

Four Score

Written by Bill Shaul for submission to a 24-hour short story contest

Kate had traveled five miles across the frozen countryside on foot, racing against the deadline to secure the vital intel that her contact would share only with her. The trip was complicated by the multiple enemy patrols she had to evade. But within one hundred yards of the isolated cabin, her deepest fear was realized: two enemy soldiers captured her.

As their vehicle drove in the opposite direction from the cabin, it careened into a snowbank. Her two captors appeared to have been killed in the impact, but she only suffered an ankle injury.

She headed in the direction of the cabin, but her injury slowed her pace to a crawl. *How am I going to cross the frozen river with this bum ankle? I can barely hobble along on the road.*

Reaching the river, she eased down the bank, placed her right boot on the ice, and then her left boot. The pain caused her to collapse, smashing her face against the unforgiving frozen surface. Blood poured from a cut to her chin, and one eye immediately began to swell shut. *Great, now I can only see out of one eye.*

She took four more steps, then fell again as her ankle gave out. She was still fifty yards from the other riverbank and the cabin. *Come on, Kate, you gotta keep going.* She struggled to her feet, only to stumble again. But this time, a pair of strong arms snatched her just before another collision with the ice.

“I’ve got you. Don’t worry. The cabin is just ahead.”

She didn’t argue or resist. She leaned against his chest, taking comfort in his strong heartbeat and steady breathing as he effortlessly carried her across the ice.

“Here we are,” Kate’s rescuer said as he opened the cabin’s only door and carried her inside. A fire in the rustic fieldstone fireplace provided heat and light to the dark structure. Kate’s eyes adjusted to the dim light, and she saw three sets of eyes staring at her from the far side of the room.

Kate waved to the woman and her two daughters, who were silently huddled together. All of them appeared terrorized by the sudden appearance of Kate and the soldier.

Kate pulled her gloves off. “I’m Kate,” she signed to the woman.

“Kate?” the woman signed.

Kate answered yes by holding her fist out in front of her face, bending her wrist twice, and smiling.

The two women began a frantic ASL conversation that bewildered the soldier. “What is she saying?”

“Don’t interrupt me,” she snapped at him. He complied.

Two minutes passed in silence as the woman signed the confidential, critical intel to Kate. When the woman stopped signing, Kate touched her fingertips to her chin and extended her hand in thanks.

“Okay, are we ready to transmit the intel?” the soldier asked.

“Yes.”

“Do you know the frequency?”

“Yes, but first, I need to say something.”

The soldier asked, “Yes?”

“Four score.”

“Four score?”

“Yes, four score.”

He hesitated briefly, then said, “And seven years ago.”

“Roger. Are you ready for the radio frequency for HQ?”

“Yes.”

She gave him the radio frequency, and he contacted headquarters. Kate then relayed the intel she got from the woman, signed off, and shut off the radio.

Suddenly, the soldier's disposition changed. He looked at Kate and said, “Thank you, you stupid woman. You just gave me the information we’ve been trying to gather for weeks.”

“So, you’re not-”

He sneered at her. “No, I’m not one of your ‘bodyguards’, watching over you. Now, tie up those three nice and tight.” He tossed her a rope. “Now!”

Kate did as she was told. He then tied her hands behind her back. “What are you going to do with us?” she asked.

He laughed. “Well, it’s going to be very cold tonight. This fire will keep this place nice and warm.” Then he suddenly doused it with a bucket of water. “Too bad. I guess the fire went out. Good luck surviving the ten below zero temperatures tonight. And just to be sure you stay put, I’ll be locking the door from the outside, so there’s no way to get out. So long.”

He marched over to the door, opened it, and exited the cabin without a word. Kate heard him start his motorcycle, rev the engine, and drive away.

A minute later, Captain Duncan and his men burst into the cabin. “Are you okay?” he asked as his men untied them.

“Yes, sir, and so is our intel.”

“How? We heard you radio HQ?”

“Yes, but not on the frequency the major and I agreed I would use.”

“How did you know that guy was the enemy?”

“Because of Abraham Lincoln.”

“What?”

She smiled. “The major and I agreed that we would use ‘four score’, followed by ‘and nine years ago’ as our verification code, and two different frequencies. I knew he was an impostor when he responded with ‘seven years ago’, so I gave him false intel and the false radio frequency. Now he’s running back to his commander with the wrong intel. I think he might be in for a rude awakening. Don’t you?”

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