

Restricted Territory

The Morning After

[Startling Introductions]

Thursday, 22 Nov 1877

Outside the cabin, it is snowing heavily in the early morning. The early hour's dim, gray, and cold glow can be seen through the gaps in the closed shutters. The cooking stove in the kitchen and the heating stove in the main room have a barely visible, deep red glow to the fireboxes and up the stack, stopping at the flue damper. Silence fills the cabin, except for the occasional slight pop or crackle and the subsequent tinkling of the coals heard occasionally from the hot stoves and the buffeting of the wind against the cabin.

Sam has two lamps lit but turned down. Towels and the kids' wet clothes are hung to dry on small ropes that cross the room. Having not slept through the night, Sam is sitting haggardly on a chair next to one of the three beds in the room. He is attentively watching over Victoria and Austin, asleep in bed, both on their left side. Austin is in front of Victoria in the same position Sam had found them the night before. Only their heads and right hands are outside the multiple layers of blankets keeping them warm. Austin's head is still wrapped in a small, dry towel.

Sam Checks Austin's radial pulse, watches his breathing, and then checks his temperature by feeling his forehead. He then checks Austin's circulation by pressing on the fingernail, quickly releasing it, and watching the return of color. Sam nods, indicating a good capillary refill response. He remains quiet while internally feeling reassured that Austin will remain alive. Still, he wonders how much damage, both physical and emotional, has been done and to what extent his new little friend can recover.

Sam then checks Victoria's radial pulse. He is pleased that it is regular and strong. Her skin temperature is also average. She is showing signs of waking up, which Sam is not expecting. She was only sleeping for about six hours. He thought it would take about ten hours for her to wake up from that degree of hypothermia.

Victoria opens her eyes slowly. Her mind begins to interpret the signals from her senses. At first, she is comfortable, warm, dry, and out of the snow. Then she abruptly realizes that she is in a strange place, doesn't feel good, and a strange man is holding her wrist.

Victoria sits up in a start: "What the hell!? Who are you?"

Startled by the sharp remarks and his respect for Victoria's modesty, Sam sits back in the chair, holds up his hands as if being robbed, and turns away from Victoria. Austin doesn't move.

Sam tries to calm her down. In a concerned and careful tone, while trying not to wake Austin or invoke any more agitation in Victoria, “Whoa, whoa, whoa. Easy now. I’m just trying to help.”

Suddenly realizing she is wearing no clothes, Victoria pulls the blanket up for cover: “What are you trying to do?” Because she is naked and has no idea where she is or who the stranger is, she feels completely vulnerable. “Get away!”

She sees Austin lying next to her with cuts across his back, “What did you do to Austin?”

Sam quickly gets out of the chair and steps back toward the door. He keeps his hands up, indicating that he will not touch them. In a calm tone, he tries to get her to calm down, “Hold on Victoria.” (Victoria is surprised that he called her by name.) “I’m not going to hurt you. You need to be careful of your brother. I’ll stay away so you can calm down. I’m not going to pretend to know everything that’s going on, but when you’re ready, I’ll do my best to explain what I know.”

Victoria looks around to get an idea of their whereabouts and identify any possible escape routes. She senses that this may be a location she knows, but there is little evidence to determine accurately where she is. “Where are my clothes? Stay back.”

Sam points to the hanging clothes. “I’m not getting any closer. Your clothes are right here, drying.”

In her survey for an escape route, she overlooked the extensive display of the drying clothes. Now that they have been pointed out, her mind registers the hanging objects as clothes. Victoria sees the clothes and recognizes them as hers. She feels a little silly for asking, but she maintains her defensive attitude.

Sam can understand Victoria’s behavior; however, he is concerned for Austin and needs Victoria’s trust to sort out last night’s events. “You have to trust me on this. Please be careful. Your brother needs his rest.”

Sensing a stalemate in the conversation, Sam changes the dynamics and gives Victoria a less vulnerable perspective. “I’ll tell you what. I will go out to the front room and wait for you there. There’s another set of clothes like these”, gesturing to the clothes he is wearing, “right over there.” He points to a stack of folded clothes on the other bed. “They may not fit well, but at least they’re dry. You get dressed and meet me in the front room. Okay? We can talk there. Please take your time and be careful. You both had a rough night.”

Without a word, Victoria just glares at Sam with distrust and anger. Sam has seen the ‘mother bear’ look many times and knows that it is best to quietly remove the threat, which in this case is himself. He keeps his hands up and makes a wide circle around the bed to the door. Victoria never takes her eyes off Sam as he makes his way around the room.

Sam stops by the door and offers some additional information to offset the mistrust, fear, and anger that Victoria must be feeling. “By the way, my name is Sam. Sam Reynolds. I’m just here because we got a letter from a hospital in Ohio that said they wanted me to check this place out. I’ll see you in the front room. Take your time.”

Sam exits through the door, closing it behind him.

Victoria looks down at her little brother. He has two large wounds from the belt. She touches his shoulder, then softly runs her fingers across his cheek. Austin does not respond.

With the stranger out of the room, Victoria can take the time to objectively assess her situation and make some sort of plan on what to do next. When she looks at Austin's back again, she starts to recount the events of last night to herself. The fear when Hank's men burst into our cabin, the deep sorrow and anger when our parents were murdered, the fear, anger, and helplessness when we were assaulted, the desperation of the escape, and the remorse of failure when we died - wait - we didn't die. We were rescued - maybe. At least for now, we're alive.

As she gets dressed, a myriad of questions bounce through her head. But who's this guy? He talks a little differently. How did he know my name? Is Austin okay? Why is it so hot in here? Are Hank's men still looking for us? Is this Sam guy one of Hank's men trying to trick us?

She concludes her assessment with the thought, "Austin cannot travel, so we'll have to stay where we are temporarily. Until we can escape again, we'll see what's up with this Sam guy and figure out if he is on our side or Hank's."

[Crazy Man Recounts Events]

Trimmed to a soft glow, the single lamp casts a warm golden hue to the cabin's main room. The shutters on the windows are closed to keep heat and light in. The unmistakable aroma of coffee wafts through the open space, replacing the mustiness of the unused cabin.

The kitchen stove is hot. The kettle, pots, and skillet are moved to the cooler side of the stove. Two buckets used for tending the bathtub are stacked by the back door.

Sam is seated at the table with a cup of coffee. Another cup of coffee on the table awaits Victoria. Sam takes a sip from the cup and sets it back down as he patiently waits. Victoria opens the bedroom door and steps out, instinctively leaving the door open and heating the bedroom for Austin.

She slowly moves as if she has a hangover. Also, because she is 'trapped' by her circumstances, she is wary of Sam, looking for possible hazards and ways to escape, if necessary. She can now recognize the old cabin. Her whole family, uncles and aunts, stayed in this cabin while they built the cabins on the meadow.

In a soft and caring manner, Sam asks, "How do you feel?"

Victoria is about to answer. Just before she speaks, Sam interrupts, "Wait, don't answer that. I'll tell you how you feel. Weak, a little dizzy, tired, and achy. Like a hangover, right?"

Victoria is caught off guard by the correct assessment of her physical status. Not wanting to show weakness and also wanting to portray someone of sophistication, as opposed to someone who drinks too much too often, she answers defiantly, "I don't know. Never had one."

She finds the conversation, so far, to be non-threatening, bolstering her confidence that Sam is not planning on hurting them. “You left out confused and angry.”

Sam can see that Victoria is carefully navigating the unknown to determine Sam’s intent. Since he has no hidden agenda and is confused about his and her situation, he decides to do what he usually does: use honesty. He speaks in a matter-of-fact tone: “That’s common for someone who suffered hypothermia, except for the angry part.”

Victoria quietly looks him over to assess her situation. Without a response from Victoria, Sam continues his monologue: “Hypothermia, that’s low body temperature.”

Victoria becomes angry and defensive because she feels she is being talked down to. After all, she still feels vulnerable; even the slightest amount of aggression or overbearing sets her off. “I know very well what hypothermia is. I’m a nurse.”

Victoria slowly starts walking toward Sam and the table, now on the offensive, raising her voice as she gets closer. “What I don’t know is why you are in our cabin, why you are wearing my dad’s old clothes –.”

Sam can see that Victoria’s emotions are escalating, which is the opposite of his intentions. He stands up with his hands up in a stop gesture.

Unfazed by Sam’s stop gesture, she continues walking and raging, “ – Why Colin sent you, why you have me and Austin naked, in the same bed no less, and what it is that you did to him. . . us.”

Sam speaks defensively but confidently, saying, “Relax a little, and I’ll tell you everything I know about last night.” Sam puts his hands down. “But first, you need to know that I only did what was medically necessary to save you.”

Sam is upset by the innuendo of wrongdoing in his medical treatment. His tone becomes condescending: “Since you’re a nurse and know how to treat hypothermia, we should have no reason to discuss why you and Austin were naked in the same bed. I did nothing unethical to you or Austin. Have a seat, and let’s talk about it.”

Sam gestures to the chairs. He sits first. Victoria pulls the chair intended for her a little farther from Sam, and sits down.

Sam gestures toward the second coffee cup. “I poured you some coffee in case you might like some. If you don’t like coffee, I can see if there is anything else, but the pantry is rather bare.”

“No. Coffee is fine.” Victoria picks up the coffee cup, smells it, and takes a sip. She takes a little while to determine if the coffee is safe. She nods to herself that the sample is safe. “Now tell me what’s going on.”

Sam begins to tell her his side of the story.

“This is what I know about from last night. . .

“I arrived here two days ago with my UTV and personal effects and was met by Wac ih a’. He seemed to be okay, but when I woke up yesterday, he was gone, and so was all my stuff. It was a long way back to the highway, and I was going to walk, but I saw that the weather was getting bad, so I decided to stay.”

“I dozed off but woke up when I heard what sounded like two gunshots. I went out the front door to investigate. A single set of hoofprints in the snow and footprints led to the door, but I didn’t see or hear anything else, so I came back in.”

“Then, after a little dinner, I heard another shot. This time, I was sure it was a gunshot and that it came from down in the valley. I went out the back door. When I got down the trail far enough, I saw you and your brother running across the meadow. I also saw two men in the cabin window from which you ran. I lost you when you got near the creek. A few minutes later, I found you on the trail.”

“So I brought you up here, warmed you up in the bathtub, and put you to bed to recover. I wasn’t sure – Austin, that’s your brother, right? – ”

Victoria nods her head.

Sam finishes, “I didn’t know if he was going to make it.” Sam pauses for a sip of coffee. “That’s what I know. I haven’t been able to call the police, and I couldn’t leave you two here unattended, especially with all the gunfire.”

Sam breaks from his story and drinks a couple of sips of coffee. Turning the questioning around. “I have some questions of my own.”

Victoria is surprised that this trespassing stranger would be so bold as to ask her questions.

Sam sees Victoria’s reaction but needs some questions answered to be of any help, so he pushes on. “What happened last night, and why were you out there in the snow in the first place? And who were those men in the ranch house? There are a dozen more questions beyond those, but more importantly, now that you’re awake, how will we get Austin to a hospital? My cell phone is missing, and I cannot find a landline. You and Austin didn’t have cell phones when I found you. Is there a neighbor close by that can help?”

Victoria stands up and moves between Sam and the bedroom. She started to trust Sam a little until he began asking questions and talking about stuff she had never heard of. She won’t let him take Austin out in this weather. She sternly protests, “You’re not taking my brother anywhere in his condition, especially in this storm!”

It’s Sam’s turn to be surprised. Sam wonders if Victoria is a nurse, and if so, why doesn’t she know how much Austin needs medical care?

Victoria states, “It’s three days to the hospital, and he’s in no condition to ride.”

Sam tries to calmly inform Victoria of the need for advanced medical care. Once they are on the highway, it is less than an hour to the hospital. Why does she think it takes three days? He doesn't understand why she is so adamant about not getting help. "We just need to get to a phone and call 911. They'll send someone to get him. We can get the police to come at the same time."

Sam stands in anticipation of leaving. "Just tell me where the nearest phone is, and I'll call. You stay here and take care of Austin."

Victoria is perplexed. "Phone?"

Sam feels like the conversation is going nowhere. "Like I said, I don't have mine with me anymore; someone stole it. I didn't have service here anyway. A landline would be best."

In both a defensive manner and with authority, Victoria tells him, "Mister. You aren't making any sense."

She looks for a way to get the madman to leave without upsetting him. There's no telling what a crazy person might do, and she's at a disadvantage with a sick brother and not feeling well herself. She speaks as calmly as she can to the lunatic. "We thank you for your help, but I think you should go back where you came from. You're starting to scare me."

Trying his best to stay calm, Sam is frustrated that she doesn't seem to see the situation's urgency. "I can't go back; it's too far, especially during this storm. My UTV is stolen, too. Where's the nearest road? Maybe I can flag someone down."

"The road's right out front." Victoria is getting annoyed, "Maybe you should just pack up your horse and leave."

He gets agitated when explaining the same thing repeatedly, yet he tries to be composed and not upset Victoria more, so he argues, "That's what I'm trying to tell you. I don't have a horse. I came here in a UTV. Some horses were here a few days ago, but they're gone now. We need to find a way to get your brother to an emergency room."

Victoria is just as agitated about their inability to communicate. "Mister, I have no idea what a UTV or phone is, why you think yelling out some numbers will magically get somebody here, or why you want to put Austin back in the cold. You aren't making any sense."

Victoria is becoming increasingly flustered. "I just can't deal with you right now." She is pretty upset now. The stress of the situation is beginning to exceed her capacity to cope. Her mental breaking point is quickly approaching: "I have no idea what this phone is you keep talkin' about, but since I've never heard of it, we don't have one."

Victoria is starting to lose control. She is starting to cry and yell at Sam. "My little brother is lying in there," pointing into the bedroom, "nearly dead. And now I have a crazy man living in our old cabin that I can't kick out because he lost his, his – his – whatever!"

Victoria starts hitting Sam in the chest while she is crying. Sam grabs her gently in restraint. She struggles and then starts crying on his shoulder. He hugs her reassuringly.

“Okay, okay.” Sam consoles her, “We’ll work through this.”

When she finally stops trying to hit him, Sam lets her go. Although the overwhelming feeling of hopelessness exposed her vulnerability, Victoria wants to maintain a chasm between this lunatic stranger and what is left of her family. She takes a couple of steps back from Sam.

Exasperated by the depth of their misunderstandings, Sam says in a calm, sincere voice, “I’ll help out wherever I can.” Sam wants to reset the conversation and clear up the misunderstandings: “I’m certainly not here to cause problems. Maybe we should sit back down and work through this one step at a time.”

Cautiously, Sam slowly sits back in his chair. When he is seated, Victoria sits back in her chair. They adjust their chairs to be at the corner of the table, creating a less confrontational atmosphere. Sam and Victoria both stare at their coffee cups. Sam clears his throat.

Quietly and with concern, Sam suggests, “Let’s start with your brother. As you can see, he’s in pretty bad shape. The sooner he gets to an emergency room, the better. There’s no medical equipment here; I looked everywhere last night.”

“We can’t take him out in this kind of weather,” explains Victoria. “He wouldn’t last ten minutes, let alone a three-day trip to Sacramento. . . . He would never make it. Besides, they can’t do more there than we can here.”

Surprised by her statement, Sam still responds very calmly, trying not to get into another argument. “I really am confused. I don’t understand how it could be a three-day trip.”

Having difficulty maintaining her composure, she explains as if talking to a child, “In this weather, three days is optimistic. It would be about fifteen hours on horseback in the summer and well over twenty hours with a cart.”

Bewildered, he tries to take in the strange answer. To avoid starting another argument, Sam decides to accept the answer temporarily. “You know the roads in this area better than I do. And, since you’re a nurse? –” stated more as a question than a statement. Victoria nods in response. “I’ll leave his treatment in your hands from here on out. I can help you monitor him, and I watch for a break in the weather. When you say he’s ready, we’ll move him. He’ll be our top priority.”

Victoria nods her head. “Okay.” She just remembered that she is at the cabin, and all the transportation is at the ranch. “But, even if he could travel, we don’t have any way to travel.”

Sam: “What do you mean?”

“Our horses and buckboard are at the ranch.” Victoria pauses as fragments of last night race through her memory. She then remembers the lawless nature of her advisory, “Unless Hank’s men stole ‘em!”

Victoria was so caught up with her brother's condition and the stranger that she forgot about why she ended up at the cabin in the first place. She suddenly realizes that she and Austin were supposed to be killed by Hank's men and that his men are probably still looking for them.

"Oh!" She startles Sam and becomes visibly shaken. "Oh no!" In a panic, she stands up quickly and looks around the cabin. Sam is becoming concerned about an unknown worry Victoria has yet to mention. Victoria races to the shuttered window and carefully peeks out.

Recognizing the shock on her face, Sam looks around the cabin to see what might have upset Victoria: "What's wrong?"

Because she doesn't know what Hank's men had been up to while she slept, Victoria becomes very frightened. She turns back toward Sam. Her voice, affected by the adrenaline rush, cracks as she asks, "Did anyone see you last night?"

Sam answers casually, "I don't think so."

Sensing Sam's lack of concern about being seen, Victoria asks again anxiously, "Are you sure?"

Sam senses Victoria's importance in his answer and adds more conviction to his tone: "I'm pretty sure. Why?"

Victoria's fear makes her nervously animated. "That's why we were in the snow. That's why we were trying to get here. They're trying to kill us."

Shocked by Victoria's revelation, Sam puts the puzzle pieces in their proper place. He instinctively stands as if an attack is imminent. "What are you talking about? Who's 'they'?"

"They're — they're the ones that killed Mom and Dad." Victoria is very emotional, trying to hold back tears, her voice breaking. Almost under her breath, she adds, "They're gonna kill us, too."

"Victoria, Who?" Sam tries to get more details. "Who is trying to kill you?"

Victoria looks around the room to verify all the windows are shuttered. "Hank Wilson — and his men. He's the one trying to steal our land. He sent his men to kill us, but Austin and I got away. If they find us, we're dead. They'll kill you, too. None of us are safe."

She puts her head down in her hands. She then looks up, staring at Sam. "You're sure no one saw you?"

"Yes, I'm sure!" Sam reassures her, "I saw two men in the window, but they couldn't see me. It was too dark, the snow was blowing, and I was hidden in the trees."

Victoria still seems unconvinced. Sam gently holds her by both shoulders, his arms outstretched, looking into her eyes: "Don't worry. I'm sure they had no idea I was there. They certainly wouldn't be out in this storm looking for you. So, for right now, you and Austin are safe."

She sees the logic in what Sam is saying and begins to calm down a bit. “I guess you’re right about that. No one would be out in this weather. They couldn’t find us even if we were ten feet in front of them.”

The ‘guardian uncle’ in Sam surfaces to restore a less flustered atmosphere in the cabin. He gently releases her shoulders and speaks in a soft, fatherly tone, “You better check on Austin; I’ll make you something to eat.”

Victoria is still not entirely comfortable with the safety afforded by the weather and the cabin. Still, with no alternative, she decides that the best they can do now is take care of Austin and maintain a vigilant watch. “Yeah, Okay,” her tone reflects her apprehension.

Victoria heads to the bedroom to check on Austin, and Sam goes to the kitchen to make a meal.