

Restricted Territory

Unsettling

[Exit Strategy]

Monday, 26 Nov 1877

Sam is seated at the table with a cup of coffee in front of him. The peaceful early morning continues the restful night that Victoria, CJ, and Tylor had. Austin had several bouts of coughing, and even though none of the EWS devices were activated, Sam got up several times throughout the night to check on things. Sam is deep in thought, barely acknowledging Victoria when she comes out of the bedroom. Sam looks at the man seated across from him and, with a tilt of his head, indicates to the man that he should leave. The man gets up and goes out the back door toward the barn.

“Who was that?” asks Victoria.

Sam answers nonchalantly, “Oh, that was a person who Hawkins had follow us up here. I hated seeing him in the cold, so I had him put his horse in the barn and keep an eye on us inside the cabin. He’s off to update the sheriff on the quiet night we’ve had. Turns out he was your father’s friend.”

Victoria nods and accepts the surveillance as nonintrusive.

Sam continues, “*Somehow*, he got the impression that the twelve other men in my platoon left yesterday afternoon when they heard Wilson got arrested. It seems they prefer to travel under cover of darkness. They may be waiting for me in Folsom—or so rumor has it.”

Victoria knows Sam started the ‘rumor,’ she smiles at Sam’s diligence in playing all sides of this deadly game. He seems particularly adept at the psychological aspect; however, his unemotional response and pensive stare tell her that more is going on. She sees that Sam looks troubled. “Sam, what’s the problem?”

“That was too easy,” Sam confides. “Someone who has this whole region scared and under his thumb is easily tricked into a public confession. It doesn’t make sense. There must be more to it.”

He holds up his cup and points to the stove, indicating that more is on the stove. Victoria nods and crosses to the stove.

“What do you mean?” Victoria presses, “I thought it was pretty sneaky of you to get the sheriff in the room to hear the confession while Mr. Fry took notes. There’s no way Wilson knew they were there.”

She pours a cup of coffee and warms her hands by wrapping them around the cup.

Sam reasons, "That may be true, but anyone who can run an operation like the -R- should never confess to any crimes, even if they think no one else is around. That kind of mistake just doesn't happen to someone running such a big operation." He pauses as he sips coffee, then poses, "Who's that gunman hanging out in Wilson's bar? I heard his name is Isaac; that's all I know about him."

Victoria crosses to the table and has a seat. "No one seems to know," A week ago, she didn't care, but now she feels like she should. She offers Sam the limited information she has. "He stays to himself. He doesn't even visit the girls. He just kind of –" As she vocalizes her observations, she understands Isaac's possible role. "– watches everything."

Sam sees that some of Isaac's behaviors are starting to make sense: not getting involved in the altercation in the bar and stopping Wilson from saying where he got the forged papers. Sam suggests a probable scenario, "Like a monitor - maybe reporting to someone else?"

Victoria agrees with Sam's speculation, "Yeah, maybe, but I've never seen him talk to anybody."

"We may not be here long enough to get to the bottom of this, and maybe we don't need to," Sam admits. "But there's a lot more we don't know about the -R-. We should keep our guard up until we get out of California."

Victoria nods, "I don't like to say this, but I felt a little uneasy about it, too. I agree that we need to be careful. Even if Wilson was at the top of his food chain, that doesn't mean there aren't other players."

Sam finishes his coffee, "I'll wake the boys and have them set up a new defense plan while I'm gone. I'll also check the early warning devices on my way out. It shouldn't take more than an hour and a half. Anybody not on the security detail should start the packing process." Sam starts to get up.

Victoria stops him, "Before you wake the boys, there's something we need to discuss."

Sam re-seats himself, sensing a serious concern, "Um. Okay – what's up?"

Victoria expects a difference of opinion; therefore, her voice has a hint of defense: "I am not against men having a drink once in a while, but I don't think the boys should be drinking in a bar at their age, especially in front of Austin."

Sam plainly states, "Agreed." Sam can see that Victoria is surprised by the easy agreement and then realizes the source of her concern. "If you're talking about yesterday, you have nothing to worry about. That wasn't real rum. It was tea disguised as rum as part of an act to make the boys look less naive. Austin was a part of the ruse and knew it was all fake. My nephews are well aware of my feelings about drunkenness and underage drinking. If you want, I'll talk to Austin about it as well."

Victoria is humbled by the sputtering end to what she thought might be a significant discussion of differing opinions, "Oh, I think that will be helpful. I don't want him to misunderstand my expectations."

Sam stands up and slides his chair in. "I'll talk to him on the train. We will have time to sit down and have a proper discussion. I'll also see where he is with the girl/boy understanding. That's a discussion I

thought I would never have to be responsible for.” Sam’s tone changes to hopeful and requesting as he tries to shed some responsibility. “Unless, of course, you’d prefer to tackle that.”

Victoria waves the suggestion off like an unpleasant odor, “No, no. I’ll leave that up to you.”

Sam heads toward the pantry, “Okay then. I should be on my way.” He gets one of the rifles stored there, makes sure it is loaded, and returns to the main room. Sam hadn’t thought about taking on the father role until just now. Since meeting Austin and Victoria, Sam’s thoughts have been preoccupied with safety and survival, not becoming a family or, more specifically, becoming a father.

Until this moment, Sam thought of their ad hoc family as a group of people who lived together and cared for each other. He did not consider their individual roles and decided to give it more thought during his trip to town if circumstances allowed.

Sam figures things will be settled after they arrive in Ohio. In any event, he will become both father and uncle to CJ and Tylor.

Victoria gets up and heads to the kitchen, “Do you want something to eat first?”

“No, the coffee will get me to town,” Sam replies, “Then I’ll go to O’Brien’s and see if I can get some information about Isaac and grab something to eat there. I’ll stop at the usual spot when I return. We can use the same codes as before.

Sam heads into the second bedroom. Victoria and Austin sleep in the larger bedroom with three beds, and Sam and whoever is not sleeping with Austin sleep in the second bedroom.

[DEFCON Four, Again]

The second bedroom has two beds. At the moment, one is occupied by Tylor.

Sam puts the rifle on the unoccupied bed and then goes to Tylor’s. Sam kneels on the floor to get to bed level and speaks quietly, “Tylor. It’s time to get up now.”

Tylor barely stirs and responds as if he were still sleeping, “Okay, I’m getting up.”

Sam whispers, “We’re back to DEFCON four.”

Tylor immediately sits straight up, “Huh? Why? What happened?”

“Nothing yet,” says Sam, “But something’s just not quite right.”

Tylor is annoyed, “Wilson’s arrest was too easy, right?”

Sam, still speaking quietly, “Yep. You felt it, too?”

“Yeah,” Tylor plops back down in frustration.

"We don't want to scare Austin," warns Sam, "but we'll be at DEFCON four until we reach Ohio. I have to take the bodies I found in the mine to town. Expect me back in an hour and a half. Brief your brother."

Tylor asks, "Which one?"

Sam gives him a serious look, "Ty, it's not the time for games."

Answering in a contrite tone, Tylor looks more at the floor than at Sam. "Sorry. It's not games, though. I just wanted you to know that I think of Austin as my brother too—my little brother." He pauses and looks up into Sam's eyes. "I was hoping you could, too."

Sam smiles at Tylor, "Okay. Got it." He messes up Tylor's already messed up hair. "I've got three nephews now. I'm happy that you feel the same way I do."

As Sam turns to leave, Tylor adds, "And one niece." Tylor sits up in bed.

Sam returns to Tylor, "Yeah, yeah. And one niece. Now get up and protect your family." Sam places his hands on both sides of Tylor's head and kisses him on the top of the head. As he exits, in a loving tone, Sam mutters, "Knucklehead."

[Delivery Number Two]

After ensuring defenses are in place and ready, Sam mounts his horse. He has two horses with bodies across the saddles strung behind him. He leaves with the horses in tow. Sam stops his caravan near the tree in front, where he is supposed to stop before coming to the cabin. With his hat, he waves at the house and in three other directions to confuse anyone watching regarding the location of 'his men.' After scanning the area for anything suspicious, he puts on his hat, settles in the saddle, and continues on the road to town.

About a half hour after Sam leaves the cabin, he rides up to the hitching post in front of the jail with the two horses and the dead men in tow. He dismounts and ties his horse first, then the other horses. Kicking the snow from his boots, he goes up the steps and into the jailhouse.

[Couldn't Happen to a More Deserving Person]

Sam steps from the cold, dull boardwalk into a heated, animated jailhouse. The sheriff is seated at the desk, and three deputies are lined up near one wall. Wilson's lawyer is yelling at the sheriff. The five men in the cell, McGinn, Wilson, Cody, George, and Carl, are badly beaten.

Wilson's very agitated lawyer yells, "How could this happen? These men were nearly killed right under your nose, and you have no idea who may have done it. There will be an investigation! I've already sent for the US marshal from San Francisco. You haven't heard the last from me."

The lawyer slams his fist on the desk, then storms out, passing Sam without notice.

Still seated behind the desk, the sheriff casually asks Sam, "So, where were you last night?"

“As you already know,” Sam responds, “I was at the cabin with Victoria and the boys. You can ask the Indian scout that you had following me. I certainly wouldn’t come down here on a dark, cold night to beat men who are bound to hang anyway. And no, I wouldn’t and didn’t ask any of my men to do it either. That would be a total waste of resources.”

“I know it wasn’t you,” admits Hawkins, “but I had to ask.”

Sam points to the battered men, “Why not ask them?”

Hawkins shakes his head, “Strange. Everyone of ‘em’s got a bad memory.”

“How’d it happen?” Sam presses.

Hawkins tells Sam, “We went to get their dinner. Came back, and they were like this. It is kind of like some highly trained killers did it. You had all your men with you?”

Sam looks at the deputies, then back at the sheriff. Hawkins gets the hint about speaking in front of Lewis. To not let on that he is suspicious of Lewis, he excuses all the deputies.

Hawkins sends them out, “Boys, maybe you should get some air.”

The deputies shuffle their way out the front door.

Sam speaks hushedly so only the sheriff can hear, “I don’t have any men—just my two nephews. We just made it seem like there were more of us. Then, once the rumors started, my invisible army went from a handful to a dozen. Remember the story about how a half-dozen men beat those guys up?”

Hawkins: “Sure.”

“Those thugs got beat up by two kids,” explains Sam. “It was only CJ and Tylor in self-defense. From the time they could walk, they started training in martial arts. Each holds a black belt in Taekwondo and has excelled in other martial arts as well. You can ask Paul, the boy from the livery, to give you the details of their encounters. He may be hesitant at first because he was told to keep it quiet, but I’m sure if you tell him I said it was okay, he’ll be happy to tell his story.”

Sheriff Hawkins is not entirely sure that two kids could have taken out four adults, but from the action he heard at the bar, it might be possible. “Okay. We’ll verify that just to put it in the record. So, what brings you in so early?”

“Well, it’s kind of embarrassing,” Sam says in his regular voice. “I see you already have an issue here, but I got two more out at the rail.”

The sheriff crosses to the window to verify the statement. He sees the deputies around the horses and checking out the identity of the dead men.

“What happened to them?” Hawkins asks sarcastically, “accidentally shot themselves?”

"No. Nothing so dramatic," Sam discloses. "I found 'em last night when we got home. You can ask your scout. One of 'em decided to fall on a three-foot spike, and the other got stuck, squeezing through a tight place. They must have been looking for my army when we were in town yesterday."

Hawkins verifies, "So you didn't kill 'em?"

"Nope. They were dead when I got home." Sam expounds, "Judging from the state of their rigor mortis, they died about five hours before I found 'em."

The sheriff knocks on the window and gestures for the deputies to take care of the horses and bodies.

Hawkins apprises Sam, "You know, Captain Reynolds, it's getting harder and harder to keep you out of jail. So far, you've brought me six dead men, and there's another one that's in a hundred pieces still up there - all killed by accident."

"Yes, sir." Sam sheds the blame like water off a duck's back, "Of course, they were all engaged in dangerous and unlawful activity when tragedy befell them. My personal opinion is that they were lacking in basic safety skills and attempted activities that were beyond their knowledge and abilities."

Hawkins is amused but requests a more pedestrian assessment. "Try that with a little less flare. Not everyone who reads the records is a scholar."

"For the record then," Sam states, "They were just dumbasses."

Accepting that he's not going to get a usable answer from Sam, Hawkins plays it off, "That's more to the point."

Sam notices the men in the cell losing interest in his conversation with the sheriff, so he lowers his voice and changes topics. He speaks so only the sheriff can hear him. "If it makes you feel any better, the boys and I will accompany Victoria to Ohio. She's given Gus Fox the declaration notice naming him as the new tenant of the cabin, starting tomorrow."

Hawkins also speaks softly, "Looks like the problem's goin' t' be takin' care of itself. With Wilson and his men going to Placerville for trial, what's left of 'em anyway, I doubt there'll be any more accidental deaths. Just to help you steer clear of any more trouble, and because I have to go there anyway, I'll be accompanying you as far as Sacramento. I'll leave two deputies here to continue the investigations and wrap things up while I'm gone."

"Don't we need to stay for that?" Sam asks.

"No," Hawkins replies, "The sooner you leave, the better it will be for all concerned. If we have more questions, we'll wire you."

"Thank you, Sheriff," says Sam. I should finish my errands and head back up the hill to finish packing. If you need more statements or have any last-minute questions, you can find us lodging at O'Brien's tonight. Otherwise, we'll see you on the train in the morning."

Hawkins shakes hands with Sam, "Sounds good."

Sam puts on his hat and, as he exits, stops to take a quick look at the beaten men in the cell. He hopes it will be the last time.

[Unexpected Resource]

The morning crowd in O'Brien's restaurant is light and mixed: a few families and a couple of business groups with two or three people. Sam enters and pulls up a seat at a table where he can see the front door and all other routes in and out. The waitress sees him and waves to acknowledge him. He waves back in response. The waitress finishes at the other table and then crosses to Sam's. The waitress, Mary, is a young woman about twenty-five years old.

"Mornin' General," Mary cheerfully greets him, "what can I get for you?"

Amused by how fast the rumors fly in the town and how distorted they get, Sam clarifies, "It's Captain, but please just call me Sam."

"Okay, Sam." Mary beams, "I can't tell you the burden you and your men lifted from this town. Today may be the first morning I felt safe around here in over ten years." She sheepishly asks, "When will you let 'em come into town?"

Because he doesn't have the army that the rumor claims, it takes Sam a little while to figure out that she is talking about his 'men.' "Two of the youngest will be here tonight," reveals Sam. "The ones you are talking about, well, we will just have to wait a bit. Not sure this is all over yet. Maybe wait for the dust to settle. You know."

Mary looks disappointed but nods along with Sam. Sam changes topics, "By the way, you wouldn't, by chance, know who the gunman who hangs out at the Harmony Valley Inn is, would you?"

Mary shakes her head, "No. I don't know if he's ever been in here except to get his mail at the postal window." She points to the other side of the restaurant to a small service window.

"Oh?" Sam asks, "Why doesn't someone just take it to him when they get the mail for the Inn?"

In a serious, almost hushed tone, Mary tells him, "He don't let nobody touch his mail. He gets a letter and sends a letter once a week, like clockwork. Nobody questions him 'bout it. No one dares." Her tone becomes much happier when she changes topics, "So, what can I get you?"

"How about three eggs, some bacon, and bread?" asks Sam. "Oh, and coffee, black."

"Sure thing, Captain," says Mary. She is hoping the youngest soldiers will be good marriage prospects. Mary quickly turns and heads off to the kitchen.

Not pleased to be called Captain by the townsfolk, he says under his breath, "Sam, just Sam."

Standing beside Sam, on the side opposite where Mary was standing, is a mature lady in her sixties. Sam doesn't notice her until she introduces herself, "Hi Sam, just Sam. I'm Merle, just Merle." Sam jumps when she speaks. "Pardon me, I didn't mean to startle you."

Sam stands to greet Merle. He saw her sitting at the next table when he came in. He did not notice that she had moved next to him.

Sam takes her hand as a gentleman, "That's quite all right. I'm just a bit jumpy, I guess. It's a pleasure to meet you."

Although Merle has the manners of an upper-class lady, she speaks plainly, "I can't blame ya' none."

Sam politely asks, "Would you like to join me?"

"No, no," Merle declines. "I don't want to interrupt your breakfast. I just have a question for you."

"Of course," Sam pulls out a chair for her, "Please sit down. I just ordered, so breakfast will be a while."

Sam helps Merle take a seat and then seats himself.

Sam asks, "How may I be of service?"

"I know you've been helping Victoria with her land and keeping her safe," states Merle.

Sam affirms, "Yes, ma'am. I've been doing what I can to help out." He is curious about where this is leading but is still guarding his release of information.

Merle puts her frail hand on top of Sam's. She starts, "As a close friend of Ren." Then, spoken as an aside, "You know who Ren was, right?"

"Yes, of course," Sam admits. He's the prospector who used to live in the cabin."

"Well, as a close friend of Ren," Merle's hand and voice begin to tremble, "I want to know about Austin. I'm hoping you can tell me that he's still alive."

"Well, Mrs. ?" Sam trails off, hoping she would help him with the name.

Merle's speech is slow and frail, "Pratt. My late husband, Frederic Pratt, God rest his soul, established this hotel over thirty years ago. He died nearly nine years ago. I couldn't run this place alone, so I sold it to Mr. O'Brien. But that's enough about me. Can you tell me about Austin?"

"I'm sure you realize that if Austin were still with us," explains Sam, "I would be careful about letting people know. It could still be perilous for him."

"Yes. I know what you mean," Merle says while patting Sam's hand. "I was hoping to speak to him one last time. You see, Ren and I would sit for hours talking about all the adventures he and Austin had."

Austin was quite bright and full of good-natured mischief. His antics kept Ren and me laughing. I don't even want to hear those nasty rumors of his death; he was such a sweet boy."

Sam feels like Merle is one of Austin's trusted friends, but he also knows that Wilson's boss might be forcing this kind lady to pump him for information. So he checks to see how well she knows Austin. He asks her about Austin's secret night-time identity, Peter Blackwell. If she knew Ren well, then she would know Peter because only Peter would be around at night when Ren would be in town. "Perhaps you are acquainted with a Peter Blackwell? He seems to be a little more active in the evening hours. I heard Peter might make town this evening. He could be a better source of information on the matter."

Understanding the reference, Merle smiles broadly, "As a matter of fact, Peter and I have met on more than a few occasions."

Sam reads her smile as evidence that she is a trusted friend. "I understand that Peter has been invited to dine with my nephews at this hotel tonight."

Merle wipes a tear from her face, "Thank you, Sam." She squeezes his hand, "Just Sam." They both have a chuckle.

Merle adds, "One more thing. I couldn't help but overhear your conversation with Mary. The gunman you are asking about, his name is Isaac. He works for Mr. Wilson." Merle sees that Sam has a confused look on his face. She leans in as if telling a secret, "Mr. Jedidiah Wilson. He runs a big land company in New York. Hank is his brother."

Sam's face has epiphany written all over it. "Mrs. Pratt. Thank you for your assistance. You were very helpful. Can we expect to see you this evening?"

"I wouldn't miss it," Merle says. "Enjoy your breakfast."

Merle begins to stand; Sam quickly stands and attends to her chair.

"Until later, then," Sam says.

As she leaves, Merle stops close to Sam and whispers, "Thank you, Captain. Thank you for taking care of them."

Merle exits through the front door. Sam returns to his seat.

[Paparazzi]

As Sam finishes breakfast, Steven Fry enters the door like a man on a mission. He looks around, sees Sam, and makes a beeline for him.

Steven Fry is not about to let the biggest news story of Harmony Flats slip through his hands. He approaches Sam with an extended hand, "Captain Reynolds, Good morning, sir." Sam stands and holds out his hand. Fry begins shaking his hand vigorously. "Without a doubt, you have made the largest positive impact on this town since, well, since I got here 27 years ago. I was hoping you might

have time to answer a few questions.” Sam’s hand and arm are finally released from Fry’s shaking assault.

A little put off by the aggressive morning greeting, but more importantly, the need to return to the cabin compels Sam to decline the interview, “Good morning, Mr. Fry. I normally don’t mind answering questions, but I’m in a bit of a rush this morning.” Sam puts some money on the table. He takes one last swig of coffee and slides his chair in.

Fry tries to sway him, “This would only take a few minutes. I know the folks here would be very interested in what you have to say.”

Sam is uneasy being away from the cabin this long and does not want to give out information the town would gossip about throughout the day. Besides that, Sam reckons the less people know; the safer the boys and Victoria will be. “I understand your dedication to your readers. I am impressed by your determination to get the information to print quality material; however, I do not have time to talk to you this morning. I’m sorry.”

Fry presses, “Is there a better time that I might be able to get a few minutes?”

In hopes of escaping Fry’s persistence, Sam offers a carrot, “Well, as luck is on your side, I’ll likely be in town tonight. Maybe after dinner, we could spend a few minutes.”

Fry takes that as a commitment. “Yes. That would be wonderful. Will your nephews be with you as well? I’ve been looking forward to talking with CJ. He seems well-informed and may have some entertaining stories to tell.”

Being non-committal on behalf of CJ, Sam skirts a direct response, “He is a bright kid, but I’m not sure about the stories. And yes, if I make it to town tonight, I expect my nephews to be with me.”

Sam uses the rumors of his guerilla militia to dissuade anyone from attempting harm to the family when they are in town tonight. “Others you may have heard about may also be down, but don’t expect to see them.”

Mr. Fry looks a bit nervous about Sam’s last comment. He smiles as he tries to hide his concern, “I look forward to our meeting.” Fry thought the problems were solved when Wilson was jailed, but if Sam has his professionals coming to town, there may be trouble tonight.

“Have a good day, Mr. Fry.” Sam plants a seed of recondite information for Fry to research. “Oh, you wouldn’t happen to know Mr. Jedidiah Wilson, you know, Hank’s brother, would you?”

Getting new information, Fry writes in his notebook. “No. I didn’t know Hank had a brother.”

“As I understand it,” Sam informs him, “He has a large land-holding company in New York. I find that interesting. Don’t you?”

“Absolutely,” replies Fry. “That may shed some light on things around here.”

Sam pats Fry on the shoulder as he heads to the door, "I thought it might. Until later then."

Fry hurriedly jots things in his notebook. Without looking up from his notepad, he replies, "Yes, Captain. Until later."

Sam exits through the front door. Fry takes a seat at Sam's table and continues to write notes.

[Packing Up]

In the cabin. There are several trunks in the front room. Some are open; most are closed. Everyone is moving about getting things for the trunks. The bell in the front yard, by the tree, rings. CJ gets the rifle by the front door and pulls the hammer back. Austin and Victoria head back to the mine. CJ opens the door just enough to see a single rider at the checkpoint. He opens the door and then closes and bolts it.

CJ calls back to the others, "All clear. It's Uncle Sam. He's alone." CJ lets out a stress-relieving sigh, then carefully lowers the rifle's hammer and puts it back by the door. Victoria and Austin come back to the front room to continue packing.

A few minutes later, after caring for the horse, Sam comes in the back door.

Sam is impressed at the progress made during his absence. He asks Victoria, "How's it going?"

Victoria looks a bit stressed, "Well, okay, I guess. It's not so easy to get everything in just eight trunks."

Sam can see how stressed Victoria is, so he calmly states, "Just concentrate on the things you'll need for the first few months. We can have Gus send some stuff later, and when the boys and I return in a year, we can bring the rest. Most importantly, get the family heirlooms and keepsakes. The rest of the stuff is replaceable. Ren gave you enough money to replace all this stuff many times over."

"Yeah. I know," Victoria sighs, "But it is just so hard to leave some stuff behind."

CJ holds up a pair of tea cups. "Victoria, what about this?"

"Yes," Victoria replies, "They were my aunt Gwen's. Pack it carefully, *please*."

CJ nods, "Of course."

After looking around, Sam senses something missing and asks, "Where's Tylor?"

Austin walks into the room from the first bedroom. He is pale and speaks listlessly, "You just rode right by him. Tylor is a good watchman. He's probably getting cold by now. And take it from me, that's no fun."

Sam, Victoria, and CJ all laugh.

Sam sees that Austin is pale and sweaty. "You should go take a break. And drink some water!" He then tells Victoria, "I'll call Tylor in. I don't expect any problems today. We'll keep our guard up, but there's no need for a watch. Besides, we have the EWDs."

Victoria is interested in what Sam was able to find out in town. He must have heard something to give him the confidence to call off the watch. She prods him for information. "Sounds like you got some information while you were in town."

"Yeah," concedes Sam, "But I should tell you all at the same time."

Austin returns slowly from the kitchen with a cup of water. He's walking while drinking. Sam is concerned that Austin is in decline. He should be getting better by now.

He then directs Austin, "Austin, while you take a short nap, I'll make some stew for lunch. It should get us all warmed up on the inside."

Austin goes back into the front bedroom to lie down. CJ comes in from the second bedroom with some pictures and hands them to Victoria to pack.

"CJ, did you check the bedroom off the kitchen?" asks Victoria.

"Yes, ma'am," CJ replies. "Nothing left in there but the bed."

"Thanks." In that one word from Victoria, CJ can feel the sadness, confusion, and apprehension this move has on her emotions. As the closest in age to Victoria in the family, he understands some of what she is dealing with. At the same time, he knows that she is much more mentally, socially, and emotionally mature than he is, so he is unsure of anything he can do to lessen her burden.

When Sam and Victoria first met, they agreed that Victoria would be the primary caregiver for Austin, and, for the most part, Sam has not meddled in Austin's care. But what Sam sees isn't good. Sam points toward Austin's room while asking Victoria, "How's he doing? He looks rather pale."

Victoria is afraid. She sees what Sam sees but does not want to say it out loud, fearing that the act of voicing his condition might set it in stone. Her veiled voice hides nothing, "He's not sayin' anything, but he gets tired easily. Even though he's trying to stay happy, he's obviously not feeling well."

Sam, implying that he will assist in any way possible: "I'll check on him when he gets up."

Overhearing the tone and content of Sam and Victoria's conversation, CJ knows something is very wrong with Austin. Concernedly, he asks Sam, "What's wrong with him?"

Sam moves CJ closer to the door, out of Victoria's hearing. He quietly fills him in, "I think he's developing pneumonia. That's not good."

Hoping, CJ asks, "Can't we give him something?"

Sam explains, "He needs antibiotics. They haven't even started studying antibiotics until this year."

CJ loses color in his face, and his eyes swell with worry as he understands the significance of Sam's words. His heart sinks, his shoulders drop, and his eyes lose focus as he stares at the floor. CJ is in shock.

Sam doesn't like to lie about a patient's condition, but he might have been less direct if he knew the profound effect it would have on CJ. He needs to get CJ's mind on other things, so he redirects CJ's attention. "Can you call your brother, Tylor, in? I'll get the stew started."

Worried and sad, CJ wants to cry. He takes this opportunity to get some fresh air and let off some steam. "Yeah, sure." CJ goes out the front door to get Tylor.

[Loose Ends]

In the cabin, everybody is at the table, sitting with their heads down and holding hands. CJ finishes the prayer for the meal: "Amen."

Everyone else: "Amen."

CJ feels he needs to express himself. "This is our last meal here. At first, I hated this place. It had everything I didn't like." Austin and Victoria look in his direction. He notes their look and clarifies his statement. ". . . except the people, of course. It was cold, I lost my parents, I didn't know what was going to happen to me or Tylor. People were trying to kill us, and I was afraid that I might have to kill somebody. It was a nightmare."

Victoria squeezes in, "None of us liked being here or the circumstances that put us in this cabin. Thankfully, we have this cabin."

CJ continues, "Yeah, I know. I wasn't trying to suggest that I was the only one having a problem here. What I wanted to finish with is that I don't have those feelings anymore. Even though we are not completely out of danger, I don't hate it here. In fact, I'm kind of sad that we have to leave."

Austin, in a soft, weak voice, "I know how you feel. After Ren died, I thought I would never come here again. But, since I did come back, we were able to help lots of people in town with Ren's generosity. I guess I was selfish for not wanting to come up here."

Sympathetically and softly, he consoles Austin, "Losing a good friend like Ren had to be hard. It probably still is. I don't blame you for not wanting to come up here right away. I'm sure Ren knew it might be a little while before you could bring yourself to come back."

Sensing that this conversation is spiraling downward, Sam segues to, "Um. Speaking of Ren, I was reminded that we'll have guests tonight after dinner. Austin, I met an elderly lady who also knows you as Peter and wants to speak with you."

"Oh," Austin chirps, as happy as a sick boy can be. "That's Mrs. Pratt. She and Ren were --" He is a little embarrassed to reveal the secret. "-- well, seeing each other. They made me keep it a secret. The town's people would have had a problem with that."

CJ is surprised and smiles, "Ren had a girlfriend?"

Tylor raises his hand, "Good for him." CJ and Tylor, hi-five.

CJ looks at Austin, "Bro? Why didn't we have a delivery for her?"

"Ren wanted to give her gold all the time," insists Austin, "but she was wealthy. She made a lot of money running the hotel and a lot more when she sold it. She said she didn't want Ren's money, just Ren."

Victoria interjects, "That's very romantic."

Austin feels he can let down his guard a little regarding his dual identity since things have changed so much and the secret of his clandestine activities has been revealed; however, he still keeps an eye on Victoria to see if he's saying too much. "We used to spend all night talking about our adventures and deciding on our next adventure."

Victor interrupts, "You never told me about that."

"Of course not," Austin admonishes, "It was a secret. I don't reveal secrets."

Trying to catch Austin off guard, Sam asks him, "Oh? What secrets didn't you reveal?"

"Well – " Austin realizes it is a trap, "That's a secret, too."

CJ laughs at Sam's feeble attempt to trick the trickster, "Good answer." CJ and Austin high-five. Austin barely has a smile on his face.

"CJ, seems like Mr. Fry has taken a liking to you," suggests Sam. "He wants to talk to you and me after dinner. I think he just wants the details of the events –" Sam chooses words carefully " – from me, but he wants stories from you. I'll leave it up to you to decide what it is you're going to tell him, but if we are going to live out our lives in the 1800s, you might want to be a little careful. And if we need to back you, let us know beforehand.

"Okay. I'll be as generic as possible," CJ tells them, "but I should be able to transpose some of my stories from the 2000s to now.

Sam approves, "That'll be helpful."

"What about Austin?" wonders Victoria.

Sam finds that topic too broad to answer, "What do you mean?"

Victoria narrows it down, "Aren't we still trying to hide him?"

"No, not so much," Sam reasons, "It's not likely that we'll be able to hide him completely, but we'll do our best to keep him under wraps at the hotel. I'm sure that he doesn't want to be the little sister again.

"That's for sure," announces Austin. He coughs a little. CJ flashes a worried look at Sam.

Sam continues, "So he'll just have to be Peter Blackwell." Austin manages a slight smile. "Unless I'm wrong—" he looks at Austin for confirmation. "-- all of his closest friends know him as Peter when the sun goes down, so they'll know to keep his daytime name quiet. Those who don't know him will think he is Peter."

"I think Uncle Sam is right," concludes Austin. "Anybody who knows me as Peter will know to keep my real name a secret."

Tylor, "What about us?"

"Well, I haven't forgotten about you, claims Sam. "I'll have you and CJ sit with Peter for dinner. If he's not with Victoria and me, then it will take longer for people to draw the connection that he's Austin. It'll also allow us to watch each other's backs. The only ones I think we need to worry about are strangers in town and the gunman from Harmony Valley Inn."

Victoria is in step with the plan. Since she and Austin are familiar with the townspeople, they can identify strange behaviors that Sam or CJ could miss. "I can tell Sam if I see something unusual, and Austin, you can tell CJ or Tylor. We're more likely to see if something's amiss if we are at two different tables.

Sam sees the advantages of the plan, "I agree. Any other thoughts about tonight?"

Victoria is surprised they haven't addressed an important detail, "What about that strange gunman?"

Austin pipes up, "That's Isaac."

Victoria is surprised that Austin knows his name, but the name is not important. "Who's Isaac?"

Austin and Sam, in unison: "The gunman in Hank's bar."

Austin sees that the conversation has gone full circle and explains, "He works for Hank's brother."

Austin constantly amazes Victoria with his knowledge of the town and its people, "Why didn't you tell us sooner?"

Austin answers apologetically, "Since nobody asked, I figured everybody knew."

Scolding him, supposedly for not letting her know, but more angry at herself for overlooking such an essential piece to the dynamics of their situation, "Anything else that we should know about, but we forgot to ask?"

Austin hangs his head in apologetic remorse, "No, . . . not that I can think of."

Sam reaches across the table to take Austin's hand so he doesn't feel bad about not passing on the information about Isaac. Isaac was one of the topics Sam intended to bring up at this meeting. Sam smiles at Austin; Austin smiles back. Sam retracts his hand from across the table. "Other concerns?" Sam solicits.

"Yeah". Tylor raises his hand. He sees everybody staring at him. He puts his hand back down and asks, "If they were able to get to those guys in the jail, how are we going to be safe at the Inn?"

"Good question," Sam grins, "I spoke with Gus when I was in town. He said that many friends of the Creightons wanted to know if there was any way they could help Victoria. From them, Gus gathered a few men to help keep watch overnight. They'll be keeping an eye out for anything unusual the whole time we're there. I'm glad you asked."

Victoria adds, "Besides that, the sheriff will have men watching our rooms."

"What about Lewis?" Austin asks with disdain. Austin feels that people like Lewis and McGinn are as bad, if not worse, than people like Hank Wilson. They're supposed to be lawful and just but are unlawful and deceitful.

Understanding Austin's dislike for corrupt officials, Sam neutralizes that threat, "I'll be watching Lewis. I told Sheriff Hawkins that I didn't trust Lewis, so Hawkins removed him from the room watch detail."

Tylor states, "Looks like we thought of everything."

"Maybe," Sam cautions. "Just don't get too complacent. We don't know . ." CJ and Tylor join him, ". . . what we don't know."

Austin whispers to CJ, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means," explains CJ, "We may have missed something because there was no reason to think it was related to our situation. Just like Isaac. It's easy to overlook things that don't seem important."

"Exactly," Sam spells it out, "To stay safe, we still need to be aware of our surroundings. Try to anticipate the unexpected and imagine circumstances or obstacles that might impede our path to safety."

CJ whispers to Austin, "He means be careful and watch for traps."

Austin whispers to CJ, "Okay, why didn't he just say so?"

CJ confides to Austin, "He tried. That's just how Uncle Sam is — complicated. You'll get used to it."

[Movin' On]

Finally, late in the afternoon, CJ loads the last trunk onto the lead buckboard, which Victoria drives. Behind the first buckboard is a second one, unladen, driven by Sam. Three saddled horses for Austin, Tylor, and CJ follow the buckboards. The cart is left in the barn for Gus to use while tending the livestock.

As she drives away from the cabin, Victoria looks back with tears in her eyes. Her family went to extraordinary lengths to build a happy home where they could live peacefully and thrive. The dream that took years to build was destroyed by greed in one night. The bitterness and remorse of her recent past conflict with relief and hope for the future in her heart as she leaves the once tranquil Creighton Valley that is now filled with nightmares of terror and death.

Victoria and Sam drive the buckboards on the main road to town. CJ, Tylor, and Austin take the detour like before to get into town unnoticed.

Victoria drives the laden buckboard to the train station's loading area. Sam parks beside her. Gus directs the railmen to unload the trunks and safely get them into the station's cargo area. Once the trunks are unloaded, Victoria and Sam drive the buckboards to the livery and give them, along with the horses, to Robert. The boys have already delivered their horses to the livery. Gus will get one of the buckboards and three horses; Robert will get the other and four horses. Of the four, Austin's horse, Blaze, will go to Paul.

[Uninvited Guest]

Outside on Main Street, Harmony Flats, it's dark, cold, and quiet. Through the front doors of O'Brien's Restaurant, the atmosphere changes dramatically. It is light, warm, and filled with joyful sounds. As the terminus of the line, Harmony Flats draws people wanting to travel by train. O'Brien's hotel is busy with customers preparing for the train into Sacramento Valley.

Victoria and Sam are sitting together. The three boys are sitting at another table on the other side of the room. The boys are laughing and telling stories over dinner. Although Austin looks like he's having fun, he is not as animated as usual. Sam and Victoria are much more formal, having a quiet conversation. Mr. Fry enters the restaurant, looks around, sees the boys, then sees Sam and Victoria. He heads straight for Sam.

Fry arrives at Sam and Victoria's table. Sam starts to get up, but Fry motions for him to stay seated. Fry starts, "Captain Reynolds. A pleasant evening to you and Miss. Creighton. Am I interrupting?"

Sam: "Well. ."

Victoria interrupts, "No. Not at all. Please join us."

Fry leaves no room for dissent. "If you insist," he says, seating himself and signaling to Mary.

Saclarifiesar that Fry is a bit early, "I wasn't expecting you until *after* dinner."

"Well," Fry explains, "I thought I should come a bit early to avoid taking too much of your time. Besides, dinner conversation is usually much more interesting than my usual interview."

Victoria graciously accepts Fry as a diner guest, "That's just fine. We don't mind a bit of company." She looks at Sam. "Do we?"

"No," Sam caves to Victoria, "No. Of course not."

"We?" Fry is trying to see if there is a romantic connection. "Is there more to that?"

"Mr. Fry," Sam firmly takes offense at the suggestion, "I'll expect this to be a professional interview, not gossip. I am honored to escort Miss. Creighton to her new home *and* her fiancé. Don't imply anything more."

"Of course." Fry backs down, "I wouldn't dare suggest anything else."

"Good." In a much more casual manner, Sam asks, "Are we now on the same page?" Victoria glances at Sam, suggesting he is a little too curt with Mr. Fry. Sam's slight head shake lets Victoria know he disagrees. Sam knows that if they don't draw a clear line of demarcation, the paper may have them married and on their honeymoon by the time they reach Folsom.

A little shaken by Sam's stern warning, Fry continues nervously, "I am sure we are."

Establishing a final ground rule, Sam informs Fry, "Just one more thing."

Fry: "Yes."

Pointing with his eyes in Austin's direction, Sam reminds Fry, "Peter Blackwell needs a few days of safe travel. I'm sure you understand."

Fry didn't look closely at the boys when he entered the tavern. His target was Sam. "Peter Blackwell?" Fry's happiness is nearly infectious. "I'm so pleased that he's here. His safety will be my highest priority."

Sam, in a nearly threatening manner, "Good. Because it's mine as well."

Fry begins to think this interview is a bad idea, "Understood, sir."

As Victoria hands Steven a letter, she directs her comments at both men, "I'm not so good at the double talk and such, like you two, so I just wrote down what happened." Speaking to Steven, "Why don't you read it over tonight? I'll be able to answer your questions in the morning before we leave."

Fry asks, "Now that Wilson is no longer a threat, what's the reason to leave?"

"Mr. Fry, you have a short memory," Sam points out. "She has a fiancé waiting in Ohio."

Getting a little more nervous with Sam correcting so often, "That's right. I knew that. I guess I should just read this tonight. But, Captain, I haven't much to write about you."

Sam gestures to the letter, "I'm sure there is enough in there to cover all you need to write about my involvement here."

Disappointedly, Fry says, "I see."

Making up a reason not to write details about Captain Reynolds, Sam speaks as if he is telling Steven a secret, "You can understand that if I divulge too much about myself and my team, our effectiveness becomes compromised. If Miss Creighton or anyone else finds themselves in need of my team's services, I'm sure you would want us to be fully effective. Yes?"

As if the grand scheme of things was now in his grasp, Fry envisions his role as part of the team, keeping it in the shadows, "Yes, absolutely. I didn't think it through, sorry."

"No problem," Sam lightens up a bit. "I just wanted to make sure you understood why I can't give you more information." Sam is removing a negative emotional link while providing positive reinforcement. He learned this technique while working as a PIO (Public Information Officer) in the fire service. He hopes this will get Steven off his back. "It's nothing personal. Like I said. I think you are providing this community with great service."

"Thank you, Captain." Fry is feeling less intimidated now that Sam has explained things to him. "While putting this story together, I'll be sure to keep that in mind."

Victoria feels this conversation is ending, "Anything else?"

Fry asks, "I hoped to speak with CJ and Aus .. Peter. Is that possible?"

"Yes. Of course," Sam replies happily, "I think CJ was expecting you. However, take it easy on Peter; he's been through a lot." Sam continues, "Once again, don't take it personally, but Tylor is rather protective of Peter. If he indicates you've gone far enough, I suggest you stop. A couple of Wilson's cowboys didn't take the hint and ended up at Doc's place. You might ask young Paul about it."

The two that went to Doc's place are still there, recovering. Fry feels a little nervous about talking with Peter now: "I heard something about that. I'll see if Paul can help with some of the details. I'm sure the town's folk would love to hear about it." Fry decides it's best to take his leave now: "Miss Creighton, Captain, thank you for your time." He stands. You should know that I would never cause --" He looks at Austin and then back at Sam. "-- Peter or Miss Creighton any more pain. Have a pleasant rest of your evening."

Victoria stands, "Thank you, Mr. Fry."

Sam stands and shakes Fry's hand, "I'm sure we'll see you in the morning. Have a good night, Mr. Fry."

Sam waits for Victoria to be seated before reseating himself. Fry goes to the other table and greets the boys. Austin gets up and hugs him, then they all sit down and start talking.

[Old Friend]

Sam and Victoria finish dinner and relax with a cup of coffee. Sam talks quietly with the waitress and indicates in the boys' direction. Mr. Fry has finished talking to the boys at the boys' table and stands to leave. Politely, the boys stand to bid Fry goodbye. Fry shakes all of their hands and then hugs Austin again. Fry puts his notebook away, heads to an empty table, and looks over his notes.

Merle comes down the stairs and looks over the crowd. When she spots Austin, she can't help but smile. Austin's back is to the stairs, so he can't see her. When she approaches the boy's table, CJ and Tylor, minding their manners, stand up to greet the stranger.

Austin turns to see what CJ and Tylor are reacting to and sees Merle. Austin jumps up and hugs her.

"It is so nice to see you, Mrs. Pratt, coos Austin.

"Of course," Merle says. "I am very pleased to see you, Peter. I'm sure Sam told you we ran into each other this morning. He was kind enough to explain a few things to me."

Austin notices that CJ and Tylor are still standing. "Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot to introduce my friends, CJ and Tylor." As he mentions their names, they politely shake Merle's hand. Boys, this is my friend, Mrs. Pratt. She's like a best friend and a grandmother in one person."

Merle subtly chastizes Austin, "I missed you, and I have missed our chats. When I lost Ren, it seems I lost Peter, too. I think we have some catching up to do."

CJ can take a hint, "Mrs. Pratt, it was a pleasure to meet you. My brother and I are expected at another table." CJ and Tylor excuse themselves and go to Sam and Victoria's table.

Merle and Austin sit down. Just then, Mary brings three pieces of pie to Austin's table. Austin accepts two and sends the other piece to Sam's table. Mary leaves the pie in front of Tylor. Tylor looks at CJ and grins.

Sam gets Mary's attention: "Mary, could you get some tea for Mrs. Pratt and Master Blackwell and a cup of coffee for Mr. Fry? It's on me." He then slides his piece of pie over to CJ. CJ smiles at Sam and grins back at Tylor.

"Yes, of course, Captain," replies Mary.

Sam watches Fry look at Merle and Austin and start writing in his book. Sam gets up and goes over to Fry's table. He quietly looks over Fry's shoulder at the notebook. Then Sam steps up behind Fry and bends down to speak at Fry's ear level. He quietly tells Fry, "This is not for public dissemination. Some things are better to know than to tell. This is one of those things. You should be honored that he trusts you to know about their closeness. Thanks for your understanding."

Fry crosses out a couple of lines in his book: '~~On the last night of his stay in this beloved town, Peter Blackwell was seen having a lively conversation with Mrs. Pratt.~~' Mr. Fry then puts his ever-present notebook back in his pocket.

Sam pats him on the shoulder and returns to his seat.

Sam is becoming increasingly uncomfortable with Austin's condition, so he's keeping an eye on him while he meets with Merle. They seem to be having a good time, and they laugh often. Sam notes that the frequency of Austin's coughing spells is getting higher.

Mary delivers tea to Merle and Austin and coffee to Mr Fry, who smiles and acknowledges Sam for the coffee. Mr Fry sits back comfortably in the chair, smiles when he looks at Austin and Mrs. Pratt, and then peacefully sips the coffee.

[Field Promotion to Nurse]

Sam, Victoria, Tylor, and CJ sit around the table, finishing their pie.

"I've meant to ask you this," starts Sam, "but I don't want to sound condescending. So, please excuse me if this comes out wrong. My question is: how can you be a nurse at such a young age?"

"Well, actually," Victoria explains, "I became a nurse a few years ago. During the war and immediately after, there weren't enough nurses to help with the injured soldiers and civilians, so My mom and I volunteered to help the regular nurses care for them. As I became more experienced, the regular nurses would teach me more and more. Eventually, the doctors saw I was doing what the regular nurses did. When we had time, the doctors would teach me what I needed to know to become a real nurse. Then, as I passed their tests, they gave me a field commission as an army nurse. I passed the last tests at the hospital and became a real nurse just before we came out here."

"Wow," CJ exclaims, "That must have been tough."

"It was hard," Victoria concedes, "but truly rewarding. Without the nurses and us volunteers, many more people would have died, military and civilian."

"You are a member of a very honorable profession." Sam states, "Too often, all the credit for a person's survival goes to the doctor. Truth be told, the nurses usually impact survival rates more than the doctors do."

"That's what Mom said, too," Tylor remarks in a tone saturated with melancholy. "I hope they're doing okay."

CJ, "What?"

Tylor responds in a distant voice, "Mom and Dad. They haven't heard from us in a week. They'll start looking for us soon."

[Last Resort]

The 'family' took three consecutive rooms on the second floor of O'Brien's tavern. Sam is in the first room, Austin and Victoria are in the second room, and Tylor and CJ are in the third room. The family enters the hallway from the stairwell and stops in the hall.

Sam tells CJ and Tylor, "Put your bags in your room, then meet in Victoria's room."

Victoria and Austin enter the center room. Austin puts the bags on the suitcase rack. Sam enters the room, followed by Tylor and CJ. Sam looks out the window and closes the roll-down blind.

"We're nearly out of this nightmare, but we can't let our guard down yet," warns Sam, "So I've come up with some rules for tonight. First, if possible, stay in your room 'till morning. If you must leave your room, both of you go together, but before leaving this floor, let me know. If you need to talk to someone in another room or let me know you are leaving your room, use the knock-knock, pause, knock-knock, pause, knock pattern."