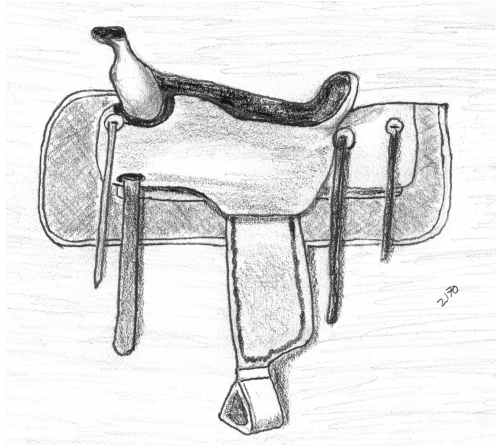


The Property in Question



[Where it Began]

Monday, 20 Nov 2017

The broken clouds filter the sun as it washes across the open span between the cabin and the barn. Wac ih a' is mounted on a fine-looking Palomino facing toward Sam and the cabin. Sam is standing beside a Pinto that is not quite as big as Wac ih a's horse but still a fine animal. Before mounting, Sam adjusts the bridle of his horse and checks the chinch strap. Then, he mounts the horse and settles comfortably in the saddle.

Nervous about the ride, Sam feels self-conscious. He hasn't been on a horse for a long time, and after yesterday's bravado, he could look foolish if he makes too many mistakes. Speaking to the horse while patting it on the neck, Sam expresses his hopes for the day's ride, "Easy now. We're just going to take it slow and easy today. There's no need to get in a hurry."

Wac ih a' is happy that Sam is not as much a novice as he was led to believe. Since Sam seems to be a competent rider, the tour will be much easier for both of them. "Looks like you know what you're doing. Not as rusty as you thought?"

"Naw, it's all coming back to me now. I spent a summer at a dude ranch in my early teens. I didn't know I could remember so much," confides Sam.

Wac ih a' warns, "Don't get overconfident just yet. There are some tricky areas along the fence line," he points back over his shoulder in the direction they will soon be heading, "and there is likely ice in the shade as well."

Sam agrees, "Don't worry. I know just enough to be dangerous. At fifty-two, I've learned that I don't recover quickly. As a youngster, if I fell, I just hoped back up, but now I have to do a thorough system check before unceremoniously dragging myself to my feet."

After chuckling at Sam's remark, Wac ih a' points to the cabin and barn, "Since this ride is supposed to inform you about the property, we might as well start here. This is the first family cabin the Creighton

clan built when they arrived in 1872. All three Creighton families lived here as they built the homes down in the valley.”

Wac ih a’ correcting himself, “Well, it’s actually a remodel of the prospector’s cabin. Ren, the prospector who took over the mine, built the kitchen, pantry, and east bedroom about five years before the Creightons arrived. Ren had bought the mineral rights and five acres around the closed Ladybird mine. The Creightons received twelve hundred eighty acres through a government land grant adjacent to him. After getting to know the Creightons, Ren made a deal with them. He would let them use and modify his cabin by adding extra bedrooms, and they would build him a small cabin, but Ren would get the big cabin back when their homes were built in the valley.”

Sam looks around, “So, where is the small cabin?”

“It was used to finish up Bryan’s cabin,” explains Wac ih a’. “Building materials were expensive, and they considered it wasteful to leave the small cabin here when Ren would be living in the larger cabin.”

Wac ih a’ turns his horse around to follow the two-track road going down the hill, past the barn, and into the wilderness. Sam, not expecting the quick start, was assimilating the information and temporarily zoning out as Wac ih a’ rode off. Coming to his senses, Sam nudges his horse onward, closing the gap between himself and his host.

When Sam catches up, Wac ih a’ continues his narrative, “None of the families moved into their new homes until all three ranch houses were built. It took a bit over two years. After that, Ren put these five acres,” Wac ih a’ gestures toward the cabin and barn area, “into a mining easement attached to Creighton’s land that was to be managed by Bill Creighton’s family. Ren, being up in years, knew that Wilson would jump the claim when he died. By making the claim part of Creighton’s land, he could keep Wilson out of what has become known as Creighton Valley.”

Sam does his best to become a sponge and absorb all the information Wac ih a’ has to offer as he and Wac ih a’ ride side by side at a leisurely pace. Wac ih a’ points out a four-point buck in the forest, rabbit and bear tracks in the snow, and a Bald Eagle soaring effortlessly high above. Sam nods and smiles in acknowledgment at each sighting. Sam is enjoying his vacation in the great outdoors. He’ll have to report his findings as promised, but that doesn’t preclude him from having a good time during the reconnoiter.

Noticing that Sam frequently looks at him, Wac ih a’ asks, “Is there something wrong? I have food on my face?”

Embarrassed to be caught staring, Sam confides, “I’m just curious about your necklace. I might have seen one like it before, but I can’t place it.”

“It is said that Yellow Feather, my grandmother of many generations past, received the amulet from a ‘tribe three moons south.’ My guess is, with a journey of three months by horseback, that the tribe was from somewhere in Mexico. It was passed down from Yellow Feather to her daughter Falling Leaf, and through the generations eventually to me,” explains Wac ih a’.

Although pleased to learn of the amulet’s history and the myriad questions it fosters: What tribe? Why were they so far north? Sam is still bothered by not remembering where he saw something like that before.

Wac ih a' continues his narrative: "As mentioned earlier, the Ladybird mine was short-lived, so the first full-time tenant was an old German prospector named Ren. He wasn't always here but would come by every few weeks, get re-supplied, and head back out. It's been said Ren and the young Creighton got along well. Ren enjoyed the company, and Austin liked the stories of adventure and gold."

"What kid wouldn't?" asks Sam. The mention of Ren and kids stirs a question in Sam's mind. He asks, "How about Ren's family? Did he have a wife and kids? Are his progeny interested in the property, too?"

"Nope. No family, just a lone prospector," Replies Wac ih a'. "Never caused trouble. A friend to most, respected by everyone. He couldn't control Wilson, but Wilson didn't bother him. No doubt Wilson was afraid Ren could out-smart him. Rumor has it that Ren made a fool of Wilson several times before Wilson backed off and left him alone."

Sam asks expectedly, "Did Ren ever get a good strike?"

Wac ih a' shakes his head, "Sure didn't hear of it. He died in the late summer of 1877. My family has been the caretakers here since the winter of that year. We maintain the cabin and watch over the rest of the place. We mostly just chase out trespassers who are trying to discover the reason the area is restricted. They leave pretty quickly when we tell them it's due to the radiation. Of course, there isn't any."

The clomping of the horse's hooves turns to a hollow thud as the trail passes over a narrow wooden bridge crossing the creek.

Pointing to the bridge, Wac ih a' explains, "The miners put this road in when they started the mine by the cabin. The creek goes down to the lake." He points through the trees. "It's just a few hundred yards through the trees."

Wac Ih a' continues to point out the various points of interest as they descend into the valley floor.

Sam is quite interested as Wac ih a' talks about the property lines, the ridge and power lines, the transmission tower, the river path, and the old fences. They stop at an opening in the trees and look across a narrow meadow that stretches between the lake to the north and the steep slope back up to the cabin to the south.

The narrow meadow eventually expands to a large meadow on the west side of the lake. In the distance, across the meadow, are the remains of the Ben Creighton home site - basically, just the crumbling stone chimney.

They proceed another five hundred yards along the creek, entering into a dense stand of tall fir trees. When they reach the massive sugar pine, they turn west into the trees, across the creek, and up on a small knoll in the forest.

[Secret Burial Site]

Wac ih a' speaks softly to his horse, "Whoa." Then, he tells Sam, "Out of respect, we should leave the horses here and go to this next spot on foot. It shouldn't be needlessly disturbed."

Sam wonders why the site is so sensitive, but he trusts that Wac ih a's has an adequate reason, "Umm, okay. I'll just follow your lead." Silently, they continue on foot, farther into the dark forest shadows.

Wac ih a' leads Sam to a small clearing in the trees. There are six wooden head markers in three groups: A group of three, a single marker, and a group of two. Fresh flowers adorn each marker. The wooden markers are hard to read, but the writing can be made out under close examination.

All markers have the date of death: "Killed on the 21st of November 1877," with one exception. The first marker of the group of three has no name, just a carved image of a squirrel. It says, "Missing, November 1877."

Wac ih a' whispers to Sam, "This is the secret burial place of the Creighton clan. It is shameful that it has to remain a secret."

Sam responds in a hushed tone, "Why are they hidden, and why is it a secret?"

Wac ih a's voice remains hushed, "As the story goes, Yellow Feather, who was a family friend of the Creightons, was afraid that Hank Wilson's men would dig them up to hide evidence of the murders. Her family and some friends from town snuck up here one night and buried them."

"Oh." Sam is surprised at all the clandestine effort. He adds, "The murders and then the secret burial at night sounds rather creepy." He points at the first marker, which is not standing upright like the others. "What about this one?"

Wac ih a' lowers his head, "White Squirrel was the name given to Austin Creighton by his Miwok friend, Falling Leaf. It is said that, after the murders, his body was never found. Legend has it that Falling Leaf refused to accept his death. She put this marker here as a symbol of her belief that he was just missing and not dead. Some say he escaped; others say his body was taken by wild animals. There are many tales of his ability to move about the town of Harmony Flats like a ghost. Some even claim he still haunts this valley. No one knows what happened to him, so his fate is still shrouded in mystery."

Sam queries, "And the girl? Um, Victoria?"

Sam steps up, straightens Austin's marker, and takes a respectful step back. Wac ih a' becomes nervous about spending so much time at the burial site. The increased number of trespassers threatens the secrecy of the burial site, so he motions to Sam: they both turn quietly and exit the way they came in.

Wac ih a' explains as they return to their horses: "She is the only known survivor of the murders that night. She moved to Ohio to continue her nursing career, got married to a doctor, raised a family, and became a respected doctor in her own right. When she died, she was buried in Ohio next to her husband. The letter you received must have come from one of their descendants."

They continue their ride through the various areas, visiting the home sites that were burned 140 years earlier. The homes have only crumbling remnants of stone used for the fireplaces and a broken outline of foundation rocks. Old fruit trees indicate where the gardens once were.

As Sam hears the stories, sees the remnants of shattered lives, and envisions what was once a valley filled with extended families working together toward a bright future, he is saddened by the cruelty that greed finds acceptable. Empathetically, he shakes his head in sadness and disgust while viewing the sites.

Returning to the cabin, they follow the two-track trail that connected the properties, which is barely noticeable, but Wac ih a' has traveled this route hundreds of times and knows it well. Wac ih a' points out another radio tower and more power lines, all of which are just outside the restricted area. As they are riding, the sky darkens, the breeze picks up, and snow floats to the ground. Wac ih a' puts on a snow-camo poncho while Sam, unprepared for the weather change, zips up his coat a little more.

At dusk, they arrive at the barn where Sam helps Wac ih a' brush, feed, and water the horses, then Sam and Wac ih a' head to the house as night falls. Wac ih a' waits for Sam to close the barn door so they can talk as they walk together to the cabin.

The nearly full moon peeks briefly between the clouds, providing plenty of light to allow safe passage to the cabin. Light snow continues to fall but is not enough to obscure the blinking red light on the tower, low on the horizon. The forest is quiet as the wildlife has taken refuge from the storm that the light snow shower is ushering into the valley.

As Sam speaks, fog forms from his warm breath mixing with the cold night air, "Wac ih a', thank you for the ride and the information. I don't think I can remember it all, but amazingly, this family's tragedy hasn't been adequately exposed - yet. It takes a lot of political and financial power to conceal something like this for well over a hundred years. Hopefully, the renewed interest in the property reveals information that will return the property to the rightful owners and unveil the complete story of this family's horrific demise."

Wac ih a' confidently states, "I'm sure that is one of the reasons you were asked to visit here."

Sam reinforces the reason he volunteered: "Of course, that's exactly the reason. The Owens family desperately hopes to get this settled and back in their name."

Wac ih a' responds in a tone of wisdom, "Perhaps only one of the reasons."

Sam looks at Wac ih a' a little befuddled and shakes his head, wondering what Wac ih a' is talking about.

At the cabin's back porch, Wac ih a' removes his poncho, shakes it off, and takes it inside to dry. Sam removes his coat before entering the cabin. His shirt and pants are wet from the snow. Wac ih a' reaches out the back door to take Sam's coat, "Next time you go ridin' in the snow, you should try using a poncho. You'll stay much drier."

Sam looks at his wet clothes and bemoans, "Yeah, I'll keep that in mind." He then hands his wet coat to Wac ih a' to hang with the poncho.

Wac ih a' hangs the wet outerwear to dry in the anteroom where other hats and coats hang. Pointing to Sam's room, he suggests, "Why don't you get on some dry clothes? I'll get dinner ready."

Wac ih a' heads over to the stove to get it fired up for cooking dinner. With clanks and clunks, wood is added to the stove's bed of coals to bring it up to heat.

Sam crosses to his room, "Okay. I'll just be a minute, then I can help out."

Wac ih a' starts moving pots onto the stove. "There's no need to help, but I wouldn't mind the company. It gets a little quiet around here with the wife gone."

Sam heads to change; he calls back to Wac ih a' as he enters his room, "Understandable. This place seems like it can get a bit lonely by yourself. Be right back."

Opening his clothing bag, Sam finds all his clothes are wet. He yells in disbelief, "What the – !" His voice trails off as he avoids cussing. His hydration pack leaked, soaking everything in his bag. "This is certainly not a good way to end the night."

In his mind, Sam sums up the situation, 'The boys won't be here 'til the day after tomorrow, so it'll be a couple of days before I can borrow clothes from them. I suppose I'll be wet for a few days. If I'm lucky, these will be dry soon.'

Wac ih a' is standing at the doorway. "Sam, is everything alright? I heard a disappointing tone from the kitchen."

Sam, startled that Wac ih a' had silently appeared, "Seems like I sprung a leak. My whole bag is soaked." Sam holds up the wet clothes and the offending hydration pack, displaying them to Wac ih a'.

Wac ih a' smiles, "It's not a worry. Some old things handed down over the years will likely fit you. You're more than welcome to use 'em for the next couple of days while your things dry. I'll get 'em now so you have something dry to wear for dinner."

Sam raises his voice so Wac ih a' can hear him, "Wac ih a', I deeply appreciate your hospitality. I certainly did not come to be a burden on you."

Wac ih a' calls back from a distance, "Of course, my pleasure."

In only a few minutes, Sam has the wet clothing hanging on ropes strung across the room. His room has become a drying locker; his pocket contents are on the wash table, including his keys, change, pocket knife, and wallet. After emptying the bag of wet clothes, he gets changed to have dinner with his host.

Sam and Wac ih a' eat dinner at the large family dining table. Sam's clothing is almost identical to Wac ih a', except Sam is without a vest. Grateful for the warm place to stay, dry clothes, and tasty food, Sam tells Wac ih a', "This is very good. Nothing beats a warm shelter and a hot meal on a cold night. Thanks for cooking. I'll do the cooking tomorrow."

Wac ih a' gracefully accepts the compliment and the offer, "Sounds good. You'll find the food in the pantry through there." He points to the doorway of the anteroom. "You are free to use whatever you find or what you brought up. I'm not a picky eater."

Sam looks through the anteroom to the pantry and is impressed by the ingenuity, "That's a great idea to put the pantry in the mountain like that. The stable, cool temperature will help food last quite a while. I guess by necessity, like not having refrigerators, many innovations were developed."

"Necessity and opportunity," Wac ih 'a continues, "As I said earlier, this used to be the head of the Ladybird gold mine. The mineral rights and the property, which were deemed valueless, were bought by Ren for next to nothing. He's the one that put the pantry there."

"I noticed the tailings out back," Sam tells Wac ih a'. "Looks like it was a lot of work for nothing. I wonder why they started such a big project just to shut it down. They must have found something to make them think there was a lot more."

Wac ih a' agrees, "Yep. That's pretty much the way mining was around here back in the day. Quick to open, quick to close. Apparently, miners around here didn't have much patience. Now, some of the old mines have been reopened with great success. The early miners were in too big a hurry to get rich and missed the big strikes."

Sam replies with a simple, "Humph. Didn't know that."

[Bed Time]

Since Wac ih a' cooked, Sam volunteered to clean the kitchen after dinner, continuing a tradition from his fire service days. At his fire station, doing the dishes and general clean-up was the responsibility of those who didn't cook. Cooking and dish duty changed for each meal.

After he dries the last plate and puts it in the cupboard, he turns the oil lamp off and proceeds to the main room, where Wac ih a' is feeding and stoking the Franklin heating stove. Sam stops near the stove Wac ih a' is working on to warm his hands. He can't get the tragic story of the Creighton clan out of his mind, trying to grasp the brutality of the times that would allow such a massacre to go unprosecuted. He reflectively states, "Sure was quite a sad story about those families."

Wac ih a' adjusts the fire damper to allow a full night of slow burning. He responds to Sam in a conciliatory tone, "All true, my friend, unfortunately, all true."

Sam goes to his room, using an oil lamp for light. He puts the lamp on the nightstand by the bed, turns it off, gets undressed, and climbs into bed. The open shutters allow the moonlight, which occasionally breaks through the clouds, to give the now quiet room a light bluish tint.

Sam utters quietly to himself, "If these walls could talk"

As Sam's mind races from image to image of the tragedy hidden in the forest below, his tired body settles into a restless sleep.

[In Town]

Tuesday night, Nov 20, 1877, 140 years earlier.

Hank Wilson, the Bar R Bar ranch owner, stands at the Harmony Valley Inn bar. It is a weeknight, and the bar is almost empty. The light from the oil lamps gives the place a golden glow, falsely hiding the evil that thrives within its walls. Hank is sipping whiskey and waiting for someone.

Isaac Wells, a loner with a bad attitude, saunters to the bar and stands beside Hank. Erik, the bartender, places a drink in front of Isaac and then leaves the area. Isaac looks around at the other patrons. As they notice Isaac's gaze, anyone within twenty feet moves away from the two men.

When Isaac is satisfied with the clearing, he addresses Hank, "Boss says that the investors' representative will be here next week. He'll be very disappointed if the rail land isn't secured by then. Without the rail line, we can't harvest the timber. No rail, no timber, no deal."

Hank angrily finishes his drink and slams down his glass, "Tell him I'll get the land one way or another tomorrow night."

Isaac finishes his drink in one shot. "I'll make sure he gets the message." He gently puts his glass down on the bar, then turns to Erik, who is sitting at a table outside the twenty-foot buffer, waiting for the conversation to end. Isaac points to the drink, then to Hank.

Erik nods, acknowledging that Isaac's drink is on the house. Isaac leaves through the front doors, never looking back.

[Up the Hill – in Creighton Valley]

The rustic ranch house's main room of Greg and Gwen Hill's cabin is dimly lit by the fireplace and oil lamps trimmed to a low glow. Two doors lead to bedrooms from this main kitchen/dining/living room. The front door is cross-bared, and the interior shutters are closed, creating a weighty, somber atmosphere.

Three men - Ben Creighton, Bryan Creighton, and Gregory Hill - sit around the table, with a whiskey glass in front of each of them and a saddle bag hung over the back of their chairs. Each is wearing a holster with a revolver, and their hats and coats are hung near the door. Keeping their voices low and reserved, they discuss a private, secret matter.

Bryan stares intently at the glass of whiskey he holds with both hands. With inescapable worry in his voice, he says, "I don't know what Hank is capable of – and don't really wanna find out. The deadline for us to sell to him is tomorrow. He never said what would happen if we didn't sell, but he's got plenty of men to cause us problems if we don't."

"I agree," says Ben. He glances at the other two men to indicate the importance of what he is about to say. "His men have been watching us for a while now. He's definitely planning something."

Greg slowly turns his glass on the table, listening to the conversation's various particulars. He has been quiet most of the conversation as he pieces together the situation in his head. Still unsure if his additional information will help or cloud their discussion, he includes this in the mix of information: "Sean O'Brien mentioned that Hank had a couple of strangers stop by town late last week. They showed up for a few days, then left in the night. Weren't going far, though. Packed real light. Said one of 'em's a doctor."

Ben cautions, "So he's already got players movin' into position. Whatever he's plannin', it'll be startin' real soon." He pushes his empty glass toward the center of the table in frustration.

Concerned about the imbalance of force, Bryan states, "We all know Marshal McGinn ain't no use t' us 'cause he's in Wilson's back pocket. And even though the sheriff knows Wilson's up to no good, he can't do nothin' to him. Folks here are too scared to say somethin' 'ginst Wilson. Sheriff says there's rumors that Wilson got'n into trouble back in Kansas over land deals. But fer now, Sheriff simply got nothin' on him. So, I guess I'm sayin' that we can't expect any help from the law."

Ben agrees, "Meanin', whatever we're going to do, we'll have to do it ourselves. But we'll do it together." In a matter-of-fact tone, Ben looks directly at Bryan and says, "Bryan, last time we talked, it sounded like you'd rather pick up and go."

Bryan hesitates to formulate a clear response, "No. I just meant I was tired of this Wilson bullshit. More than that, we put in over two years of hard work t' get our houses built and our family settled. We didn't do all this just to move on." Showing his resolve, he continues, "'Spect Wilson t' cause some trouble, but I'm stayin', no matter what! 'Course, we'll need t' be extra mindful and watch our backs."

Ben's feelings parallel Bryan's, "I agree with you on both points, stayin' and watchin' our backs. Greg? What 'bout you?"

"I say we stay and hold our ground." Greg amplifies Bryan's statement, "It took us two years of government paper shuffling just to get this land *and then* another two and a half to build our homes. I'll be damned if I'm going just to give it away."

The three men sit back in their chairs and inattentively fidget with their now-empty whiskey glasses as they ponder their options. While contemplating various thoughts, their mannerisms and facial expressions are shared, as only brothers can. Even though technically Greg is a brother-in-law, they have been together and have always been treated as brothers since they were just out of diapers.

After about a minute, which seemed like hours, Ben skeptically suggests, "Maybe that's precisely what we should do - give it away."

Bryan and Greg are surprised at this notion. They look at him as if he has lost his mind. Though they both have the same thought, Greg spits it out first: "You gone loco? We all just said we're gonna stay."

"Hold on." Ben half-expected this reaction. He puts his hands up to fend off the onslaught of detractors: "Hear me out now. Bryan has a point about being careful. I'm sure Hank has a plan, but maybe we can outflank him on this. What if we transfer the land to Victoria? Just 'til we get a better handle on this."

Bryan is unconvinced: "I don't know. Isn't she leaving for Ohio next week? What could she do from there?"

"That's the point," counters Ben. "Hank won't be able to harass her in Ohio as he does us. Besides that, Colin has a lot of family there. She'll be safe, and we won't be able to sell him land that ain't ours. He'd have to go through an agent to deal with her, so he wouldn't be able to pressure her. I'm sure he ain't plannin' on that. He's been after this land for a long time, but this is the first time he came up with a deadline. Makes me think Wilson's in a hurry. This kind of delay may make him lose interest."

"That's true enough," agrees Greg. "Of course, when Hank figures that he can't buy what we don't have, he'll be pretty upset. I'm sure that won't stop him from harassing us."

Bryan suggests, "Of course not, likely not less than he does now, but it could buy us some time. We could use that time to devise a better solution or maybe help the sheriff get 'nough on Wilson, t' put him away, or at least send him back to Kansas."

"Wilson behind bars." Greg smiles as he imagines it. "I would love to see that happen." His smile fades as he states, "After the dust settles, we can wire Victoria and return property ownership to how it is now."

"Timing's right!" exclaims Bryan. "I heard that the County Clerk is supposed to be in town tomorrow and Thursday. It'll be a few weeks before he gets back around these parts."

Greg adds, "With winter settin' in, it could be months —" Then, addressing Ben, "Do you think we could get it all together that soon?"

Ben nods, "I wasn't plannin' on getting down t' Harmony Flats 'til next week, but if we draw up the papers tonight, we can make the trip to the land office in the morning."

Bryan retrieves the saddlebag draped over the back of his chair. "To keep Victoria safe, we'll have to keep this from her. At least 'til she gets to Ohio, and, of course, we can't let Wilson know 'til after she's been gone a few days."

Greg pauses while getting papers from his saddlebags: "I was thinkin' that too, but that ain't gonna work. She'll have to sign something to keep it all legal."

Ben forgot to consider the time gap between completing the paperwork and Victoria's departure in his planning. "Guess're right." He pauses as he realizes the danger his daughter may face. "We'll just have her sign whatever she needs to and keep it quiet 'til after she leaves."

Greg introduces another complication, "What about the deeds and stuff? We certainly can't keep 'em safe at the ranches any longer, and I hope yer not thinkin' of puttin' 'em back in the bank?"

"You kiddin' me. No way!" Ben adamantly opposes. "Hank don't even need to rob the place. They'd just open the doors and let him take whatever he wanted. We gotta hide 'em somewhere that he'll never find 'em. Any ideas?"

As before, it is quiet enough to hear a cricket chirp as the three men sit back in their chairs to ponder options.

Timidly, Bryan is the first to speak, "Well, ya' might not like it, Ben, but I think Austin's our best bet."

Bryan barely finishes talking when Ben exclaims, "You're right. I don't like it! I don't want him involved in this in any way. It's too dangerous. Besides, if his mother found out, she'd kill me."

Bryan was expecting resistance, but not quite that much. He chooses his next words carefully, "C'mon Ben, y' know I'm right." He takes a deep breath before continuing, "Austin knows every secret place in this whole damn valley. He's smart and knows how to keep safe. No one will suspect a kid of knowing anything 'bout deeds an' stuff. And there ain't nobody knows what that kid's up to - ever. Can you think of anyone better?"

"It's too big a responsibility for a ten-year-old," argues Ben. "Greg, back me up on this." Ben's hoping Greg will have a better plan or any plan that does not include Austin.

"Sorry, Ben, I'd like to, but I agree with Bryan," concedes Greg. "No better person to hide anything than Austin. He's so sneaky that no one would ever know he knew anything about this." Ben's expression clearly shows that he is not pleased that Greg is siding with Bryan.

Greg continues, "Bryan and I love Austin nearly as much as you do, Ben." Bryan silently nods in agreement. "We wouldn't even suggest it if we thought he'd get harmed. Besides, who can you trust more for an assignment like this?"

Ben is steadfast in his disapproval of including Austin in the plan but can find no flaw in their logic, "I don't like it." He pauses as he pours himself a splash of whiskey. "I don't like it one bit."

After a lengthy pause, where Ben mentally examines all possibilities, he concludes there is no one better for the job than Austin. Reluctantly, he agrees, "There's no arguin' yer points. But if his mother ever hears of it," he points to his brothers to emphasize their inclusion, "we'd all be strung up by our

privates.” He takes a sip of whiskey. “I guess we ain’t got much choice. However, no one,” He emphasizes by putting his fist on the table. “No one except us will know that he’s got anything to do with this. We aren’t going to put our troubles on him.”

Greg and Bryan nod in agreement.

Ben finishes his drink and sits back, pondering the full scope of the situation. “Damnit!” Ben shouts in frustration. Greg and Bryan both jump, startled by Ben.

“Sorry”, apologizes Ben. “I know this is our only solution, and it started as my plan, but that doesn’t mean I like it. I’ll feel much better about this when Victoria and the documents are safely on their way to Ohio.”

Ben puts his saddlebag on the table to retrieve his documents, “I’ll take the family t’ town first thing in the morning. Austin and I’ll meet up with ya ‘bout an hour after sunrise at O’Brien’s.”

Bryan solidifies their discussion into action, “That’s the plan then. Let’s get things ready for the morning.”

All three men begin reading, signing, and passing papers in preparation for tomorrow. After checking that their documents are in order, they each carefully put them back into the saddlebags.

When Ben gets up to leave, the other two also get up. Greg unbolts the door as Ben and Bryan put on their coats.

Acknowledging Ben’s discomfort, Greg pats him on the shoulder. “We have plenty of things to worry about, but Austin isn’t one of them. We’ll see you tomorrow.” Then he turns to Bryan. “Stop by, and we’ll ride in together. It’ll be safer that way.”

Ben, shaking Greg’s hand, “Take care of Gwen.”

Greg closes and bolts the door. Gwen, hearing the door bolt, figures that the meeting is over. She steps into the doorway from the bedroom and looks into Greg’s eyes; his concern is unmistakable.