



Saving BAXTER

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They were on a rescue mission,
and now they need to be rescued.

WHEN CODY CAME TO, he was lying in snow on a small outcropping of a mountain. The wind was swirling about like an angry bird of prey. Snow pelted his face like a million tiny ice daggers.

The unpredictable gale had driven the chopper into the side of the mountain. Luckily, Cody was hooked into the harness in the cargo bay, which had just enough length to throw him clear of the wreckage. As his head cleared, something warm and wet smothered his face.

When he opened his eyes, he hollered in shock. A horse was licking his face.

"Ahhh!" he shouted.

The horse took a few steps back and stared at him.

Cody momentarily forgot the horse as he took inventory of his bruised body. Moving his right arm, he groaned. The elbow hurt, but he could move it. There was a goose egg on the back of his head. Otherwise, he was miraculously unhurt. Three feet of drifting snow had cushioned him.

His dad.

Where was his dad?

He was piloting the helicopter. Cody tried sitting up, but the harness had pinned him beneath a piece of wreckage. He lifted his head to survey the damage.

Cody could see large chunks of metal and glass strewn about. The cockpit, main fuselage and the rear of the craft were broken apart in three large pieces, lying perilously close to the edge. Cody saw no sign of his father.

What were we doing flying up here?

The details came flooding back.

They were on a relief flight. A few months ago, a packhorse became separated from an excursion on a nearby dude ranch. Somehow the horse — named Baxter — had found a way through the mountain passes and emerged onto this small 2-acre ledge. Before a rescue team could reach him, heavy snows came and Baxter was trapped.

His story made national news. Plans were discussed to airlift him off the mountain, but the dangerous winds made such a move impossible. Instead, donations poured in from around the country, and feed was purchased for the stranded animal. Volunteer pilots flew the supplies up and dumped them on the ledge. Baxter was surviving, but there was worry about him lasting the winter.

Cody's dad was a helicopter pilot in the Marine Corps. He'd done two tours in Afghanistan, flying medevac choppers into hot landing zones, ferrying wounded Marines back to aid stations.

Yet even a pilot as good as his dad couldn't control the wind and weather. **CONTINUED>>>**

Cody wiggled his left hand into his pocket and removed his pocketknife.

Part of the harness was wrapped around his left hand. He had to flip himself up on his side to reach his right hand to open the knife. His gloves didn't make it easy, but it finally opened and he sliced the webbing.

Once free, he could see his father inside the cockpit, slumped over the controls.

“Dad!” he shouted, his voice nearly drowned out by the howling wind and driving snow. There was no answer.

He clambered to his feet and made his way to the cockpit. The copilot side door was jammed open.

Cody climbed inside, studying his dad's injuries. There was a cut on his forehead. Cody couldn't determine if he had any other wounds.

He touched him gently on the shoulder. “Dad?” he said.

The wind picked up and the cockpit shifted, sliding toward the edge. If it moved much farther, it would plunge over the side.

Cody tried the radio microphone. “Mayday! Mayday!” he said. It was silent. The antenna was probably damaged in the crash. He checked his dad's cellphone. No service.

Cody heard a strange noise. He looked over his shoulder and came face to face with Baxter. Sticking his head inside the door, he stared at Cody, snorting and blowing.

“Hey ... there ... horsey,” Cody said, not wanting to startle the animal. Gently, he patted Baxter on the muzzle. He didn't jerk away. “Good horse,” he said. “Good Baxter.” The horse's ears pricked up when he heard his name.

“Good Baxter,” Cody repeated. He returned his attention to his father. He worried he had a concussion.

He shook him gently by the shoulder. “Dad! Dad, wake up!” he called over the howling wind. His dad groaned and his eyes fluttered open.

“What happened?” he muttered. “Where are we?”

“We crashed, Dad. Are you hurt?”

“I ... don't ... know. My head hurts.” His gaze came to rest on Baxter. “Is that a horse?”

“Yes. It's Baxter. We were flying him hay. The relief effort, remember?”

“Yeah. I do now.” His father touched the gash on his forehead. “A first-aid kit's in there,” he said, pointing to the console. Cody removed it and cleaned and wrapped his dad's head with gauze.

Suddenly, the cockpit shifted and tilted toward the ledge. Cody fell against the console, and the wreckage shifted again.

“Get out! Now!” his dad shouted. “I can't move. I think my leg is broken. If this goes over the side, you need to be clear.”

“Dad! I'm not leaving you.”

“You have to. That's an order.”

Cody glanced around to see if there was some way he could secure the cockpit with rope or wedge it into the side of the ledge so it wouldn't move. He looked at Baxter. The horse still had packs lashed to his sides. He had lost weight, and they were twisted around his midsection. It had to be uncomfortable and painful.

“Hang on, Dad. I'll be right back,” Cody said. He grabbed the first-aid kit and slowly exited the cockpit. Cautiously, he approached Baxter.

“Easy, Baxter,” he crooned. The horse looked at him, his ears twitching again. “Good boy,” Cody said. He patted the horse on the muzzle, running his hands slowly and gently along the neck and back. He could see skin rubbed raw in a few places.

Carefully, Cody sliced through the pack straps with his knife. The heavy packs tumbled to the ground with a thud. The horse startled but appeared relieved to be free of the bothersome weight. Cody talked to Baxter gently, keeping him calm.

Inside the first-aid kit was a tube of cream for cuts. Cody removed his gloves and squirted some on his hands.

He rubbed the cream onto the raw spots on Baxter's back and sides. Surely the cream was a relief after all this time.

Cody grabbed a handful of hay that had spilled from the cargo compartment and offered it to Baxter, who wolfed it down greedily. Baxter pressed his head against Cody's chest. He felt like they were friends now.

Cody opened the packs Baxter had been carrying. Mostly it was feed, but Cody's heart nearly sang when he found a 50-foot coil of rope. It was exactly what he needed.

Returning to the cockpit, he leaned inside. “Dad, Baxter is going to pull the cockpit back from the edge. It'll probably hurt a lot when it moves.”

“Cody, no. It's too dangerous!”

The wind picked up and the swirling gale lifted the

wreckage and slammed it down on the ground.

“Dad, we don't have a choice. Another strong gust and ... It'll work. But brace yourself.”

Cody tied off one end of the rope to the doorframe of the cockpit. Now came the hard part. He tied the other end in a bowline. Cody scooped up a handful of hay. Baxter took it eagerly, and Cody looped the rope over the horse's head and neck.

Cody took a firm grip on Baxter's halter. He turned the horse around, facing away from the helicopter.

“C'mon, Baxter,” Cody said. “Let's go.”

Baxter just stood there.

“Giddy up, boy.”

Suddenly, Cody was nearly jerked off his feet. He spun around and watched in horror as a gust of wind caught the wreckage and it went over the side. Baxter was yanked

backward by the weight, his hooves scrabbling on the rocky ground.

Cody regained his footing.

“C'mon, Baxter!” he shouted.

Baxter lowered his head, but the weight of the cockpit pulled him backward. Baxter strained and whinnied. Then his reverse movement stopped.

Slowly, he took one step forward, then another. The muscles in his chest and back flexed and strained. Grunting, he lunged forward. The cockpit reappeared, and Baxter kept pulling until it was safely away from the edge.

“Whoa,” Cody said. “Whoa, Baxter.”

Baxter stopped, his ears twitching. Cody threw his arms around the horse's neck. They would be OK. All they had to do was ride out the storm. Then a rescue party would come for them.

Cody raced to the side of the cockpit. “Dad!” he shouted. His father opened his eyes.

“What happened?” his dad asked.

Cody laughed. “It's going to be OK. We came to save Baxter, and he ended up saving us!”

Baxter looked at them. His ears twitched. ♣

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