

PDB Name: Heroics by Kristine Kathryn Rus
Creator ID: REAd
PDB Type: TEXT
Version: 0
Unique ID Seed: 0
Creation Date: 8/16/1973
Modification Date: 8/16/1973
Last Backup Date: 1/1/1970
Modification Number: 0

=====
Heroics
by Kristine Kathryn Rusch
=====

Copyright (c)2002 by Kristine Kathryn Rusch
First published in Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, April 2002

Fictionwise
www.Fictionwise.com

Mystery/Crime

NOTICE: This work is copyrighted. It is licensed only for use by the original purchaser. Duplication or distribution of this work by email, floppy disk, network, paper print out, or any other method is a violation of international copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines and/or imprisonment.

He thought: He had gotten it all wrong.

His body no longer worked the way it wanted to. He had read that a man with a gunshot wound -- a simple one, perhaps a slug going through the fleshy part of the thigh, missing everything vital -- could die from the systemic shock alone. He had always ignored that, thinking his heroes could survive anything.

He could survive anything.

Sobel lay face-down in a pile of leaves, the smell of decaying vegetation rich in his nostrils. The ground was cold and damp, the chill seeping through his flannel shirt and the knees of his jeans. His feet were twisted awkwardly, but he felt no pain there, nothing except the throbbing in his arm, trapped beneath him like a wounded animal.

It was beginning to rain, big fat droplets landing intermittently. Water was sliding off his face, reminding him that he was alive, that he had to take action.

He didn't want to sit up.

But he had to. Go back up the road, flag someone down. The car was dead now, and he'd called 911 from his cell, although he hadn't had time to tell them the location. He'd left the connection open -- they could triangulate, right? He'd seen that in a Harrison Ford movie -- but he wasn't sure it would do any good.

Nothing would do any good.

The rain had stopped suddenly, as if its only duty had been to rouse him. Being unconscious -- semi-conscious, stunned, shocked, whatever the term was (and he was usually so good with terms) -- had probably saved his life.

He'd heard the footsteps around him, felt the boot in his side, nudging him, but he hadn't reacted. Couldn't react. And so he'd been left for dead.

He rolled on his good side, felt his arm flop against his stomach, and the agony, so sharp that the world went white for a moment. The first man's shove had sent him over the embankment, down the hill -- he remembered soaring, swearing, thinking of Sarah, alone up there with them -- and then the ground rushing toward him. He put his arms out to brace himself, to break the fall, underestimating both his own weight and the speed he'd been dropping. He'd heard the snap -- snap_s_ -- three at least -- and then the pain that blotted out the urgency, the fear, the anger.

He thought of pushing himself up, imagined climbing the embankment like Jackson Ross, his fictional alter ego, and saving Sarah. Jackson would have rolled on his good side immediately, would have used the broken limb to pull himself up the hill despite the pain.

Sobel would do that -- after he rested for a moment.

He had no idea how long he had been un- or semi-conscious. Long enough for them to climb down the hill, check him for dead and leave, presumably with Sarah in tow. Why would they want her? An innocent three-year-old with eyes as big as the world. Not his, not yet. Not legally anyway. The adoption papers were ready and would be signed the same day he married JoAnn. Instant family. Take one, add water, and suddenly --

Oh, he was not well.

He pushed himself into a sitting position, and felt his closed Swiss Army knife press against his left thigh. For a moment that was the only sensation, and then he realized he was dizzy. The blood staining the leaves; the way his breath came shallowly; the clammy feel of his skin all added to his queasiness. He touched his face, felt stickiness, knew that was where the blood was coming from. Cuts, bruises. He probably had them all over. He was in shock, no doubt about it. He was in shock and he probably wasn't thinking clearly.

But to stay here was wrong.

He braced himself with his good hand and got to his feet, swaying slightly. The air smelled of smoke -- fall in Oregon -- and the sky was dark gray. It was probably going to start raining again.

He sighed and looked up the embankment. Steep, even with two hands. There was no easy path. He would have to climb.

Part of him wanted to sit down, wait for someone to come to him. Surely they would see the car, abandoned, and call someone. The state police would check the plate, find out it belonged to him, try to call his home, maybe try to see him. JoAnn was in New York, spending a couple thousand dollars of his fortune to buy a wedding dress so secret that he couldn't even be in the same city with her, and she had left Sarah with him.

For safekeeping.

He closed his eyes against the thought, and the swaying grew worse. His stomach flipped over -- nausea, unfamiliar and unwelcome, adding to his discomfort.

Cars stayed abandoned on this road for days. He had no idea if anyone would think to run the plate, and if they did, he doubted they would think to look for him down here. For all they knew, he was at home. The message on his answering machine said it all:

Yes, you've reached Max Sobel, and you should know that I never pick up this phone unless I recognize the voice speaking into my machine. If I don't recognize you, I won't call you back, no matter how many times you leave a message. And claiming an emergency won't help. I learned long ago that an unlisted number doesn't protect you from unwanted calls, but a well-screened answering machine does. If you really need to reach me and you don't know me, try it the old-fashioned way -- by mail.

He had used that message for years, and never regretted it until now.

The embankment. Sarah. He had to wrench his mind away from the other tangents. And here he'd thought that injuries made the mind focus. Laser-beam

clarity, he had once said in one of his books. Not this never-ending muzziness, the feeling that he was suddenly wrapped in cotton.

Whatever happened to adrenaline-soaked miracles? Shouldn't he be running up the hill now, desperate to find Sarah?

He took a deep shuddery breath, and thought, *_You can do it._* A mantra, repeated over and over. *_You can do it. You can do it. You can -- you will -- do it. They had Sarah, and God knew what they would do to her._*

The embankment was wet too, the ground soft. He stuck his right foot into the dirt experimentally, found that it gave easily. He could create his own stairs. Water seeped into his leather shoes, but he didn't care. He had to get up to the car. Once he was there, he would figure out what to do.

Right foot, left foot, right hand clawing the mud. The movements slightly uncoordinated. He hadn't realized how much the use of his other arm added to his balance. It bobbed against his side, a long aching morass that sometimes became sharp and stabbing if the arm bounced too hard.

He made himself focus on the climb. Foot, hand, foot, pull. Foot, hand, foot, pull. The soft mud between his fingers, the damp socks against his toes, the sound of a car whooshing by above him.

He would make it by sheer will alone. Damn Jackson Ross. Damn his imagination. Sobel might not be his most famous character, but he was strong. He had to be.

Sarah was out there.

They had caught him off guard. Two cars, one following closely from Grand Ronde, the other crossing the line in the Corridor, forcing him to either drive off the road or hit the on-coming car. He'd been trapped by the hill on one side, and the embankment on the other, the narrow road curving ahead of him and behind. There was a small shoulder -- the only measure of safety -- and he took it almost without thinking.

He'd locked the doors and speed-dialed the hands-free phone on the dash, keeping the car running. They'd boxed him in, behind and in front, leaving him no room to turn on the narrow highway, no escape.

He should have hit them, but he'd been thinking of Sarah. *_Is this a game, Max?_* she asked, her little voice quivering. Even she had known something was wrong, strapped into the child-seat in the back, watching the men approach.

At the last minute, he'd decided to hit the cars -- they were all stopped. He was afraid his airbag would deploy, but he'd deal with it. He had to.

As he shoved the car into reverse -- a mistake, he knew now, because they saw the lights -- the men who had gotten out of the car behind him shot out his tires. The explosions echoed in the afternoon stillness, making Sarah scream.

The 911 operator answered right at that point, and he was trying to drive even with the shot-out tires, trying to talk to her, trying to keep the car between him and the men walking toward it. Sarah was crying by then, and he couldn't see a mile-marker. He didn't know exactly where he was, and the stupid operator was trying to figure out jurisdiction of all things, when he and Sarah might have been shot.

Then they got to the door, used the keyless entry to unlock the door. It shouldn't have worked but it did, making the little click-click as the locks rose. Sarah was crying as the smallest man opened the rear passenger door and pulled her out, car seat and all.

Nooooo! Max had shouted, reaching for her, then he felt cold air as his door opened, and a gun at the back of his head.

Foot, hand, foot. So much pain it was crawling along his back and down his spine, his injured arm a dead weight. He'd never known his limbs were so heavy. He was nearly to the top. The thought made him giddy, and he nearly lost his balance. He clung to the dirt, digging his feet in harder, feeling the leather of his left shoe giving.

A diesel truck went by, exhaling exhaust, rumbling the road. Didn't

anyone see his shot-up car? Hadn't anyone thought to stop, get out, and help? Would he have written it that way?

He pulled himself up, saw the reassuring dark blue of his Lexus -- a rich man's family car, JoAnn had said, laughing -- found himself wishing he had a new one, with the on-board guidance system, or the Cadillac he'd liked -- the one JoAnn had hated -- with its night vision and On-Star system. He would have been pinpointed then. No one would have had to hone in on his phone signal. They would have found him, quickly and easily.

But despite the Hollywood money, the increased book sales thanks to three successful Jackson Ross movies, Sobel had still been fiscally conservative. He'd seen no reason to buy a new car when the old one was paid off and worked just fine.

How was he supposed to know that it was going to be important?

As he reached the top, he lost his hold and fell forward, catching himself on his good hand. His bad one brushed the gravel and sent a wave of pain through him. He blinked against it, feeling it, and not letting it slow him down. Determination was all he had.

A car rounded the corner -- red, four-door, new. It passed him quickly, not even slowing down to gawk. A woman's face stared at him from the back window. She was frowning as if she disapproved. Did she think him drunk? On a weekday afternoon? Whatever happened to compassion? When did people start disapproving of a man on his hand and knees, injured on the side of the road?

He managed to push himself up and head toward the car. It looked as wounded as he felt, leaning awkwardly on its shot-out tires. The doors were closed, although he remembered leaving his open, and there was no trace of Sarah inside.

His stomach churned. Why would they take her? Had they followed him from Portland? He'd spent the night after taking JoAnn to the airport, done a bit of research at Powell's, and left Sarah with a close friend who often babysat for them. He didn't notice anyone following him after he picked Sarah up. When they had lunch, he saw nothing out of the ordinary in the restaurant, although he wasn't sure how he would have noticed. Coping with a three-year-old who was determined to get pie first took most of his energies.

This didn't seem random. And that scared him more than anything.

He reached the car. It felt like safety, but safety was elusive. He'd always known that, but not viscerally, not like now. He peered inside, saw the stuffed dog he'd bought Sarah days ago, felt his heart twist. How she looked at him. How she trusted him.

God knew what they were doing with her. Doing to her.

And why.

His briefcase was still in the back. He pulled open the back driver's side door, reached in, felt his left arm sway, prayed it wouldn't hit anything. Fingers brushed against the edge, but he was getting used to the pain. Or maybe he was numb. Blessedly numb.

As long as he held onto his mind.

He opened the briefcase, saw his laptop, his business papers, his extra credit card. And his cell phone. His pager. How strange. They should have taken everything, shot out the hands-free phone, the ignition, made sure he was stranded.

But they hadn't.

He picked up the cell, speed-dialed 911, identified himself as the man who had called before. He probably should have just spoken to the hand-held. He wondered if the men had even bothered to cut the connection.

"Stay there, sir," the dispatch said. "The county sheriff and an ambulance will be there momentarily."

How, he wondered, when they didn't know where there was? He supposed it didn't matter. The highway was the only way through the Van Duzer Corridor. They probably figured they'd stumble on him soon enough.

"They took Sarah." His voice sounded thick and muzzy to his own ears.

"Are you injured, sir?" Apparently the dispatch had picked up on that.

Maybe he sounded worse than he thought.

"Broken arm, I think. But Sarah -- "

"Sarah is?"

"My daughter. Nearly. I'm adopting her. I just got the papers." Not relevant. He usually was relevant when he spoke. Focus. Focus.

"How old is she?"

"Three."

He spun around, realizing that the dispatch was keeping him talking until the help arrived. His brain was working slowly, but it was working. He stared at the tire tracks on the gravel, at the road. No other cars had passed. Just the few he'd heard, marring the oil path....

Oil path. From the gravel. He tracked it, saw a variegated puddle exactly where the back car had been parked. It had been leaking oil.

"...sir? Are you all right?"

Apparently she'd been talking to him. He hadn't even heard.

"Wait," he said. "I see something."

"Something?"

He left the line open -- old-fashioned habits died hard -- and walked beside the trail, realizing almost too late that he had gone on the highway without looking. Focus. He had to focus. If he wasn't clear, he wouldn't be of any help.

Why was the oil trail crossing the road horizontally? It headed straight toward the hill. It didn't make an obvious U-turn.

"Sir?" the tiny voice of the dispatch -- female (didn't they ever hire men in these positions?) -- sounded panicked.

"Just a minute," he said. "I see something."

Which was what he said before, but he didn't want to tell her, not yet. He followed the trail to the south face of the hill, onto the gravel shoulder, where the oil became black rock. A wide U-turn then. He felt a deep disappointment combined with slight wooziness.

This time, going back to his car, he would be cautious. He walked to the edge of the curve, looked east, saw no cars.

And no oil trail.

"Sir?"

He didn't answer. He was spinning, looking for the oil. It had to be here. It had to be --

The road was almost invisible, cutting through the trees. It looked like a path, overgrown and neglected, but it was wide enough for cars. Trees and shrubs grew over the road, but some of the branches were broken. He jogged toward them, then quit almost immediately as the pain in his bobbing arm made him gasp.

"Sir?"

The oil was there, black and familiar, like a trail of bread crumbs. Follow me. Follow me.

"Sir?" the poor dispatch sounded panicked now. Funny, he should be the one who was panicked, but he felt strangely calm.

He brought the phone to his ear -- her voice louder there, and the ambient noise of her job, faint voices, beeping -- and briefly wondered what it was like to be her, sitting in a small cubicle, headphones on, mike to the mouth, monitoring emergencies all day long.

"Sir? If you're there -- "

"I found something," he said. "One of the cars was leaking oil. It went up a side road just near my car. On the other side of the highway. I'm going to follow it."

"No, sir. Stay there. When the sheriff arrives -- "

"It might be too late. Sarah's alone with them. She's only three. I'm heading up. I'm bringing the phone." As if that made it better. He wasn't sure what he could do. Wasn't sure if he would do it if it weren't for the fact he had back-up coming. Then realized he would. He couldn't leave her up there, alone, those wide brown eyes scanning for him, pudgy hands waving, demanding.

If she were awake.

If she were alive.

He closed his eyes, swayed again. Water. He was probably dehydrated. He crossed the road, went back to his car, put on the flashers so that they wouldn't miss him (he was being careless about too many details; a warning sign. He knew it, but he wasn't going to stop), and then reached into his briefcase, made a small map pointing the way to that road. He didn't trust anything to fate, not this time. Not with Sarah at stake.

A truck roared by, spattering him with dust and gravel. Exhaust fumes floated past him, adding to his dizziness. He reached across the back seat, grabbed the bottle of water he'd hardly touched on the drive, worked the cap off with his good hand, and drank. The water was warm, but it tasted wonderful, better than water ever had before. He made himself drink all of it, and as he did, his gaze fell on one of JoAnn's scarves, crumpled under the seat.

He let out a little sigh. It would help, that scarf. It wasn't as good as a gun, but it was something. A sign maybe.

Then he smiled at himself. He used to be too rational to believe in signs. Jackson Ross never believed in signs. But then, Jackson Ross would have already been blundering up the hill, gun out, ready to take down an army one-handed -- and doing it, through ingenuity and sheer balls.

Sobel managed to pry the scarf free, its silk edge feeling fragile beneath his fingertips. But silk was a strong fiber, right? He seemed to remember that from his reading. Silk was one of those miracle fibers.

He hoped.

With his teeth and his good hand, he managed to tie a knot in the scarf. Then he struggled to get it over his head. That was harder than he'd imagined -- the little jolts of pain making him gasp. Once the sling was on, sliding his arm into place was even more difficult. At one point, he had to lean against the car and force himself to breathe evenly to keep from passing out.

Once it was done, though, he felt an odd relief. His shoulder wasn't supporting the dead weight any more. Now his back and neck were. And his arm felt halfway decent in this position. Maybe he would make it after all.

He turned, looked at the road, the oil trail. Visions of Deliverance -- the movie, not the book (he was ashamed to admit, even to himself, that he hadn't read the book) -- rose in his mind. But he was going to go.

She was just a little girl.

He looked both ways, crossed, patted his right jeans pocket, felt the weight of the cell phone. He didn't remember putting it inside, but it was there, bobbing against his thigh. His security. His link to the outside world.

Maybe if he just waited a moment longer, he'd get back up. He'd get help.

But he knew how far it was from any town. The county was wide and long, with only a few state police cars -- usually divided between Highways 101 and 18, trying to catch speeders on the dangerous narrow roads. It would take a long time for someone to come for him.

Too long.

He staggered across the road, then straightened. He had to be able to walk. He had to be able to fight. He had to be able to defend himself and Sarah in some way.

If only he had a gun.

He reached the side road and slipped through the opening in the trees.

The road had once been covered with gravel, but most of it had worn away with time and traffic. He suspected this had been a logging road. Once the trees were cleared, no one used it any more.

Except the idiots who took Sarah.

There were weeds in the middle of the path, bent and broken by the passage of at least one vehicle. The oil trail coated a few of them, still saying, Follow me. Follow me.

He did follow, keeping to the side of the road so that he didn't disturb the oil trail. He wanted the police to be able to follow it.

He had never been off the main highway. It was quieter here, different, light filtering through the trees, the smell of pine and loam. There was a damp scent here, as if the ground never really dried completely, a reminder that this part of the state was rainforest in the purest sense of the term.

The road twisted around a second growth tree, tall and stately, towering above him like a beacon. There was a rock in the center of the path -- more of a boulder really -- and he stopped to inspect it.

Something metal had scraped against it, not once but twice, and there was black goo along the side. More oil. The rock was pointed on one edge. Cars had been this way, driving over the rock, figuring they could clear it.

He wondered if the scrapes had caused damage to one of the car's underbelly -- if what he was taking for an oil leak was something else, something that would really incapacitate a car quicker than the drip-drip-drip of the oil pan.

He hoped. He needed a break here. He needed something.

At least his arm wasn't jostling any more. But he was beginning to feel desperate. He couldn't see the highway. He couldn't even hear vehicles passing -- if there had been any. Birds chirruped above him, apparently oblivious to his passage. Or maybe they didn't care.

Sobel could hear his own breathing, coarse and ragged, and smell the acrid scent of his own sweat.

He needed a plan.

He couldn't go in, guns blazing. He couldn't attack, even if he had both arms. He was a middle-aged man, about thirty pounds overweight and out of shape, a man who spent the last twenty years sitting on his ass, typing comfortably, making up adventures that he had never -- could never -- experience. He'd fought as a boy, but only defensively, arms up as the school bullies pounded him for their own perverse joy.

He'd won one of those fights, kicking, jabbing, connecting accidentally, fighting dirty, giving up fighting fair. No one fought fair and won.

No one.

He'd have to grab her, bring her back down this trail, and they'd be after him. They'd have their cars, and their guns, and their confidence, and he'd have a broken arm and a little girl who was scared out of her mind.

If she was still alive.

It was that thought which kept him going forward. Maybe he couldn't rescue her. Maybe that wasn't his function. Maybe his function was to keep them from killing her -- keep her alive until the police arrived.

He fingered the cell phone with his good hand. He had to make good mental notes of this trip. Then he'd call and say what he found -- if he found anything.

He stopped at the next corner. He had no idea how far he'd gone. All he saw up ahead was dappled sunlight and more trees. Something rustled in the grass near him -- a small sound. A bird, maybe, or a squirrel. Nothing threatening.

Nothing that could toss him over an embankment again.

He frowned, realizing that something was different.

It took him a moment to figure out what it was. Stumps. Stumps, buried in the underbrush, moss and ferns growing on top of the old, perfect cuts. Stumps everywhere, and beside them, willow trees at least twenty years old.

He had been right. This was an old logging road, unused since the early eighties, gravel gone to storms and rain and trucks that once combed this land. Forgotten by everyone except the handful of people who'd worked it.

He felt a thin excitement. The road would only go as far as the stumps. The loggers had no reason to go deeper into the forest than that. Now he had a destination. The end of the road. He'd go to the end of the road and turn around.

Sobel moved into the weeds at the roadside, noting without irony that a big part of him wanted to find nothing on this road. Even though he was searching for Sarah and the men who took her, part of him wanted the nobility of the search without the messiness of finding them.

Jackson Ross wouldn't have felt this way.

Sweat trickled down Sobel's back even though the day was cool. His feet crunched in the weeds, and near him a bird twittered, unconcerned that he was nearby.

He rounded a corner and saw the cars.

Three cars -- the two that had boxed him in and one other -- a black SUV, new, and parked to the side.

The getaway car.

Why hadn't they left yet? What were they waiting for? His stomach churned. What if the third car wasn't a getaway car at all, but belonged to someone else -- reinforcements, someone as tough as the others?

It didn't matter. He had back-up. The sheriff was coming. The state police were on the way. It wouldn't take them long to find him.

If they knew where he was.

He didn't see anyone near the cars, but they had to be somewhere. He took one more step forward and then saw the cabin. That word was too grand for the dilapidated building, but he didn't know what else to call it. Shack implied something smaller. This had once been someone's home, but it had fallen into disrepair. The roof was half off, the porch was crooked, and the stairs leading up to it were missing.

They had to be inside.

Sarah had to be inside.

He needed to get to her, but first he had to make sure their rescuers could find them.

He backed down the road quietly, going around the corner, praying that no one had seen him. His arm throbbled; he could feel his heartbeat echo in the wound.

He went halfway down, near the beginning of the stumps, where he believed no one could hear him, and pulled out his cell phone, flipping it open.

The line to the left of the tiny screen, the line which showed him how good the reception was, was barely visible. Great. He'd have to go down to the highway to get good reception -- and that would be a waste of time, not to mention a serious drain on his energy.

He dialed 911 anyway, hoping he'd get through, wondering if the new dispatch knew about him as well. If he didn't get through, he'd go down to the road, but he'd risk it here, now, and then he'd go back to the cars.

By then, he'd have a plan.

"Nine-one-one," a female voice said, and then got lost in static.

He identified himself, hoping she could hear him, hoping she knew who he was and what his situation was. He should have left the line open, but he hadn't wanted voices to come through, hadn't wanted any unusual noise as he hurried through the trees.

A voice mingled in the static, something about staying by the car. Good. She knew who he was then, knew what he was about.

He told her, quickly and as quietly as he dared, about going up the logging road and finding the building and the cars.

"Excellent." Suddenly her voice was as clear as if she were beside him. "Now return to the highway, Mr. Sobel. Our officers are nearly there."

"No," he said. "I haven't seen Sarah yet. I have to find her."

"Let us do that, Mr. Sobel. You could get -- " Her voice disappeared in a crackle of static, and he used that moment to sever the connection. He dropped the phone back in his pocket and felt it bump against the fabric, slamming against his thigh like the Swiss Army knife had earlier.

His breath caught in his throat as the plan came to him. He reached across, fumbling in his left pocket with his right hand, cursing softly as his

forearm knocked against the sling, jostling it.

At least the pain had eased. Keeping the arm elevated made it less of a liability.

His fingers found his Swiss Army knife and pulled it out of his pocket. He did owe this moment to Jackson Ross and mentally he saluted his character. Since Sobel had come up with Ross, he'd carried a Swiss Army knife.

A man has to be prepared for anything, he used to say.

And now he was.

He pushed open the blade, and looked at it. Shiny with lack of use, it looked sharp and impressive. Then he folded it back into the knife. Last thing he wanted to do was walk with the blade extended. His balance was bad enough from the injury that he could trip, and hurt himself worse than he'd hurt the thugs who'd taken Sarah.

Still, he clutched the knife in his right hand. The bird had stopped twittering. He wondered if that meant it had noticed him or it had seen someone else.

He tried to retrace his own steps, so that he wasn't knocking down new weeds. He also kept himself a little lower to the ground, wishing he'd blend in more with the trees than he did.

As he rounded the now-familiar corner, he let out the breath he hadn't known he'd been holding. No one was around. He couldn't even hear voices from inside the building.

For the first time, he wondered what they were doing in there. Waiting until the search had moved on -- to Grand Ronde or McMinnville or maybe even Portland. If he hadn't seen that oil trail, he would have thought that they had driven Sarah out of the Coastal Mountain Range.

But why stay here? How long would they wait? Wouldn't the police continue searching for them?

Then he remembered how shorthanded the county was. Even if the state police brought personnel to help, they wouldn't be enough to cover every square inch. And even if they were on the ball, they wouldn't be stopping SUVs. They'd be looking for the cars that Sobel had described, hoping to find one with a little terrified girl inside.

If they waited, they would be less suspicious. Their getaway would be much easier.

His grip tightened on the knife. So close to disaster. One oil trail away from losing Sarah forever.

He made himself go slow. This much he'd learned from all his novel research: the man who panicked -- the man who felt he had to do everything quickly -- was the man who died.

He had no intention of dying, not on this old logging road, in front of a dilapidated cabin. He was going to find Sarah, and he was going to make certain that the police could rescue her.

Sobel crouched as he approached the cars. He moved back onto the road, so that he could walk as silently as possible. His injured arm bounced against his chest, but for the first time that day, the pain didn't matter.

He was focussed.

He moved to the SUV first. Its wheels were large and state-of-the-art. It would take all the strength he had to damage them. To hedge his bet, he hunkered down beside the wheel farthest from the cabin and opened the air pressure valve. He threw the cap into the weeds. Then he gripped the knife in his good hand and jammed it into the tire.

It felt good to slam the knife repeatedly into something -- a way of working of the adrenaline, the pent-up anger and frustration, the fear buried beneath all the bravado.

When that tire was sufficiently ruined, he did the same thing to the front tire, amazed that no one had come out of the cabin to investigate the chunk-chunk-chunking sounds he was making. Maybe they couldn't hear them. He couldn't hear any conversation from the cabin. They probably couldn't hear much outside.

Bits of galvanized rubber hung off the blade of his knife. He glanced at the other cars. He had to destroy their tires too, but he wasn't sure doing the wheels would be enough. He had to make certain that no one got away from this cabin. It was the only thing -- the best thing -- he could do.

Only he knew nothing about cars except the basics -- how to check his own oil, where to put in the coolant, when to change a fan. He certainly had no idea how to disable one, not from the inside anyway. And even if he managed to pop the hood, someone would hear that. People's ears were always attuned to the closing of a car door, the slamming of a hood.

Not to mention the fact that he'd probably be seen.

He slid under the SUV, wincing as the movement tugged his flannel shirt tighter around his shoulders. The make-shift sling fell sideways, and he banged his arm against the ground. The pain made him whimper -- an involuntary sound that he would have taken back if he could. He lay still for a moment, feeling the damn dizziness return.

He made himself exhale, then inhale. Slowly. Measuredly. Trying to control each breath, and get rid of the dizziness. After a moment, it passed. He found himself looking up at tubes and wires and pipes -- most of which he had no idea what they were to or from.

So he cut the tubes and stabbed a hole in the flimsiest of the pipes -- the last thing he wanted to do was break off his blade. Fluid dribbled out of one of the tubes. Then he severed a few wires and froze as a thought hit him.

What if one of the wires went to a security system?

His hand stilled near the underbelly of the SUV. Well, if it did, he hadn't hit it yet. And who set the security alarm on a car parked in the middle of nowhere? Paranoid businessmen, maybe, but certainly not crooks.

As if he knew this for a fact. The only crooks he'd ever known were the ones he'd read about or the ones he'd conjured in his imagination. These were not imaginary crooks. These were people who had shot his car all to hell, tossed him over an embankment, and then kicked him to see if he was dead.

They were all too real. And all too ruthless.

With his feet, he eased himself out from under the SUV. He disabled the other two cars, always working on the side of the cars that hid him from the cabin itself, careful when he slid underneath not to whack his arm again.

When he finished, he felt as if he had run a marathon. He was dripping with sweat, covered in some kind of noxious goo from one of the tubes, and he ached all over. Still no cops. He wondered if they were having trouble finding him or if he had lost all track of time.

He needed to get back to the road, to tell them where Sarah was, and to have them get her free. He was in no shape for it. He knew that now.

He knew he should go down immediately, but he couldn't quite bring himself to it. He had to look inside the cabin. He had to know if she was dead or alive.

If she was dead -- if she even looked dead -- he would launch himself inside that building and used his knife to carve up whomever he saw.

The anger propelled him forward.

He stayed to the side of the dirt driveway. It sloped downhill. The back of the cabin was a mess of ruined furniture, rotted firewood, and non-compostable trash -- plastic milk containers, beer bottles, and the remains of plastic garbage bags. He avoided the piles, knowing if he knocked anything over, someone would come for him.

Then he eased around the side of the cabin.

Overgrown rhododendrons covered the closest window. Calla lilies the size of children lined this side of the building. There was no way for him to get close without going on the porch.

He wasn't willing to do that.

He crossed behind the cabin again, hoping the other side was less overgrown. It wasn't. This side had hydrangeas and some weird evergreen plant that used to be popular as decoration around houses in the 1960s. Someone had loved this place once. A long, long, long time ago.

The porch was his only option. The wood was rotted on this side, and the railing had long ago fallen away. He wondered if it would even hold his weight. He crouched down, testing it, and felt the soft, spongy wood move.

It would be a risk. Would seeing Sarah be worth that risk? He wasn't sure. But he had to try.

He eased himself onto the soft wood, careful to keep his head down. The wood groaned. He froze and the wind -- a wind he hadn't noticed until now -- swirled around him. He thought it carried voices.

Maybe he was finally close enough to hear. No doors opened, though, and no one came for him.

Slowly, he raised his good hand and touched the windowsill. It was slimy beneath his fingers. Slimy and ruined. He doubted it would take any pressure at all.

He moved his hand to the side of the building, then braced himself and leaned upward. The rotted porch shifted beneath him, groaning again, and he felt his bad arm ache. If he slipped, he fall toward his left side and he wouldn't be able to catch himself.

He would be trapped by his own pain, unable to rise, a perfect victim for the men inside.

Still, the compulsion to see if Sarah was alive was greater than any disaster scenario his fertile brain could come up with. He dug his shoes into the building's side and got just enough leverage to raise himself up.

The window was covered on the outside with old dirt and cobwebs. He could just barely peer inside. The men were sitting around a table. Two of them were playing cards. The third was holding Sarah.

She had one tiny arm around his neck, and she was chattering like she always did. Then, as Sobel watched, she flung her head back and laughed.

This was not a terrified child. This was a child completely comfortable with the people around her.

And Sarah hated strangers.

At that moment, his foot slipped. He lost his leverage, his weight landing firmly on the rotted porch. The wood bounced beneath him, and for a minute, he thought it would break off. But with that rubbery movement common to ruined wood, it simply rocked for a minute before easing to a stop.

His heart was pounding so loud, he wondered if the men inside could hear it. His breathing was short and ragged and he didn't want to slip off the porch for fear he'd fall and lose whatever advantage he had.

Maybe if he just went inside and asked for her. She seemed comfortable with them, those men who had tried to kill him.

Something was going on here, something he didn't entirely understand. Something that all his imagination and his own desire to be as cool as the hero of his own books wouldn't lead him to.

Wasn't that what all of this was about, anyway? His struggle up the road, his refusal to listen to the 911 dispatch although she made sense? Wasn't it about his desire to prove himself to himself? Prove that he could be just like Jackson Ross?

He hadn't been thinking about Sarah at all. What could a man with a broken arm do, besides make things worse? She was too young to understand that a fall of the embankment might kill him, but she would know, if she saw him shot, that he was dead.

The best thing he could do now was go back to the road, and direct the sheriff up here. Sobel had disabled the cars; no one was going anywhere.

He only wished he could get Sarah free. If he had the ability to turn into Jackson Ross for just five minutes, he would. He would go in, get her out, and be down the hill with her before her captors -- if indeed that was the accurate term for them -- knew she was gone.

But he couldn't, except in his own imagination, and at this moment, his imagination was a liability.

So he carefully slid off the porch. The wood rocked and groaned behind him, but he tried to ignore it as he moved forward, hugging the side of the

building as best as he could go.

As he went around the mound of garbage, he heard a twig snap. He froze. Something moved beside him, and then there was a gun in his face.

Not just one gun, but half a dozen guns. The sheriff and his deputies, their brown uniforms blending with the woods, stood in the driveway, all their weapons pointed at him.

So the calvary had finally arrived.

Staring down the barrel of a gun, held by a macho grim-faced boy barely old enough to vote, was a lot more unnerving than Sobel ever thought it would be. It took all of his self-possession to keep from blithering the classic "Don't shoot! Don't shoot!"

Instead, he took a deep breath and hoped he would be able to sound a lot calmer than he felt. "I'm Max Sobel," he said. "I'm the one who called this in."

Still the boy deputy with the big gun didn't move. One of the other deputies did, approaching slowly, his gun up, always keeping Sobel's hands in sight.

The second deputy reached him in a matter of seconds, reached into his pockets, and pulled out both the cell phone and the knife. His gaze met Sobel's. The man's eyes were blue, direct, and emotionless.

Sobel said, "Sarah's inside the cabin. She doesn't look injured. They're holding her. She seems to know them."

The sheriff, an older man Sobel had seen around town, said, "Bring him."

The deputy took Sobel's good arm and pulled him forward. The other deputy kept the gun trained on him. The rest of the group disappeared into the trees.

Sobel half walked, half stumbled with the deputy. They went down the road a ways, past the corner. The sheriff was standing there. He was a beefy man, but most of the beef came from muscle, not flab. He had the square-jawed look of confidence most real cops had. The deputies formed a triangle behind him, like a team ready to charge if anything went wrong.

"I'm not going to yell at you," the sheriff said tightly, "even though you're being an absolute ass. You know how most civilians get killed in police actions? By interfering. By thinking they can be a hero. Looks like you got a hero complex, Sobel."

Sobel felt his cheeks flush. "You would never have found her, never have found this road."

"We haven't done anything yet. Right now, I'm going to be short one man because he's going to stay here and make sure you don't do anything stupid."

The sheriff started up the road.

"Wait," Sobel said. "I got to see in that cabin. I know where everyone is."

The sheriff stopped. He seemed to be considering Sobel's words.

"Please," Sobel said. "You can yell at me later for everything I did wrong, but use my information. For Sarah's sake."

The sheriff turned. His dark eyes sparkled with anger. "Make it quick."

Sobel described the interior, the way that they were holding Sarah, the fact that two of them were playing cards. "It looks to me like they're waiting for something, or someone, or a time."

The sheriff grunted, not agreeing or disagreeing.

"And you should probably know that I disabled their cars."

The sheriff's eyebrows rose a little, displaying surprise.

"I destroyed two tires on each and cut up lines underneath. Even if they get out of that cabin, they're not going to get off this road -- by car anyway."

The sheriff studied Sobel for a moment, then nodded. With his right hand, he signaled his men to follow. All of them went except the deputy who had Sobel by the arm.

"Can we at least watch?" Sobel asked. "I want to know if Sarah's going

to be all right."

"No," the deputy said. "We're going back to the highway."

Somehow Sobel had known that would be the response, but he had hoped. The deputy led him down the dirt road. Sobel was dizzy again, and did everything he could to remain upright. He didn't want them to know how much this was taking out of him -- how much it had taken out of him.

They were almost to the highway when he heard the first gunshot, followed by half a dozen others.

He yanked his good arm free, started back up the road, and the deputy tackled him. Sobel landed on his bad arm -- the pain blinding, knocking his breath away, knocking out everything except sensation that was at once cold and white hot and electrifying.

By the time he could move again, the shooting had stopped.

This was why they had wanted him away from it all. He had been the wild card, the unpredictable factor, the thing they couldn't control.

Him and Sarah.

The deputy had rolled off him. "You all right, Mr. Sobel?"

No. Of course he wasn't all right. He was lying on his stomach on a dirt path. Up ahead, there had been gunfire, right near a little girl he loved more than he'd ever realized.

"Sarah," he said.

And to his credit, the deputy did not offer a single platitude. Instead, he said, "Let's get you down to the ambulance," as if nothing had gone wrong.

* * * *

The wait was interminable. Sobel was sitting on the edge of the ambulance's back doors where he had a good view of the highway and that awful dirt road.

He had refused to go inside the ambulance. The paramedics had poked and prodded him out here, declaring his arm broken (what a surprise) and his body in a state of shock.

Around him were police cars, not just the state cars but some black county cars, and one marked McMinnville Police. An off-duty officer had heard about this on his police scanner as he drove through the corridor and pulled over to help.

Apparently, Sobel's eyes weren't as good as they used to be either. He had thought the officers were wearing the same uniform, but they weren't. They had all come together to help him and Sarah.

Sarah. His mind skittered over her name, mixing the sound of it with the sound of gunshots, the way his arm cracked when he fell on it the final time, the silence when the firing ended. Maybe he should have gone for her, advice be damned. Maybe, if he had, she would be all right. It worried him that no one had come out of those trees.

It worried him that he hadn't heard any more shooting either. And no cars starting -- no one trying to drive away on ruined tires. He kept staring at the opening in the trees, hoping -- maybe even praying -- that he would see Sarah come through it. Sarah, safe and protected, and alive.

When the trees did shudder, he thought he was imagining it. When a deputy stepped out, Sarah in his arms, Sobel thought he was imagining that too.

Until he realized that Sarah's tiny face was scratched and dirty, that she was crying hard, and that her small hands were braced on the officer's shoulders, trying to push away. Like she always did with strangers.

She was alive and she was safe.

"Sarah!" he called, pushing off the back of the ambulance. Sitting hadn't helped him. Indeed, it had made him wobbly. But he tottered forward, the paramedics yelling at him, and Sarah, sweet Sarah, turned her beautiful face toward his and screamed, "Max!"

She extended her pudgy arms and twisted in the officer's grasp so that he was holding a whirling, determined three-year-old, one who wasn't going to be denied. Sobel hurried toward her, not even looking at the highway,

realizing at the last minute that a truck or a car could have come barreling toward him and he wouldn't have even known.

But the luck gods were with him somehow. The road was empty and Sarah was alive.

He reached her as she launched herself toward him. She slammed against his broken arm and he staggered backwards. It took all of his concentration to keep from whitening out again, to keep his good arm wrapped around her.

She smelled of dirt and child-sweat and urine. Her pants were cold and wet, and her shirt -- the one he'd put on her that morning, her Pooh shirt, which she loved -- was ripped and stained. She buried her face against his neck and sobbed, deep heart-wrenching sobs, the kind he'd never heard her make in the year that he'd been involved with her mother.

He scooted her up, placing his good arm more tightly around her. The movement jostled his bad arm and he had to grit his teeth. This time, as he went to cross the highway, he looked for traffic, saw none, and hurried toward the ambulance. At least there were people here, people who could make sure she was all right.

One of the paramedics, a woman with dirty blond hair and a too-thin face, tried to take Sarah from him, but the little girl tightened her grip on Sobel's neck.

"It's all right," he said. "I'll be right here."

But Sarah didn't seem to care. He wasn't even sure she heard him, the way she cried, her entire body shaking with the intensity of her sobs.

He glanced at the paramedic in supplication. The woman put one slim hand on Sarah's back, as if she could absorb all of that pain through her fingers.

Finally, Sarah took a deep, shuddering breath, and raised her head. "Max," she said and touched his face with begrimed fingers. There was something in her eyes, something older than he'd ever seen, and it made him want to cry. If he could, he'd use all the powers of his imagination to remove that look from her face. He knew he would be haunted by it for the rest of his life.

"I'm going to hand you to this lady," he said. "She's a doctor. She's going to make sure you're all right. I'll be here the whole time, holding your hand."

Sarah's face scrunched up and he thought she was going to burst into tears again. But her grip on his neck loosened, and he was able to ease her into the paramedic's arms.

"Do you have extra clothes for her?" the woman asked as soon as she touched Sarah's wet pants.

"In the car," he said, "but I'm not going to get them. I said I'd stay here."

The woman nodded. She told one of the other paramedics to get the clothes, then she set Sarah on a bunk. Sobel had to struggle to get into the back of the van to be beside her.

Sarah didn't complain as the woman checked her over. Sobel watched intently, seeing only scratches and the occasional bruise on Sarah's arm. They hadn't had her long enough to do permanent damage -- or so he hoped.

As the woman worked, methodically checking Sarah's eyes, her mouth, her scalp, voices echoed in the road behind them. Sobel stiffened, but the paramedic smiled at him.

"They're ours," she said softly.

"They shooted Craig, Max." Sarah's voice was reed-thin.

The paramedic looked up from her work. Sobel felt stunned, but he kept his voice even. "Who's Craig, honey?"

"Mommy's boyfriend. He's not as nice as you."

Max felt cold. It was a physical condition, he told himself. The shock. Nothing more. "I thought I was your mommy's boyfriend."

Sarah gave him a sad look. "No, silly. You're Mommy's fiancee."

She'd always said fiancee wrong. He'd thought it cute that a little

girl would even bother to learn the term. Now he was beginning to understand why.

"You never told me about Craig," he said.

"Mommy said not to say nothing. She said you didn't like Craig. She said he made you mad."

Damn right it made him mad. It was making him mad now, though he struggled not to show it.

"Did Craig hurt you?" he asked softly.

Sarah's lips got thin. "He held me too tight. He put his hand over my mouth when the men with guns came. It hurt."

Those were bruises near her nose and mouth. He had thought it was dirt.

"She was kicking him when we got there." The voice came from behind Sobel. "Her face was turning blue. He was cutting off her air."

Sobel turned. The sheriff stood there. He looked smaller than he had in the woods, shoulders slumped, eyes weary.

"We sent one of our men in and got her out."

"It hurt, Max." Sarah's voice hitched.

"Where did it hurt?" the paramedic asked.

But Sarah's gaze hadn't left his. She was making it clear she wasn't going to talk to anyone but him. "Where did it hurt, honey?" he said.

She touched her mouth, her nose, then closed her eyes against it all.

"Is the little girl all right?" the sheriff asked.

"Badly bruised," the paramedic said. "We'll take her in, let her stay overnight. I think Mr. Sobel's hurt worse, but he won't let me help."

They were talking as if he weren't there. He kept his hand in Sarah's. She was trembling ever so slightly.

Then he turned slightly so that he could see the sheriff. Deputies were coming off the road. One was holding his arm. Another sat beneath the hill, put his face in his hands, and shuddered. It looked like he was sobbing.

"We've got a mess in the trees," the sheriff said.

"Do we need to go up there?" the paramedic said.

"Not right away." The sheriff's voice was flat.

"Any of them our guys?"

"No."

Sobel looked at the sheriff. "Sarah was out of there before it happened, I trust."

The sheriff shook his head. "We got her out as fast as we could, but everything came apart rapidly. I don't know what she saw."

He glanced at Sarah. Her eyes were still closed, the lashes moving slightly as if she had fallen asleep and was dreaming. Her breath seemed to be coming evenly. "She knew the man."

"I heard." The sheriff's gaze met his. This time, there seemed to be some respect in it. "You're Maxwell Sobel the writer, right?"

"Yeah." Sobel suddenly felt wary.

"You rich?"

Sobel paused for a moment. That was a question he usually hated to answer. It wasn't about the money, he would say. It's about the writing.

Only this time it probably was about the money.

"Yeah," he said. "I'm rich."

"They had guns. They didn't shoot you. They took the girl and went up there to wait. She's your girlfriend's daughter?"

For an odd, giddy moment, Sobel wanted to correct him. My finance's daughter. "We're engaged," he said. "When she got back from New York, I was going to sign the papers to adopt Sarah."

"Was?"

"If you're suggesting what I think you're suggesting, some of my plans are going to change." He was being deliberately vague in case Sarah was still awake. Strange, he wasn't thinking so much about JoAnn. He was thinking about Sarah, about the way he'd finally learned there was more to life than books and words and imagination.

How he'd had to see her before he left that cabin -- jeopardize everything, his life, his future -- just to make sure she was still alive.

"You got an answering machine, Mr. Sobel?"

"Yeah."

"One that plays back messages no matter where you are?"

Sobel felt cold. "Yeah."

"Let's call it."

Sobel hesitated for a moment. Sarah's hand was lax in his. He put her small fingers across her chest, then reached into his pocket and grabbed his cell phone. He flipped it open, dialed with his good fingers, then pressed the necessary code to get the messages.

Three stored -- he'd already heard those the day before: two from his agent on some foreign sales; one from JoAnn declaring her undying love. He was glad he didn't have to listen to that one again.

Then there were four new. The friend who'd babysat for him in Portland saying Sarah had left behind one of her books; two from the police, trying to see if anyone else was there -- maybe even trying to see if his 911 calls had been pranks -- and one with a filtered electronic voice:

Max Sobel, we have what you lost. If you'd like it returned, it will be expensive. We will call again with instructions.

"Well?" the sheriff asked. This time, Sobel thought he saw compassion in the sheriff's face.

Sobel handed him the phone, explained how to replay the last message, and watched the sheriff as he listened. His expression didn't change at all.

He flipped the phone closed and handed it back to Sobel. "You think your girlfriend's involved?"

The calls all through her trip, ostensibly lovey, keeping him up to date on her shopping. Usually when they were apart, they spoke once a day. When he left for Portland, it seemed they were speaking once an hour.

He'd told her when he and Sarah were heading home. He'd spoken to her as the car crossed the Burnside bridge, Sarah giggling at something in the backseat.

He'd told her. And then she'd called them.

Why would she do this when she could have married him? But he knew the answer to that, too. The prenup had been restrictive, and he had told her, early on, that she'd be on an allowance. He'd provide, yes, but there'd be no access.

No control.

A ransom -- one she was sure he'd pay -- would bring in what she needed.

"Mr. Sobel?"

"She knew where we'd be," he said, amazed such a broken voice could come out of him. "She knew exactly where we'd be."

Two deputies led a man off the side road. His hands were cuffed behind his back, his shirt smeared with blood. His hair hung in a stringy mat over his face, but it was clear he was one of the card players.

Sobel dropped Sarah's hand. He slid off the end of the ambulance, but there must have been something in his eyes because the sheriff gripped him by his good shoulder.

"Let us take care of this," the sheriff said.

"He tried to kill Sarah."

"We have him."

But that wasn't enough for Sobel. He started across the highway. The sheriff grabbed his good arm.

"We need him, Sobel. To testify against your girlfriend, and everything she's done to that poor little girl."

Sobel let himself be stopped. Sarah. He hadn't thought about Sarah and what this would mean. "What'll happen to Sarah?"

"You said you got adoption papers," the sheriff said. "Better sign 'em, maybe the same time as when you go home to let us know where we can find that

girlfriend of yours."

"I'll call her for you," Sobel said. "She's probably waiting to hear from this Craig anyway."

"Well, she won't." The sheriff sounded philosophical.

One of the deputies grabbed the prisoner by the head, and shoved him into the back of a squad car. The other deputy was still sitting by the side of the road, shaking. The male paramedic was tending to the third deputy, Sarah's change of clothes on the road beside him.

"What happened up there?" Sobel asked.

The sheriff shook his head and his eyes grew dark. "Went in, standard two-two formation, going for the girl. Got her -- harder than you'd think, Sobel, it was us she was scared of -- and the jerk holding her shot my man."

Sobel remembered the first shot, then the others in rapid succession. Sarah. No wonder she looked so old now.

"Brigs, there, he grabbed her and ran, like he was supposed to, shielding her with his back, and we opened up. That one there, he went for the car. Would've got away too, if it weren't for you."

Sobel could picture it, all of it, the way the bodies moved in Sam-Peckinpaw slow motion, the blood spurting, the holes appearing in that ruined wood wall. Sarah, too frightened to scream, wanting someone familiar, wanting anyone except the uniformed man carrying her down the hill.

Those adoption papers were everything. JoAnn's miscalculation. She hadn't expected to get caught until she had Sarah back, until her companions had collected Sobel's cash, and they were all far away.

Now the trip to New York made sense. Everything, the little looks, the grimaces when he brushed past her, the biting comments, made since the prenup, all made sense.

"For what it's worth," the sheriff said, "I don't recommend what you did. But we wouldn't have gotten that little girl back without you."

Sobel looked at him, feeling old and tired and not victorious at all. He had never thought about the messes, the way life changed in a heartbeat -- gunshots fired at a car, a man falling down an embankment, a woman betraying everything for too much green.

"I have to get back to Sarah," he said.

Jackson Ross wouldn't have said that. Jackson Ross would have been on the next plane, tracking down JoAnn himself. But Jackson Ross was a fictional construct, designed with an out-moded sense of macho by a man who only survived one schoolyard fight.

Jackson Ross wasn't real.

Sarah was.

Sobel climbed back into the ambulance and sat beside the stretcher, taking Sarah's hand in his own. She sighed and turned toward him. Her now-clean face bore bruises in the shape of a man's fingers, her skin was scraped from a run in the trees, her mind was forever filled by the terrifying images of good guys with guns.

He had gotten it wrong because real life wasn't entertaining and it didn't play. And people lived with the consequences. Forever.

Visit www.Fictionwise.com for information on additional titles by this and other authors.