made no difference at all.”

They all start digging again.

“It feels like our situation is my fault, but how could it be?” Tylor tells them about his premonition, “I knew something like this was going to happen, but I didn’t know exactly what, when, or how. There was nothing I could do to stop it.”

Sam and CJ now understand the incident on the boat. At the same time, they know that Tylor only sees things; he doesn’t control them.

Taking some pressure off Tylor, CJ points out, “It can’t be any of our faults. But how it can happen, I have no idea.” He looks for a connection to Sam’s experience. “How did it happen to you, Uncle Sam?”

Sam takes a short break, “I’m not even sure when it happened. I think it was while I was asleep. When I went to bed, everything seemed normal. Then, the next morning, everything had changed.”

CJ tries to find any connection at all, “Were you naked?”

Sam starts working again as he ponders what he went through to get to this time. Recalling details is difficult because he was more interested in what happened with Wac ih a’ and his stuff. He didn’t know he had traveled in time. “No. I never lost my clothes –” Thinking it through a little more. “ – well, maybe I did.” The boys listen with more interest - there may be some similarities. “See, that night, my hydration pack leaked on all my clothes,” he gestures to the clothes he is wearing. “so Wac ih a’ gave me these. It was the night before everything changed. Everything I had from 2017 was gone. My UTV, my cell phone, even my wet clothes. It didn’t affect the clothes I got from Wac ih a’ though.”

Tylor sees some merit to his hypothesis, “So the cabin might have something to do with it.”

“It is a strong coincidence,” CJ admits, “But not proof though.”

Tylor continues to push for staying, “Austin said Ren was still the tenant of record for the cabin and mine. If Victoria transferred it to us, we could stay here forever.”

Sam wants to avoid dangerous changes that could negatively affect the future. “Thinking about what we read in the packet, and if we haven’t changed anything yet, we may have to go to Ohio. The packet said the tenant rights were transferred to a local family from Harmony Flats.”

Even though the temperature is below freezing, the trio’s hard work heats them as they dig. CJ wipes the sweat from his brow, “Of course, since we’re here, that could change.”

“True,” Sam agrees, “but if we change that, what else happens? We have to be careful not to create other problems by making unnecessary changes. Something else to consider, but something we haven’t discussed yet, is your safety.”

The word safety makes CJ look around again. He misses Sam’s point, “That’s a pretty well-built cabin. I don’t think it will be unsafe.”

“No.” Sam tilts his head and looks at CJ, wondering when he’ll see the big picture. “I’m not talking about the cabin. I’m referring to Wilson and his gang. You know, the ones who want to kill Victoria and Austin, and likely us, too.”

The mention of Wilson makes them all nervous, and they look around again.

“We don’t have anything to do with the deeds. Why would they bother us?” asks Tylor.

“Because Wilson also wants to open the mine.” CJ explains, “That’s right where the cabin is. If Wilson wanted to do anything illegal, like working the mine in restricted territory, he couldn’t do it with someone living in the cabin.”

“I agree with CJ,” Sam says between breaths. “An empty cabin would give Wilson complete freedom to do whatever he wanted. He may do some extreme things to make that cabin empty again.”

CJ confesses, “Tylor, I want to return to 2017 as much as you do. It’s just that I don’t see what else we can do here. Remember, you said it was scary here. And I agree that it’s scary here. It’s terrifying here. It’ll probably get worse.”

Tylor relents, “Okay. I don’t like looking over my shoulder all the time, either. I mean, I feel like I’m being watched right now.” He shakes as a shiver goes up his back. “But, if we leave, we need to be back here next year at the same time we got here this year. Just in case.”

Sam summarizes their discussion with a decision, “Sounds like a good idea. So, unless something comes up, we’ll go with them to Ohio?”

CJ and Tylor nod in agreement.

CJ adds, “And we’ll get back here a few days early, so maybe Sam can go back too.”

Tylor, sounding as if that was already part of the plan: “Of course.”

Sam takes a deep breath, “Okay. That’s our plan. We’ll tell ‘em tonight. I just want to warn you not to get your hopes up. We may stay in this time for the rest of our lives. We’re goin’ to have to blend in and live our lives accordingly.”

Tylor speaks with dejected optimism, “We can hope and dream, can’t we?”

“Absolutely,” Sam cautions, “Just don’t plan your life around something we have no control over.”

“We got it.” CJ looks at the blisters forming on his hands. He doesn’t complain, knowing that Tylor and Sam are in the same condition.

A small branch breaks. Tylor quickly turns around, steps out of the grave he is digging, and draws his pistol.

Sam and CJ quietly put down their shovels. Sam taps CJ on the arm and motions for him to scan into the trees in the opposite direction of the sound. Sam and CJ scan for a few seconds.

While scanning the trees, CJ tells Tylor, “Tylor, you can holster that.”

Tylor asks as he puts the pistol back, “Just a pine cone falling?”

“No,” CJ points to the trees near the meadow. “It was that girl behind the trees.”

Sam reveals, “She’s been circling for a while now.” Calling to the girl, “Step out where we can see you. We’re not going to hurt you.”

Falling Leaf steps halfway out from behind the tree.

Sam quietly instructs the boys, “Boys, watch my back.” just as they had learned in their paintball games, the boys stand with their backs to Sam, each looking 120 degrees from Sam.

Sam calls out to the girl, “Who are you, and what are you doing here?”

Falling Leaf responds in a soft, sweet voice, “I came to check on White Squirrel. They say he died of the pox, but I don’t believe them. He was fine two days ago.”

Sam speaks in a natural tone, “Are you alone?”

CJ, without losing his watch position, quietly relays to Sam, “I think it’s Falling Leaf. She is one of Austin’s closest friends.”

Falling Leaf answers, “Yes, I’m alone.”

Sam moves closer to Falling Leaf to talk quietly, “What’s your name?”

“I am called Falling Leaf, daughter of Yellow Feather and Gus Fox,” replies Falling Leaf.

Sam wonders how she got here. He thinks, ‘If she had gone by the cabin, she would have stopped there first. She could have seen Austin and not come down here to ask us. Either she didn’t go by the cabin or has another reason to get our attention. She seems okay. Maybe she hasn’t gone by the cabin. Then how did she get here?’

Sam has been observing her actions ever since he noticed her. He does not think she poses a direct threat, “Okay, come on over. How did you get here?”

Falling Leaf does not know who these guys are or their intentions. She doesn’t recognize them as any of Hank’s men, but she is cautious about how much information to give them. After thinking it over, she realizes they could follow her tracks to discover the north trail. She decides that information can’t be considered a secret anymore, so she tells them, “I came in on the north trail. There’s less snow on that side of the mountain.” Almost instantly, she regretted giving the last bit of information.

Still looking 120 degrees to Sam’s right, CJ announces, “I don’t see anything here.”

Tylor still looks 120 degrees to Sam's left. "Nothing here either."

Tylor sees something move in the distance through the trees. "Wait!" It moves again. Tylor sees that it is her horse, a dapple gray. "It's okay. It's her horse." Falling Leaf's Dapple Gray horse blends well with the snow, so it is not so easy to identify as a horse.

Sam motions her to come over, and she does but stops short.

Now that she is closer, Falling Leaf knows she has never seen them. They are strangers to this area. Maybe they are Hank's recruits, but so far, they don't act like anyone associated with Hank. Although she has a soft and sweet voice, her tone reveals she has more right to be there than Sam and the boys. She asks Sam, "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

Still unsure of the intruder's intentions or if she might be a spy for Hank, Sam answers ambiguously, "We're the new tenants of the cabin."

Seeing the graves, she fears that the rumors might be true. Falling Leaf starts to tear up, struggling to maintain her composure, "Is White Squirrel really ... dead?"

CJ can see the sorrow in her eyes. He feels it would be cruel not to let her know that her friend is alive. He whispers to Sam, "Sam. We can tell her, can't we? Austin told me all about her. She's like a sister to him. There's no way she would put him in danger."

Sam turns to the boys so only the three can hear, "Well, we have to tell her something. If she tells anyone about us, it'll be just as bad as seeing Austin alive, maybe worse."

Sam turns to Falling Leaf, "No, he's not dead. He's with his sister up in the cabin, but you can't see him today. He nearly froze and is recovering."

The boys stop scanning for others and face Falling Leaf.

Sam invites her to come closer, "Come on over so we don't have to talk so loud. We're not doing a very good job of it, but this is supposed to be a secret."

Falling Leaf wonders how they know who she is, "You seem to know me, but I don't know anything about you. How do I know you won't use one of those graves for me?"

CJ quietly tells Sam, "Sam, I got this." CJ takes over the conversation with Falling Leaf, "You know Austin as White Squirrel. He told me you are like a sister to him. You also know that some people call Victoria Medicine Woman. The thing is, she hasn't told anyone, but she doesn't like the name. Only Austin or Victoria could have told me that. Isn't that something Austin would only tell someone he likes and trusts?"

Falling Leaf thinks about it: "Well, I guess so." CJ has won her trust, at least partially. Falling Leaf approaches them so they can talk quietly.

The trio gathers around Falling Leaf and tells her what has happened. Falling Leaf starts to cry as she hears the tragedy unfold. Surprising both Sam and CJ, Tylor wraps his arms around her, comforting her as she cries. They are surprised again when Falling Leaf embraces Tylor as they sob together. Tylor is not known for his consoling. He says it overwhelms him emotionally to touch very sad people.

After a time, the two of them pull themselves together and part, wiping tears from their faces. Standing face to face, Falling Leaf whispers, "You see me, don't you?"

Tylor whispers, "And you see me. I will let Austin know we met. It is dangerous for anyone to know White Squirrel and Victoria are alive."

Falling Leaf speaks softly, "I know."

Falling Leaf leaves the trio, headed to her horse. CJ and Sam start digging. Sam looks at CJ for an explanation of Tylor's odd behavior. CJ shrugs to Sam, indicating, 'I don't know, either.' Tylor watches Falling Leaf ride off, and then he starts digging again.

Sam and the boys survey their work as the sun starts to go behind the hills to the west. The graves are all dug, and the men pick up their tools and head back to the cart.

Sam shakes his hands as if doing so would stop the pain. "Thank you, boys. I wasn't sure we could finish it, but I underestimated your drive."

"We couldn't let Victoria and Squirrel down." CJ brushes the dirt from his pants, "Tomorrow might be their only chance to say goodbye."

Tylor puts the last shovel on the cart: "This might sound weird, but I feel like doing this was for Mom and Dad, too. Even though they aren't even alive yet, it's kind of like—well, like they died too."

Sam rubs his ring finger where his wedding band should be, "I know exactly what you mean." They pause and stare briefly at the graves.

Sam breaks their stare, "I'll bet Victoria had dinner ready an hour ago. You guys must be starving."

CJ and Sam mount horses, and Tylor climbs on the cart. CJ leads off on his horse. The cart follows. Sam, now mounted, looks around carefully and follows a short distance behind the cart. The sun is setting with a bright red and orange sky.

[We're Staying Together]

The group is at the dining table, in their usual seats, holding hands in prayer. Sam, CJ, and Tylor have large, open blisters. The grave markers are at the foot of the table.

When Sam finishes the prayer, they all say, "Amen," and start to eat.

Victoria starts the conversation, "Sam, did you have a chance to discuss the possibility of going to Ohio with us?"

Sam begins to answer, “We did. We agreed –”

CJ butts in, “May I?”

Sam yields to CJ, “Um, sure. I guess.”

CJ takes center stage, “We decided there’s no point in staying here after you two leave. So we’ll move to Ohio with you. Well, not with you, but at the same time as you. We don’t want to interfere with your marriage. So, yeah, we’re going with you to Ohio!”

CJ puts his hand up for a high-five with Austin. Austin flinches away. CJ laughs at his reaction, then CJ takes Austin’s hand with his other hand and brings it up to meet his. “It’s called a hi-five. You do that when you’re excited about something.”

“Oh.” Austin is not very impressed.

“But we’re coming back,” Tylor explains the agreement. Austin’s face goes from excited to concerned. “We’ll come back next year so we can be here on the same dates that we arrived here from the future. Just to see if we can get back to our own time.”

Victoria presses for a commitment, “And after that?”

Sam finishes the agreement, “If we don’t get back, then we stay in Ohio and live out the rest of our years. Since we have no option on whether to return to our time, we’ll have to deal with whatever comes our way.”

Somberly, Austin discloses his perspective, “It’s like a double-edged sword. It cuts either way. If you go home, I’ll lose my brothers and Uncle Sam. If you stay here, you lose your family. There’s no good solution.”

“Well, as Uncle Sam said, we have no control over it,” CJ concedes. “We’ll just have to do our best, no matter what happens. I can safely say that we’ll all miss someone whether we change times or not.”

“I’ll agree with that.” Sam wants to lighten the atmosphere, “The mood around here is getting kind of heavy, so I’ll change topics.” He uses a positive tone, “Austin, CJ tells me you know someone named Falling Leaf.”

The thought of her lifts Austin’s spirits. “Yes, sir. She’s my friend.”

Sam asks, “Can you trust her?” Austin nods in the affirmative. Sam increases the seriousness of the question, “Even with your life?”

“Yes, sir.” Austin confidently answers, “I can’t trust anyone more than her.”

Sam smiles, “Good. Then CJ made the right call. You told CJ about Falling Leaf the first day you two met. He said the way you talked about her, it seemed like you trusted her.”

Wondering why there is so much discussion about Falling Leaf, Austin asks, “Yes sir, why?”

Tylor jumps into the conversation, fulfilling his promise to tell Austin they met Falling Leaf, “She stopped by while we were ...” He searches for the best word. “working. She was really worried about you. Uncle Sam invited her back tomorrow morning for the funeral.”

“Did you tell her about my Aunt and Uncles, too?” Austin asks sadly.

In a soft voice, Sam answers, “Yes, I did. I told her about everyone. She was heartbroken. That’s why I invited her back. We told her how important it was to keep it a secret. She understood.”

CJ teases him, “Austin, you told me how smart, kind, and spirited she is, but you never told me how cute she is.”

Getting a little defensive, Austin clarifies their relationship, “She’s just a friend, not a girlfriend.”

Half teasing Austin and half using the opportunity to say that he thinks she’s cute, Tylor joins in the tease: “She’s too good-looking for you anyway.”

“That’s enough teasing.” Sam breaks the continuity, “And boys, “ Looking more at Tylor than CJ. “Keep your distance. She’s Austin’s friend. Don’t mess up that relationship.”

CJ and Tylor both answer, “Yes, sir.”

CJ messes up Austin’s hair, “Just messin’ with ya’.”

“Yeah.” Tylor retracts his previous statement, “Nobody’s too good-looking for my little brother.”

Austin breaks out in a shy smile.

In a more serious but soft tone, Victoria asks, “Sam, when do you want us to come down?”

He tells her, “I told Falling Leaf to meet us there about an hour and a half after sunrise. We’ll plan on you and Austin getting there about a half hour later. The boys and I still have a little to do before you arrive.” Directed at Tylor, he says, “ I’ll send Tylor up when we’re ready.” He states more as a question than a statement and looks at Tylor for a reaction: “He can bring you down?”

“Yes.” Tylor responds dutifully and with kindness, “Yes, sir.” While speaking, he looks at Victoria and Austin, “It would be my honor to escort them.”

[Standard Documents]

At the table after dinner. The table is cleared of the food dishes and replaced by a saddlebag and documents. There is also an animal trap with attachments on it. Sam looks over the documents while the boys look at the modified trap.

Shuffling through the documents, Sam tells Victoria, "I should tell you that Falling Leaf told me that Hank has already put in a claim on your property."

"That son of a bitch!" Victoria covers her mouth and looks at Austin, "Sorry."

Austin chuckles, "It's okay, that's what Dad called him too."

Sam puts the documents back in the saddle bag, "These look to be in perfect order. I don't see why a judge couldn't find this sufficient evidence of ownership."

"What do you mean?" Victoria senses that there is more to Sam's statement.

"The reason I came to this cabin in the first place," Sam tells her, "is because the judge said he couldn't tell which of the transfer papers were real. You see, Hank made some counterfeit documents to give the judge. I was supposed to find evidence to authenticate the real documents. I'm not exactly sure what that could be - something that shows an obvious fabrication, an artifact from the cabins, I don't know. A lot of evidence gets erased in one hundred forty years."

CJ wonders out loud, "So How will we prove that Mr. Wilson submitted forgeries?"

"I'm not sure we can," answers Sam. The technology or expertise may not have been available in 1877." He directs his response at CJ. However, we might be able to help your parents and Trish in the future. If we could put some kind of marker on these documents now, then later, by using the technology of 2017, it could be the proof that these are authentic documents."

As respectfully as he can, Tylor reminds Sam of the theft, "Uncle Sam, you must have forgotten that these documents were . . . or," Tylor is a little confused. " will be - whatever, stolen during the recess of the hearing."

Victoria interrupts, "If we know that, can't we stop it?"

"I'm not sure we can stop it or should." Sam reasons, "If they aren't stolen at the courthouse, then Wilson will likely have his men steal them from the court file and destroy them later. We can use that to our advantage since we know what's likely to happen. We'll see where they put 'em and then steal 'em back. That way, we can protect them."

Victoria doesn't follow Sam's logic, "Don't we need them to win the case?"

"According to court records, your documents get 'lost' after the judge looks at them. He already declared that he couldn't determine the authenticity of the documents. So, as far as the judge is concerned, the docs don't matter after that. I think our best move is to recover the documents and put them where they can be found, intact, a hundred and forty years from now, for the new case."

Victoria looks for another angle, "What about the recorder's ledger? That should prove our documents are real."

“Again,” Sam says, “According to what we read in 2017, the ledger will conveniently miss a page. It would be nice to find that, if at all possible.”

Austin asks, “Then what’s the point of even going to the hearing? They already win.”

Sam appreciates all of the questions. They help him plan for contingencies. He counters Austin about defeat, “Not necessarily. There is no record of anybody else but Victoria on our side at the hearing. Maybe by showing up, we can make a difference. We could change the outcome with myself and the sheriff there to support Victoria’s claims. If nothing else, we need to be at least able to cause the one-hundred-fifty-year wait.”

Tylor asks, “And if we don’t win the case now?”

“We do whatever we can to make a difference later, Sam states, “We can plan to counter everything that we read about the case and see what happens.”

Victoria has reached her limit on ideas and suggestions. She has too many other things to think about before the morning to give this topic any more effort. “It’s too late tonight, and there’s too much to think about for me to come up with any plans. We’ll have to do that tomorrow after the funeral.”

Nodding his head, Sam agrees, “Sounds good. But I don’t think it’s too late to see what Austin’s come up with for the EWDs.” Sam directs his attention to Austin. “Austin, why don’t you explain it to us?”

Austin starts timidly, as if they may disapprove, “Well, it’s really kind of simple.”

CJ jumps in, “The simpler, the better. Less to go wrong.”

Tylor and Sam nod in agreement. Austin’s confidence is bolstered, he smiles.

With more confidence, Austin speaks in a more instructional tone, “Okay, it’s based on these rabbit traps I got from the mine”