

Restricted Territory

Services

[Startin' Early]

In the dark bedroom, before dawn, Sam quietly wakes Tylor, sleeping next to him, and motions for him to go to the other bed. As Sam quietly gets dressed, Tylor goes to the bed where CJ and Austin sleep. Tylor and CJ deftly exchange places without waking Austin. CJ starts getting dressed as Sam fastens his holster and exits the bedroom door.

Sam makes his way to the kitchen and warms his hands in front of the stove. The coffee pot is in the back position over what Sam has determined is the hottest spot on the stove this morning. CJ comes into the kitchen carrying a coat and wearing a revolver. He puts the coat on the dining table and pulls up a chair. His movements show that he is comfortable and at ease wearing the revolver. They keep their voices low while discussing the day's plan.

"Joe'll be hot in just a minute." Sam holds a cup toward CJ, "Join me for a cup before we go?"

CJ is not quite awake yet; his speech is not slurred, but also not very crisp either, "Yeah. I'd like that. You know I'm not much of a coffee drinker, but today, it feels like I could use it. Why are we up so early?"

Sam pours two cups of coffee and brings them to the table. His rough and blistered hand transfers a hot cup of coffee to CJ's hand, which is in no better shape, "We've got a lot of work to do to keep Victoria and Austin from having to see the bodies of their family. I'm a little concerned about all of us being out in the open for very long. The sooner we finish the funeral, the safer we'll all be."

Suggesting that Sam forgot they had to use horses, CJ carefully mentions, "You do know that the horses don't have headlights. Right?"

Defying the youngster's accusation of not thinking things through, Sam gives CJ a quiz, "The full moon was four days ago. What do we have now?"

CJ thinks for a second, "A waning gibbous."

Sam continues the quiz, "And when does it come up?"

CJ is entirely into the challenge now. He speaks to himself, calculating, "Fifty-two minutes and 45 seconds times four. That's two zero eight and one zero eight." He confidently answers, "Three hours, twenty-eight no, . . . three hours, thirty-one minutes after sunset."

Impressed, Sam smiles at CJ and then tells him what the math is all about. "Very good. I would have taken 'about three and a half hours' as an adequate answer, but it's good to get the brain going in the morning. The fairly bright moon and the light reflecting off the snow will provide more than enough light for the horses. They have excellent night vision." Sam finishes his coffee and puts the cup in the sink. Let's hit it."

CJ follows suit, putting his empty cup in the sink. As CJ gets close to Sam on their way to the door, Sam puts his arm around CJ's shoulders and confides in him, "I haven't had this much anxiety about a day since I got married. I'll be happy when it's over."

CJ turns down their lamp and grabs his coat. Sam gets his coat from the hook by the door. They both grab a rifle from the security stash by the door and put on their hats. CJ turns off the lamp as they head out the back door into the cold early morning. As they step out the door, the light blue moonlight illuminates them, the barn, and the snow.

[Unexpected Help]

Just before dawn, Sam arrives alone at the grave site. He rides to the access point of the grave site, dismounts, and scouts the area for problems, checking for extra footprints or other signs that someone may have discovered the site. Then he goes through one hundred and fifty feet of forest to the grove's edge and scans the meadow to the west. To the northwest, Sam sees a light in the window of Gwen and Gregory Hill's ranch house. Determining that the site is compromised, Sam signals CJ not to come down. Quietly, he dashes back to where his horse is tied. Next to his horse is Falling Leaf's horse. A familiar voice is heard.

Falling Leaf calls out to Sam in a forced whisper, "Wait. It's just me. I knew you'd be here early, so I came to tell you what's happening at Gwen's."

Sam turns around to face the voice. In a decidedly relieved but exasperated tone, "Falling Leaf, you should know better than to scare an old man. I didn't expect you this early."

Falling Leaf flatly states. "Mr. Reynolds, you should be more attentive. Anyone could have been here, and you might have been in a lot of trouble."

Sam talks to himself. "Man, I don't need that kind of rush this early in the day." Then, addressing Falling Leaf, "You're right, Falling Leaf, I need to be more attentive; at the same time, you could be a little less sneaky when you know it's me. I'm sure Hank's men are not half as sneaky as you are. Hold on, let me bring CJ in." Sam lights the lamp and holds it up high. "I wanted to check this place out before he came in with the cart. So what's going on at Gwen's?"

"My mother and father are in Gwen's cabin." She explains, "We were good friends of the Creightons and Hills. My mother and father spent all night using the wood from the ranch house, making coffins. We knew you wouldn't have time. I hope we didn't overstep our boundaries."

Sam is grateful for the help. "You're right; we didn't have enough time to build coffins. That's very thoughtful. I sure didn't want to bury them without coffins, but we don't dare wait any longer. Hank's men may come as early as today. Thank you very, very much. And give my thanks to your parents."

Falling Leaf understands the situation but doesn't like it. It saddens her to think that her happy and lively friends, whom she met just last week, are now secretly buried in a dark, cold forest. She speaks sorrowfully, "I wish we could do more. My friends were good, happy, and loving people. They don't deserve a secret burial, but I know it must be that way."

Sam feels her sorrow, "You and your family have done much more than we could have asked. Austin, I mean, White Squirrel, and Victoria will be grateful for all you have done. Also, I couldn't agree more about the grave site and the secrecy. They deserve better." He is sure Falling Leaf knows the importance of keeping this a secret, but he is curious about how many people she has told. "Who else, besides you and your parents, knows about us?"

"No one." She lets Sam know that they understand the safety risk. "We came at night using the north trail. Very few people know about that trail. As far as I know, nobody from Bar-R-Bar has ever used it."

CJ arrives, driving the cart. He dismounts as Falling Leaf and Sam approach. They work together to unload the tools.

CJ is surprised and happy to see Falling Leaf, and although this is a somber time, he tries to keep upbeat as best he can. "Good morning, Miss Falling Leaf."

"Morning CJ." She thinks CJ's awkwardness is caused by the unfamiliarity of using her Miwok name, so she offers an alternative: "You can call me by my English name, Sarah, if you prefer."

CJ answers shyly, "No, that's okay. I Think Falling Leaf better suits your beauty." CJ is embarrassed by his own comment. He blushes and looks at the ground.

Not used to being complimented so directly, she responds with a shy smile and looks away from CJ. She now knows that his awkwardness is not a result of the name.

Sam is not pleased with CJ flirting with Austin's friend, especially today. He does get some insight into CJ's reputation, but even he is embarrassed by CJ's excessively cheesy comment. Sam is beginning to realize that CJ is not a player; he's simply awkward around girls. For the sake of the three of them, he advises CJ, "Back to the task at hand, please."

CJ gets the hint to stop flirting. Both CJ and Falling Leaf compose themselves as if nothing was said.

Sam sees that the graves are ready. "Falling Leaf, maybe you should let your parents know I'm here with CJ, and we're ready to start moving the bodies. We'll bring the cart over in a little bit."

"Okay, we'll be waiting." Falling Leaf starts to leave, then stops and asks, "How is White Squirrel?"

Sam starts with a positive tone: "Physically, he's doing okay. He's not yet out of the woods but is getting better. He's a real tough kid." Falling Leaf nods in agreement. With less enthusiasm, he reports, "Emotionally, it's been real hard on him. I know that your being here will help him a lot. Thanks for being such a good friend. It will take some time to deal with the trauma he's been through."

CJ has been uneasy since leaving the cabin this morning. He continuously looks for threats as he brings the last items, the markers, from the cart and respectfully places each one on the ground at the head of the graves.

Falling Leaf admits, "He is much more than a friend to me." CJ briefly forgets about the threats and takes more interest in Sam and Falling Leaf's conversation. She continues, "He is my brother in spirit. I have felt his pain for the last three days. That's how I knew he was alive. You will help him with his pain, and I will miss him when he leaves."

CJ is surprised that she knows their plans. "How'd you know he's leaving? We never told you that."

Sam is disappointed in CJ's lack of covertness. He chides, "We have now." He looks at CJ in disbelief about how he could be so careless in disclosing their plans to leave. Sam shakes his head condescendingly. "Really, CJ?"

CJ is embarrassed by his slip. "Sorry, I guess I'm no double-oh-seven. I'll try to do better."

Falling Leaf wants to help CJ out of the hole he dug by explaining to Sam her premonition ability, "I just know things, especially related to people I care about. I don't know why I know, but I know he will go with you. You will make a good family. He will be happy again, as will many others." She abruptly changes topics. "I will let my parents know you will be there soon."

Falling Leaf mounts her horse and rides off to Gwen's house.

CJ confounded, "What did she mean by that?"

Sam shakes his head. "I have no idea, but she reminds me of your brother."

CJ climbs onto the cart. "She sure is pretty, but she kinda freaks me out a little."

Sam disagrees, "We all have our quirks, even you, CJ. I like her. She has a good heart."

Sam gets the saddlebags from his horse and puts them in the cart as he climbs up.

Since they are moving bodies to the grave site, CJ sees no need for saddlebags. "What's that for?"

Without further explanation, Sam simply states, "This is 'Plan B'."

Although curious, CJ knows Sam is keeping 'Plan B' under wraps for a reason, and he won't question him about it.

Sam and CJ ride across the field to Gwen's house. Four coffins are in front of the house, and they can hear work being done inside the cabin to finish the last one. They load two coffins onto the cart, drive to the explosives shack, and then to the grave site. They drive back to Gwen's to repeat the process until the whole family has been moved.

[Final Prep]

The cart is unhitched in preparation for unexpected guests, and the horse is saddled for a quick escape. All grave sites have coffins, and a marker is at the head of each one. Gus is pounding in the last marker.

Sam, CJ, Yellow Feather, and Falling Leaf are all standing together near the foot of the graves. The adults and CJ are wearing holsters with revolvers.

A final swing of Gus's sledgehammer firmly secures the last marker. "That ought to do it." After he finishes, he approaches the rest of the group.

CJ reaches out his hand to shake with Gus. "Thank you, mister ... I'm sorry I didn't catch your last name."

"Just call me Gus." Gus shakes CJ's hand and holds on to it while he finishes his sentence. "I appreciate the sentiment, young man, but it makes me feel old to be called 'mister.'"

CJ finishes shaking hands, "Well, thank you, Gus. We couldn't have done it without you."

Sam interjects, "I know Victoria and Austin will be pleased with the site, too." He directs his attention to Yellow Feather, "We know you've worked as hard as the rest of us; thank you."

She clearly reflected her discontentment with the circumstances and said, "My friends deserve more than a secret burial. Someday, they will be remembered properly for their sacrifice."

CJ knows that the grave site will be revealed in 2017, but unlike before, when he admitted they were leaving, he holds his tongue. Respectfully, CJ agrees, "Yes, ma'am. I'm sure they will."

Sam is eager to start the ceremony so they can retreat to the safety of the cabin. "CJ, how about ridin' up the hill a bit to help escort Victoria and Austin down?"

"Yes, sir. Be glad to," Says CJ.

Sam starts to remind CJ, "Thanks. Ever ..."

CJ interrupts and finishes saying, "Vigilant!" taking the wind from Sam's sails.

Quietly, Sam talks to himself, "Yeah. Ever Vigilant."

CJ mounts his horse and rides up the hill and out of sight.

[The Funeral]

At the grave site, Sam is talking to Gus and hands him two of Austin's EWS (Early Warning System) devices. Gus and Sam both have rifles in addition to their sidearms.

Falling Leaf and Yellow Feather are talking by the access point to the grave site. Falling Leaf waves to the men, indicating that CJ is returning. Gus nods in acknowledgment.

CJ rides down to the ladies and looks into the grove at Sam, waiting for confirmation. Sam nods to him, indicating that bringing Victoria and Austin to the site is okay. CJ turns his horse to face uphill and then waves with his left hand to Tylor, who is just visible in the distance.

Tylor looks behind him and nods at Victoria and Austin, hidden in the trees. Victoria and Austin ride their horses past Tylor and down toward the rest of the horses at the grave site access point.

CJ leads four horses past the grave site to a spot in the trees closer to the meadow so they will not be bunched up if Wilson's men arrive.

Victoria and Austin arrive at the access point and are assisted with their dismount. Tylor takes one more look around from his vantage point on the hill before heading to the access point.

Sam is getting more nervous because everything is going as planned. The personnel movements, the signals, and even the weather are just as planned. Over the years, Sam has learned that if everything runs smoothly, you're probably overlooking something.

Sam addresses CJ and Gus, but mostly CJ. "I'm sure God will understand why you can't close your eyes during the prayers. Do your best to keep your vision clear. CJ, make sure Tylor understands the security plan as soon as possible. Just to make sure we're all on the same page, repeat the plan to me."

"Yes, sir." CJ repeats the plan in a military-like tone, "If we get visitors, you and Tylor will take care of Victoria and Austin. Gus and I will take care of Yellow Feather and Falling Leaf. If we get separated, we meet back in the mine."

Sam is satisfied, "Great."

"It's a good plan." Gus adds, "Let's hope we don't have to use it."

CJ, still in combat mode, "Copy that."

Gus is bewildered by CJ's expression. "What?"

CJ forgot about the culture change, "Sorry. It just means I agree."

Gus wonders, 'Why do kids have to make things difficult?' He simply responds to CJ, "Oh."

Victoria and Austin are dressed in their best Sunday clothes. Tylor wears a white shirt and tie under his jacket, as well as a holster. He takes Austin's rifle out of the scabbard as he follows Victoria and Austin.

Yellow Feather and Falling Leaf greet and hug Victoria and Austin. The four of them, followed by Tylor and then Sam, proceed solemnly to the grave site. CJ pulls Tylor aside and whispers the plan to him, pointing to the horses and gesturing to the area he is to watch. When Sam sees that everyone is in place, he makes his way to the head of the graves.

Yellow Feather, Victoria, Austin, and Falling Leaf, as they hold hands, position themselves at

the foot of the graves. Gus, Tylor, and CJ are standing about 120 degrees from each other, surrounding the others, looking past the grave site to watch their respective areas of concern. Tylor takes out his revolver, adds one more round to the cylinder, and puts it on half cock before he re-holsters it.

Sam is the de facto head of the new family. The responsibility of conducting the funeral falls on his shoulders.

Sam opens the Bible. He speaks reverently, quietly, and solemnly:

“Shall we begin?”

The foursome at the foot of the graves bows their heads. The three on watch keep their heads up, looking for any trouble.

“O Lord, why you called our beloved to be with you at such early ages, we do not understand.”

Yellow Feather’s eyes gloss over as she fights to keep the tears from flowing.

“Their presence here on earth will sorely be missed.”

Victoria’s tears form jagged lines down her face, and her lips tremble.

“Although we may ponder why, it is surely not ours to question your wisdom in bringing them home to be with you.”

Austin has his head buried in Falling Leaf’s arm as he cries.

“Receive their souls into thy kingdom, where we will...”

Falling Leaf has her arms around Austin as tears drop from her cheeks.

“Once again, be rejoined with them, in thy great presence. Amen.”

Everybody says, “Amen.”

Tylor's face is streaked with tears. His feet are shoulder-width apart, and his rifle is held low across his body. He is concentrating on his area of concern. Maintaining his post, he wipes a tear from his cheek. The hammer is back on the rifle’s action.

CJ is in the same stance, with the same tear streaks and concentration. Even though the boys never knew the deceased, they are fully empathetic to Victoria and Austin's pain. This ceremony also represents a funeral for CJ and Tylor’s parents and Sam’s wife, who have yet to be born.

Gus is on one knee; tears are on his cheek. His rifle butt is on the ground, and the barrel is pointed up as he carefully keeps watch. He knows that he will miss his friends for a long time.

Sam continues the ceremony as snow starts falling, “Let’s read from the bible, Genesis chapter 3, verse 19.”

After the service, the attendees comfort each other with hugs and well wishes. Gus’s family returns home via the north trail and the rest return to the safety of the cabin.

[The Map]

The small, dark space is filled with the sounds of people rustling and keys jingling. A lamp is brought into the small pantry to illuminate the objective. CJ, Tylor, and Austin are at the shelving unit that leads to the mine. Their eyes are still puffy from crying at the funeral. The blurry vision of grief has given way to a spark of curiosity, at least temporarily.

Sam and Victoria agreed that this would be a good time for Austin to follow Ren's wishes and use the key that Ren had given Austin. This challenge might give the boys a reprieve from grief and help settle their hearts.

Austin has placed the key into the lock hidden behind the hole with the R around it. Hearts begin to beat faster; breaths become louder, and anticipation peaks.

Taking his eyes off the lock to look at CJ and Tylor, Austin says, in a quiet, stealthy voice, "Thanks, guys, for doing this with me. I didn't want to do this alone."

CJ is quick to respond, whispering, "Of course."

Tylor, whispering, adds, "What's an adventure without your brothers?"

Austin smiles at them and turns the key. The whole back panel of that shelf pops open toward them. Tylor jumps. The other two look at him and laugh.

CJ teases, "A little jumpy?"

Austin joins him, "Do we need to wait for you to change your pants?"

CJ and Austin laugh. Victoria and Sam, sitting in the front room, are pleased to hear the laughter.

Embarrassed that he is a little nervous, Tylor presses for further action, "Just get on with it."

They clear off the shelf and remove what is now apparently a box. The wooden box is sealed. There is an inlay of a squirrel just above a small round hole.

Without success, CJ looks over the box to find a way in, "Now what? Do we need a nail or something?"

Tylor examines it closely with the lamp, "It looks like a small keyhole. Is that the only key you have?"

"Yeah, that's all he left me," Austin thinks for a moment, "Wait! I got it!"

He pulls out his pocket knife with the inlay of a squirrel and opens the back blade. The little blade has notches on it. He puts the blade into the box and tries to turn the knife, but it won't turn. Turning the blade over, he tries again. This time, the blade turns, and the box unlocks.

Tylor is wide-eyed, "Wow! Now we're getting somewhere."

Noticing the similarity to Sam's knife, CJ asks, "Can I see your knife?"

Austin hands it to CJ, "Sure. Why?"

Tylor notices the similarity, too. He responds, "Uncle Sam had one just like this, but it wasn't in such good shape."

After a thorough inspection, CJ gives it back to Austin, "Where'd you get it?"

“My dad gave it to me on my tenth birthday,” he says, wiping off the squirrel inlay. “Ren used to be a watchmaker before he was a prospector. He made it.”

“No way.” Tylor is astonished, “Hand made?”

“Yeah.” He folds it back up and puts it in his pocket. “It’s a key, and I never knew it.”

CJ looks at Tylor and says, “Ty, it’s got to be the same knife. Things are getting too weird.”

Austin asks, “What do you mean, CJ?”

Tylor tells him, “Sam’s knife was just like yours. He used that blade for stripping wire.”

“How could Sam have Austin’s knife?” CJ wonders. “We’ll check with Sam to see if it’s the same one.”

“Okay, but later.” Tylor is focused. “I want to see what’s in the box.”

[Ren’s Mark]

Austin is as excited as CJ and Tylor, “Okay, let’s open it.”

They slowly open the box and peer in. It has rolled-up paper and some keys.

Austin wasn’t expecting what he saw, “That’s strange.”

CJ was totally unaccustomed to Ren and Austin’s games and didn’t know what to expect. “What’s strange?”

Austin pulls out the keys and map. “I never got keys before. Just a map.”

Tylor loves games with maps. He’s starting to get into this. “What’d the map lead you to?”

Austin is happy to have an opportunity to share stories of the experiences he had with Ren and his new brothers. He proudly discloses the treasures he acquired on previous adventures: “Usually something I’ve wanted for a long time, like a book or some clothes. Once, I got a ten-dollar gold piece!”

Still thinking the map and treasure hunt are cool, CJ is not too impressed by the difficulty. “So, you just follow the map and get your stuff? It sounds kind of easy.”

“That’s how it was when I first met him,” Austin says as he unrolls the map. Then, he made it harder and harder. Now, the map only gives me clues, and then I have to figure out what they all mean.”

The map shows the house and mine system. It has a legend down in the lower right corner. In the center top of the map are three skulls and crossbones. There are smaller crossbones scattered throughout the mine system. Other symbols are declared in the legend.

The other symbols correspond to the names of people in town. Ren's symbol corresponds to Austin, while the V corresponds to Victoria.



Pointing to one of the crossbones symbols in the middle of the map, Tylor asks, "What does this mean?"

"He used to put traps out that would cover me in flour or pour water on me." Austin points at one of the skulls with crossbones, "Like this one. This is a trip wire. It did something different each time. He would put one of those symbols on the top of the map to remind me to be careful.

CJ points at the three complete skulls and crossbones at the top of the map, "I guess he *really* means it this time."

"Yeah." Austin emphasizes, "He never put something on the maps that wasn't important. This down here is new, too." He points to the legend.

Tylor cautions, "Let's look it over a couple of times before we start."

CJ, "I agree!"

"Maybe three times." Austin points at the top of the map. "There're three skulls."

[EWS activated]

Inside the cabin's main room, Sam and Victoria are talking at the table, planning tomorrow's trip to town. Sam suggests, "Since we're going to present your evidence to the judge tomorrow, we need to plan to get in and out of town with the least amount of exposure possible, and maybe a couple of backup plans should things change. The boys and I are completely unfamiliar with the town, its people, and its layout. The more detailed we are here, the less chaotic it will be in town."

"We'll have to ask Austin how to sneak into town." Victoria divulges, "He thinks I don't know, but he does it all the time. He can also tell us how to get around wherever we need to go without people knowing."

Sam states, "Once you and I step into that courtroom, everyone will know you're alive and in town and that you're with me; however, until then, the boys and I should be able to move about freely since nobody knows us."

Victoria corrects his assumption, "Not too freely, but at least they won't know that you know Austin or me yet. The townsfolk don't feel comfortable around strangers. You'll be watched *pretty closely*, that's for sure."

"That could work to our advantage. Sam reasons, "If everybody's watching my nephews and me, then you should be able to get around more easily until court starts. I don't think Austin needs to be seen at all. Let's just kind of leave him as a ghost. It'll be much safer for him if no one knows he's alive. He could hide in the mine."

Victoria knows that Austin is safer if no one knows he's still alive, but they need him in town. "True enough, nobody needs to see him, but we can't leave him here by himself. Besides, we'll need him to get around. There's no way I could remember all the tricks he uses. And, like you said, circumstances could change."

Sam sees Victoria's point. "Then, we'll have to come up with a disguise or something for him."

An explosion is heard from one of Austin's early warning devices on the front road.

Sam yells to the boys who are in the mine. "It's from the South Road." Now, addressing Victoria calmly, "You know the plan."

Victoria quickly heads back to the mine entrance, passing CJ on his way out.

Sam yells to the mine, "Tylor, back door, please. Stay out of sight. CJ, circle around. I've got the front door."

CJ is at the back door with a pair of rifles and a poncho, "Copy that."

Tylor is in the kitchen, peeking out one of the shutters and holding a rifle. He nods at CJ. CJ rushes out the back door. Tylor continues watching through the shutter until CJ is safely on his way.

Tylor cocks his rifle, and with just enough volume for Sam to hear him, "The mine is secured. CJ's has made the corner. I'm on my way now."

Sam is in the front room with two rifles. He cocks the hammers back on both rifles while looking out the front door. He tells Tylor, "We'll do it just like we practiced. Stay hidden unless I need you! And remember the codes!"

Tylor quickly replies, "Understood."

Tylor looks out the shutter one last time, then closes it. He grabs two more rifles and a poncho staged on the table and exits the back door.

Sam leaves the front door open so he can see out. He crosses to the kitchen, puts the rifles on the table, muzzles toward the door, and continues into the kitchen, putting some green branches into the stove, creating dark smoke that draws the riders to the cabin. Sam then gets a cup of coffee and takes the two rifles to the front door. He places one inside, by the door."

In a raised voice so Victoria and Austin can hear but not yell, Sam reports, "Ready in the front. Steppin' out." The latch for the mine clicks as the door is closed.

Sam takes the other rifle and the coffee cup with him. He places the rifle behind the column on the front porch, takes a position between the columns, and puts another round in his revolver as he waits for the visitors. Sam leaves the front door ajar for easy ingress.

There are six riders on the road to Creighton Valley (the name of the valley where the ranches are); Wilson is on the lead horse. Behind the riders, a slight cloud of snow and gunpowder smoke dissipates.

Cody, one of the riders, points out the smoke from the cabin to Wilson. Cody then directs two riders off the trail and to the south.

CJ is stealthfully making his way to a pre-built hiding place. The hiding place has several ropes tied off and a clear view of a small footpath. He is wearing a white poncho to camouflage his body and a bandana with an obviously homemade camo pattern to cover his face. CJ blends into the bush and is entirely camouflaged by the poncho and bandana.

Tylor makes his way into the trees just north of the cabin. He gets into a trench and places one rifle behind a large tree. He continues twenty yards farther west, in the trench, to another area with lots of cover where he puts the second rifle. There are two strands of fencing wire, with stick handles, sticking out from the snow and into the trench near the rifle. Tylor returns to the first rifle and takes a 360-degree look around. He places the white poncho over himself, ties a white bandana over his face, aims the rifle at the old cowbell, and cocks the hammer back. He sees Sam on the front porch and lets out a deep sigh as he settles in.

The two riders Cody sent off the trail dismount when they get to a down tree that blocks any further progress by horse. They find and follow a small footpath that heads toward the back of the cabin. The two make their way carelessly up the path through some brush and, eventually, between two large trees. CJ, who has been sitting motionless like a sniper, releases slip knots of two ropes in quick succession. A large branch swigs out and hits the men in the face, and another swings out from behind and hits them in the legs, knocking them down onto their backs. CJ releases another rope that drops a log across the intruders and pins them to the ground.

Once the two men are trapped, CJ talks into each of the three sound tubes made from plumbing found in the mine.

First tube: "Private pile, keep your sights on them. Private Ryan, you go and deal with those two bastards."

In the second tube, CJ changes his voice: "Yes sir, Sargent Carter."

Third tube, CJ again changes his voice: "Copy that, Sarge. I'm on it."

First tube again: "Lieutenant Dan, move the rest of the men to the flank."

The other four riders arrived on the road as expected: The fake doctor - Dr. Evans, Marshal - Pete McGinn, Hank Wilson, and Cody, the foreman. They ride up toward the cabin as if they were invited.

Sam calls out to the riders, "That's far enough!" The riders pull up. Sam continues in an unwelcoming tone, "What'd ya' want?"

Marshal McGinn starts to talk, "I'm the marshal from Harmony Flats -"

"Didn't ask who ya were," Sam talks over McGinn, "I asked what ya wanted. We'll get to who ya are later." Sam now knows the identity of one of the riders.

Sam calmly sips his coffee. He is quite nervous but acts very calm. Sam can see snow falling from some trees in the distance in the south. Since there is no shooting, he knows one of the traps was sprung successfully. The only reaction Sam makes is a slight smile as he gains confidence in the plan. The riders are oblivious to the trap being sprung.

Wilson gruffly claims, "This is my property. What the hell are you doing here?" Then he yells at McGinn, "Marshal, arrest him for trespassing." McGinn starts to get off his horse, then stops when Sam starts talking. Sam now knows the identity of two of the riders.

"First off." Sam speaks authoritatively, "The town marshal has got diddly-squat for authority here."

Knowing that Sam is correct and feeling, by Sam's tone, that he has an excellent understanding of the situation, McGinn settles back into his saddle.

Sam continues, "This area is under the sheriff's jurisdiction. We all know that Sheriff Hawkins has revoked all law enforcement authority—" McGinn looks to the ground, defeatedly. "of the marshal outside the township. So Petey can stay right there on that horse."

The riders are surprised that Sam knows the marshal's name. That is also part of the plan—psychological superiority. Sam can deduce the identities of the other two riders. The one who looks like a ranch hand must be Hank's second-in-command, Cody. That leaves the other to be the fake doctor, Evans.

Sam advises them, "Secondly, I'm the legal tenant." He holds up a paper that might or might not be a tenant agreement. "These ten acres are under an easement agreement, in perpetuity no less, of the deed; therefore, it's under my control, not yours." He finishes his sentence snidely. "Hank – perpetuity means forever."

Because none of them had ever seen Sam before, knowing the marshal's name was a surprise, but knowing Wilson's name and calling him Hank set all of them to wondering who they had just tangled with.

Sam is pleased to see the expected reaction. His confidence builds as he continues. "And, of course, third, last I heard, the rest of this land is Bill Creighton's. So, unless you come back with proper ..."

Sam stops in mid-sentence as Cody reaches down and puts his hand on his gun aggressively to intimidate Sam.

Sam puts down his coffee cup on the railing while raising his left hand with a closed fist. "Cody, take your hand off that weapon. I'm only going to tell you once."

Cody leaves his hand on the gun. Sam raises one finger. Immediately, a shot rings out from somewhere north of the riders' position. The slug hits an old cowbell, conveniently hung behind the riders.

While the riders are distracted by the bell, Sam draws his gun and holds it on Cody. "This would be a good time to comply."

Cody raises his hands away from his gun.

After the shot and seeing no more immediate action, Tylor, undercover, moves to the other rifle position in the trench.

Sam smirks, "Very good. I think we're communicating much better now."

Sam puts his finger down and slowly puts his hand down. In a very calm and authoritative tone, he states, "Now is a good time for introductions. I am Captain Sam Reynolds. You can call me Captain Reynolds. I am the current legal tenant of this cabin, and I have every right to be here. Next person who touches their gun gets no warning. I do hope that is understood."

Wilson, feeling as though he has the upper hand, pompously states, "Since you gave us the courtesy of a warning, I feel obligated to let you know that I have two rifles pointed at you right now . . . and they don't miss." He looks at the cowbell, suggesting that it was an errant shot. "So," mocking Sam, "This would be a good time —" Wilson starts yelling in a fit of anger, "For you to toss that gun right out here and call off your man!"

Smiling and slightly chuckling, Sam counters, "I sure wouldn't want to get this —" He looks down at his gun. "Fine piece of machinery muddy for no reason." He yells into the trees south of the riders. "You boys can come over and join the rest of your pack."

The riders and Sam look at the trees south of the road, where Sam directs his voice. Two men in long johns and boots emerge from the trees. They both have targets drawn on their foreheads.

"Oh, by the way, my men don't miss either." Sam points to the bell. "He hit exactly where I asked him."

James, one of the two in Longjohns, addresses Wilson. "Sorry, boss, we never saw 'em."

Wilson yells at the men in Longjohns, "Morons! Where's your clothes?"

Sam answers for the thugs, "They can have their stuff back when they leave, except, of course, the guns. We'll be holding those for a while. Back to the original question: what'd ya want?"

Marshal starts, "So, Mr. Reynolds —"

Sam instantly corrects him, "Captain."

Marshal pauses and rephrases the statement, emphasizing the 'Captain': "Captain Reynolds. To answer your question, we're looking for lost children: one boy, about 12, and a girl, about 18. Have you seen 'em?"

Sam carefully words his response to state the truth to prevent the riders from sensing that he's lying: "Can't say I have." He yells out into the forest in all directions, as if asking an entire platoon of men, "If anybody seen some kids, fire off a round." Sam waits a couple of seconds. The forest is silent.

Sam quips, "Guess not." He holsters his weapon. "If I do see 'em, I'll be sure to let 'em know you're looking for 'em." Sam is starting to have fun now. He puts them on the defensive by calling them liars

without stating it directly. "Funny, I didn't hear ya' callin' for 'em on your way up here. That's the usual way to find lost people, isn't it? Besides that, It seems to me that you've got an awfully large pack of wolves for finding a couple of lost sheep. Not exactly what I'd consider a standard search party."

Wilson is now fully aware that Sam isn't buying the story, but he is unsure how much Sam knows about what has happened. He sits on his horse, staring at Sam to elicit a reaction. Sam stares back.

McGinn, oblivious to the depths of understanding Sam and Hank have about the situation, awkwardly attempts to complete the cover-up that Hank tried but gave up on. "Those kids mean a lot to us." If the kids are somehow still alive, McGinn doesn't want Sam to talk to them, so he tries to scare Sam off. "You shouldn't talk to 'em or get near 'em. They got the pox."

"Humph, smallpox, you say?." Sam, in apparent disbelief, "Really? So, how do we know that? Some sort of premonition?"

Trying to give some authority to his claim, McGinn gestures that he is talking about the man next to him, "That's what Doctor Evans has concluded."

Sam raises his eyebrows. He wasn't expecting McGinn to know how to use the word 'concluded.' Sam decides to paint the 'doc' into a corner. "So, Doc, I take it you've seen 'em already and came up with that diagnosis just before they got lost?"

"Well, no," Evans hesitates, "But I have seen their kin. They died of the pox, and if the kids were in the same house, then they would have it too." Sliding by the first hurdle gives Evans some confidence. "I'm sorry to say their kin have succumbed to the disease."

Sam incredulously says, "Really? I just spoke to them a few days ago. They had no signs or symptoms of smallpox." He deliberately adds suspense to increase their nervousness. Well, I suppose I should take care of their animals then."

Wilson angrily opposes. "No! That's my property. The Doctor here put it under quarantine. No one is allowed down there."

Sam challenges the reasoning and shows that he understands the disease well. His tone becomes arrogant, knowing that he is playing their game better than they are. "I'm sure the fine doctor here surely told you that livestock can't get or carry smallpox."

Wilson knows nothing about smallpox and animals but pretends he does. "Of course, he has." He looks to the doctor for confirmation. The 'doctor' gives a nearly imperceptible nod.

Wilson starts threatening Sam, "The livestock is not your concern. You just keep away from those ranches, or I'll have you shot for trespassing."

Sam has just about had enough of this bantering. He invokes a serious tone. "Actually, the livestock is my concern, but I'll keep your threat in mind. Understand, I don't take kindly to threats." He picks up his coffee cup. "You have exceeded your welcome." He sips the cold coffee, spits it out, and throws the rest into the snow.

Sam is tired of playing games and speaks to them like unwanted dogs. "Are you still here? Go on now, get. Don't come back. There'll be no more warnings."

Wilson turns his horse to face the ranches. "You haven't heard the last from me."

McGinn, following the lead of Wilson. "Or me!"

Sam mockingly. "Likewise, I'm sure."

The riders start heading north toward the ranches, followed by the men in lonjohns.

"Hold on there." Sam calls the riders, "Can't let you go that way." The riders stop. "Remember, the Quarantine! Hate to tell the town's people that you're spreading smallpox everywhere you go."

The riders start moving north again. Sam draws his revolver. "I just couldn't sleep at night knowing that I let you infect all those fine people."

Cody thinks about drawing his gun. Sam holds up two fingers. A shot rings out that hits a plow disc across the path of the riders.

Tylor puts down the rifle and holds onto one of the handles leading into the snow.

Sam announces, "Another perfect shot."

The riders stop again. Afraid he might be the next target, Cody puts his right hand on the saddle horn to show he will not draw his sidearm.

Flustered by his incompetent appearance at the cabin, Wilson yells at his men. "Where'd that come from?"

James stutters, "Du, Don't know, boss. It's like they're ghosts. That's how they got me and Toby."

"Don't bother lookin' for 'em." Advises Sam, "They're well-trained professionals. The only time you'll see 'em is just before the bullet hits your forehead." He points to the target on Toby's forehead with his revolver. Toby tries to wipe off the target. Sam adds some soulless evil to his 'professionals.' "They like to see the fear in your eyes right – before – you – die." Toby gets a shiver down his back.

Sam turns his attention to the 'doctor.' "Standard quarantine for smallpox is two weeks, right Doc?"

Evans has no idea what the quarantine should be but answers, "Yeah, About that."

Sam stares directly at Wilson. "I expect it to be nice and quiet around here 'until it's lifted."

Just then, a sizeable clump of snow falls on Tylor's hand. He jumps a little, pulling one of the handles in his foxhole. The wire attached to the handle is attached on the other end to a rabbit trap. On the trap is a bag of black powder. Next to the trap is a larger bag of black powder. A large explosion goes off along the trail to the ranches, sending snow and debris a hundred feet into the air. The valley echos the explosion.

Tylor looks surprised as he ducks farther into his trench, awaiting the debris. The horses get startled, and the two ranch hands dive into the snow for cover. After the debris stops falling, Sam rolls his eyes. "I'm done talkin' now, so back to town you go. Cody, your minions can find their stuff on the trail out." Cody is uncomfortable having someone he has never met know who he is. Besides his name, he wonders how much more Sam knows about him.

The two thugs on foot get up, dust themselves off, and start to leave along the road, but the riders just sit there, defying Sam. Sam raises his closed fist. After about a second, Hank turns his horse to leave. The pack rides off toward town, with Toby and James following on foot.

Wilson looks back over his shoulder, "We'll be back."

Sam maintains complete confidence in his tone. "We'll be expecting you."

Sam makes the 'watching you' gesture, pointing with two fingers at his eyes and then at the pack.

Out of sight of Sam and his 'platoon,' Wilson orders, "Find out everything you can about that son of a bitch!"

Sam hears James tell Wilson, "There must have been at least four of 'em just on that back trail." He listens intently as the riders' sound fades into the forest's silence. Sam takes a deep breath and releases an extended sigh. When he is absolutely sure Wilson or his men have not backtracked, he motions for the boys to come in.

Before going back into the cabin, Sam and the boys reset the early warning devices and remote explosive charges.

[Debriefing]

After dinner, when all the chores and dishes are done, everybody gathers at the dining table and sits in their regular seats. This group, assembled under mysterious circumstances and united by tragedy and compassion, has become a true family.

Victoria starts the conversation: "Sam, I want to thank you and the boys for this afternoon. Your plan worked exceptionally well, and your army did a great job. I hope we don't need to do that again very soon."

CJ and Tylor high-five across the table. "Yeah!" Austin is a little envious of Tylor and CJ doing a high-five. He sees their excitement and would like to join in, but he doesn't think he would be welcome in their celebration because all he did was hide.

"I agree." Sam echoes the sentiment, "The boys and I did some shooting and fast draw competitions for a few years now. I had complete confidence in their firearm skills. Also, CJ did a good job with his voice impersonations. Everybody stuck to the plan, *mostly*." Throwing a knowing glare toward Tylor.

"I said I was sorry." Tylor issues an excuse, "It was too sensitive."

Tylor adamantly and silently mouths to Austin, "It wasn't my fault," while Sam analyzes the day's results. "We sent them back to town, wondering what to do next. Our advantage was that we surprised them. It won't be that easy next time. Since they don't know how many of us there are or know this area too well, they won't be back at the cabin tonight, although they'll probably go after the ranches. CJ and I will take care of that later. One thing we can count on is that they'll be back up here again tomorrow, scouting around and looking for intel on our capabilities. I'm afraid there's not much we can do about it."

Respectfully, CJ disagrees, "Uncle Sam, you could be wrong about that." Sam looks at CJ quizzically, waiting for further explanation. CJ explains, "Not that we can keep them away, but we can sure make their visit very unpleasant."

Sam's interest is piqued. "Oh? Fill me in."

In reserved excitement, CJ explains, "We wanted to wait till after dinner, which I guess is now, to tell you what Austin's map was about. We found so much cool stuff. We also learned about some serious stuff that'll help when Hank's men return."

Sam asks, "Well –Are you going to tell us?"

Glancing at Austin, CJ gives the floor to him. "I think Austin should tell you." Directed at Austin. "It's your map."

Austin takes over, "Okay." He begins by giving credit where it is due. "Remember that without CJ and Tylor, I wouldn't have been able to figure all this out."

Getting impatient and wanting to forego the acceptance speech, Victoria prods him along, "Okay. Okay. What'd you find?"

"The First thing we found out," Austin reveals, "is that Ren was an excellent miner. He found lots of gold in the Ladybird mine."

Victoria interrupts, "I thought he was gone most of the time. Any idea how much he found?"

"I don't know exactly," Austin reports. "It is all divided up for his friends in town." He coughs softly, then takes a sip of water. "The map pointed to all the places in the mine where Ren hid the gold. Each hiding place was for a different friend. We didn't open other people's gifts, so we don't know how much is in each one, but they're pretty heavy."

Cutting to the chase, Tylor summarizes the amount to continue with other items on the map. "Let's just say it's a lot of gold."

Austin continues, "He also left some for each family member." He becomes sullen as he lists the family members, "Mom, Dad, Uncle Greg, Aunt Gwen, and Uncle Bryan." Directed at Victoria. "He left some for you and me, too."

Impressed, Sam interjects, "Wow, that was quite generous of him."

“But that’s not all.” Tylor declares, “The mine has traps all through it. Ren made all kinds of traps.”

Victoria is clearly not pleased with the news.

“Yeah.” Austin tells them, “If you use the wrong hole to open the pantry, all the traps are active. That’s why Ren said only to use that one hole. That pile of levers and stuff near the entry is used to reset the traps.”

Victoria’s voice exposes her concern. “What kind of traps?”

CJ makes the nature of the traps abundantly clear, “The kind you don’t walk away from.” Directed at Sam. “That’s what I was eluding to. There are enough traps to take out over a dozen of Wilson’s men. None of them are the same, and it looks like Ren never intended to have his secret mine exposed. We found all seventeen of the traps. One of the clues on the map led us to a list of the trap locations and how they trip, how to reset them, and how to disable them.”

Concerned for her little brother’s safety, Victoria tells Austin, “I don’t want you going back in there.”

“Ren would never hurt me.”, replies Austin. “That’s why he gave me the map. It shows all the traps and the triggers. I guess the little traps he set for me before were training for this. It’s not dangerous when you know where everything is.”

Sam is also concerned for the boys’ safety. If they miss just one trap, the results would be fatal. “Did you find *all* the items marked on the map?”

“We located all the traps.”, CJ announces. “Every last one. We also found all the hidden gold locations – except one.”

Victoria asks, “Why’s that?”

“There’s a clue we can’t figure out.”, confesses Austin.

Sam is always up for a challenge. “Maybe we can help. What’s the clue?”

“It’s more of a riddle.”, Tylor says.

Austin tells him, “It has three blanks. Then –”

All three boys answer simultaneously, “The first one is something else.”

Offering his best guess, hoping to get a little recognition for his cleverness, CJ suggests, “I first thought it was ‘a kiss’, but that doesn’t fit. Maybe ‘Love’s first kiss.’”

Sam knows that CJ is at the age of discovery, so he pokes a little fun at him, “Of course you did.”

Tylor and Austin giggle at CJ's romantics. CJ returns the favor and looks directly at Austin, “But that doesn’t make a very good clue to a location ... unless you know whose first kiss it was.”

Now everybody looks at Austin, who immediately turns red, "It isn't me."

Dismissing his brother's idea, Tylor Interjects his thoughts on the subject. "Besides, that doesn't make sense."

CJ and Victoria look at each other and smile at the innocence of youth, understanding that Tylor and Austin haven't reached that point in their interpersonal relationships yet.

Tylor expresses his idea, "I thought it had to do with an imposter or something fake, like a fake wall or something."

Austin adds, " Maybe it's something that changes like a caterpillar becoming a butterfly. But I don't know anything like that in the mine. Fool's gold?"

"That is a tough one.", admits Victoria. "There's not much to go on. Maybe it's one of the phrases he used often or a lesson he taught you." Speaking directly to Austin but referencing everyone else, "If that's the case, the rest of us won't be much help."

"Maybe it's a famous quote," suggests Sam. "It has an odd, familiar ring to it –." He trails off into thought. Snapping back to reality, he continues the conversation, "We'll all look at it tomorrow and see what we can come up with."

[Another Plan]

"Speaking of tomorrow," Sam changes topics, "We need to finalize our plans and contingencies."

"Why?" CJ asks. "What's happening tomorrow?"

"I need to go to town to see the district judge," Victoria informs them. Everybody but Sam is surprised and turns toward Victoria in disbelief. "Yellow Feather told me that the judge would be in town 'till the end of the week: That means tomorrow. Wilson's already claimed this to be his property. We need to fight the claim. I can't let Mom and Dad die for nothing."

After today's encounter, Tylor is not in a hurry to see Hank or his men again, "Isn't it too dangerous to be seen before we leave for Ohio?"

"That was the plan, but things have changed." Sam tells them, "Hiding won't work. Wilson knows, that I know, that he murdered Austin and Victoria's family. I could see it in his face. He expects me and my men –" gesturing to everybody else, "to either run or make fortifications in anticipation of his attack. If we stay, we can hold off an attack for maybe a few hours." He surveys the cabin as if it were currently being attacked. "Eventually, they'll burn the cabin, and we will escape through the mine. But then we're on the run, on foot, in the snow."

The vision of escaping the ranch house races through Victoria's mind, "We aren't doing that!"

Austin is shaking his head, almost in terror, at the thought.

“The other option is run. Tonight.” Sam unfolds the option further, “However, I’m sure he has scouts watching for just that. They’ll pin us down before tomorrow evening. If the impossible happens and we don’t get caught before making it to Sacramento –” Sam hugs Austin from behind while talking. Austin smiles slightly at the affection. “Austin won’t make it.”

Austin completely loses his smile and color as a quick wave of doom passes through him.

Sam states flatly, “He isn’t well enough yet to ride for three days in the snow.” Knowing that Austin feels like he’s letting everyone down because of his weakness, Sam clarifies his position. “He’s tough enough. More than tough enough.” Sam kisses Austin on the top of the head. “He’s just not well enough.”

“What are we gonna do then?” Tylor wants to know.

“Our best chance is to do something he won’t expect,” responds Sam. “And that is to face Wilson head-on – with some help. We’re going to meet with law enforcement before we get to town. We’ll be counting on them to keep Victoria safe. The rest of us will be more or less on our own.”

Surprised that neither Sam nor Victoria thought about the corrupt marshal, Austin presses, “But the marshal won’t help us. He works for Mr. Wilson!”

Sam understands his concern, “No, you’re right, Austin. “The marshal is absolutely not our ally; I, personally, put him in the enemy category; however, the sheriff and his deputies *are* on our side. I talked to Gus about it this morning. He said the sheriff was looking for a reason to lock up Wilson and would take any help we could give him. So I told Gus to have the sheriff meet us at the train station at sun up so we could find a way to join forces and maybe put Wilson behind bars.”

Uncharacteristically, Tylor adds, “Or at the end of a rope.” Nobody disagrees with him, but they are blindsided by the terse comment made by the most non-violent person at the table. Tylor has taken Hank’s ‘visit’ and the evil he felt from Hank and his men personally. He knows they will have at least two more run-ins with them, and people will get hurt. Because Tylor can sense the incidents, he knows he will survive the run-ins but fears for the safety of the rest of his new family. Tylor can’t sense who gets hurt but knows they are hurt badly. His stress level goes up as he keeps this information to himself.

An idea flashes to Austin in an instant. “Since we’re going to town, I can give out all the gold for Ren. It may be my last chance before we go to Ohio.”

“That probably won’t happen,” differs Sam. “You need to rest and not be seen. Victoria has to see the judge, so there’s no way around her being seen, but it’s best that Wilson thinks you’re dead. I will see if I can help Victoria in the courthouse so that Wilson will see me there with her. He’ll put two and two together and know that Victoria is staying here. You and the boys should just find a place and keep out of sight until we come home.”

Austin is visibly dejected. He feels like he is breaking his last promise to Ren, and although he wants to cry, he holds it in.

Victoria sees his expression and tries to cheer him up by acknowledging his value in tomorrow's plan. "Austin, we'll need your help getting into and out of town, but no one should know you're with us. We need to come up with a way to hide you or a really good disguise of some kind."

"If anybody sees him sneaking around," Tylor advises, "It will draw attention. I think he should hide in plain sight. If you don't look like you're hiding, no one pays much attention to you." He queries Austin, "Austin, who is the least noticed person in town?"

After a short thought, Austin replies, "Probably Mary-Lou Parsons. Why?"

Victoria doesn't recognize the name: "Who?"

"You know David Parsons, right?" Austin asks Victoria, "The big guy with the white horse? He doesn't cause problems or anything, but most people know him."

Victoria doesn't see the connection, so her answer is more like a question, "Yes. I've seen him around. So?"

Austin continues the inquiry, "And his brother, Russell? He always has on those noisy spurs and wears his hat tilted to one side."

"Sure", Victoria replies, "Sure, everybody knows 'em."

"Well," reveals Austin, "Mary-Lou is their little sister. She's always with 'em, but nobody ever notices her. She has blonde hair, is kinda' pretty, and always has her doll with her."

Victoria scrunches her forehead as she tries to picture the girl. "You're right. I've never noticed her. Even with your description, I can't recall her at all."

A big, mischievous smile comes across Tylor's face. "I'm sure Austin is going to hate this, and just to be clear, I'm not encouraging him to be – (Tylor uses air quotes.), 'different,' but I think he should become our –" Tylor anticipates strong opposition from Austin. " – um – our little sister."

Austin thinks for a second, then fully realizes the implication of Tylor's suggestion. Austin emphatically declines the suggestion. "No! No way. I'm not dressing up like a girl."

Not the least bit surprised by Austin's reaction, Tylor is amused at the irony of the situation. "Sorry, man. You just made the perfect case for why you should." Tylor challenges him, "Tell me this: who would ever think that tough guy, Austin Creighton, would dress up like a girl?"

Insistently, Austin responds, "Nobody. Everybody knows I'm not a sissy."

Giving more credence to Tylor's case, CJ jumps on the bandwagon, "Exactly. Even your friends won't expect you to be disguised as a girl. Right?"

Sam and Victoria are entertained by the boys' exchange. Sam thinks CJ and Tylor are like Yellow Jackets to a scrap of meat, with relentless attacks. Victoria sees Austin as a boy weakened by illness, desperately trying to protect the manly image he is attempting to project.

Austin feels like his masculinity is circling the drain, and he is helpless to fight it. Grasping at straws, looking for any excuse not to dress like a girl, Austin argues, "I don't have long hair or nothin."

CJ dismisses Austin's excuse without a second thought. "You could wear a hat. I'm sure Falling Leaf will help you get in disguise." Remembering her ability to foresee things, CJ's internal voice suggests, 'She might have the disguise waiting for him.'

Seeing the value of Austin having the freedom to move about the town incognito, Sam makes the masquerade sound more intriguing. "Seriously, Austin, this is not just dress-up; it has to be a believable disguise. The suggestion is not to make you look like a pretty little girl with make-up and bows in your hair. In fact, that would be counter to the objective of the disguise. The purpose of the disguise is to make you disappear, become invisible, and blend in. If you take the role seriously, you will become the perfect spy. As you said, no one would think Austin would dress like a girl, and, as a girl, no one would notice you. I think that could be the best way to keep you safe."

Austin looks at Victoria in a desperate, non-verbal plea. Victoria flatly states, "Without the disguise, there's no way you could go about town giving away the gifts from Ren. I won't allow it."

Sam notices that Austin lets down his defense a little as he contemplates a way to complete the task Ren entrusted to him. Not to miss a good opportunity, Sam quickly wraps up the discussion: "It's settled then. Tomorrow," he reassures Austin of the limited engagement, "and only tomorrow, CJ and Tylor will have a little sister."

Austin hangs his head in defeat.

Sam then announces to CJ and Tylor, "A little sister they will protect from all harm. Right?"

CJ responds, "Of course."

Austin tries a final plea for clemency, "Victoria? Really?"

Victoria solidifies the sentence, "It is the safest disguise you could have. I'm sure you can make it work; you are the sneakiest person I know."

Feeling bullied into becoming a sissy, Austin plants a blaming glare on Tylor. "Okay, but I don't like it. Not one bit!"

Attempting to end the topic as 'not a big deal' so Austin isn't embarrassed further, Sam states, "Noted. Austin doesn't like disguises." He intentionally made the broad statement to cause Austin some reflection.

Austin starts to explain that he just doesn't like *girl* disguises. "That's not what –"

Sam holds up a hand to stop the complaint. Austin stops in mid-sentence. He resigns to the fact that he will be dressing in disguise tomorrow. Changing directions, he tries to draw the other boys into his misfortune. "What about CJ and Tylor? Don't they need a disguise, too?"

“No. Nobody knows them.” Sam discloses, “I’ll also use that to our advantage tomorrow.”

Victoria asks Sam, “So, Sam, what will you be doing?”

“I’ll need to help you with the judge, I’m sure.” Sam does his best not to sound too condescending, but there seems to be no way to avoid it. Victoria is disappointed to hear a chauvinistic remark like that from Sam.

Sam had expected the reaction, so he hurriedly continued to explain. “Not that you aren’t capable. But if I remember my history right –” Sam redirects the chauvinistic attitude from himself to current culture: “Men did not take women seriously when it came to ‘manly’ things like business and law. And your youth is not helpful either.”

After briefly considering his points, she unhappily agrees with his assessment of the political and social atmosphere. Victoria’s faith in Sam as a non-biased person is mostly restored. She admits, “I wish you were wrong about that. Your help would be appreciated.”

“The reason for the trip to town is the crucial court appearance,” Sam tells Victoria, “However since I’ll be in town anyway, I will take the opportunity to take care of other pressing business as well. Hank needs to be held responsible for his unlawful activity, especially the murder of your family.”

Sam now addresses the boys, “CJ, Tylor, Austin, and I will formulate a plan to accomplish our goals after we check out the lay of the land, so to speak. Austin, of course, will be our primary source of intelligence.”

CJ asks the question everybody else was avoiding, “Who’s going to watch the cabin?”

“There’s no one left for that. We’ll just have to assume that Hank’s men will be here by themselves”, states Victoria, illuminating the fact that Hank will then know their number and maybe even set a trap for them on their return.

Without hesitation, Tylor says, “We should let *Ren* handle that for us.”

CJ knows that Tylor is referring to the traps in the mine and is on board with him, “Yeah. The mine could be left open by ‘accident.’ They’ll have to check it out.”

Playing the devil’s advocate, Sam pushes the conversation’s veiled meaning into the open. He starts with the bait: “They’ll find out where Victoria and Austin have been hiding.”

“True,” CJ agrees, “but they’ll never get out to tell anyone.” Tylor and Austin nod in agreement.

That was the response Sam was waiting for. He can now do a reality check on the boys to see if they have thought this through. “You’re talking about people getting killed in there. It’s not a game – Are you sure you can live with that decision?”

Tylor slightly twists Sam’s words and answers coldly, “Sure. With that decision, I think we all have a better chance to live.”

The overtone of Tylor's response and the stress of being only marginally safe impassioned CJ, "I agree. Every one of them is trying to kill Victoria and Austin and even us. The fewer of *them* there are, the better chance we have of *seeing* Ohio. I've never been more sure. I have no problem letting them get killed."

Sam checks with Austin, "Austin? Will our decision bother you?"

Austin quickly declares, "No—no sir, not at all. If someone's got t' die, between them or us, I choose them. They killed my parents, aunt, and uncles. They deserve t' die."

Sam asks Victoria last, "What about you, Victoria?"

"Anyone coming here is trying to kill us," maintains Victoria, "I have no problem killing them first. I agree with Austin; they got it comin' to 'em."

"Okay, that's settled." Sam adds a complication: "There is something we should consider, though. What if Falling Leaf or her parents stop by? She's been here already. There's no telling if she'll be back. And, Austin, what about anyone else that might come up?"

"I'll leave a note." Austin tells Sam, "Any of my friends will be able to read it, but Wilson's men won't even know it's a note."

Sam questions him, "You sure? We're talking life or death here." He looks at Victoria for confirmation. Victoria gives a nod.

"Positive." Austin asserts, "I would never let my friends get hurt. They know when I leave a note that I am serious."

"Okay, then." Sam sees that Austin is confident in keeping his friends safe and that Victoria supports Austin's confidence, so he accepts the plan. "To recap, the plan for the cabin tomorrow is to leave a conspicuous note for the safety of friends but leave the entrance to the mine open for any of Hank's men who might come snooping around. And, if they get injured or die, it is okay with us. Any changes or questions?"

There is silence at the table until Tylor submits confidently, "Nope. Sounds good to me!"

Sam interprets the other's silence as agreeing to the plan, "That's it then. Is there anything else?"

Victoria is still uncomfortable with Austin in the mine with the traps. "Austin, we'll need to take all the documents with us, so make sure you get them out of the mine **before** you set the traps."

"I will." Austin knows that his sister is just being overly cautious of her 'baby' brother, so he has no problem tolerating her nagging.

"We need an early start tomorrow, and CJ and I have to go out for a little while tonight," Sam informs the rest, "so let's do a security check and call it a night."

Sam runs down the security list:

“Have you boys ‘set the alarms’ ?”

Tylor dutifully reports, “Yep, one at the front door, one at the back, and one in the outhouse. All the EWS devices were replaced just after Hank left.”

Sam: “Windows?”

CJ reports, “Locked and shuttered. Both the outside and inside shutters are secured.”

Sam: “Defense?”

Austin reports, “All loaded and ready. I put the guns from Toby and Jones just inside the pantry.”

Victoria knows the boys have been using every minute of their free time to devise better security systems. Hence, she inquires about the advancements, “Since we’re discussing security, I’d like to know what else you guys came up with?”

“Well, there’s a rope and pulley for the scarecrow to use the outhouse.” Austin smiles. He thinks he’s clever, suggesting the scarecrow would ‘use the outhouse.’ “We tested it. It works better than we thought it might. When the sandbag drops, the scarecrow flies to the outhouse super fast. Then the EWS device in it explodes and, well, no more Mr. Scarecrow.”

“We already showed you where we put extra boards on the steps, right?” CJ asks her. Victoria nods. The extra boards at the steps include a board across the opening at the top of the stairs and a tread extension on the second step. Both are trip hazards that most people would overlook, especially in the dark.

Tylor adds, “We also made remote detonators for the warning devices. They use a black match fuse to fire the EWS devices. That’s so we can have a smaller trip device and still have a big warning.”

“Okay, Okay. We get it. You guys are geniuses.” Sam watched the boys transform their ideas into workable, reliable systems, only giving safety guidance when needed. He was pleased with what they developed. “Get cleaned up and ready for bed.”

Sam knows Austin believes he has lost much of his dignity in agreeing to the disguise. So, to not commute his dignity further, Sam treads lightly and avoids asking Austin directly if he needs someone to sleep with, “Austin, are we in your room or the middle room tonight?”

Austin recognizes Sam’s effort to afford him some pride but is embarrassed anyway. “Maybe we could all stay in the same room until we get to Ohio. Is that okay?”

“That’s fine,” Sam cheerfully answers. “However long it takes, we’ll be there for you. Okay?” Sam gives Austin a big, carefully placed hug.

Austin smiles and closes his eyes while enjoying the safety and care Sam’s hug conveys. He softly tells Sam, “I know. Thanks. I really appreciate it.” Austin becomes emotional as he feels the depth of Sam’s love, so he releases the hug, turns to the bedroom, and walks away before Sam can see him cry.

[Arsonist's Surprise]

Night has fallen at Ben Creighton's ranch house. It is dark outside. Sam dropped CJ here earlier to make a fire in the stove and heat the stove and pots. Once the stove turned red and the pots were boiling. CJ removed the fire.

Sam returns while CJ cleans the last ashes from the heating stove. A large pot is on the stove, and several unlit lamps are on the kitchen table. Sam comes in, closing the door behind himself.

"Make sure you get it all," Sam instructs. I certainly don't want this to go up while we are in here." He looks around: "Did you get all the windows and doors closed?"

"Yes, sir." CJ answers, "I did that while the stove and pot were heating. Do you really think they'll come tonight?"

CJ finishes clearing the stove. He carries the ashes in a bucket and takes them outside.

Sam follows CJ outside with a lamp and places it on a porch chair so the light shines through the window. He answers CJ, "Almost positive. People like Wilson don't wait for things to happen. They make 'em happen. He knows, by now, that we've discovered the murders. The way I see it, he used to have two options: either pin the murders on us or try to destroy the evidence. However, because he's already told everyone, with a doctor by his side, that the Creightons died of chickenpox, his options have been eliminated - now he needs to destroy the evidence. And, for him, the sooner the better."

"Can't we just tell the sheriff what happened?" CJ asks. "Victoria and Austin are eyewitnesses."

"The case would never go to trial," Sam replies. "At least not in this county. The people here are too afraid of Wilson to form a jury that could convict him. The sheriff wouldn't want Wilson to get a not-guilty verdict. If that happened, Wilson could never be charged for it again."

Disappointed and slightly sarcastically, CJ explodes, "So, Wilson gets away with murder!"

Understanding CJ's frustration, Sam tries to calm CJ by telling him the issue is not getting dropped, just that it will take some preparation to do it right. "From what Gus tells me, the sheriff's a lot like Wilson - He likes to make things happen. The sheriff's goal is to push Wilson into making a mistake that he can't squirm out of. He's doing everything within the law to nail Wilson and present a strong case so the jury has to return a guilty verdict. We have to do whatever we can to help him."

CJ and Sam come back into the house. Sam looks into the big pot, takes a towel, and removes an inner pot. After looking into the big pot and seeing the boiling water, he returns the smaller pot.

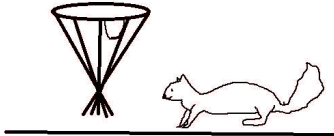
CJ watches as Sam splashes a little water into the stove and closes the stove door to keep the steam in, extinguishing any remaining embers. Sam then extinguishes the last indoor lamp, placing it on the table away from the stove.

Sam pours the fuel from a lamp into the very hot, smaller pot on the stove. A cloud of fuel vapor rises out of the pots and cascades down the sides of the pots and the stove to the floor. The heavy vapor finds the cracks in the floor and falls, trapped, in the space between the floor and the ground.

CJ watches the fog-like vapor spread across the floor. "Did you do this to the other houses too?"

Sam hands CJ one of Austin's signs and gestures for him to leave. CJ takes the sign outside, leaving the door open so he can talk to Sam.

Sam answers as he slowly pours fuel from a second lamp into the pot, "I used the same idea for Gwen's place, but I changed it up a bit for Bryan's. I didn't have time to heat his stove, and there wasn't much fuel oil, so I changed the fuel in the lamp to black powder. I also put up the signs that Austin gave me in case a friend comes up."



*** Warning sign: Upside down teepee indicates death or dead house. ***

The signs that Austin made up are just pictures of an upside-down teepee and a squirrel beside it. CJ pushes the sign up under the lip of the siding so it can be clearly seen. He then watches through the window as Sam pours the fuel from the remaining lamps into the pot.

CJ's lack of confidence in the trap is evident when he asks, "You sure this will work? It seems kind of iffy. We're counting on them coming inside. Why won't they just throw torches or lamps on the roof or through the windows and ride off?"

Sam chuckles, "They only do that kind of thing in the movies. This will work just fine. These guys want to burn these buildings to the ground, leaving nothing to chance. So, they'll come in and set multiple fires to make sure it happens. I've seen it before."

Sam leaves the house and joins CJ on the porch. He then turns off the last lamp he placed on the chair.

CJ and Sam mount their horses and ride slowly across the meadow toward the creek. The pale blue light of the moon in its last quarter illuminates their path.