

Restricted Territory

The Rescue

[Search]

Whap!. The sound of the book falling to the floor wakes Sam from his impromptu nap in the cabin's front room. As he picks up the book, he hears a sound that might be two gunshots. In his waking haze, he may be mistaken but feels compelled to check it out. He leaves the book on the table, unbolts the front door, and steps onto the porch.

His sleepiness vanished as soon as the freezing breeze hit him like a snowball in the face. He slowly scans the forest downhill from the cabin toward the valley area where he thought the possible gunfire originated. He stands there briefly as his eyes become accustomed to the dark. He hears nothing except the wind through the trees; nothing can be seen in the darkness.

He turns to go inside but stops when he notices one set of footprints in the snow. They lead to the hitching post, where horse prints are also present. The tracks vanish into the darkness toward the pass out of sight. The prints indicate that a single rider came to the cabin and left again.

The rider appears to be long gone, but Sam still calls out, "Hey! Anybody there? Hello — " There is no response, just the wind in the trees. He figures he missed someone who stopped by earlier. "Damn, I must have been out back. Hope they come back tomorrow." He listens for another minute, then returns to the house to warm up and clean the kitchen.

While washing the dishes, he hears another shot. Since he is fully awake, he knows he heard a gunshot. Not too close, but close enough to require further investigation. He puts the can he was cleaning on the counter, grabs a coat and hat from the rack, and goes out the back door.

Crossing toward the barn for a better view of the valley, he looks for the source of the gunfire. Although the chill is biting, he stands there slightly longer than before. The snow is falling steadily, and the accumulation is evident.

Through the gaps in the trees, Sam can see down to the meadow that he and Wac ih a' crossed two days earlier. The light from the moon is broken by the clouds that move quickly across the sky. As he stares out into the valley, blanketed in snow, he catches a glimpse of two people running from where Creighton's cabin once stood across the meadow toward the creek. One of the runners looks like a child.

Sam unconsciously speaks aloud, "What the hell?"

He instinctively reaches to confirm that his Sig Pro .40, which he usually wears, is on his hip, but it is not there. He quickly looks around but sees nothing he can use for defense. He runs into the empty barn, looking for a weapon or shield. He hears two more shots, which compound the urgency of the situation. Seeing nothing else better, Sam grabs the handle of a broken hoe.

With no lights and the moon blocked by the clouds, he could easily get lost venturing into the forest, so he decides to drag the handle behind him to make a line to follow back to the cabin. Sam rushes down the hill to find the people running across the meadow. Because the snow is slippery and the darkness hides the rocks, he trips, stumbles, or falls several times while descending the path.

When he gets about 150 yards down the slope, in the distance, through the trees, Sam can see the Creighton's ranch house. In the excitement, he doesn't realize it shouldn't be there. Sam stops to see what's happening. The snow and distance make it hard to see clearly, but he can make out two backlit people in the ranch house window. One appears to have a handgun or something pointed out the window. Sam takes cover behind a tree. He hears a woman's shriek farther down the hill. Maintaining his cover, he continues down the hill.

The forest is eerily quiet except for Sam's steps in the snow, the wind rushing through the trees, and the faint gurgling of the creek. Sam's assessment of the situation is that the two people he saw in the window tried to harm the two people running in the meadow. He is sure that the runners need some help and that he and the runners need to keep hidden.

Sam, trying not to be discovered by the thugs at the ranch, hushed, he calls to the kids, "Hey! Can you hear me? – Where are you guys? – What's going on? – If you can hear me, call out." There is no response.

Sam continues his search further down the hill. In the darkness, he doesn't recognize the two lumps on the path until he gets close to them. When he realizes that the lumps are the runners, the shock causes him to blurt out loud, "Oh my God! What the hell?" Fortunately, his voice is lost in the wind. Rushing to his discovery, he finds Victoria and Austin curled up on the snow-covered ground. The kids are motionless.

When Sam reaches the kids, he drops the handle, falls to his knees, and shakes Victoria to see if she is alive. Victoria wakes with a start, but she has little energy to move. Sam shakes Austin. Austin does not respond. He checks and finds that neither seems to have been shot, but the boy has blood stains on the back of his shirt.

"Damn it!" Sam feels he may be too late to save the child. He checks for a carotid pulse on Austin. He has a pulse, but it is weak and slow. A survey of Austin reveals that he is soaked from head to toe, and ice is beginning to form on his clothes.

Next, he assesses Victoria. Her lower half is wet, and her eyes follow his movement, but her gaze is emotionless, and she does not speak.

His priority is stopping further heat loss, so he removes his coat and wraps Austin in it. Then he sits Victoria up to get her out of the snow and keep the ground from draining her heat.

Even though he clearly saw only two runners, Sam's thirty-plus years of medical training instinctively causes him to ask, "Is there anybody else?"

Victoria's cold mind works slowly, but finally, she understands the question and shakes her head.

Sam knows that Victoria is in shock. He looks directly into her eyes and talks deliberately and clearly so she can understand: "We have to get you to the cabin. I can't carry both of you, so you'll have to help me as much as possible. We only have to go a few hundred feet."

Sam helps Victoria to her feet and steadies her to keep her standing. Victoria is extremely weak and unsteady. Her legs and feet are numb from the cold and slow to respond to her wishes.

Sam grabs Victoria's forearm and puts her hand on his arm, "Come on. Grab on."

He then picks up Austin in a cradle carry. He encourages Victoria, "I'll do most of the work; just keep holding on. Let's go."

Sam carries Austin, dragging Victoria along, as she holds on to his arm. They follow the line in the snow that Sam had made with the tool handle. Victoria frequently stumbles as Sam struggles to move the kids to the cabin. They make it about a hundred feet before Victoria stumbles and falls. Sam, again, gets her to her feet. "You can do this! We have to keep going. I know it's hard. C'mon. We're so close now."

The snow is coming down heavily in almost white-out conditions. When they get to the corner of the barn, Victoria collapses once again. Sam looks at her, then looks at the door to the cabin.

"Victoria, You have to stay awake. I don't want to lose you both. I'm gonna need you to keep fighting."

Sam puts Austin down, adjusting the coat, where necessary, to keep him wrapped well. Using a fireman's carry, he picks up Victoria and rushes toward the cabin. Sam gets halfway to the cabin and looks back at Austin's motionless body. He picks up his pace as he struggles to get Victoria into the cabin.

[Warming Up]

Once in the cabin, he puts her down in the anteroom. He quickly removes her boots. He then stands Victoria up, removes her dress, and drops it to the floor. "Hurry, you have to help me here. We need to get your wet clothes off and get you warmed up. Stay awake. Keep working on this," Sam says, putting Victoria's hands on the buttons of her petticoat. "I'm gonna be right back."

Sam leaves Victoria propped up against the wall and rushes off. Victoria tries to remove her petticoat, but her fingers do not work well, and she is confused.

Sam runs out the back door to the corner of the barn where he left Austin. He picks him up and rushes back toward the cabin. "Stay with me, little guy. I'll get you warmed up soon. Don't give up."

Sam arrives back in the cabin carrying Austin. He kicks the door closed behind him and rushes over to the anteroom, where Victoria is sitting, propped up against the wall. He sees that she has made no progress in getting undressed. "Come on, girl. We need to get you in the tub."

Sam gently puts Austin down on the floor next to Victoria's feet, then, reaching over, checks the water temperature in the tub. Sam knows time is running out to warm them up, so he skips getting Victoria undressed for now. The warm water will still work to bring up her core temperature. "We'll get the rest off once you get a little warmer."

Sam gently helps Victoria into the tub. "This is gonna sting a little. You'll just have to endure it for a few minutes, then it'll feel pretty good."

Once Victoria is in the tub, Sam tilts her head back so her face doesn't fall into the water. "Girl. You have to keep your head up. I'll help you in just a minute. Just concentrate on keeping your face up."

Sam then begins to remove Austin's wet clothes. "Your turn, young man."

He first removes Austin's shirt. He sees the wounds left by the belt. Assessing the damage, Sam gently moves his fingers over the wounds, "You poor little guy." Austin does not flinch at the touch.

Sam finishes undressing Austin and puts him in the tub in Victoria's arms. The water has streaks of red emanating from Austin's injuries.

"Here." Sam puts Victoria's arms around Austin and tilts Austin's head back against Victoria's shoulder. "Hold on to him. Can you hear me? If you can hear me, open your eyes." Victoria does not respond. Sam needs Victoria to understand and respond, so he repeats himself sternly as a command. "Open your eyes!"

Victoria barely manages to open her eyes.

Sam is still speaking in a command-like voice, "Good. Now, keep his face out of the water. It's super important that you keep his face out of the water."

Sam is sweating. He takes off his hat and puts it on Victoria. Sam takes Victoria's hand, reassuring her, "This will be uncomfortable for a little while, but it's necessary. Okay? I've got some things to do here in the cabin, but I'm not going anywhere. I'll be right here. Okay?"

Victoria barely manages a slow head shake response - no.

Sam tries to leave the tub side, but Victoria will not release his hand. He pries his hand out of Victoria's grip and places his hand on top of hers. "I've got to put more water on the stove. I'm going to be right here. I'm going to stay and take care of you, but I need my hand so I can get you two warmed up."

Sam leaves the anteroom and crosses to the kitchen to the cook stove. He puts more wood in the stove and checks the temperature of the water. He glances back at the tub and sees they both have their heads out of the water.

Sam tries to keep his time away from his patients to a minimum. He dashes over to the heating stove and puts more wood in it, then rushes back to a position that affords him a view of the tub to ensure their heads are up. He then dashes into his room and grabs some towels, returning as quickly as possible to the tub. Neither one of the kids has moved at all.

Sam is frustrated that he is limited in his care options. His patients should be on supplemental oxygen and placed on cardiac monitors. Their core temperature should be brought back up in a controlled manner, but he can't even check core temperatures. He understands that he has to do the best he can with the resources available; nonetheless, their chances would be much better if they were in an emergency room.

Sam touches Victoria's hand: "See? I'm still here."

Sam rolls up two towels and places them around Victoria's and Austin's necks as improvised c-collars to help them keep their faces up. He takes the hat off Victoria and puts it on Austin. Sam wraps Victoria's head in a towel in place of the hat to help retain heat. "This will help keep your heat in."

Sam is making small talk, trying to keep Victoria's spirits up. "I know it's not fashionable, but it helps a lot."

Sam rests his hand on Victoria's to reassure her that he is still there. He checks Austin's carotid pulse and radial pulse. He then checks the capillary refill of Austin's fingers by gently squeezing the fingertip and the fingernail and quickly releasing them. The color returns slowly.

Sam speaks to Austin in a reassuring and calm tone. "A little slow, but not too bad. Not too bad." Next is the capillary refill of Austin's toes. Sam gently squeezes Austin's big toe, like he did his finger. There is no color return within the two-second acceptable range.

"Hey, big guy." Sam's voice is gentle and positive: "Keep fighting! We need to get better circulation to those toes."

Sam moves to the head of the tub and removes the hat from Austin. "Let's warm up that handsome head of yours."

Austin shivers as Sam dries his hair with one of the towels. Even though Austin is unconscious, Sam speaks to him as though Austin is awake. "Oh yeah! Shivering's a good thing. Keep it up, buddy."

Sam goes to the stove and puts hot water on a small towel. He then returns to the tub and drapes the hot towel over Austin's head. "Hey, little fella. Hang in there. Keep fighting. I need to see you open your eyes, buddy." He turns his attention to Victoria, "Hey girl, what's your name? Can you tell me your name?"

Victoria slowly shakes her head in the negative. Sam is desperately trying to get Victoria to start thinking again and to allow her to take warm fluids.

Sam hopes that his annoying insistence on getting her name will help revive her to a state that will allow her to drink without choking. "Hey, girl. I hate just to keep calling you 'girl.' I need you to tell me

your name. I'm going to the stove to get you some soup. When I get back, you have to tell me your name."

Constantly watching the tub occupants, Sam quickly goes to the stove, where there is a pot with boiling soup. He pours some into a cup, spilling some on the stovetop. Because Sam has the stove so hot, the soup instantly boils off. He returns to the tub with the soup.

He checks the temperature of the towel on Austin's head. It has cooled too much to help, so he removes it. He then grabs another towel and dries Austin's hair some more.

While wrapping a towel around Austin's head, Sam is speaking to Victoria, "Okay, I kept my side of the bargain. Now you have to tell me your name. I need to know who you are and who you are holding. Is that your brother?"

Victoria nods in the affirmative.

"Okay, at least we are getting somewhere. I'm sure your brother has a name, but it's probably not Buddy. But first, I need to know your name."

Victoria does not respond.

"Since you're not helping me out here, I'll just have to start from the beginning. Abigail?" Victoria shakes her head slowly. "Alice? Beth?" Victoria continues shaking her head slowly.

He tries to lighten the mood, "You know, this could take all night."

Sam checks the water temperature, then takes a bucket, dips some water from the tub, and takes it to the stove. He grabs the other bucket from the stove and pours it slowly and carefully into the tub, making sure not to burn the kids.

Sam persists in getting Victoria to say her name, "Okay, let's try this again. Where was I? Barbra?" Victoria shakes her head slowly. "You have to help me out here. Give it a try."

Victoria starts to say something, then stops.

Sam is pleased that she is trying' "Yeah. Try again."

In a hoarse, airy voice, Victoria manages to utter one syllable, "Vict."

"Vic?" Sam tries to coax Victoria into a higher level of consciousness by making her think and adding humor to their communication. "Vic sounds like a man's name. It certainly isn't Vic. A beautiful young lady must have an equally beautiful name – Vic." Victoria shakes her head. "Victor. Vicky?" Victoria stops shaking her head. "I must be getting close – Victoria. Are you Victoria?"

Victoria nods in the affirmative.

Sam is Happy to get an affirmative response. “Okay, Victoria. Since you can give me that much, you should be able to handle the soup. Do you think you can try it?”

Victoria gives a slight nod.

Sam wraps his hands around the cup to check the temperature, then carefully hands it to Victoria. He keeps his hands close to the cup for safety. “Now, take tiny sips. Start with just a taste; don’t choke. Okay?”

Victoria gives a slight, slow nod to indicate her understanding.

“This is to help get you warmed up from the inside too. You understand?”

Victoria nods a few times. Sam helps Victoria with the cup. Sam moves Austin slightly to allow Victoria to drink the soup. Austin shivers once in a while. Victoria sees him shiver and looks at Sam, worried.

Sam reaches up and gently puts his hand under Austin’s chin. He softly strokes his thumb across Austin’s cheek a couple of times. Reassuring Victoria, “Shivering is the body’s way of fighting the cold. He’s not out of the woods yet but has a fighting chance. He seems to be a tough little guy.”

Victoria nods once to verify his toughness, “Yes.” Sam smiles at the verbal response. He then checks the water temperature of the tub again. “One or two more water changes, and we’ll see if you’ve warmed up enough that we can get you into bed.”

Victoria nods a couple of times slowly. “Kay.” She looks at Austin’s expressionless face, and tears roll down her cheeks. She wonders how her little ten-year-old brother will ever recover from all that happened that night - his parents murdered, his assault and beatings, his self-defense, the emotional trauma of possibly killing someone and the physical stress of hypothermia.

Sam dries her tears with one of the towels he brought to the tub. He knows that kids have a better recovery rate than adults when it comes to hypothermia; however, he does not want to get Victoria’s hopes up too much. If her brother takes a turn for the worse after Sam says he will be fine, it could devastate Victoria.

Sam takes an honest, optimistic, but guarded approach to explaining Austin’s condition to Victoria: “We are doing all we can—and he’s responding. Don’t worry. I’ll be watching over him all night. There’s no guarantee, but I think we got to him on time. And, if so, his recovery may take a while.”

Sam gets up, grabs the empty bucket, and dips water out of the tub. He then crosses to the stove, puts the bucket on the stove, takes the bucket that was on the stove, and carefully pours it into the tub.

Now that things have stabilized a bit, Sam can sense that his adrenalin level is decreasing even though his anxiety about the perpetrators discovering their location is high. He can now take the time to focus on securing the cabin as best he can.

He walks to the back door, cross-bolts it, and makes sure the curtain completely covers the door's window. As he walks around the cabin, checking the shutters and bolting the front door, he turns off all but one lamp, which he keeps on low.

Sam uses the time between stoking the fires and vigil over Victoria and Austin to piece together what he knows and better understand the situation. He knows he is on the right side of this conflict but has no idea what it entails. Whatever the situation, his instincts compel him to protect the kids.