

## FALL LINE

MARTA SPROUT

UP AT THE SKI PATROL SHACK on top of Wildwood Ski Resort's main peak the nine o'clock morning meeting was well underway.

"Folks, listen up. Today is going to be a challenge. We had a big dump of snow last night. Our guests are used to good ol' New England crud, not powder. Keep a keen eye out for skiers in trouble. I want everyone out on the slopes today – no sittin'. You can check the pre-game hoopla at lunch break but save your Super Bowl plans for after work," said their twenty-year-veteran patrol director, John Larson.

Larson, with his lean tall stature and grizzled hair, looked over his varied crew of men and women, who were like one big raucous family. There before him were a wide range of ages, sizes, and backgrounds, each one bonded to their common mission: to be on board and ready to help when things went wrong. Whenever something needed to be done they all descended in a swarm of red coats and work gloves to complete the task at hand. Everything they did was a joint exercise in efficiency. And the craziest thing was they had one hell of a good time in the process.

This team could pull-off just about anything, from working in horrendous climate conditions to top-shelf emergency care – especially his new recruit, Danny Fowler who was in his first season on the patrol. It was good to have some new blood, as a large number of his better patrollers were now over the age of sixty. Everyone was so impressed with the skill and dedication of the youngest member of the patrol they all had taken it upon themselves to look out for him and offer advice when needed.

"Remember to sign up for your watches. Now get out there and have some fun."



UNDER A BRIGHT BLUE New Hampshire sky, Danny Fowler's new red ski-patrol jacket with the large white cross glinted in the sun, offset by a dazzling backdrop of glistening fresh snow. On this descent he was bombing down his favorite black-diamond trail, Raven's Ravine, letting his new K2 all-mountain skis run. Each fluid turn sent a face shot of cold snow onto his goggles and into a small crevice between his neck gaiter and jacket. The refreshing chill made

Danny smile as he floated on the soft powder, enjoying every exhilarating moment of this brilliant playground of new snow until he spotted a singular rental ski missing its rider.

Further down, just off-trail, was a motionless skier with his chest wrapped around a snow-making pipe. Danny did a hockey stop next to the still man, sending a wave of sparkling powder flying into the air. While the skiing public zoomed on down the run as usual, Danny clicked out of his skis and jammed them into an upright cross in the soft snow. He immediately began assessing the scene and putting on his body substance isolation gear, BSIs he called them, which in this case was a pair of bright purple exam gloves.

His mind took control over the adrenaline surging through his veins and clamped down to focus on the scene. Silently coaching himself, he launched into a well learned mantra. First rule: keep yourself safe. Can't do anyone any good if you're taken out of the action.

"Summit, this is Danny."

The radio crackled back in response. "This is Summit, go ahead."

"I'm on the scene of an accident about halfway down Raven's Ravine on skier's right. I have an unconscious adult male with head and chest trauma. Request 10-27-Air, backboard, collar, trauma pack, and O2. This is a status one. Repeat – status one."

"Roger that. We're on the way."

Danny took a deep breath. When he exhaled his warm breath made a small cloud in the brisk twenty-eight-degree air. Time for ABCs. Okay. The patient had an airway and he was breathing, therefore, he had to have a pulse. Unfortunately, it wasn't a very good one...it was rapid, thready, and weak.

His respirations were even worse. There were no signs of significant external bleeding but by the looks of it, the damage was internal and severe.

"Come on, man. Stay with me."

Danny surveyed the damage. Closed head and chest trauma – great. The truth was everyone was trained for the worst but no one liked seeing anyone hurt this badly.

"Oh my gosh. Is there anything I can do to help?" said a concerned bystander who had stopped to catch her breath. Danny sent her to redirect skiers around the accident just as the toboggan arrived with the emergency gear and an entourage of four patrollers. Danny took the lead and stabilized the man's head as the others went to work at his direction.

It was always amazing to Danny how fast these free-spirited adrenaline junkies could get down to business when something serious was happening. Like a finely tuned machine, all hands

moved in a synchronized effort. Not one word or movement was wasted. Everyone was focused on the needs of the patient. And time was of the essence.

“Insert an oral airway and get O2 on this guy – now. He’s shocky and has a pneumothorax. Let’s keep him on his left side and transport head downhill,” said Danny as he firmly gave the orders.

Overcoming the steep pitch, the awkwardness of ski boots, and the bitter cold, Danny and his mountain rescue team had their patient secured in the toboggan and ready to head down the mountain in record time. As not to waste one second on non-life-threatening injuries, the man’s broken wrist had been quickly body-splinted across his chest as they had snugly strapped him onto the backboard.

Danny was charging ahead in control of the handlebars as he skied the toboggan carrying the still unconscious man down the mountain, alternating between straight skiing, a controlled snow plow, and side slips on the steeps. Changing positions allowed Danny to adapt to the snow conditions and the pitch, keeping the sled safely in control and doing so without overtiring his legs.

While Danny selected the fastest and smoothest ride possible, patroller Kyle Smith followed behind on the sled’s tail rope. This technique offered additional security in the off chance that Danny lost his balance. Meanwhile, the other patrollers went ahead to clear a path, which offered protection for both the patient and the skiing public.

Before they reached the bottom, Danny could see the ambulance waiting by the base’s first-aid room. His two-way radio reported that the helicopter with the Dartmouth Hitchcock Advanced Response Team was circling in preparation for landing at the landing zone or the LZ as everyone called it. The chopper was called when patients with extensive injuries could not tolerate the longer ground transport to the trauma center; the ambulance was routinely called as additional back-up. A few minutes later, Danny and crew rounded the bend and glided into place next to the EMTs in front of the ambulance.



READY FOR BUSINESS, cocksure Jay T. Ellis got out of the ambulance wearing a pair of purple exam gloves and a look of annoyance. But then again, Jay nearly always looked annoyed. He saw the bundled-up patient being transported down to his location. His mood was not improved when the lead man on the bright orange toboggan removed his goggles and revealed

that Jay would once again have to deal with Danny Fowler, a rookie who had a particular knack for getting under his skin.

“Hell’s bells, what do we have here?” asked Jay.

“He’s unconscious,” said Danny. “We found him with his chest wrapped around a snow-making pipe. There’s a large bruise on his torso and evidence of head trauma. Looks like he lost control and ran into the snow-making pipe at a high rate of speed. And he has a pneumothorax.”

“So you say. How the hell do you know that, son? Those eyeballs of yours suddenly grow X-ray vision?” Jay loved nothing more than to grill rookies until they got all hot under the collar and flustered. It did them good, made them think for a change. He figured Danny for an arrogant ass and delighted in tweaking him even more than the others.

The young patroller looked as if he was trying to ignore the smart-ass comments. “Just look at him. Check his pulse – he’s tachycardic. He’s in respiratory distress. Only one side of his chest expands when he breathes and his trachea is deviated. Jesus, look at the bulging veins in his neck. What else do you want?” The rooky responded with a predictably defensive attitude as he continued to monitor his patient’s vitals.

Jay snapped his gloves at the wrist and went to work. “So hotshot, if his trachea is deviated – looks like to the right – which side is damaged?”



DANNY IGNORED Jay and checked the oxygen tank’s flowmeter. So far the patient was receiving eleven liters per minute through a nonrebreather mask. If his breathing deteriorated any further Danny was prepared to switch to a BVM and bag him manually to ensure adequate oxygenation.

While protecting the injured man with an extra blanket, Danny hoped the chopper crew would arrive soon and relieve him of the company of Mr. Know-It-All. Patients were always handed off to the highest level of definitive care: the first ones on scene were the ski patrol, then the patient was handed over to the ambulances’ crew of EMTs and paramedics – higher up the chain were the Dartmouth-Hitchcock paramedics and finally a physician or the trauma center.

Danny knew he was the lowest person in this pecking order. And he couldn’t care less. Ever mindful of the “golden hour,” he knew he’d done everything he could for this patient – including getting him off the mountain safely in a very respectable twenty minutes from when he

put on his latex-free gloves to when he pulled up next to the ambulance. Danny was proud of his ability to get a patient in a backboard and collar in lightning speed and do so with exceptional precision.

Jay had already started an IV and was well into the rhythm of his routine as he commanded his crew. While checking the patient's pupils he began his litany of questions. "Was he conscious on the scene? Did he respond to anything? You guys get an AVPU score? Jesus Christ, does anybody know anything about this patient?"

Danny watched as the helicopter spotted its landing. "It was a status one...so no, I didn't have enough time to write a biography for you. Besides, he was skiing by himself"

Just as the cranky paramedic dismissed Danny with the wave of his purple-gloved hand, the chopper landed and out popped Jason Henry, paramedic extraordinaire and the team's operations manager. With great relief, Danny slapped the accident report in the middle of Jay's chest and stood to walk away through the crowd of patrollers who had gathered.

"Son, there isn't anything on this sheet. Didn't they teach you how to fill out a goddamn form?" said Jay with his usual candor.

Danny's tan face flushed bright red. "In case you haven't noticed, he's unconscious. I couldn't have very well asked him about his medical history, now could I?"

"Calm down, son. I'm just tryin' to get the facts here. Don't get your shorts in a knot."

Before the jousting between Jay and Danny could go any farther, Jason and his crew swarmed around the patient like a circle of angels. Skilled hands swiftly went to work with an eerie calm, each addressing the most critical issues first as if they'd done this a million times before. The oral airway flew into the air and fell to the ground along with anything else that was not needed while a patroller did the clean-up with gloves and a biohazard bag. The patient was intubated and medications administered with not a moment wasted.

Danny and Jay put their differences aside for the time being to offer assistance where needed. They might not have liked each other very much, but they were professionals and there were more important issues to consider now.

Danny continued his vigil at the head of his patient. From there, he quietly encouraged the injured man he was sure couldn't hear him. Still, no one bothered to splint the broken wrist that was causing the patient's hand to grotesquely flop around. Danny knew no one died of a fractured wrist but the sight was still unnerving.

Within minutes the man was in an induced pentobarbital coma to reduce the brain's metabolic rate and prevent further damage caused by swelling. Danny was bagging him with a BVM unit at fifteen to sixteen liters per minute.

Danny's back and hands were starting to feel the strain but he didn't care. Beads of sweat rose across his upper lip and his blond hair stuck to his damp forehead. The residual adrenaline gave him an edge and an endurance beyond his usual ability.

As the ski jacket was cut from the unconscious man's torso Danny saw the tee-shirt his patient was wearing. Written across the chest in a kid's scrawl were the words "I Love You, Daddy." Apparently Jason saw it too because he cut it off up the side seam to preserve the artwork. As the cut-off clothing was stuffed into a large plastic bag Danny prayed that this man would open his eyes once again to see and hug the kid who had decorated that shirt.

After all the critical issues of airway, breathing, and circulation had been addressed, the patient was moved within the cluster of caretakers to the waiting helicopter. Everyone watched as the gurney carrying their critically injured patient was gently loaded aboard the helicopter by the Dartmouth-Hitchcock crew and whisked away to DHMC's level-one trauma center to the whopping sound of the rotor blades beating the air into submission.

The agility of the chopper and its medical team always left everyone with a sense of awe. The only thing that now left their eyes glued to the horizon was the hope that the man inside would survive.



DANNY WALKED BY JAY on his trek back toward the first-aid room. Not willing to leave anything undone with Jay T. Ellis, Danny shouted, "Left," as he walked by.

"I didn't catch that," Jay said as he flipped off his gloves.

Danny rushed at Jay as if he were going to tear the man's head off. Nose to nose with his adversary, Danny was not going to back down. Not this time. "I said it's the left side that damaged. Asshole."

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