

Born to Fight Fires

By MJ Hajost and Gail Chandler

His long legs stiff and cramped from the shortage of space between the seats, John Gage unfolded himself from the tiny airplane seat, and pulled himself awkwardly upright. Glancing at his friend Dutch Masters, he lifted one eyebrow. "Now are we there yet?"

Dutch grinned. "Last stop, pal."

With a snigger of suspicious disbelief, Johnny followed Dutch down the roll-out stairs that butted up against the outside of the eighteen-passenger plane, squinting into the bright August afternoon. He reached into his pocket and slipped on his sunglasses. *Much better*. Dutch hefted his backpack from the storage compartment underneath the back of the plane and waited until Johnny's was also unloaded. Then, together they made their way across the tarmac to the tiny terminal that was the Kallispell, Montana, airport.

Johnny, eyes on the surrounding mountains, nearly bumped into his friend as Dutch stopped to scan the crowd before they stepped through the doors. Dutch grinned. "Beautiful, aren't they?"

"Oh, yeah." Johnny smiled behind the sunglasses and followed Dutch through the doors and into the terminal.

"Dutch!" Both men looked toward the cry to see a tall, fair-haired woman waving to them from behind a barricade. Dressed in the government-green uniform of the National Forest Service, she too wore dark glasses against the glare of the summer sun. Even with half her face hidden, Johnny could see the family resemblance to his friend Dutch.

"Hey, Valerie!" Seconds later Dutch had his arms wrapped around her in a bear hug. After a moment he released her and turned around.

"Valerie, this is John Gage," he said, pointing to Johnny. "My cousin, Val Mifflin."

Johnny reached out to shake her hand, yanking off his sunglasses with his free hand as he did so. "Hi," he murmured, his teeth showing in a slightly off-kilter smile, holding perhaps a second or two too long to her hand.

"Nice to meet you, John." She smiled pleasantly and glanced at Dutch as she tugged her hand free. "How was the flight?"

Dutch shook his head. "Long."

"Puddle jumpers always are," Valerie agreed. "Come on, let's get out of this place." She pointed to the fully outfitted backpacks. "Is that all you have?" Her voice was faintly surprised.

"Hey, we're guys. We don't pack the entire house when we travel." Dutch lifted his pack and settled it comfortably on his shoulders. "Lead on, Mifflin."

The terminal was so small, as was the crowd, that there was no way to lose her, but Johnny still stayed close to Dutch as Valerie led them out through a set of wide glass doors and into a tiny parking lot, stopping at a mint-green government Jeep and unlocking the back hatch.

Dutch flung his backpack into the back of the truck, taking Johnny's from him and doing the same. He pulled the hatch closed and indicated to Johnny that he should climb into the back seat, while he

climbed in beside Valerie in the front.

Valerie started the vehicle and backed out of the space, turning left and heading for the toll booth set up at the far end of the lot, and Johnny stretched his legs as much as the cramped space of the back seat allowed.

"So, Johnny, Dutch tells me you're originally from Montana," Valerie said conversationally as she waited for her change from the toll collector. The gate lifted and the truck passed through as the gate lowered to stop the next car. "Whereabouts?"

Johnny looked up from his contemplation of his legs. "Down in the southeastern part of the state," he answered vaguely,

"And you've never been to Glacier before?" She pulled smoothly onto the two-lane highway that serviced the little airport.

Johnny shook his head. "Never had the chance," he said, leaning back and studying the passing fields.

The valley extended quite far west, but ended abruptly to the east at the low hills that shrugged down from higher elevations of this part of the Rocky Mountain chain. Around the airport, myriad small farms stretched into the distance, disappearing into the forests that carpeted the hills.

"Well, I hear you like hiking and mountains, so I imagine you'll like it here," Valerie smiled. "This is truly God's country." She laughed at the expression she caught in the rearview mirror. "Don't worry—once we get out of Kallispell it'll start getting a whole lot prettier."

Gage shook his head. "Oh, I'm not worried," he grinned. "The view's already a whole lot better than the inside of a plane."

"You ain't seen nothin' yet, pal." Dutch cranked down the window and put his arm out.

"Is it always this hot around here?" Johnny wondered, thinking pleasantly of an ice cold beer. "I always thought mountain elevations were cooler than this."

"Oh, you betcha. It's always hot in this valley in the summer, especially in August," Valerie explained. "Once we get near the river and start to climb, it'll cool off."

A vague nod was Johnny's only response. His attention had been caught by the double-trailer logging truck heading in the opposite direction. "How long you been working for the Forest Service?" he asked, his head swiveling around like a child's to watch the truck as it swayed by.

"About four years," answered Valerie, jerking the steering wheel as the vehicle rocked in the truck's wake.

"You must like it." Gage once more faced front.

"Oh, it has its moments, that's for sure," Valerie was saying. "Which reminds me. I need to stop at the station for a minute to drop something off and pick up my truck."

"Are we taking you away from duty?" Dutch asked. "I told you we could have rented a car."

"Oh, I'm off duty now," Valerie assured him. "I spent all day yesterday and most of this morning scouting the Reservoir. And I'm off for the next three days now. Give you fellas the grand tour."

"What reservoir?" Johnny wanted to know, dimly recalling an immense lake below them as they had descended into Kallispell. "Is that the one we flew over on the way in?"

"No, that probably would have been Flathead Lake," explained Valerie. "I meant the Hungry Horse Reservoir. I'll show it to you, if you like."

"Maybe another time," Dutch suggested. "I think we'd just as soon get where we're going. Especially Gage, there." His thumb hooked over his shoulder.

"Yeah, well, next time tell me we're gonna be spending eighteen hours getting where we're going," Gage shot back with a grin. Not that he was sorry he had finally let Dutch talk him into joining him for the trip.

"Montana? I've been there," Johnny had snorted derisively when his friend had first mentioned the idea of visiting his cousin in the northern Rockies. "Nothin' to see."

"You've never been to Glacier?" Dutch had been astonished that a Montana native had not visited the vast National Park. "You gotta come with me!"

Gage had finally been convinced, mostly due to lack of funds and alternatives, to pack his backpack and camping gear and fly myriad puddle-jumping planes to reach the northwestern corner of his home state.

Dutch had been right, though. The little they had seen was beautiful.

Soon they arrived at Hungry Horse Ranger Station. "I'll be right out," Valerie told them, pointing to a large red pick-up truck parked under a tree near the end of the lot. "Why don't you guys toss your gear in there?" She disappeared into the low building, and the men did as she suggested.

"Fire Danger High'," read Johnny from the large sign in front of the ranger station, grinning crookedly at Smokey the Bear's smiling face. "Huh. I can believe that."

"Oh, man, don't you start talking about fires, Gage. We're on vacation, remember?" Dutch punched him lightly on the arm.

"Listen, Dutch, the closest I want to get to a fire is the campfire, and I'm not sure if we'll even need that, it's so hot." He leaned against the side of the truck and yawned. "How far to your cousin's place?"

Dutch shrugged. "I don't really know," he admitted. "I haven't been out here in years, and she didn't have the place back then."

"You sure there's room for us?"

"Will you stop already?" Gage must have asked him that twenty times over the last couple of weeks. "If she didn't want us here, she wouldn't have offered. She likes me, you know."

"Well, somebody has to." Johnny ducked away from Dutch's open hand.

A side door on the building opened, and Valerie swung down the steps and over toward them.

"Uh, oh." Even from where he stood Dutch could tell she was upset.

"Trouble?" Johnny murmured, straightening.

"She does look a little peeved," Dutch nodded. "Something wrong?" he asked his cousin as she drew near.

Valerie shook her head. "Oh, they've just put everybody on 24-hour alert," she muttered. "Fire danger is at its peak." Her head indicated Smokey behind her.

"That mean you won't get your three days off?" Dutch frowned.

Valerie's head moved from side to side. "No, I still get the days, I'm just on call the entire time." She lifted a small black portable radio, her face twisting into a grim smile. "I get to carry this wherever I go. Aren't I the lucky one?" She moved around to the driver's side of the truck. "Let's get outa here before they find something else for me to do."

Johnny shot Dutch a troubled look as they climbed into the truck, but Dutch just grinned. *Women*, he mouthed. Valerie's dark mood passed quickly, improving with each mile's distance from the small and overly touristy town of Hungry Horse as they headed east along the highway. Dutch and Valerie caught up on family matters as they rode, but Johnny's eyes roved constantly over the passing scenery, oblivious to the conversation on his left.

"Wow!" he breathed as they topped a hill and the lofty mountains of Glacier National Park loomed on his left. "That's where we're going tomorrow, right?" he asked hopefully.

Valerie laughed, and Dutch dug an elbow into Johnny's ribs. "You sound so much like a tourist," Dutch told him.

"I hope I brought enough film," was the reply.

"This isn't the middle of the Sahara," Dutch snorted. "They have stores. I hear there's even running water in some places."

"I have it now," Valerie affirmed.

"They hooked it up, huh?" Dutch laughed.

Valerie nodded. "You betcha. I'm still learning how to use it, though. I keep forgetting to turn off the handle thing."

Johnny made a face and resumed his inspection of the scenery. They passed the mountains at the tunnel entrance into the town of West Glacier ("The west entrance into the Park," Valerie explained to John's question. "There are only two ways in and out of the Park by car."), and continued into a narrow canyon where the heat immediately dissipated. The ride to Valerie's cabin by this time seemed long to Dutch, but to Johnny the time passed quickly as they swooped up and down hills, around broad sweeping curves through the narrow canyons, and along the banks of what Valerie told him was the Middle Fork of the Flathead River. The clarity of the water was such that Gage could easily make out the variegated rock bed in remarkable detail.

"Would you guys like to go rafting?" Valerie offered when Johnny commented on the beauty of the river. "I can dig the raft out."

"You haven't used it yet this year?" Dutch sounded surprised.

"Been too busy," Valerie shook her head.

Johnny shuddered faintly, recalling his last river immersion with a little less than enthusiasm. "I'm, uh, not too crazy about whitewater," he mumbled.

Dutch turned to look over his shoulder. "Aw, come on, Gage, where's your sense of adventure?"

"I left it on one of those planes," replied the other with feeling.

Valerie grinned at the verbal sparring, beginning to understand what Dutch saw in his lanky

paramedic friend. "Well, think about it," she suggested. "We can do it the day after tomorrow, maybe."

"Or not."

Valerie laughed at Johnny's less than enthusiastic response, and Dutch just shook his head. Leaning over toward his cousin he murmured, "Hard to believe the man runs fearlessly into burning buildings, isn't it?" and Valerie laughed again.

"I heard that!" was all Johnny could think of to retort.

They finally turned off the highway onto a narrow, rutted dirt road, following it into the trees until the highway disappeared from sight. The air was absolutely still, the only sound the distant rush of the river gradually growing louder as they neared its banks. At last, they reached a large clearing in which sat a small, brown log cabin. A metal roof, painted forest green, extended to one side to provide a shelter of sorts for a variety of equipment, including, Johnny saw, a small trailer with an inflatable raft aboard. Valerie stopped the truck in front of the shelter and switched off the engine.

"Home, sweet home," she told them, opening her door and climbing down.

Johnny and Dutch followed, a little more stiffly perhaps than Valerie had moved, Gage stopping a minute to stretch before grabbing his backpack from the truck and trailing after the others to the house. His gaze reluctantly left the magnificent view of the mountains and river that the location afforded as he stepped through the front door.

"This is beautiful!" he exclaimed, his mouth hanging open in awe, his eyes almost childishly wide.

The inside was a little more modern than he expected, and much larger. The front door opened directly onto a big, bright room, the centerpiece of which was a massive, natural stone fireplace. The hardwood floor was partially hidden by a large area rug, and several framed photographs graced the wood-paneled walls. A large sofa and a couple of large easy chairs hugged the walls in front of low windows that looked out over the high riverbank on which the cabin sat.

One door at the far end of the room led into a large but sparsely furnished bedroom, and Valerie ushered them into this first. A pair of bunk beds against one wall, a small dresser, and one straight-backed chair were the only appointments the room held. "It's not much," she apologized.

"No, this is great!" Johnny argued, dropping his pack on the floor and peering through the uncurtained window. The view of a nearby mountain showed through a gap in the trees, and the late afternoon sun lighting the peak glinted off a small glacier. "This is great," he repeated as he turned around.

Dutch grinned at his cousin. "I told you he's easy to please."

"Doesn't being in a place this remote bother you?" Johnny, hands shoved in the pockets of his jeans, didn't remove his gaze from the distant peaks visible above the treeline on the opposite river bank. Late as it was, the sky was still the vibrant blue he remembered so well--the unbroken Big Sky for which Montana was famous. It was far too early for stars, but he knew he'd be out in the middle of some night soon scanning the constellations.

"That's the best thing about this place," Valerie told him, pointing toward the opposite river bank.

"Look, a hawk."

Following her arm, Johnny saw the bird floating to a rest in a tree near the top of the cliff. He was

silent a long moment watching to see if it would take off again.

Valerie studied his profile in the fading light. *Wonder why he hasn't been snatched up yet?* She felt Dutch's eyes on her and met his amused gaze. "You guys hungry?" she stammered, straining furiously not to blush.

"Are you kidding? Gage is always hungry."

"Hey," objected the other, "I've seen you put away your fair share of food."

"Well, come on, then," Valerie ordered. "You guys can check out the map to see where I'm taking you for the next few days, and I'll start dinner."

"Would you two get this off the table so we can eat?"

Dutch and Johnny both looked up from where they sat at the table studying the map of Glacier that Valerie had provided. "Great!" Johnny exclaimed. "I'm starved!"

John slid the map aside, taking the rag Valerie had in her hand. "Here, let me get that." He wiped the table clean, then, while Dutch folded the map and put it away, set the table and helped Valerie put the chili she'd concocted onto the table, and poured himself a glass of milk.

Valerie's eyes crinkled in amusement as she sat down. "I'm still not used to guys helping put dinner on the table," she remarked.

"It's kind of an unwritten department rule, I guess," Dutch explained, dishing out the steaming food and handing the bowls to his companions.

Valerie shook her head. "I wish it were that way in the Forest Service, too."

"Aren't any women in the fire department," Johnny reasoned around a mouthful of cornbread. "We have to fend for ourselves."

"Is that the only reason you help? And I thought it was because your mother taught you manners."

"I don't know about his mother," Dutch mumbled, gesturing at Johnny, "but you know as well as I do the training my mother gave us!"

"Well, I do know she taught you to chew with your mouth closed." Valerie ate more slowly than the men, watching in almost sickened fascination as they downed their meal.

Dutch, catching her expression, laughed. "You get used to eating fast in a fire station," he told her as he helped himself to another piece of cornbread.

"I thought it was just me expecting the bells to go off," Johnny agreed. He accepted the second helping of chili that Dutch offered and lifted his spoon again. "This is great chili!"

"Thanks..." Amused, Valerie set to work on her own food, trying, not quite successfully, to ignore the other two shoveling in their food.

"So, where we headed tomorrow?"

Following Valerie's wary eyes, Dutch laughed. "Get used to it, Val," he told her. "One thing Gage never does is sit still."

Her bemused expression remained. "I've made plans to take you on the Highline Trail," she said at

last. "Dutch said he'd like to see some more of the high country," she told Johnny. "He also said you'd like to get some camping in."

Dutch tipped his head. "All right by me," he agreed. "Is this Highline Trail open, do you know?" Sometimes, grizzly bears had a habit of closing trails down.



If you look slightly to the right and above the center of the picture you can see a very thin line following the mountainside. This is the Highline Trail, as seen from above the Logan Pass Visitor Center, which is the highest point the highway (not visible) reaches in the Park. And, yes, we've hiked it! J

"Far as I know," his cousin told him. "They might have a campfire ban in effect, though."

With everyone agreeable to the plan, after dinner they sorted their gear and re-stuffed their backpacks in preparation for an early start in the morning, and all three were asleep before ten-thirty.

When the bell went off a few hours later, Johnny bolted awake, swinging his legs automatically over the side of the bed to reach for his turnout pants--and nearly catapulted from the top bunk. He managed to stop his fall with a wild grab at the headboard, but the noise and motion woke Dutch below him.

"Gage," Dutch grumbled sleepily, "you better have a damn good reason for waking me up in the middle of the night."

"Sorry," mumbled the other, realizing what it was that had startled him into wakefulness.

Valerie's voice, soft and sleepy, carried from the living room through the silent night. Johnny slipped from the bed and grabbed his jeans.

"Gage..." warned Dutch.

But Johnny was already out the door.

"Johnny?" Valerie turned surprised eyes to the paramedic.

"Everything all right?" he asked, noticing that she had pulled a pair of green firefighting pants over a yellow shirt, and was lacing up a pair of heavy-duty hiking boots.

Valerie nodded, smothering a yawn and climbing to her feet to grab a knapsack that sat near the door.

"Got called in---there was a lightning strike in the Park."

"A fire?" Dutch was standing in the doorway of the bedroom, now wide awake.

"Lightning? I didn't even know it was storming," muttered Gage.

Again Valerie's head bobbed. "Looks like the fire's moving pretty fast, too."

"You need some help?"

She hesitated only briefly. "You guys are on vacation...."

"Which means we can spend it any way we want." Dutch had already disappeared into the bedroom, and Johnny was speaking over his shoulder as he followed him. "At least let us give you a lift in. If they don't want us," he continued, pulling a shirt over his head as he returned and sat down to tug his boots on, "they can send us away."

Minutes later, the three were speeding through the dark on a deserted highway.

Hungry Horse Ranger Station was alive with activity when they arrived some thirty-five minutes later. Lights blazed across the parking lot and in the building, and cars and trucks filled almost every adjacent space. Near the front entrance several large vans and a couple of heavy trucks converged on one another in a purposeful jumble.

"Six-packs," Valerie pointed as she pulled into the lot.

Dutch woke at her words. "What?" he mumbled sleepily.

Johnny laughed softly. He'd spent an amiable ride chatting with Dutch's cousin while the man himself, grumbling about his interrupted slumber, dozed intermittently "Six-packs?" he asked.

"The vans," Val explained. "Transport to the site. They hold more than six people, but the name seems to fit, I guess." She parked the truck in a small space at the far end of the lot, and she and the LA firefighters trooped into the noisy ranger station.

Not any different than the staging areas of a California brush fire, thought Johnny, except that he wasn't working with his usual partner. He tossed a grim smile at Dutch and got a sleepy yawn in reply.

Valerie led them to the commander's desk and reported in. She was directed back to a second area to await crew assignment and collect her gear. "You guys don't need to hang around," she insisted. "Why don't you head back to the cabin?"

But Johnny had taken in the numbers around them. "Looks like you people are going to need an extra hand or two," he murmured. "How bad is it, you think?"

Val shrugged. "Didn't sound like an easy one, from the initial report," she admitted, leading them to the huge map that covered one wall. "The strike was in here," she said, pointing to what looked like an inaccessible spot in a narrow valley a little southeast of the summit of the highway called Going-to-the-Sun. She sighed. "If it moves up this slope--" she drew her finger toward the top of the map "--and to the road, it'll get a little tricky. Might mean evacuating the pass, and that could be difficult."

Dutch exchanged a look with Johnny. "We'll stick around a while," he informed his cousin.

Valerie stared at them a moment. "You're both crazy, you know that?"

Johnny's teeth gleamed in the dim light of the room and he jerked his head at Dutch. "That's why he hangs out with me."

"Not me, Johnny boy. It's your leftover girls I'm after."

"Well, sure, 'cause you can't get any of your own."

"Aw, Gage, you know it's because they know a better thing when they see it."

Good Lord, thought Valerie. *It's three o'clock in the morning and these two are trading insults.* "Come on, then. I'll introduce you to Fred."

"Well, we sure ain't gonna turn down help, especially help that knows a thing or two about fighting fires." Ranger Fred Allison nodded at the men. "It might be awhile, though, before we can put you anywhere. Why don't you make yourselves comfortable over there." He tossed his head toward a couple of uncomfortable-looking chairs in the corner of the room. "Help yourself to some coffee, and we'll come and get you when we've got a team for you."

Instead of taking him up on his offer, though, the trio left the stuffy room for the chillier early morning air, strolling around the parking lot and studying the slow but sure process of organization taking place around them.

"How soon before they start moving out?" Johnny asked Valerie. In his neck of the woods, it would already be a madhouse.

"Not long," she replied. "They'll take the crews to the staging area at Avalanche first, then move them out from there. I imagine we'll get going in another half hour or so."

Johnny, walking across the middle of the lot, had been trying to gaze up at the stars, so it was no surprise when he knocked into someone. His head swung down and around, his mouth open to apologize.

"Watch where you're going!" The angry shout came from the grey-haired, cranky-looking man on whose foot he had trod. About six inches shorter than Gage, he glared angrily at the apologetic paramedic. Ignoring the words of regret, the other man continued his tirade about thoughtless people and the young in general, stalking off as he ranted, his voice carrying across the lot.

"Who was that?" Dutch wanted to know.

"If we're unlucky, that'll be our crew boss," replied Valerie.

Gage lifted an eyebrow, shrugged, and resumed his study of the skies above, this time standing carefully still.

Even as dawn neared, the level of purposeful organization was at a peak. When they finally re-entered the main building, the noise level had increased such that it was impossible to carry on a normal conversation. Valerie headed for the Ladies' Room and the men settled themselves into a couple of chairs. Dutch grinned ruefully at his friend.

"Can't get it out of our blood, huh?"

Johnny shrugged. "We were born to fight fires, Dutch."

"Speak for yourself, mister." Dutch composed himself as comfortably as he could in the ancient chair, stretching his long legs in front of him and folding his hands across his stomach. "They had to drag me kicking and screaming into this profession."

"Uh-huh. That was after they discovered your middle name is 'Pyromaniac.'" Gage leaned back and closed his eyes. In minutes both men were sound asleep.

"Gage? Masters?"

Johnny came instantly awake at the sound of his name, jerking upright so quickly that he nearly toppled from the chair. Beside him, Dutch moved a little more slowly.

The grey-haired man Johnny had bumped in the parking lot hours ago stood in front of them, a frown on his face as he gazed distastefully at the long-haired young men. *What the hell is this? Lord, they'll take anything that can walk and let him volunteer, won't they?* The man tapped the clipboard in his hand. "You the firemen from L.A.?" *No way.*

"Uh, yeah." Johnny rose a little unsteadily and waited for Dutch to do the same. He looked around vaguely for Valerie, wondering if she'd already been called out.

"I'm Walt Rivers," the man said finally, not quite stifling the long-suffering sigh, and offered no hand to shake. "Come on with me. We've got a team for you."

He led the way from the building toward a staging area on the far side of a large parking lot. Gage saw that the sun had risen. From the ache in his stiff muscles, he wasn't really surprised to discover they'd slept a couple of hours.

"Friendly, ain't he?" murmured Dutch.

Johnny nodded in amusement. "A regular Captain Hook," he agreed, looking around again. "Where do you suppose your cousin has disappeared to?"

"No idea."

Several men and women waited underneath a large tree, and Rivers waited for Dutch and Johnny to join the group before he spoke again.

"My name's Rivers," he began. "I'm one of the crew bosses, and I'll be in charge of you until you reach the field station. It looks like this is going to be a big fire, and we're gonna need all the help we can get. Most of you--" he shot a skeptical glance at the two firefighters "--have no experience in firefighting, so I expect you to listen carefully and follow orders. Under no circumstances are you to take any sort of initiative in the field. That's the job of the first response teams."

"They're called 'hotshots,' moron," Johnny murmured quietly to no one in particular.

Rivers waited as if to make sure they all agreed with his authority before he continued. "The first thing is your equipment." He pointed to several piles behind them. "As I call out your name, take a pile of gear and line back up."

Looking at the pile of strange equipment, Johnny made a face. "I'd rather have my own outfit," he muttered to Dutch, who responded with a smile.

"Where's your sense of adventure, Gage?"

"Back on one of those planes, remember?"

Dutch's expression altered slightly as he picked up the yellow shirt and green pants that were the standard firefighter gear, and it was Johnny's turn to grin at the expression.

When everyone had collected his pile, Rivers took a few minutes to explain the outfit to the group.

"This here's your backpack," he announced, holding up a sample of the dark green firefighting

backpack that had rested at the bottom of each pile. "It contains everything you'll need to work this fire. Don't lose it."

Johnny rummaged through the pack as Rivers spoke, holding up the various items to show to Dutch: water bottles, meal pack ("MRE?" wondered Dutch. "Meal-Ready-to-be-Eaten, remember?" explained Johnny. "Otherwise known as 'FDC--Freeze-Dried-Crap.'") and what Rivers called a "pulaski"-- the tool they'd use to dig line.

"Never heard it called that before," murmured Johnny. His comment drew a narrow-eyed look from Rivers and Gage subsided.

"Wear your helmet at all times," ordered Rivers. "It'll make it easier for you to be seen, and it will also protect your head."

"Hear that, Gage?" whispered Dutch. "Try not to lose this one, huh?"

Rivers held up a metallic-looking object, about the size of a large hardcover book. "This is your fire shelter," he explained. "In the event you become trapped by the fire, this will offer some protection. You'll receive further instruction on the use of all of your equipment once you reach your site."

Glancing at Johnny, Dutch was surprised to see the other looking suddenly very serious. He opened his mouth, but Rivers was issuing rapid orders about who was to ride where as he loaded the group into the forest service truck for the trip to the field station. "Six-packs," Dutch muttered to Johnny, "but not the kind I could use right now."

Johnny dug his elbow into Dutch's arm as Rivers issued another threatening look in their direction.

"When we arrive at the field station, you will each report to your crew. You will then be transported to the site your crew has been assigned. You'll most likely have to hike in to the actual firefighting location. At that time you will be given instruction and training. It is imperative that you follow orders at all times. Since most of you are novices--" again his eyes found Gage and Masters "--you won't be able to work on your own initiative, so do as you're told and you won't get hurt." He glared meaningfully around the seats, and after a moment began to call out crew assignments. "Gage and Masters, you two are assigned to my crew." His voice carried a faint note of distaste.

"Ain't we the lucky ones?" Johnny's remark was barely audible.

"You might want to get some rest on the ride," suggested Rivers, although the way he said it made it more than a recommendation. "You've got a very long day ahead of you."

Subdued by the demeanor of their supervisor, the entire crew remained relatively silent for the duration of the ride to the northern end of Lake McDonald. Dutch dozed off again, but Gage felt restless and simply stared out the window at the passing scenery. Not exactly how he had planned to spend his vacation....

The field station at Avalanche, when they arrived fifty minutes later, was a scene of controlled chaos. A sea of yellow shirts greeted the newcomers as they disembarked the van to stand uncertainly on the pavement.

"This way," called Rivers. The men joined the other yellow-shirted novice firefighters in front of a bullhorn from which crew assignments were being directed. The men and women were divided quickly, and soon re-boarded the vans for transportation to the actual site of the fire. Johnny and Dutch re-boarded the Suburban in which they had arrived, followed closely by Rivers.

"How far to the site?" Johnny asked the cantankerous boss.

"Bout a half hour," came the reply. Rivers turned his back on the men and dropped once more into his own little world.

"Guess he didn't get his Wheaties this morning," Dutch murmured sotto voce.

"That reminds me," moaned Johnny. "I haven't had any breakfast, either."

Dutch slapped him lightly on the stomach. "Yeah, well, you could stand to lose a few pounds."

It was nearing seven, Johnny saw, looking at his watch. Figuring they'd work several hours before stopping to eat, he decided he would be going on eighteen hours between meals. His stomach certainly wouldn't understand. Opening his issued knapsack, he rummaged through it in search of food. Nothing but that MRE. Sighing, he dropped it back into the pack and closed the satchel again. He glanced ruefully at Dutch. "It's gonna be a long time until lunch."

Dutch grinned. "Here." He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a candy bar.

"Where'd you get this?" Johnny's face lit up at the sight of the snack.

"Emergency supply." Dutch handed it over. "I always keep one in my jacket pocket."

"You're a lifesaver, Masters."

"Hey, give me half," Dutch griped.

Johnny split the bar in two and handed half to his friend. "They don't call you 'Dutch' for nothing," he grinned.

"Shut up and eat, Gage."

They drove in silence for a while, admiring the various views of the lake to their left as they climbed and, then, the alpine meadows and panoramic valleys seen from the higher elevations. "Fire must be pretty big already," Johnny whispered as his trained nostrils caught the scent of smoke crawling along the increasing grade of the slope. McDonald Creek was far behind them now, and the haze they could see in the distance was not due to heat alone.

"It's gonna be bad," Dutch agreed.

As they rounded the curve that began the long climb to the Loop in the road that would lead eastward to Logan Pass, there was a muttered exclamation from the driver.

"Ditto," muttered Dutch.

A heavy cloud of dark grey smoke lifted above the floor of the valley below, rising slowly in the direction of the road. Occasional glimpses of red broke through the haze as intermittent gusts of wind broke the curtain of smudge that veiled the landscape. The fire was still low, far from the upper road. Gage hoped fervently they would be able to keep it there.

"Steve Santowski," said a stocky, soot-streaked man from under his silver-colored helmet, reaching out to shake first Johnny's, then Dutch's hand. Behind him, Gage could see five more men working on a line that began near the access trail and was angling to the northwest. "You guys ever done this kind of work before?"

"You might say that," Johnny grinned.

"We do this for a living," Dutch explained. "Johnny and I are paramedics with the L.A. County Fire Department--in California."

Santowski's face brightened. "Oh, man, welcome to the team! Guess you two don't need much training, huh?"

"Well, it would help if you told us where we're headed. I take it this is the line crew?"

Santowski nodded at Gage's analysis of the situation. "The saw team is above us there." He pointed vaguely to the slope above them. "We're trying to make sure the fire won't reach the road."

Gage and Dutch followed his gaze to the sliver of road that wound around the mountainside far above their heads. It was still quite early for cars to be on the highway, so there was no sign of the traffic jams that usually lined the narrow road. It seemed a long way from where they now stood. "You think that's a possibility?" Johnny wondered.

"Ever fight a forest fire?"

Johnny and Dutch shook their heads in unison. "Brush fires," Johnny answered.

"Not a whole lot alike. You get a wrong wind, the whole place goes to hell." Santowski glanced over as another man strode up. "Main difference is the slope. Fire's gonna move pretty quickly up this grade if we let it--a whole lot faster than a California brush fire. We wanna keep this from heading up the hill if at all possible."

"Hey, Steve, Bruce is ready to move on," said the newcomer.

"Nick, we got us two experienced volunteers here. This is John Gage and Dutch Masters, firefighters from LA, no less." He gestured at the other man. "Nick Orsini."

Nick's face split in a welcoming smile as he shook hands. "Finally, volunteers that won't double the work load!"

"Well, I don't know about Dutch here," Johnny grinned, "but I can handle myself all right."

Dutch slapped at him ineffectually.

"Well, I guess you two know how to handle that pulaski there," said Santowski. He gestured to four men who worked at the ground a short distance from them. "The hotshot team started the line back there, and our job is to keep it going in that direction. We spell each other about every half hour or so. Why don't you two head over and replace that crew? Nick and I will be behind you to dig the trench."

The two paramedics nodded and moved cautiously down the slope. A slight breeze ruffled Gage's hair at the edge of his helmet and rustled through the trees around them, but it was otherwise fairly quiet. The men around them worked without much talk, focused on their task, although Johnny surmised it wouldn't be long before things became a great deal more hectic. The men they were replacing greeted their substitutes with grim nods and stood back to let the four men replace them on the line.

Johnny paused a moment as he lifted his pulaski and studied the panorama through the clearing in which they stood. A snippet of silver indicated the path of McDonald Creek, winding along the valley floor--much too far from the fire to be of any use in helping in the fight. Trees thinned out above the road but here climbed easily to their level. And, under his feet, the earth was the arid dry of a summer drought. Gage glanced wordlessly at Dutch and dug in.

Valerie dropped to the ground in a tired heap, pushing her shiny helmet from her head, swiping a hand across her scalp and scratching at the grit that had collected there. She took a short breath and turned her face to the sky. Above the ridge an impeccable, cloudless blue provided the backdrop to the dry peaks, but below the smoky haze was beginning to obliterate the scenery. Angry red flames, looking more like glowing embers from this height, crept ever higher along the hillside, hungrily eating everything in their path.

"Think they're gonna start evacuating the pass?"

Valerie eyed the man who collapsed next to her on the slope and nodded. "Any time, now," she replied, swallowing a mouthful of water from her bottle and studying the remaining amount. *Not much*. She sighed and rubbed a hand across her eyes. "You got as much dirt in your eyes as I have in mine, Lar?"

The man beside her gave a short laugh. "Probably more." He lay back and closed his eyes. "Wake me when they come back for us."

"Wake yourself," she told him. "I'll be asleep, too." Closing her eyes against the glare of the mid-afternoon sun, she inhaled the stench of sweat and smoke and thought idly of Johnny and Dutch, wondering how they were faring. *I probably shouldn't have let them volunteer*.

Hell, she wouldn't have been able to stop them if she'd wanted to. She had recognized the gleam in their eyes when the phone had first awakened them.

The heat and smoke were thick on the flank. Johnny stopped to wipe his face, struggling to avoid breathing too deeply. He'd never fought fire at such a high altitude and the thin air was beginning to make him dizzy. He glanced at Dutch, seeing a similar struggle. Santowski caught John's sleeve and pointed through the gloom.

"Let's get the line going where that break in the trees is."

Gage nodded, taking as deep a breath as he dared, and moved forward again, swinging his pulaski into the dry earth and raking it toward him for what must have been the thousandth time that afternoon. His arms moved mechanically, completing each motion in spite of the agony creeping into his shoulders, biceps, and forearms. Shifting his attention for a moment over his head, he noticed the sun high in the blue sky. Blue. As in no clouds. As in no rain. As in they were in for the long haul.

"Hey, Gage."

He turned at the sound of the crew boss. Walt Rivers was staring at him disagreeably. "You're off duty now." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Take a break."

Johnny glanced at Dutch, then nodded silently and moved slowly off the line. Finding a patch of relative shade in the trees above the line, he collapsed onto the hard-packed earth and slid his knapsack from his back. He stretched his legs, lay back, and propped the canvas bag under his head and closed his eyes. In an instant, he was asleep.

"Hey, save some shade for me!"

Gage stirred slightly and turned his head away from the voice, but made no sound.

Dutch kicked Johnny's booted foot lightly. "Geez, Gage, you can't possibly be a fireman. No fireman could sleep that soundly."

"Find your own shade," mumbled Johnny without opening his eyes.

A soft laugh sounded behind Dutch. "He wasn't really asleep, was he?"

Johnny heard the rustling of others lowering themselves to the ground near him, and turned on his side, his back to them.

"Oh, yeah, he probably was," answered Dutch, poking Johnny in the back. "I've known Gage to nod off in the middle of teaching one of his own classes. You gonna eat?" This to Gage. "We've only got about a half hour before we go back on line."

His only reply was the soft sound of Johnny's even breathing.

"Damn, I think he went back to sleep!"

Santowski and Orsini laughed out loud. "Eat now, Gage, or be hungry later," warned Orsini.

Dutch shook his head. "Just ignore him," he advised. "He'll turn over as soon as he smells food." He opened his knapsack and dug out the MRE. Tearing off the cover, he stared distastefully at the contents, glancing over at the other two, trying to determine if theirs were as bad as his.

Gage's eyes opened, and he rolled over and stared into the branches above. "Remind me why we do this," he muttered to no one.

"Because we're the only ones dumb enough," answered Santowski.

"It's in your blood, remember?" snorted Dutch.

Johnny sat up and reached for his knapsack. "Also in my ears, eyes, nose, and throat," he said.

"Yeah, well, get some in your mouth, buddy. You never know when your next chance to get food is gonna come, you know that." Orsini made a face at the morsel he'd just swallowed. "And, believe me, this ain't it."

"I heard Rivers say they're probably gonna have to evacuate the pass with this one," said Santowski.

Dutch narrowed his eyes at the other. "I take it that's not a good sign."

Santowski shook his head. "Fire's moving pretty fast. I don't think I've ever known them to evacuate the pass."

Johnny turned around and peered through the trees. "How far are we from the road?" he asked.

"Oh, we still have a long way to go from here," explained Orsini, his finger angling vaguely toward the hill behind Johnny's back. "But it looks like it's heading pretty fast down the valley," he went on. "It's gonna be murder getting those cars off Going-to-the-Sun."

"Could be hard down below, too," added Santowski.

"Won't they close the road?" Dutch frowned.

"Oh, sure," replied the other. "There's a gate way back at the northern end of the lake. Up there, too," he added, pointing toward the road above. "Problem is all the cars that come through before they get it closed. Gotta get 'em all turned around."

Johnny nodded. He'd only seen a few massive evacuations, and they were neither easy nor fun. He whirled around at a sound behind him. Not twenty feet away stood a large mule deer--a doe, and behind her, peeking curiously around its mother's legs, a fawn. The doe's ears twitched and her head swiveled slowly to regard the men in her path. At last, however, her fear of the fire took control and she trotted toward them, heading uphill and away from the danger. Johnny and the others watched silently, unmoving, as she skirted them and disappeared into the trees above them.

They finished their meal wordlessly.

"You all right?" Johnny felt a hand on his shoulder and he lifted his head.

Johnny nodded. "Yeah, I'm all right." He offered a weak smile to the other. "I think that MRE did me in."

Santowski did not return the smile. Gage looked sick. "Where's your water bottle?" he demanded, grabbing Johnny's arm and steering him away from the spot he'd been working. "Nick," he called as he lowered Johnny to the ground, "take over for Gage."

Johnny shook his head. "It's empty," he told Santowski.

Santowski's eyes narrowed even further. He said nothing, but reached for one of his own bottles and handed it to Gage. "Drink this."

Johnny looked at him a moment, then accepted the water and took a long swallow.

"Drink some more," Santowski ordered as John tried to hand it back.

Gage drank some more. "Thanks," he said finally.

"Have you had any water all day?"

It took a moment for Johnny to realize that Santowski was not angry with him. His mouth quirked crookedly. "It's my own fault," he admitted.

Santowski shook his head. "It's the crew chief's responsibility to make sure his men have all their supplies."

John put out a hand. "Steve," he insisted, "I'm a fireman. I should have known better."

Santowski glanced over to where Dutch was working. "Your friend?"

Johnny followed his gaze. "He probably doesn't have any, either."

Santowski sighed and looked up at the sky, then glanced at his watch. "We're due for a supply drop soon. I'm gonna take you two off the line until then. The last thing we need," he went on firmly as he saw Johnny start to object, "is to have two men dropping on us. We've got enough trouble right here."

Gage nodded slowly, grateful, in fact, for the breather. He'd been feeling nauseous since lunch, and had assumed it was the food that wasn't sitting well. It wasn't until the dizziness had started that he realized it was dehydration.

Santowski rose. "Stay put, you hear?" He smiled briefly before returning to the line and dismissing Dutch.

"Kinda stupid, huh?" Dutch said as he dropped beside his friend.

"I am feeling a bit like a fool," Gage agreed. He swiped his hand across his forehead and sighed. "Kinda forgot that I wouldn't be riding the squad around the perimeter."

They sat silently for a while, Johnny with his head on his knees as he continued to fight the nausea and dizziness, Dutch on his back staring at the gradually disappearing light in the sky.

"This ain't quite how I pictured my vacation," murmured Dutch after a while.

There was a short, quiet laugh from the older paramedic. "Dutch, if there's one thing I've learned about vacations, it's that they almost never go the way you plan 'em."

"Yeah, but *working*?" He snorted.

"Face it, Masters--"

"Yeah, I know...we were born for this..."

"Well, that and chasing women."

Dutch smiled and shook his head. "You're somethin' else, Gage."

"Ain't I just?" His eyes closed, his voice was soft and very far away. Dutch realized after a moment that Gage had fallen asleep.

I have got to learn that ability, he told himself again.

Darkness was falling quickly now, though the upper elevations were still visible against the twilit sky. Below, the valley was lit only by the raging fire that now swept along the entire floor and had moved rapidly up the mountainsides in every direction.

Valerie glanced up at the road ahead of her, scanning for the signs that the fire was ready to cross the barrier. Probably not here, she thought--her location had her along Haystack Creek, and trees and shrubbery grew sparse along this stretch of the cliff. Closer to the Loop, though, the fire was gaining elevation quickly, and where the roadway switched back, it would be too easy for the flames to curl around.



Haystack Creek and Falls. Going-to-the-Sun Highway crosses over it.

It would soon be too dark for continued bucket drops.

She sighed and drained her water bottle as she waited for the truck that would take her to the fire shelter where she would spend the night. "Relief" was sure the right word, she thought grimly.

Valerie had been on duty now for almost twelve hours, certainly not a record for her, but she was ready for the break. Tomorrow she would work with a saw crew further around the pass. It would be a welcome change, even if the work was more demanding and dangerous.

Around her, the rest of the crew slouched silently in various postures of repose, some even with eyes closed. A couple of hours off their feet would restore some of the energy, and she suspected that there would be a poker game or two under way after they'd eaten.

Her thoughts strayed again to Dutch and Johnny. She'd spent much of the day wondering how they were faring, worrying and feeling guilty for having allowed them to use their precious vacation time to endanger themselves. She felt especially responsible for Gage--Dutch was her cousin, and for some reason family seemed fair game for getting involved with her life. Gage, however, was a stranger, and much as she supposed he would never have backed away from helping, she still didn't like the idea of him being on this mountainside.

Valerie smiled ruefully. That must be the mothering instinct he inspired.

The truck pulled up, and wearily, the group of firefighters climbed aboard and headed to the fire shelter area.

Santowski's argument with Rivers was interrupted by the crackling of the radio at Rivers' hip. Spinning away from the irate firefighter, Rivers yanked the radio from his belt and acknowledged the call. A minute later he was stalking around Santowski and heading back to the line.

"Gage! Masters!"

Johnny looked up from where he had once again joined the line, and brushed ashes from his face.

"You guys need to come with me!" Rivers' voice didn't diminish as he drew near.

Dutch glanced at Johnny and suppressed a groan.

"What's up?" asked Johnny, leaning a moment on his pulaski.

"We've got a stranded Jammer just below the Loop," Rivers replied, pointing upward to their left.

"They've got a couple people who need some medical attention, and you're the closest thing we've got."

Johnny and Dutch looked at one another. "Uh, look, Walt, we don't have any equipment, and even if we did, we're not certified in this state. There wouldn't be much we could do..." Dutch's voice trailed off.

"You can give first aid," snapped Rivers. "I don't have time to argue with you two hotshots. Let's go." He whirled back toward the road and stomped off.

Sighing, the two paramedics packed their digging tools and followed. Santowski stopped them as they started to pass. Wordlessly he handed them both of his water bottles, one nearly empty, the other nearly full. Hesitating only a moment, Johnny nodded his thanks and took them, silently handing his empty bottles to the other. Then, he and Dutch climbed after Rivers.

Twenty minutes later, Rivers turned impatiently back to the paramedics. He didn't like what he saw.

"What's the hold up?" he shouted, climbing back down to where they had paused.

Johnny sat on the ground, his head between his knees, gasping for breath. Dutch leaned over him, peering anxiously into his face. "Johnny, you're hyperventilating. Slow it down." His voice was faintly strained.

Johnny nodded once and Dutch watched as Gage visibly tried to slow his breathing. Suddenly, Johnny rolled sideways and vomited helplessly into the dirt.

"What the hell is his problem?" demanded Rivers, watching with disdain the heaving young man at his feet.

"You're the problem!" Anger propelled Dutch from Johnny's side, and it required a supreme effort to keep his fists at his side. "He's badly dehydrated--because you didn't bother to remind your volunteers to fill their bottles---"

"You're supposed to be *experienced* firefighters," sneered the other. "You should've remembered to do it yourselves!"

Dutch took a step closer.

"Stop it!" Johnny was sitting back on his heels, pale and shaky, his breath coming in trembling gasps.

"There are people...who need help." He closed his eyes and swallowed. "Forget...this..."

Dutch reached out to steady Gage as he climbed to his feet, and pulled a water bottle from his

knapsack. "Here, better drink something." Johnny swallowed a mouthful or two, clenching his teeth to keep it down.

"Let's go," Gage said hoarsely. He looked at Rivers. "Which way?"

Rivers stared at him, slid his gaze to the still smoldering Dutch, then turned around and began to climb once more.

"You okay?"

"Hike behind me, all right?" He offered a half-hearted smile. "If I pass out, I'd appreciate having someone there to catch me." With that he followed Rivers up the hillside. After a moment, Dutch let out his breath and stepped behind John, shaking his head. *Son of a bitch!*

"Okay, just take it easy now." Johnny smiled at the elderly woman, his voice and manner professionally reassuring. "You're gonna be just fine. I don't think it's a heart attack, ma'am, no," he added to the woman sitting beside her. "I think it's just a little altitude sickness."

"Well, sir, I'm sure that going down sounds a little scary. That's why I think we're gonna head back the way we came--so you won't have to worry about it." Dutch grinned easily at the middle-aged man near the back of the bus.

"That's right, the bus will have to go back the way it came," Rivers echoed from behind the LA paramedic.

"Here, just drink a little of this," Johnny instructed, holding a cup of water for the nauseous woman. "There ya go. You want some more? Okay," he went on at the shake of her head, "I'm just gonna go back there and see if anyone else needs anything."

"Thank you," smiled the woman.

The Gage grin went into action again. "You're welcome." He joined Dutch. "Anything serious back here?"

Dutch shook his head. "Mostly, they're just a little scared."

Rivers watched silently as the two men made their way the rest of the way down the aisle, relaxed and easy, gradually calming the frightened passengers. His forehead creased in a frown. After a few minutes, they turned back and met him near the front.

"I think they're all okay," said Johnny, dropping his hands to his hips and studying the obscured view of the valley. "They'll all feel a lot better when we get the bus turned around and headed back up to the top."

"You all right?"

Johnny blinked at the solicitous question, then nodded slowly. "I'm all right," he assured the older man. He jerked his head toward the passengers. "We need to get these people to safety."

A short cry from the rear of the bus interrupted his words. The three firefighters snapped up and around. Johnny was the first to move, pushing past Rivers and Dutch to lope to the source of the scream.

An elderly man slumped sideways in his seat, his head thrown back and mouth working soundlessly

as he tried to suck air into his lungs. Johnny dropped to his knees.

"He just grabbed his chest," wailed the woman at his side, who cradled the man in her arms.

"Sir?" Johnny reached out for the man's wrist and felt for a pulse. Behind him, Dutch tried to reassure the woman. "Sir, can you tell me where it hurts?"

"Chest..." gasped the man.

"Is it a sharp pain?"

The man nodded numbly.

"Okay, just take it easy," Johnny advised. "Does it hurt anywhere else?"

"Side...arm..." The man's eyelids fluttered.

"Okay, just try to relax, we're gonna get you some help right away."

Jumping up, he was startled to see Rivers standing behind him, watching anxiously. "Look," he said quietly, "I think he might be having a heart attack-- I don't know for sure. Is there any way you can get some help up here?"

Rivers shook his head. "Road's closed in both directions, and it's too dark now for choppers."

"Damn." Gage brushed his hair back, leaving his hand on his head as he tried to think of a plan. Glancing at the patient, then through the front window of the bus toward the rapidly approaching wall of flame, he finally dropped his hand and gestured toward the road. "We gotta get him down from here."

"What do you suggest we do?" Disdain underscored the words.

Gage shut his eyes for an instant, then opened them and began counting...out loud. He didn't get far before Dutch was passing between the two men and approaching the driver of the bus.

"You in radio contact with anyone?" he demanded. The driver nodded mutely. "Then, get on your radio and tell them we have a medical emergency you're bringing down. We need to get that man--" he pointed behind him "--some medical help. It's too dark for a chopper, so it's up to you."

The driver stared at Dutch a moment, then seemed to draw strength from the calm urgency Dutch relayed. He grabbed his mike, speaking as he shifted gears on the bus and pulled from the parking lot to negotiate the hairpin curve.

By the time Dutch returned to the back of the bus, Johnny had ripped a scarf one of the women had handed him, and was tying tourniquets on either arm of the patient. He'd moved the woman, who proved to be the man's wife, and she now sat across the aisle, fretting.

"What's wrong?" she begged as Johnny stepped back.

He frowned but spoke reassuringly. "Well, we think he might be having a heart attack, ma'am," he began. "Does he have a history of heart trouble, Mrs.--?"

"Richards." She shook her head and stared at her husband. "Never."

"Okay, good. Listen, we're gonna try to make him comfortable." He brought his smile into play again. "You just try to relax, all right?"

"The pain seems to be easing a bit," Dutch told Johnny, tightening the scarf on the left arm and

checking his watch again. "Breathing is still labored."

"Okay. Not much else we can do, I guess."

"How's he doing?" Johnny looked up at Rivers' question.

"He's holding his own," Johnny told him. "That's about all we can expect for now." He glanced out the window at the rapidly approaching flames. "How long until we're down?" he asked quietly.

Rivers made a face as he followed the paramedic's gaze. "It won't be easy with all the smoke. At least a half hour, forty-five minutes. And that'll just get us out of the higher elevations....Until we can get him to a hospital? Probably another half hour after that. At least."

"Listen, can you at least radio for medical personnel to be waiting for us at the staging area? Let them know what we have coming in?"

Rivers pursed his lips as if to question the suggestion, but common sense finally took over. He lifted his walkie talkie and spoke briefly, glancing at Gage as he spoke. When he'd finished, he studied the dark-haired man still standing in the middle of the aisle as the bus lurched down the road.

"Happy?" he sneered as he lowered the radio.

"Oh, man..." Johnny slowly shook his head, compressing his lips with an effort and biting back the angry words that threatened to burst forth. *It's not worth it, Gage.* Johnny turned away and lowered himself to the floor, leaning his head on his knees.

"John?"

"Just a headache," murmured the dark-haired man.

Dutch glanced up worriedly toward the front of the bus. Gage was in trouble here.

"What's wrong?" asked Mrs. Richards, her eyes on Johnny's bent head.

"He's suffering from dehydration," Dutch explained. "If we don't get some fluids into him pretty quick, he's gonna keel right over."

"I think there might be some water up front," declared Mrs. Richards. Before Dutch could respond, she had jumped up and made her way to the driver. Thirty seconds later she was back with a younger man and a small water jug in tow.

"This is Mr. Galyan," she said. "He has some water for your friend."

Dutch took the water gratefully, acknowledging the introduction. "Thank you," he said simply, dropping to Johnny's side and holding out the cup of water Galyan had poured. "Here, drink this," he ordered.

Johnny lifted his head lethargically, but he took the water obediently. Dutch insisted he keep drinking until the jug was nearly empty and Johnny threatened dire consequences if Dutch tried to force any more water down his throat. But, he did look less queasy.

"You feeling lightheaded at all?" Dutch peered at his face.

"A little," Johnny admitted, "but it's not bad--it'll go away in a bit, I think."

"Okay, you just sit there, then." Dutch rose, alternated the tourniquets on Mr. Richards, then sat down to ride out the trip down.

"I'm all right..."

"Will you lie down? For Pete's sake..."

"...but I really gotta take a leak right now...."

Gage pushed himself firmly to his feet and grinned at Dutch. "Less you want to take me to the little boys' room to make sure I make it okay?" With all the Gatorade that had been poured into him in the last hour it was a wonder he could even walk. And he honestly did feel much better than he had on the mountainside. If Dutch and Valerie would just stop fussing over him now....

The field station was a quiet madhouse at this hour as the last of the crews arrived from the fire and the next shifts made their way out. The fire showed no signs of burning out, and it was only partially--and temporarily--under control in one sector. A good rain would help, Gage thought as he strolled across the tarmac. Looking up, the scattering of early evening stars suggested that rain was far away yet.

"You spend a lot of time not watching where you're walking, don't you?"

Johnny's head dropped but the smile remained firmly in place. "You'd be surprised what I see from this angle," he replied mildly.

Walt Rivers shook his head. "Where does it come from?"

"You mean my attitude?"

Rivers stared a moment. "I meant," he said finally, "your determination, your energy. The way you kept going out there today, sick as you were....where does that come from?"

Johnny shrugged. "Maybe I just wanted to get off that mountain," he said flippantly.

"You're quite the punk, aren't you?"

Johnny laughed out loud. "I'm a little old to be a punk," he retorted. "Look," he went on, looking around, "you see these people? They're here because there's a job that needs to be done, and they know how to do it. Out there today....there was a job to be done, and I knew how to do it."

"You almost didn't get the chance."

"Yeah, well, that was stupidity on my part."

Rivers narrowed his eyes, then his features relaxed into an uneasy grin. "I think maybe I've underestimated you."

Johnny inclined his head. "Good deal," he finally smiled. Then, he turned and found his way back to the sleeping quarters.

Dawn brought a chorus of groans from the rudely awakened firefighters. Aching muscles protested as wearied bodies tumbled from the cots in the fire shelters; skin burned by sun, wind, and heat stung in anxious anticipation of another brutal day.

Johnny remained in his bed until the last possible minute, determined to get the most of the brief night. Finally climbing slowly from the narrow canvas, he laced his boots and limped slowly outside,

groping half-blindly for an empty cup for coffee. It took several swallows to get his eyes fully opened.

"What's the story?" he asked Valerie, who was grinning at him with impossibly wide-awake eyes.

"Fire hasn't moved much, they say. Wind is still low, which is good." A yawn stretched her mouth wide, a gesture Johnny found immensely endearing. He ducked his smile behind his coffee.

"What's the forecast?"

"Clear, blue skies for the next few days," came from behind. They turned.

Walt Rivers smiled grimly at the pair. "Sorry, folks. Time to go back to the line."

Shrugging, Johnny looked at Valerie and over her head to Dutch as he approached. "Well, see you tonight, I guess," he offered, tossing the remaining coffee from his cup and setting it with the rest on a nearby table.

"Listen," laughed Valerie, "after yesterday's adventures, I'm not letting you two out of my sight. As of now, we are all in the same crew."

Johnny's grin widened. "Far out!"

"Oh, my God," muttered Rivers, stalking away, "a John Denver sound-alike...."

"Come on," Valerie ordered the LA firefighters with a snicker in Rivers' direction, "I'm going to make sure you have water today. And bear repellent."

For the first time in memory, the West end of Going-to-the-Sun Road was closed to traffic at the northern edge of Lake McDonald. Logan Pass was once again opened with limited service available, but no vehicles were permitted beyond the Loop, and it was certain that even the stretch of road up beyond that location would soon be forbidden to passage. The fire had progressed up the tinder dry valley far enough that a heavy haze hung over much of the mountainsides and obscured the normally boundless view.

The crew to which Valerie had attached herself on the second day of fighting were assigned to the stretch of mountain beyond the Loop, near where John and Dutch had helped rescue the Jammer the day before.

Hour merged into hour, time passing in a blur of motions so repetitive that, after a while, Johnny felt like a mindless robot. The weather was, if anything, hotter today than yesterday. Or, perhaps it was the heat of the steadily advancing fire that seared the insides of his lungs and sucked the air from his body. The smoke, too, was thicker today than yesterday, so as near as they were to the highway, they couldn't see it from where they worked.

Because they had spread out so far as they worked, Johnny could barely see the rest of the crew. Dutch, he knew, worked several feet to his left, but he had no idea where Valerie was in the crowd, nor Steve Santowski, whom he had last seen somewhere to his right. It was a very eerie feeling.

Even weirder were the occasional bucket drops that further launched smoke and heat in their direction, but which also helped keep the fire where it belonged--below the road. As the day progressed, Johnny grew ever more leery of passing helicopters. Having been dumped on more than once in his career, it was not an experience he cared to repeat, so he worried that each approach would suddenly find him awash.

A shout sounded from just in front of him. Gage lifted his head and took a shallow breath as he lowered his pulaski and eased his aching shoulders. His relief was here. Nodding silently to each other, Gage and his replacement passed each other as John headed up the slope for a short rest.

Steve Santowski joined Johnny as he flopped to the ground and dug his water bottle from his knapsack. A few minutes later, Dutch Masters collapsed spinelessly at their sides, his long legs folding easily underneath the rest of his body like a gently cascading piece of cloth. John watched his friend through half-closed eyes.

"Dutch, you'd better check under your cot when we get back to the shelter tonight," he muttered. "I think someone took your bones while you were sleeping."

"Is that what happened?" Dutch tapped himself on the leg. "I was wondering why I couldn't stand up straight." He lifted his helmet and scratched at his grimy hair, his eyes peering through the fog at Santowski. "We due for another supply drop soon?"

Santowski's shoulder's lifted and dropped lethargically. "Not a clue," he answered. His gaze sharpened abruptly. "You out of water?"

"No, I'm fine." Dutch stretched out on the ground. "Kinda hopin' they'd drop off some decent food, though." He waited for a rejoinder from Gage and, when none was forthcoming, lifted his head and looked at his friend. Gage had fallen asleep.

In less than a minute, Dutch and Steve had followed suit.

The rushing sound roused the three men from their doze. Gage lifted his head in confusion and stared, trying to recall where he was and what was happening.

"Oh, shit," muttered Dutch.

"Flashover!" The shout came from somewhere in the near distance. Frantically tugging at the square packet at his waist, Johnny followed the others in ducking beneath the protective fire shield's minimal defense against the rapidly approaching wall of fire.

The noise had risen to a deafening crescendo of crackling wood and snapping and hissing flame. Huddled beneath the fire-retardant material of the tent-like shelter, the breath sucked from their lungs, the firefighters could only pray that help was on the way.

It must have been at least an hour that passed, Gage thought, fighting for breath and fiercely hoping he wouldn't suffocate in his shelter--so quickly had he lost track of time. Smoke and steam filled his nostrils, choked his lungs. Coughing and gasping for air, Gage didn't dare show his head from under his covering. The fire was by no means out--any hope of escape lay in remaining exactly where he was until someone told him otherwise.

He hoped fervently that Steve and Dutch had gotten into their shelters in time. And that Rivers was still in radio contact with the field station.

It could be a long while before they moved again.

In reality, less than fifteen minutes had gone by before he detected the sound of chopper blades drawing near. John hunched even lower, preparing for the impact of the water, yet still not quite ready when it hit, flinching against the sudden heaviness. He dimly heard the muffled exclamations to his

right and knew that Dutch and Steve had caught a good deal of the weight as well.

"Move up!" Rivers' voice echoed across the forest.

Gage, Santowski, and Masters jumped up and dashed uphill through the smoke and steam. They climbed rapidly and silently above the fire once more, not stopping until they had managed to put as much distance as possible between them and the fire. Looking up when they finally came to a halt, Johnny saw that they were much higher than the road now. Turning around, he could see the raging flame just below, spreading down and across the slope as far as he could see. And still rising too fast in their direction.

"Damn!"

He nodded slowly in response to Dutch's low muttering. *Damn is right.*



The Loop on Going-to-the-Sun Highway. The highway switches back sharply on itself here. Toward the left you can see the beginning of the Loop portion of the Highline Trail (which leads straight UP to Granite Park Chalet), and to the left and behind (out of shot) is the valley. The fire damage is real, though not from the fire in this story. J

Plodding along some distance behind Santowski, Gage's eyes were focused solely on the dirt under his feet. He'd already wrenched his knee missing a step and he didn't care to do it again. It was hard enough to hike at this altitude--becoming dehydrated, weary, inhaling the stench of thick forest fire smoke. Behind him, Dutch followed in similar fashion, though his gaze traveled frequently to the friend trekking in front of him.

Already they had been traveling for fifteen minutes since the water drop, yet they were still surrounded by thick smoke. The only sound Dutch heard was the sound of his own heavy breathing as they tried to outrun the fire. Ahead, Santowski led the way along a narrow game trail toward what he hoped would be the Highline Trail. From there, he had called breathlessly over his shoulder as they fled, they could decide which was the safest direction toward safety. They had no idea where the rest of the crew was, but in the dense smoke and shrub it wasn't surprising that they could see no one else.

"You all right, John?" Dutch called out.

His answer was a silent nod, followed by the sight of Johnny turning to look back. "Yeah," Gage started to reply. He stopped suddenly, his eyes growing wide. Dutch followed the direction of his stare.

On the trail behind him stood a young bear cub, poised uncertainly. A pitiful, plaintive whine rose from its throat.

The two men froze. "*Shit!*" murmured Dutch. *A grizzly cub.* The mother had to be close. He began to back slowly toward Johnny.

"Easy..." breathed his friend.

A mere ten feet separated the men. The cub continued to cry, rising up on its hind legs and pawing at the air, its nose twitching in the smoke-filled air. As it dropped back to all four feet, a noisy rustling came from Dutch's right. Three heads swung in that direction--Dutch's, Johnny's...and the cub's.

There was no time to move. Johnny stood rooted to the ground in helpless horror as a massive grizzly sow charged from the trees, aiming straight for Dutch. Her speed was incredible--Dutch had no chance.

The bear caught him full force at chest level, sending him flying backwards into the uphill brush. Johnny screamed as he lunged forward.

The cub, too, howled, its head swinging back and forth in agitation. Johnny ignored it and dashed into the trees after Dutch.

The bear had Dutch pinned to the ground, where he yelled, kicked, punched, and fought with all his might to get away. Johnny added his shouts to try to distract the animal, stumbling around in search of a large branch that he might use to beat it. He suddenly recalled his pulaski, still in his hand from using it as a sort of cane. With one swift motion, he swung it over his head and down as hard as his exhausted muscles allowed.

The tool connected with her shoulder, catching it with the side of the head instead of the sharp axe-head as he'd intended. With a roar of fury she rounded on her attacker.

Continuing to yell and wave the weapon, Johnny shifted backwards. As the animal launched herself at him he tripped, stumbling against a narrow tree and tumbling sideways. The bear raked at him with massive claws and knocked the pulaski from his grip. John felt himself rolled onto his stomach as she pawed at him again, sharp pain scraping across his back as she caught him once more with a paw.

Gage was still yelling, still trying to fight, when another sound finally reached him--a voice. Someone was shouting at him. Or near him. He stopped yelling to take a breath and the words out there finally made sense.

"*Play dead!*"

Abruptly, Johnny stopped moving and yelling. Except for the nearby wailing of the cub, sudden silence reigned. The sow swatted at him a few more times, and Johnny bit nearly through his lip to keep from crying out again. Her nose dropped against his neck and pushed at him once or twice, then he no longer felt her breath on his face. He kept still, listening for the sound of her moving away.

Everything had been happening so fast that no one noticed the sound of a helicopter approaching for yet another bucket drop. Fortune had it drop its contents almost directly on top of them.

Knocked to his knees by the force of the water, Steve Santowski forced himself to remain unmoving at the edge of the copse as the startled grizzly sprang up with a frenzied bellow. The bear swayed back and forth a long moment, yowling in surprise and anger, her teeth gaping dangerously in wide jaws. Then, with a last hoot, she turned and lumbered back toward her cub.

Santowski stayed where he was until she had disappeared, then he lunged up and toward the downed paramedic. "Johnny?"

Gage felt a hand on his back and tried to shift. "No, don't move. You've got some nasty wounds here--"

"Where's Dutch?" Johnny gritted his teeth and moved anyway, shutting his eyes against the discomfort in his lower back and pushing himself to his knees.

Santowski twisted around, uttered a low oath, and put his hand again on Johnny. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," Johnny lied. He spotted Dutch's unmoving form about fifteen feet away. "Dutch?" Ignoring Steve, ignoring the pain, he propelled himself toward his friend.

Dutch lay on his back, eyes closed, breathing shallow and rapid. "Oh, man," he wheezed as Johnny and Steve reached him, "oh, man...."

"You okay?" Johnny was slipping his knapsack from his shoulders as his eyes swept over the downed man. Blood flowed freely from a deep gash along his left shoulder, and that arm hung limply at his side. More blood seeped from what looked to be puncture wounds on the upper arm, and his face and head were covered with dirt and debris.

"Yeah," muttered Dutch, whispering a couple of unprintable words. He grimaced as Johnny began to examine the wound on his arm. "Ribs hurt...."

"Okay," Johnny muttered, more to himself than Dutch, "let's take a look." Gently he ran his hands along Dutch's chest and shoulders. "Hurt here?" he asked. Dutch winced as John touched his left collarbone. "Never mind," Johnny murmured.

"I don't think she bit me," Dutch told him, opening his eyes and peering up into the trees as he caught his breath. "Man, talk about timing."

A Gage grin flashed down at him. "You know," he said, pulling a small first aid kit from his knapsack and setting it aside, "I think you just used up a life. You're down to only eight now."

"Still got more than you," grunted the other.

Johnny turned to Santowski. "Steve, you got a first aid kit in your knapsack there? We're gonna need some bandages here."

"Not to mention what you're gonna need for yourself." Santowski's reply was wasted on Gage, who was busy dressing the wounds on Dutch's arm, disregarding Dutch's muttered curses as he lifted the arm.

"Sorry." He quickly tied off the bandage and shifted Dutch's arm across his chest, then helped him sit up.

Dutch shook his head slowly to clear it and stared with sorrow at his drenched clothes. "Damn. And I left my dry socks back at Val's."

"I'm surprised you even remembered to bring spare socks," Johnny grinned.

"Ah, you taught me well, Johnny--always be prepared."

"That was the Boy Scouts, Masters. Now, sit still, would you?" Carefully, he immobilized Dutch's left arm, wrapping it tightly against his chest. "You probably have a few cracked ribs there," he told his

friend, "and a broken collar bone. Looks like she did bite you on that arm. Any place else you hurt?"

Dutch rubbed the back of his head. "Oh, I'm sure a few more spots will pop up soon." Catching Johnny's look, he amended, "No, I don't think so."

"Okay," John started to say, brought up short as he tightened the knot on the last bandage he was putting on Dutch. He gasped sharply.

"Here, sit back." Steve settled him to the ground and glanced at Dutch's frowning face. "She got him a couple of good ones, too," he explained.

The "couple of good ones" turned out to be two lacerations across Johnny's right forearm and four more deep cuts on the lower right side of his back. Dutch wasn't much help one-handed, but he was able to direct Santowski in the application of gauze and bandages. "You're probably gonna need stitches," he told Johnny, who just compressed his lips and shut his eyes until Steve was finished.

"What now?" Johnny shivered in the breeze that stirred in the brush.

Santowski pointed. "Up. We still need to move out of the trees and the path of the fire. We'll be safest up there." He rose and hauled first Johnny and then Dutch to their feet.

"You sure you're okay?" This from Johnny to Dutch.

"Yeah," Dutch assured him, his face creasing into a broad smile. "I think we might scare the tourists, though."

Johnny nodded, smiling grimly in return. "Let's go, then."

Dutch led the way this time, Johnny in the middle, and Steve at the rear where he could keep an eye on the other two. It looked like their volunteer service was at an end.

"What do you mean, they're gone?" Valerie's voice, when annoyed, took on a low pitch.

Rivers shrugged. "Just that. No one has seen them since the flashover. They must have headed up the slope."

Valerie shaded her eyes with a hand and studied the mountainside that rose up before her. They were above the road now, forced higher by the burst of flames, now doused, that had flared dangerously half an hour before.

The only thing visible from here was brush and scrub. And more brush and scrub.

Valerie sighed and lowered her hand. "Do we search?" she asked the crew boss.

Rivers' reply was to lift his radio and speak into it. "This is Team 8," he announced. "I've lost three of my men in that flashover. We suspect they're headed uphill, probably toward this end of the Garden Wall."

After a second or two, the radio crackled with a tinny answer. "Roger, 8. We've got a copter making a pass for another water drop. We'll keep an eye out for them."

"10-4." Rivers settled the radio once more at his hip and shrugged at Valerie. "Not much else we can do," he offered by way of apology. The road obviously wasn't offering the natural fire break it should. The danger of the fire snaking around the hairpin curve of the Loop and spreading up over the next ridge was all too close. What was left of the team needed to resume work.

She didn't like it, but she would gain nothing with a probably fruitless search of the mountain. They could be anywhere. Heaving a sigh that was both exasperated and worried, Valerie headed back to finish what they had started.

Johnny had just decided that he'd had enough of mountains and hiking for this vacation. *Not exactly the kinds of stories I had planned on telling when I got back*, he thought, repeatedly cursing the pain that stabbed through his back with every step. At least now they were clear of the dense thickets and had a clear view of the rise above as well as a commanding vision of the panorama below.

Flames continued to eat away the hill just below the road, which was visible as a narrow grey band curving into the rock beneath them. In the valley, smoke persisted in overshadowing the tops of the trees above the fire, and from their elevation, Johnny couldn't tell if flames still smoldered underneath the cloud. Higher up the slope, angry dots of red undulated in the fading light, but he could see that it hadn't spread further down the valley than it had been earlier in the day. It looked as if the firefighters were winning the containment battle on that end. The fight nearer the Loop in the road looked to be a much closer call.

He glanced ahead again at Dutch, then turned back toward Steve. "Let's take a breather," he suggested, his voice loud enough to carry to Dutch as well. Steve and Dutch stopped readily, and Johnny peered through narrowed eyes at his friend. "You okay?" He stepped closer and examined the bandage on Dutch's arm. The wounds appeared to have stopped bleeding, though it was clear that the fair-haired man was in considerable pain.

"A couple of aspirin wouldn't hurt," admitted Dutch. "How about you?"

"Oh, I'm just peachy," Johnny grinned as he handed him the water bottle he'd pulled from the knapsack on Dutch's back.

"Uh-huh." Dutch walked behind Johnny and lifted his shirt. He glanced at Steve.

"You two sure are a pretty pair," murmured Santowski.

The bandages covering Gage's wounds were soaked with blood.

Santowski studied the mountain above them. "We're close to the trail, I'm sure." He lifted a hand and pointed. "It runs right underneath that ridge." As he spoke, he had removed the first aid kit that Dutch carried in his own knapsack and removed what bandages he found in there. Careful to not disturb the dressing already in place, he added a new compress and fastened it tightly. "That oughta hold a while," he told John, who nodded his thanks.

"Let's get going then," said Dutch, raising his eyes to the sky. "It's gettin' kinda late, and I don't fancy being caught by another bear."

Twenty minutes later they found the Highline Trail and help.

Nick Orsini scanned the saw line with a critical eye, pleased with what the crew had accomplished. A broad band of low shrub and fallen timber spread as far as he could see in either direction where the work of several crews joined together to form a miles-long fire break in the forest. The wind was dying down, too, and the fire seemed to be losing some of its force. As the sun dipped behind the mountain, he waited for word that the crew was released from duty for the night.

Resting next to him, Valerie looked up also as Rivers' radio crackled to life.

"Team 8, this is Copter 4."

"This is Team 8," Rivers replied, looking over to where Valerie and Orsini had turned.

"Team 8, we've found your missing firefighters..."

The relief that crossed the faces of the other crew members did not escape Rivers' notice. He couldn't help but smile himself.

"...they're a little battle-scarred, so we're gonna go ahead and give them a lift back to Avalanche."

"10-4. And thanks a heap," Rivers added.

"You betcha," came back from the helicopter.

Rivers slipped the radio back on his belt. "Let's call it a night, folks!" he shouted.

A weary chorus of agreement answered him, and the crew slowly headed up to the road to await their transport back to the field station.

The First Aid station was quiet, thankfully. Until Johnny and Dutch arrived, the on-call doctors had seen nothing more serious than a sprained ankle or two and a few people overcome by heat or smoke.

By the time Valerie and Nick returned to the field station, the two LA paramedics had been patched up and were getting ready to head back to the shelter in which they'd camped the previous night.

"What on earth happened?" Valerie demanded, eyeing her cousin's heavily taped shoulder and the sling holding his arm.

"Lord, you two look like something the cat left behind when he dragged home dinner," quipped Nick.

"You wouldn't be far off from that," agreed Steve Santowski, only a hint of a smile on his face as he regarded the wounded men.

"What I am," Johnny said, arching his eyebrow at Orsini, "is tired and hungry."

"You're always hungry, Gage." Dutch looked a little glassy-eyed.

Johnny shot him a pained look. "I said 'tired' first."

"Come on," Valerie interrupted, "I'll buy you a cup of coffee and see what I can scrounge up for dinner while you tell us where you three disappeared to."

"Good deal," Johnny grinned.

"You betcha," Valerie grinned back at him.

"What is this 'You betcha' thing?" Johnny demanded as they made their way over the parking lot toward the chuck wagon. He'd heard the phrase tossed around several times in the last couple of days without paying it much attention, but as the adrenaline began to wear off, he found time to wonder about it.

"It's a Montana thing," laughed Valerie. "You should be using it yourself."

Johnny shook his head. "I don't think so," he countered. "I don't think I'd ever hear the end of it if I

started that."

Dutch grinned slyly. "You betcha."

Johnny sighed contentedly and shifted his position so he had another angle on the stars.

"Can't get enough of 'em, huh?"

He lowered his head and smiled at Walt Rivers. "Don't get to see much of the stars in LA," he explained.

Rivers nodded. "Guess not. Never saw the attraction to big cities, myself," he went on, tilting his own head back and joining Johnny on the bench from which he viewed the night. "I like the high country."

Johnny shrugged. "Yeah, so do I. But I like the city, too." He watched a meteorite streak across the sky. The annual August meteor shower was in full color tonight.

"How you feeling?" Rivers asked, dropping his head and looking at Gage.

"Oh, I'm all right," Johnny assured him, his gaze remaining heavenward. "Can't sleep is all."

"Fires can do that to you."

Johnny shook his head. "No, it isn't that." He pointed. "Look, there goes another one!"

"Why did you do this?"

Johnny turned surprised eyes on the older man. "Do what--help fight the fire?" Rivers nodded. "I guess because...it's in my blood. I can't walk away from it, you know?"

Rivers studied him a long, silent minute. Then, "Get some sleep, son," he advised, resting his hand a moment on Johnny's shoulder before moving away.

Johnny watched him go, then resumed his perusal of the sky.

Stepping out of the Women's bathroom on the lower level of the Logan Pass Visitor Center, Valerie couldn't help but smile at the crowded parking lot. Now that the pass was re-opened, tourists once more flocked through the Park, stopping at the top of the highway to hike a little and view the tremendous vistas the location afforded. As well as the devastation of the fire.

A blue haze still covered much of the valley as the last of the hot spots dwindled away, and firefighting crews continued to watch for flare-ups. The stark destruction, however, did not much diminish the splendor of the mountains.

"Hey, Val, we gonna get this show on the road or what?"

Valerie turned lazily and regarded her cousin. "You know, for someone who's got the light load here, you're a little too anxious for my taste."

Dutch simply grinned and performed a one-handed adjustment to the lightweight bedroll strapped to his waist. "Hey, that reminds me. I didn't thank you for tying my bootlaces for me this morning."

"You need your eyes examined," Johnny told him, adjusting his own load--a heavy backpack, perfectly balanced a few minutes ago and now somehow out of kilter. "I was the one who tied your

bootlaces this morning."

"Well, who was it who buttoned my shirt?" Dutch winked.

"You need your head examined, too," Johnny said mildly, slipping his sunglasses on, grinning widely and pointing. "No buttons." A woman coming out of the bathroom stopped in midstride, causing another woman behind her to knock rudely into her back. Two other women coming down the steps missed their footing and had to grab wildly at the railing to keep from falling the rest of the way down the stone staircase. None of the four took their eyes off the oblivious paramedic.



The stairs leading into the Visitor Center at Logan Pass. A sidewalk to the right (out of shot) leads to the highway, across from which begins the Highline Trail.

Valerie settled her own backpack onto her shoulders. She had noticed the women and grinned inwardly that a) Johnny hadn't noticed, and b) she would have the distinct pleasure of being seen walking away with the good-looking man who was stopping traffic. "If you two are finished trading insults, maybe we could get going, huh? You've been begging for two days to get back on the Highline Trail."

"Just as long as there aren't any helicopters in the vicinity..." began Johnny.

"...dropping water bombs," finished Dutch.

Valerie shifted a strap, tilted the cap she wore, and slid her own sunglasses into place. She stared a moment at the men, one with his arm still in a sling, the other sporting a still-bandaged forearm and that silly grin. "You two sure you're up for this?"

Johnny and Dutch locked eyes for an instant before they replied in unison.

"You betcha!"



Middle Fork of the Flathead River, near the original entrance to Glacier National Park.

Val's cabin is set upstream from here.

Author's note: As every summer opens, forest rangers across the country prepare for the all too real probability of fire. Fire is simply Nature's way of weeding out overpopulated timberland, and fighting those fires is a dangerous, thankless, and generally highly misunderstood job. Next time you see a National Park or National Forest Service employee, thank her--or him--for the job she performs.

I must offer a great big THANK YOU to many people who helped me along the way in writing this story. First off, thank you to my beta readers--Linda, Theresa, Kathy, and especially Valerie, who kindly loaned me her name. Your enthusiasm for the story overwhelmed me. Your appreciation for the setting tells me it was a worthwhile choice. And, for those who've never been there, plan a trip to Glacier soon. Take me along and I'll be your tour guide--for free! Or, take a photo tour by visiting the Park's website at <http://www.nps.gov/glac/> Check out the picture pages to see Logan Pass, photos of the highway in the story, and even a red Jammer bus. Of course, the snow is usually gone by August....

I also have to thank Charlotte. She patiently answered my dumb (I don't care what she says about them not being dumb!) questions about fighting fires in the wilderness. Even more, she put me in touch with people who could answer the questions she could not. Thank you, Charlotte!

I must recognize especially, one of those with whom Charlotte put me in touch. Joel McNamara, you are in my thoughts and prayers as you wend your way through this fire season of 1999. You perform a VERY difficult job. Thank you for sharing your knowledge and expertise!

Last, but not least, Chickie, thanks for the inspiration and guidance through this labyrinth. Not only did you provide a whole array of geographical assistance, you also provided much of the basic outline of the story. Whether you agree or not, you DID help author this story. Johnny and Dutch would never have made it out of there if not for you. I love you, Little Sister, you betcha!

August 2010: I added pictures taken on a trip there in July of 2010. We've been going to Glacier since we were kids, Gail and I. She lives out in that part of the state now. I still commute. --MJ