

Restricted Territory

Back at the Cabin

[Riddle Solved?]

It has been two weeks since Austin was released from the hospital. His doctors have removed all elevation restrictions, and he can now enjoy any activity he wishes, as long as he stops when he gets winded. It is a beautiful winter day, December 16th, 2017. The sky is clear and bright blue. There are about two feet of snow blanketing the cabin site. It is quiet except for the sound of an approaching UTV. Wac ih a' steps out onto the front porch and watches as the UTV arrives. Sam and Austin get out of the UTV and remove their helmets. They put the helmets on the seats and then walk toward the cabin. Wac ih a' meets them at the base of the stairs.

Sam shakes Wac ih a's hand, "Wac ih a', it's good to see you again. "Then he steps aside to present Austin. "Do you remember Austin?" Austin shakes Wac ih a's hand.

"Of course I do. White Squirrel, isn't it?" Austin nods to affirm. " Long ago, there was an Austin here that was also called White Squirrel. It is good to see you well."

"Thank you, Wac ih a'. It'll be a couple of months before I'm well," Austin informs him, "but I'm getting better every day. I got my name and nickname from the one you mentioned. He was my great, great, great Uncle."

"Let's get you inside then." As they are walking toward the cabin, Wac ih a' asks, "What brings you up? Bill, CJ, and Tylor collected your stuff the day after you went to the hospital."

"A couple of things," states Sam. "If it's not inconvenient, a cup of your fine coffee is one of them.

"Of course, my pleasure."

Sam and Austin kick off their boots, and the three enter the cabin. They are greeted at the door by a beautiful lady about Wac ih a's age and an equally beautiful girl about Twelve. Their features suggest they have Native American ancestry.

Wac ih a' smiles broadly as he introduces his family. "Sam, White Squirrel, I'd like to introduce you to my wife, Savanna, and my granddaughter, Page. Page is just up visiting for the weekend while her dad is in Sacramento for a conference. They fly back to Belize tomorrow evening."

Sam politely shakes her hand. "It is a pleasure to finally meet you, Savanna. Wac ih a' mentioned you many times before I – left for a few days."

"I've heard a lot about you, Sam," says Savanna with a slight chuckle as she shakes Sam's hand.

Sam looks at Wacih a'. He is hoping he didn't tell her only the bad stuff. Wac ih a' cocks his head toward his wife. In the silent world of 'man talk,' that gesture represented Wac ih a' confessing that no critical information was redacted. Still, some embarrassing parts may have been changed slightly to protect a fellow man's pride. In other words, he told her everything except some embarrassing details. Sam is not elated, but, as a married man himself, he fully understands.

Finally, Sam speaks to Page. "I hope you are enjoying your stay."

<Spanish> "Si." </Spanish> Then Page remembers she should be speaking English. "Sorry," She releases a nervous giggle. "Yes. Yes, I am, thank you."

Following Sam's lead, Austin politely takes Savanna's hand. "A pleasure to meet you, ma'am."

Austin catches Savanna's soft, grand-motherly eyes as she replies, "It's nice to see you, Austin. Glad you're feeling better."

"Thank you." Austin can feel the kindness in her words.

Austin is a little shy as he speaks to a beautiful girl around his age. Falling Leaf doesn't count. She was like a sister to him. <Spanish> "Buenos días, Señorita Page." </Spanish> [Trans: Good day, Miss Page].

Page smiles at Austin's shyness. She thinks he is cute. <Spanish> "Buenos días, Ardilla blanca. ¿Te sientes bien?" </Spanish> [Trans: Good day, White Squirrel. You feel good (fine)].

Austin extends his hand. <Spanish> "Si. Si, Señorita Page." </Spanish> [Trans: Yes. Yes, Miss Page.] Page takes his hand, looks him in the eye, then slightly squeezes his hand before letting it go. Austin blushes. All three adults caught the flirting but pretended not to notice.

Sam learned about Austin's language skills during his recovery over the past couple of weeks. Austin can converse in English, Spanish, Mandarin, and Miwok. He also knows a few phrases in Irish, German, and Russian. However, many of those phrases were learned at worksites, so he refuses to use them.

Wac ih a' ushers the group inside. "Let me get something hot for our weary travelers."

[Collecting a Few Things]

Bringing five cups to the table where Austin, Page, Savanna, and Sam are seated, Wac ih a' carefully balances the hot beverages. He announces the contents as he distributes the cups. "Cocoa." Placing cups in front of Austin and Page. "Coffee." Placing a cup in front of Savanna and Sam. "And coffee." He places a cup on the table in front of himself and sits down.

“First,” Sam starts, “The boys and I thank you very much for your hospitality and assistance. I’m not sure what we would’ve done without you.”

“That’s what I’m here for,” Wac ih a’ replies. I’m happy I could help.”

In a polite and respectful tone, Austin asks, “Wac ih a’, do you know about the mine entrance?”

Referencing the one through the pantry and the entrance via the cave on the other side of the mountain, Wac ih a’ makes it known that he is quite familiar with the mine. “Both of them, yes. I also have a very old map of the hazards. The boobytraps were disabled a long time ago. Is there a problem?”

“No,” Sam tells him. “We’re trying to find some important documents to help with the title claim for Creighton’s land. We only have a week before our next court appearance. Austin seems to think he knows where the original property deeds were hidden. Victoria Creighton was going to have them sent to her after she got to Ohio because she figured it was too dangerous to carry ‘em with her. They never made it to Ohio. She must have forgotten where she hid them. Do you mind if he takes a look in the mine?” Sam stares at Austin to make his point. “He knows to be very careful.”

“No, of course not,” answers Wac ih a’. “I am just the caretaker. Everything, except my personal stuff, belongs to the Creightons and their heirs. You are welcome to look wherever you’d like.”

Austin states, “If I may be excused, it should only take a minute or two.”

Wac ih a’ looks at Sam approvingly. Judging by their earlier flirting, Wac ih a’ further encourages Tylor and Page’s friendship. “Page, why don’t you go with him? You know the mine well.”

“Go ahead. Please be careful,” Sam cautions.

As he pulls the chair back for Page, Austin looks at Sam with a ‘Really! I know more about this mine than anyone alive’, look.

Sam responds to the look, “I know. But, please...”

Austin interrupts so Sam doesn’t have to finish his sentence. “Okay. I’ll—” He looks at Page, who is now standing beside him. He changes his response to, “We’ll be extra careful.”

“Thank you,” Says Sam. “Oh, and maybe bring back a pick.”

Austin frequently uses the term he first learned to call Sam out of habit. “Aye, Captain.”

Austin and Page leave for the mine.

<Spanish> “Capitán?” </Spanish>, asks Page.

Austin nods. <Spanish> “Es una larga historia . . .” </Spanish> [Trans: It’s a long story. . .]

Back at the table, Wac ih a' carefully inquires about CPS issues. "Are there no problems at the hospital?"

"The doctors did have a few questions about how he got his injuries," Sam admits. "But it all got straightened out. I'm glad they did look into it. That tells me they're doing their jobs."

Wac ih a' tells Sam, "I thought that might happen. I'm glad it did not get too complicated."

Sam's relief was apparent. "Yeah, me too."

"How is the battle over the title going?" inquires Savanna.

"The original soil samples they took," Sam explains, "came back with old PCBs as expected. Once again, I'm sure," He nods at Wac Ih a'. "Thanks to you, they also came back with high levels of fresh urine." Savanna looks at Wac ih a', surprised and questioningly. "That prompted a re-sample."

Looking at Savanna, reassuring her, Wac ih a' shakes his head, "It wasn't mine."

"The new samples," adds Sam, "Taken by another company, came back completely negative. State Environmental said sufficient DNA was in the first sample, and they'll launch an investigation. Don't be surprised if state investigators stop by and ask a couple of questions."

Savanna puts down her cup. "We'll expect them. Maybe the failed pollution claim will benefit the Creightons."

"I think you're right," Sam reasons. The judge will be more skeptical of any other 'evidence' against our claim, especially from the Bar R Bar cattle company. Of course, I'll keep you informed of any new developments. If Austin can recover the lost deeds, I'm sure the courts will find in the foundation's favor."

Sam looks at Wac ih a'. "Changing topics: Do you remember a few weeks ago?" he gestures toward the front door. "When I first arrived, you said something about that first step?"

Thinking about it, Wac ih a' shakes his head. "Not specifically; however, we've been passing down a saying about that old stone step for generations, so I likely told you too. When someone first visits, we always say, "Watch your step; that first one can be somethin' special." It's kind of a tradition."

Sam grins. "That's what I thought! When Austin gets back, you wouldn't mind taking a closer look at that step with us, would you?"

"I've never given the step a second thought," Wac ih a' chuckles, "but now you've piqued my interest. I would enjoy a little exploring. Oh, I almost forgot." He gets up, goes to a small table, gets an envelope, and hands it to Sam. "This was left in the front bedroom." The envelope is addressed to Sam. "I did not know when you would be back here, so I was going to mail it to you. You saved me a stamp." Sam opens the envelope and empties the contents into his hand. It is the pocket knife with the squirrel inlay.

Austin and Page make their way back from the mine.

Carrying a small pick and a saddlebag, Austin announces, “Right where I –.” Austin was going to say, ‘Left them,’ but caught himself. “Um—guessed they might be.”

Savanna is surprised by the quick return. “That was fast!”

“He went right to it as if he had hidden it himself,” remarked Page.

Killing two birds with one stone, Sam checks up on Austin and quickly changes topics. “You’re not getting too tired, are you?”

“No, sir,” replies Austin. I’m feeling fine.” He hands the saddlebags to Sam, who looks at him to see if he is covering for feeling weak.

Austin sees the look. “Really? I know better now.”

Due to Austin’s hospital stay and conversations in other public places, Sam and Austin have become reasonably comfortable with the terms ‘son’ and ‘dad’ for each other.

Reaching out, Sam hands the knife to Austin. “Okay – Here, son. This is yours.”

He takes the knife and examines it. Austin is thrilled to receive it. “Thanks, Dad. I wondered where it was.” He turns to Page and shows her the knife with the squirrel inlay. <Spanish> “Ardilla blanca.” </Spanish> [Trans. White Squirrel]

Taking the documents out of the bag, Sam looks them over. He checks the back of the papers; there is a dark brown thumbprint and a heavy smear. Also, a handwritten note says, ‘Time’s Up.’ Sam carefully puts the documents back into the saddle bag. “Hopefully, modern forensics will wrap this up quickly.” He hands the saddle bag back to Austin. “Why don’t you secure those on the UTV while Wac ih a’ and I get started on the step?”

Austin hands him the pick, and Page hands Wac ih a’ a pry bar. “Yes, sir.” He and Page head to the UTV.

Sam suggests, “Let’s see what’s so special about that step.”

Savanna, Wac ih a’, and Sam get up from the table and cross to the door. Sam and Wac ih a’ go out the door, and Savanna steps up to the window to watch from inside.

[Something Special, Indeed]

Sam has dug around the top of the step, removing the snow and a few inches of dirt. The rock now seems to be a carved lid. Wac ih a’ and Sam carefully pry and lift the lid off the stone box it covers. The four of them, Sam, Austin, Wac ih a’, and Page, peer into the stone box. Inside is a jar containing a worn book and a note. The rest of the box is filled with gold coins and gold bars.

“Wow!” exclaims Sam.

Austin eagerly adds, “This is much more than he left in the mine.”

Page excitedly, “It’s a treasure chest!”

Barely keeping a lid on his astonishment, Wac ih a’ remarks, “Very impressive.”

Sam looks at Austin and then at the jar. He gives Austin a nod. Austin reaches in and takes the jar, opens it, and removes the book and the note. With trepidation, Austin carefully unfolds the note. While Austin looks at the note, he can hear Ren’s voice reading it.

Dearest Austin,

I knew you would eventually find this box. It is my life’s work of prospecting. I didn’t prospect for the money but for the challenge. I saved what I could over the years to keep a record of my achievements. You are the kindest-hearted person I have ever met, so there is no one I would rather give it to than you. Whatever its tally, it is now yours. Do with it as you please.

Your friend,

Ren.

PS. The little book is what I could recall of my adventures, both before and after we met. I thought you might like to read it every now and then.

The excitement causes Sam’s patience to run out. “Well, what’s it say?”

Paraphrasing, Austin reveals, “It is a note from the prospector who lived here a long time ago. Ren left this to—” Austin started to say ‘me’ but morphed it into ‘my.’ “Umm—great, great, uncle.”

Sam knows that the great, great uncle is Austin. Also, looking at Austin, he knows there is more to the note that Austin is keeping to himself. Sensing that the mood may get somber if the topic is pressed much more, Sam tries to focus Austin on the gold. “Wow! He was a great prospector. What do you think we should do with all this?”

“I’m not sure. It looks like a lot,” Austin confesses.

“We’d better just keep this quiet for a bit,” Sam cautions. “It obviously belongs to your great, great uncle’s heirs, meaning you, but let’s not complicate the land case unnecessarily.”

Wac ih a’ slowly shakes his head in wonderment. “What a step. It certainly was something special.”

Austin tugs on Sam's coat to get his attention. Sam turns so Austin can whisper in his ear.

Apologizing for the whispering, Sam speaks to Wac ih a'. "Sorry." He now speaks in a formal tone. "Austin just reminded me about an earlier family discussion involving you and your family. We'd like you to know that you're welcome to stay if we win the case. No, we hope you'll stay – for as long as you like."

After hefting one of the gold bars, Austin hands the gold bar to Page so she can feel the weight.