

Sidelines

By Gayle Smith

Dr. Kelly Brackett dashed up the stairs of the LA County Fire Department Air Operations headquarters, head bent as he tried to avoid getting thoroughly soaked. As he stepped inside, he shook the drops of water from his leather jacket and looked around for a familiar face. When Kel spotted "Mac" McKenzie, the pilot he'd ridden with last time, he made his way toward him with a smile.

"Dr. Brackett." Mac reached out to shake his hand. "I'm surprised to see you here."

"Dr. Salinger's wife went into labor last night," Brackett grinned. "Two weeks early, and I offered to fill in for him."

"Any word on how she's doing?" Mac asked, concerned.

"As of 6:25 this morning mother and baby were doing fine," Brackett replied happily. "And from what I hear little Charlie is thrilled to have a baby brother."

"That's really great." Mac clapped him on the shoulder. "Listen, why don't I get you a flight suit and let you get changed?"

"Sounds good, Mac." Brackett followed him into the locker room. "Say, do you know who I'll be riding with today?"

"I'll make sure it's me," Mac laughed as he stepped out of the room. "I'll be back in a couple minutes, Doc."

As he changed, Brackett gave some thought to the helicopter search and rescue program. While he believed that his place was in the ER, Kel had to admit that he found more than a little satisfaction working on the county rescue choppers. They provided an immediacy that couldn't be found in the ER where the doctors had to rely on the paramedics to be their eyes and ears in the field, waiting about anxiously until the patients were brought to them. There were, however, drawbacks to working with the program. The most difficult was turning a patient over to the hospital ER staff and simply leaving to await the next run. Something a man as thorough as Kelly Brackett would never be comfortable with.

"Ready to go, Doc?" Mac stuck his head back in the locker room.

"Sure am." Brackett closed the locker and followed Mac out. "Where will we be working out of today?"

"We'll be taking chopper 10 up to base 14." Mac pushed the door open, cringing slightly as a gust of cold air filled the room. "Although, with this weather I can't say how much action we'll be seeing. You may wind up spending most of the day sitting in front of the TV watching football and drinking Captain Simmons' bad coffee."

Dr. Brackett laughed as he followed Mac out to the helipad. "I can't say that sounds all bad. I just hope the people of LA County follow suit."

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Johnny Gage sighed as he gazed out the station house window at the pounding rain. "Man, I can't believe how hard it's coming down out there. I don't think I've ever seen it rain this hard."

His partner, Roy DeSoto, looked up from the paper and a bemused smile lit his face. "Johnny, you say that every time it rains hard."

"Yeah, but this time I really mean it." Johnny gestured toward the window. "I mean, man, would you look at that? I'm thinking of building an ark."

Chet Kelly snorted softly from the couch where he sat with Henry, the station mascot. "Any animal that'd have to depend on an ark you built would be in pretty sorry shape."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Johnny demanded, hands on hips.

"It means that you couldn't build a toy boat that would float," Chet replied tauntingly. "And who would you get to sail it? You get seasick just doing the dishes."

"I DO NOT!" John protested hotly. "And another thing, I'll have you know that I could build a perfectly good boat if I wanted to."

"Right, Gage." A grin twitched at the corner of Chet's mouth as he moved in for the kill. "Perfectly good for . . ."

"All right!" Captain Stanley interjected. "Knock it off, you twits. I don't intend to be stuck inside all day listening to the two of you bickering."

"Sorry, Cap," Johnny muttered sheepishly, sparing a frosty look for Chet.

"Yes sir, Cap, whatever you say." Chet smiled innocently.

Roy sighed and glanced over at Marco Lopez. "It's going to be a long shift."

Marco simply shook his head in reply.

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Kelly Brackett looked up from the game of chess that he and Mac were engaged in as the tones sounded through the building. "Sounds like they're playing our song."

Station 10. Station 51. Station 36. Engine Company 14. Helicopter 10. Multiple vehicle accident on the 405. Half mile north of mile marker 23. The 405 half mile north of mile marker 23. Time out 10:17.

The two men exchanged a glance as they rushed to the helicopter. Both knew from too many years of experience just how bad this kind of call could be.

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The scene that met them as they landed on the clear strip of highway just past the accident stunned both

men. A fully loaded semi-truck had spun out of control on the rain-slicked tarmac careening across all three lanes of traffic and slamming into the retaining wall. After flipping over the center divide, the truck had continued to skid across the three southbound lanes as well. The resulting chain reaction left the freeway littered with crushed and broken cars as far as the eye could see in both directions.

"God, Doc, where do you even begin?"

Mac's words, while soft, shook Kel to the core. Both men were veterans in the war to save lives and both had seen more than their share of heartache and tragedy, but the sheer scope of the scene stunned and disheartened them both.

Kel forced himself to ignore the screams of the injured and dying and hurried toward the triage area. The first victim he reached wore a black tag pinned to his shirt, but still Brackett reached down to check the man's carotid pulse. Nothing. Not that he'd expected anything given the extent of the man's visible injuries, but the physician in him could do no less than check.

Kel bent next to another victim and listened as paramedic Craig Brice began detailing the man's vitals and the treatment provided thus far. "Looks like his vitals are holding steady. He's okay to go out in one of the ambulances. What else've you got?" As he made his way toward the next victim, Brackett caught sight of a pair of legs clad in blue fire department uniform pants sticking out of a crushed station wagon. As he watched the legs moved forward, wiggling into an impossibly small space. Who'd be crazy enough to try and fit in there?

"Gage, whatcha need in there?"

When Kel recognized Captain Stanley's voice he made his way toward the wreck to offer his assistance. As he approached he could see the captain's expression turn grim in response to Johnny's muffled reply.

"Hank, is there anything I help with?" Brackett knelt next to the captain, peering into the tangled mess.

"Hey, Doc." Captain Stanley favored him with a brief, weak, smile. "I'm not really sure. It sounds like John's got a pretty bad one."

"Johnny, what've you got in there?"

"Dr. Brackett?" John sounded strained and tired. "I've got a female victim, age approximately 3. She's pinned between the roof and the backseat with most of the pressure on her left leg and sternum."

"Have you been able to get any vitals?"

There was a pause before Johnny began. "Her pulse is 38 and weak. Respirations are 7."

"Damn," Brackett muttered softly under his voice as he turned to Hank. "Better have someone bring in a children's M.A.S.T. suit; there's one on the chopper. And get me another paramedic over here stat. I'm gonna need all the help I can get on this one."

"Right away, Doc." Hank Stanley nodded and reached for his handi-talkie. "Lopez, grab DeSoto and get him to my location. Then get a hold of Mac and have him pull the M.A.S.T. suit and get it over here. Kelly, where are those jaws?"

"Coming, Cap," Marco's voice responded over the radio. A few seconds later Chet Kelly appeared, making

his way through the tangled mass of automobiles toward the station wagon. "Where'd ya want 'em?"

"Let's get this door here open," the captain said, indicating the back driver side door, "then we'll see what we've got. You ready in there, Gage?"

"Just a sec, Cap." Brackett wasn't sure how it was possible, but Johnny managed to wedge himself even further into the car. "Okay, ready."

Captain Stanley gave Chet a quick nod and the stocky fireman fired up the 'jaws of life,' skillfully using them to separate the mangled door from the rest of the car.

With the door gone, Brackett was able to get a better look inside the car and what he saw raised his admiration for the paramedic another notch. Johnny had contorted himself through the small gap provided between the seats and into the space separating the child from the roof. Johnny hovered a mere three inches above the child as he checked her vitals. "How's she doing, Johnny?"

"Vitals are holding, Doc," Johnny sighed, twisting to look Brackett in the eye. "But I'm afraid the minute we remove the pressure from her lower extremities she's gonna crash."

"They're bringing a M.A.S.T. suit up for her now." Kel tried to sound reassuring, but he knew that the paramedic was as aware of the little girl's chances as he was. "We'll hold off until they get here."

Johnny nodded and turned his attention back to the child.

"Dr. Brackett?" Roy knelt down beside him, glancing into the car. "What've we got?"

"A three-year-old pinned in by the roof. Her vitals are depressed and it looks like the section of roof holding her down is acting as a tourniquet." Kel rubbed a hand down his face. "We're going to have to move pretty quickly once we get her out of there."

Marco hurried up to the scene, setting the M.A.S.T suit down next to the doctor. "Is there anything else you need, Doctor?"

"Yeah, could you let Mac know that we're going to need to get this one to Rampart in the chopper?"

"Si." Marco nodded and made his way toward the chopper.

"Okay, Johnny, we're going to have Chet open this baby up." Captain Stanley peered into the car. "Are you ready?"

Johnny nodded grimly and reached down to hold the little girl's hand.

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Dixie squinted and turned her head away from the mud and wet leaves kicked up by the helicopter as it landed on the roof. Next to her, Joe Early stood with two orderlies and gurney awaiting the arrival of the injured child. Seconds later, as the helicopter's blades began slowing down, they rushed forward helping to transfer their small charge onto the gurney while Roy performed chest compressions.

"What are her vitals, Kel?" Joe asked as the elevator doors slid shut, cutting off the noise from the roof.

"She went into respiratory arrest before we lost her pulse. BP's down to 50/30. Her abdomen is rigid and distended." Brackett continued to squeeze the ambu bag in rhythm with Roy's chest compressions. "We gave her half an amp of epi two minutes ago and began CPR."

When the elevator doors opened, the orderlies rushed the gurney into treatment room three with Roy standing on the rail, still pressing down on the small chest, and a doctor on each side. All working furiously to save the small life.

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"Gage, I don't think that's such a good idea." Chet shook his head as Johnny looked for a way to reach a small compact trapped against a truck and beneath a station wagon. "You better wait until they get back with something to brace that wagon."

"Chet, I can hear someone in there." A small moan reached their ears. "I'm not gonna wait out here if I can get in and help them."

"You can't help anybody if you get yourself killed," Chet replied with a scowl.

"I'm not going to get myself killed." Johnny returned Chet's scowl, his hands placed firmly on his hips. "I do know what I'm doing."

"That'd be a first," Chet muttered, peering under the wagon at the small car.

"What did you say?" Johnny didn't bother to look back as he spotted an opening wide enough to squeeze through.

"I said you better wait for Cap first." Chet chewed his bottom lip worriedly as Johnny threaded his thin body between the cars, "Gage, I really don't think . . ." The sound of groaning metal caught both their attentions. "GAGE! LOOK OUT . . ."

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"DAMN IT!" Brackett slammed his fist down on the counter as Roy grabbed the last of the supplies from Dixie. "If we'd just gotten her here a few minutes earlier."

"Kel, don't." Dixie reached out and placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "You did the best you could, we all did, but sometimes we just can't save them all. You know that better than anyone."

"I know, Dix, it's just . . ." Kel sighed heavily, raising his head slowly to look her in the eye. "It's just that . . ."

"Some of them hurt more than others," Dixie finished, her voice warm and filled with compassion.

"She was just so young." Brackett placed his hand over hers, squeezing it for reassurance. "Thanks, Dix."

"Anytime," Dixie began, but was interrupted when they recognized Captain Stanley's voice over the LA dispatch radio.

"LA, this is engine 51, we have a code I at this location."

Roy looked up from where he'd been standing quietly, thinking of his own little girl safe at home, his features falling. "Johnny."

Without a backward glance, both the doctor and paramedic hurried toward the elevator, intent on getting back to the scene as quickly as possible.

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Roy jumped out of the chopper and made his way toward the triage area, his stomach tied in knots as he worried about what kind of mess his partner had gotten himself into this time.

"Quit whining and sit still."

"I'm not whining. And I'm fine so you can just stop that."

"You're not fine. At the very least you've got a sprain. Now sit still."

Roy stopped as he recognized his partner's voice, a curious expression spreading across his face. He stepped around the group of firemen watching the scene and looked down to see Johnny palpitating Chet Kelly's ankle.

"Knock it off, Gage!" Chet roared at him. "I told you it was fine."

"Kelly," The captain warned softly. "Don't make me order you to sit still."

"What happened?" Roy asked, amusement warring with relief as he continued watching.

"Gage tried to kill me, that's what happened," Chet grumbled.

"What?" Johnny looked up sharply. "I did not. Is it my fault you weren't paying attention to where you were walking?"

"Yes, it is." Chet glared openly at him. "If I hadn't been trying to keep you from getting your head knocked off this never would've happened."

"All right, that's enough!" Hank Stanley bellowed, fixing both his men with an icy stare. "Cut it out, both of you, before I write up the lot of you. Now, how is he?"

"It's just a mild sprain, Cap," Johnny responded contritely. "But he should go by the hospital and get it x-rayed just to be sure."

"The hospital?" Chet protested.

"John's right, Chet." Brackett stood behind the captain, arms folded, "An x-ray's the only way to be sure. Unless you'd like us to perform an amputation right here." He tried and failed to suppress a grin over Chet's startled reaction.

"Not funny, Doc."

"You heard the man, Kelly." The captain's tone alone assured Chet that he'd brook no argument on the subject. "I want you on the next available ambulance. I'll have dispatch call someone out to cover the rest of your shift. Give me a call as soon as you know anything."

"Right, Cap," Chet grumbled.

"Hey, Roy, how's the little girl?" Johnny asked quietly.

Roy sighed, his sad eyes meeting Johnny's. "She didn't make it."

"Damn," Johnny muttered softly. "I knew it was bad, but I hoped . . ." Johnny rubbed his eyes and turned his attention back to Chet's ankle.

"Okay, guys, let's get back to work." The captain clapped his hands together and looked out at the mass of cars and remaining casualties. "There's plenty more to be done."

"At least it's stopped raining," Roy sighed as he picked up his handi-talkie and made his way back into the clutter of damaged automobiles.

"For now," Johnny responded as he followed, tossing a glance up at the heavy gray skies. "But for how long?"

Two hours later as the last patients were loaded into the ambulances, Brackett rolled his neck to relieve his sore muscles before starting back to the helicopter. "No offense, fellas, but I hope I don't see any of you for the rest of the day."

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"Hey, Doc!" Chet Kelly's legs dangled over the edge of the gurney he was waiting on. When Dr. Early looked up from the chart and smiled Chet continued, "Doc, when am I gettin' out of here? There's nothing wrong with me. I just twisted my ankle."

"Look, Chet," Dr. Early smiled patiently. "I know it's no fun hanging out in the hallway and waiting, but we're really backed up with the accident victims and that ankle needs to be x-rayed. Just be patient with us and I promise we'll get to you as soon as possible."

"All right, Doc," Chet grumbled, crossing his arms over his chest with a dramatic sigh.

"Good, then you won't mind lying down and propping that foot back up, will you?" Dr. Early asked with a twinkle in his eye.

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"Kel, what can I get you?" Dixie rounded the base station desk and perched on the edge of her stool.

"Hey, Dix." Brackett smiled fondly at her. "I've got a list of supplies we've used today."

"You've had a busy morning haven't you?" Dixie took a quick glimpse at the list, making a mental note of the availability of the requested items.

"You have no idea." Brackett smiled wearily at her. "We spent three hours on that MVA this morning and we've had another three runs since then. I'm beginning to think that Dr. Salinger got his wife to have the baby early just so he could have a day off."

"Could you blame him?" Dixie asked with a glance down the hall. Craig Brice stepped out of one of the treatment rooms, speaking into his handi-talkie as he did. "I hear you got to work with the world's only perfect paramedic on this last run. How did it go?"

Brackett rolled his eyes. "Brice is very proficient technically, but . . . he's somewhat lacking in interpersonal skills."

"Sounds like a doctor I know," Dixie commented, hiding her smile by focusing on the supply request.

"Hey! I don't have to stand here and take this," Brackett responded playfully. "I'll just take my supplies and lack of interpersonal skills and get out of here."

"Certainly." Dixie looked up, a smile tugging at the corner of her lips. "I'll just need supply requisition form SR10-142 in triplicate."

"Supply form, what?" Brackett inquired, aghast.

"SR14-102."

"Wait a minute, that's not what you said a second ago." Brackett eyed her carefully.

"Or . . ." Dixie's smile broadened.

"Or what?" Brackett asked suspiciously.

"Or you could treat a poor working girl to lunch." Dixie's eyes dance mischievously.

"I think I could handle that." Brackett grinned. "Just let me check in with Mac and make sure there's nowhere we need to be."

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Jim Patterson tilted his head to the side, watching with some amusement as John Gage paced next to the phone. Except when he'd been out on a run, Gage had been at it since Jim arrived to finish out the remainder of Chet Kelly's shift. "Does he do this a lot?"

Roy looked up from washing the dishes, followed Jim's gaze, and turned back to his chore. "He's waiting for the room to be empty so he can call the hospital and check on Chet."

"I thought Kelly only sprained an ankle." Jim shifted in his chair, watching Gage a little closer. "And if he's worried, why doesn't he just call? Why wait for the room to be empty?"

"It was only a sprain, and a mild one at that." Roy dried his hands, then turned and leaned against the

counter to watch his partner's restless pacing. "But Johnny's going to worry until he hears that from the hospital. As for calling in front of witnesses, well it might get back to Chet that he was worried and that would spoil their relationship."

"Relationship?" Jim lifted an eyebrow. "What relationship would that be?"

"The one where they pretend they can't stand each other." Roy reached for the first dish and started to dry it.

"That's a little . . ."

"Weird?" Roy suppressed a smile. "Yeah, it is, but then so is pretty much everything that Johnny and Chet do."

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"Tired, Doc?" Mac asked as Kelly Brackett sank gratefully into the couch cushions.

"If I'd remembered how tiring this was I don't think I'd have volunteered to take Peter's shift for him," Brackett admitted with a rueful grin. "I feel like I've been on the go for 7 days, not 7 hours. What do think our chances of a quiet afternoon are?"

"After you asked that question?" Mac laughed. "None."

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Johnny glanced around nervously as he listened to the ringing phone. So far, so good; everyone was busy with chores or in the dorm. A soft click on the other end of the line caught his attention. "Hey, Dix, it's Johnny. I was just wondering if there was any news on Chet Kelly. Dr. Early's just looking at him now? A back up in x-ray? Uh huh. Who, me? Worried? Nah. It's just that . . ." He looked up gratefully as the tones sounded. "Sorry, Dix, gotta go. Thanks."

STATION 51. STATION 8. HELICOPTER 10. UNKNOWN TYPE RESCUE. RIVER CANYON ROAD. SIX MILES PAST THE STONE CREEK BRIDGE. RIVER CANYON ROAD. TIME OUT 15:25.

The squad and engine roared out into the rain filled streets.

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Chet bit his lower lip and tried not to wince as Dr. Early probed his ankle. "So, how's it look, Doc?" he asked a little too casually.

"I'm pretty sure it's just a sprain." Dr. Early smiled reassuringly. "But I'd still like to wait for the x-rays to come back to make sure."

"And when will that be?" Chet inquired anxiously. "I mean, no offense, Doc, but I'm gettin' kinda tired of hanging out here."

"I can't say that I blame you, Chet," Dr. Early sighed. "But unfortunately x-ray's still backed up with the last few victims from this morning's pile-up. Which means it'll probably take a little longer than usual to get the x-rays developed."

"Great." Chet rolled his eyes, crossed his arms and fell back on the gurney.

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Roy drove slowly, one eye on the odometer and the other on the road that seemed to disappear into the sheets of rain falling around them. "Do you see anything?" he asked, sparing a quick glance toward his partner.

"No. Man." Johnny grimaced in frustration and squinted into the early twilight. "I can't see anything out there. How close are we to the location?"

"We should be right on top of it." Roy slowed the squad down even more as John reached for the microphone.

"Engine 51, this is Squad 51, do you see anything?"

"That's a negative, Squad 51," Captain Stanley's voice came back at them. "Keep your eyes open and be careful."

"Right, Cap." Johnny hung up the mic and peered again into the blinding storm. "Roy, hang on. There!" He pointed to the side of the road. "Did you see that?"

"Yeah, yeah." Roy pulled to a stop. "I think I saw something move."

Johnny pulled the collar of his turnout coat up against the rain, jumped out of the squad and headed toward the side of the road.

"Thank God, you found us." A girl of not more than 17 came running toward Johnny, her drenched hair plastered against her head. "I didn't think that anyone would find us out here."

"What happened?" Johnny started looking the girl over for injuries, but except for the mud covering her and a slight shiver, she seemed to be fine. "Here, why don't you come sit by the squad while I check you over?"

"It's not me, I'm all right." She tugged on Johnny's hand trying to pull him closer to the roadside. "It's Jesse and Bobby. They're trapped."

"Okay, calm down, calm down. What's your name?" Johnny exercised his best paramedic voice. "Who're Jesse and Bobby and where're they trapped?"

"I'm Tara. Jesse's my boyfriend and Bobby's my brother," Tara explained, tears welling up in her blue eyes. "I told them that it was still too wet to go spelunking, but as soon as the rain stopped they just had to come out here."

"There're caves down there?" Johnny frowned and exchanged a worried glance with Roy.

"Yeah." Tara wiped angrily at her eyes. "When the rain started again there was a flash flood and the ledge

got washed away. Bobby tried to climb out, but the cliffside came tumbling down and he fell. I told him it was too dangerous to try getting out that way."

"How'd you get out?" Roy asked gently.

"I climbed up, but I don't weigh as much." She sighed, leaning her head against the squad. "And a couple times I thought I wasn't gonna make it either."

"What's going on?" Captain Stanley leaned in close to be heard over the wind.

"We've got two people trapped down the side of the cliff." Johnny opened the squad's side compartment and started pulling out climbing gear. "They were exploring the caves and got trapped by a flash flood."

"Okay, you and Roy get your climbing gear ready," Stanley directed him. "I'll have Stoker pull the engine up closer."

"Ah, Cap," Johnny continued strapping on his safety gear. "From what Tara says that whole cliffside's about to wash away. I'm not sure it can hold both our weights."

The captain considered Johnny's words as he wandered over and looked down. He shook his head and turned back. "You're right, it looks damn unstable, but I'm not about to send either of you down there alone. We'll be up here on the lines. Just take it slow and easy and let us know if there're any problems."

"Right, Cap," both paramedics acknowledged. They double-checked their equipment then started for the edge just as the helicopter set down up the road.

"ROY! JOHNNY! WHAT'VE WE GOT?" Brackett shouted to be heard over the combined noise of the helicopter and the storm.

"Two people trapped in a cave," Roy replied. "We don't know their condition yet."

"Do you want me to come with you?" Brackett asked, taking a step closer to the edge and peering down.

"No, Doc." Johnny shook his head quickly. "It's too unstable. There's no telling what we might be getting into down there. We'll call you on the handi-talkie as soon as we know anything."

"All right, but you two be careful," Brackett called out as they began their descent. "I don't need any extra business."

"Will do, Doc," Johnny assured him with a slight grin as he disappeared over the edge.

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Roy swung carefully into the mouth of the cave, unhooking his safety line as he landed softly on the mud floor. A few feet away Johnny was already bent over a young man examining him. "What've you got?"

"He's got a broken right tibia and fibula." Johnny dropped his helmet on the floor as he answered. "And it feels like he's cracked a couple ribs. We're going to need a splint and the stokes down here."

"Right." Roy reached into the pocket of his turnout coat and pulled out his handi-talkie. "HT 51 to Engine

51, do you read?"

"10-4, HT 51, we read you."

"Cap, we're going to need a leg splint and the stokes down here." Roy glanced over at the scared and wet looking boy kneeling next to Johnny's patient and clutching his arm to his side. "Are you all right?"

"I think I broke my arm," he replied through chattering teeth. "Bobby landed on me when he fell."

"Let me take a look at that." Roy gently pried the boy's hand off of his arm and palpitated it. When he winced in pain Roy smiled apologetically and reached again for his handi-talkie. "Sorry. Engine 51, this HT 51 we're gonna need an arm splint sent down as well."

"10-4, HT 51. Roy, Dr. Brackett wants to know if you've got any vitals."

"Negative, Engine 51," Roy reported, sparing a second to look up at the rain soaked earth above their heads. "Conditions are not conducive at this time. We need to get these kids out of here in a hurry before the whole thing comes down on our heads."

"10-4, Roy. The stokes is on its way down to you now."

Roy stood and made his way back to the opening. He grabbed the line and carefully guided the stretcher into the cave.

"Roy, be careful," Johnny cautioned as the ground near Roy's feet started to crumble. He hurried over to help his partner with the unwieldy basket. "This place is about to go any minute."

"Yeah," Roy agreed quietly, moving away from the edge. "Let's get out of here."

"I hear ya, partner." Johnny grinned weakly as he grabbed the leg splint. He turned back to his patient. "This is gonna hurt, but it has to be done. The longer we wait the greater the chance of permanent damage," he explained kindly.

"I'm ready," Bobby replied weakly, biting his lower lip as he prepared for the pain to come.

As gently as possible, Johnny reached out and straightened the leg before applying the splint. John felt a pang of sympathy, all too aware of just how painful the procedure could be, as the boy moaned and the blood drained from his face.

"Okay, we'll have you out of here in just a couple minutes," Johnny assured Bobby as he and Roy lifted him into the stokes. Once he was secured and the captain had been contacted, Johnny turned to Roy. "Why don't you go up with him?"

"He's your patient, Johnny." Roy frowned, knowing that, once again, Johnny was trying to place Roy's safety above his own. "You go up with him. Jesse and I will be right behind you."

"You're closer, Roy." Johnny shrugged nonchalantly. "Besides, I've gotta get my helmet. It'll be faster this way."

Roy studied his partner for a moment before acknowledging to himself that Johnny was right. "All right, but this is something we're gonna talk about later."

"Sure thing, Roy." Johnny glanced up nervously at the rain soaked ceiling. "But let's do it topside, okay?"

"Engine 51, this HT 51. I'm ready to bring the stokes up," Roy spoke into his handi-talkie, taking a last look back at his partner before the ropes started moving.

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"Let's get him into the chopper and out of the rain before we start the vitals," Brackett shouted as Roy, Marco and two of the crewmen from Station 8 lifted the stokes off the ground.

"Is he going to be all right?" Tara pushed her way toward the stretcher, trying to catch a glimpse of her brother's pale and strained face. "Where's Jesse?"

"He should be fine," Roy told her. "But we've got to get him inside the helicopter and examine him more closely."

"What about Jesse? He's still down there, isn't he?" Tara turned to stare fearfully at where the rest of the firefighters waited to pull John and the remaining victim to safety.

"Yes, he is, but my partner's still with him." Roy couldn't help casting a glance of his own in that direction. "He'll make sure that Jesse gets out all right. Now, why don't you wait by the squad until he comes up?" She nodded reluctantly and made her way back, leaving Roy to hurry after the stretcher.

Once Roy joined Brackett inside the shelter of the helicopter, he grabbed a stethoscope and began assisting in taking the boys vitals.

"Pulse's 130, BP's 140/110," Roy reported, removing the stethoscope from his ears.

"Was there any evidence of head trauma?" Brackett shone a light in Bobby's eyes. "Bobby, did you lose consciousness at any time?"

"No." Bobby shook his head. "I just hurt my leg. It really hurts bad, Doc."

"Well, we're going to do something about that." Brackett smiled at him before turning to Roy. "Roy, start an IV, Ringers TKO. Then administer 2 milligrams MS, IV push. I'm going to conta . . ."

The rest of Brackett's words were drowned out as a loud crack rent the air followed by the sickening sound of mud being sucked into a hole.

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Johnny picked up the remaining splint and crouched down next to Jesse. "I'm afraid this'll hurt just as much as your friend's leg did."

"That's okay." Jesse smiled bravely. "As long as it gets me out of here and into a long hot shower. I've got mud in places I didn't even know I had."

Johnny laughed and grinned at the boy. "I hear ya. Okay, let's get out of this place." He took hold of the

boy's arm and repeated the procedure he'd performed on Bobby. Once he was sure the splint was properly placed, Johnny reached for the extra safety belt that had come down with the stokes and started to place it around Jesse's waist.

"On the way up I want you to be sure to let me and the other firemen do all the work." Johnny double checked the belt. "Whatever you do, don't try and use that arm. Got it?"

"Got it."

"Then let's get out of here." Johnny had reached the cave's entrance when a sound caught his attention and he looked upward. Johnny's eyes quickly spotted the widening crack in the ceiling that started at the mouth of the cave. The crack that was swiftly making its way toward them.

"LOOK OUT!" Johnny yelled, grabbing Jesse by the shoulder and hauling him back into the cave as the ceiling collapsed around them.

~*~*~*~*~

"What the hell? Stoker, get that engine outta there now!"

"Madre de dios."

Roy was out of the helicopter in an instant – later, he wouldn't even be able to recall if his feet had touched the ground -- rushing to the side of the cliff. The sight that met his eyes stunned him. The water rushing by below the cave had ripped away the cliffside collapsing the cave on itself and tearing out half the roadway.

"Good Lord!" Brackett stopped a few feet behind him, his eyes widening in shock. "What the hell happened?"

Around them firemen scrabbled away from the sides of the sinkhole. A few ventured forward to peer into the abyss. Roy ignored the pounding of his heart and crept slowly closer to the edge, hoping to find some sign of his partner.

"Johnny? JOHNNY?" Roy's stomach dropped as he looked down at the solid mass of dirt and rocks. He took another stumbling step forward, hardly noticing when Captain Stanley grabbed his arm and started pulling him backward. "My God," he whispered, looking up at Stanley with wide, frightened eyes. "How the hell do we get them out of that?"

"I don't know, Pal." Captain Stanley shook his head. "I put in a call for the chief and a light company. In the meantime, I need you to get the squad out of here. We don't need any extra pressure on the area and we don't want the squad falling down on them." The captain gently directed Roy in the squad's direction.

Roy climbed behind the wheel numbly, barely noticing Tara's shocked expression as he brushed past her, moving the squad on pure instinct.

"Miss, we need you to get out of the area," Captain Stanley spoke kindly to the shaken girl. "Please, just move over by the helicopter. They'll make sure you get to the hospital along with your brother." Turning away after making sure the girl left, Stanley surveyed the mess with a grimace. "OKAY, I DON'T WANT ANYONE GOING NEAR THIS UNTIL WE GET SOME MORE MANPOWER OUT HERE."

"But, Cap, what about Johnny and . . ."

"Roy, I know how you feel. But until we know it's safe I can't risk any more men." Hank sighed unhappily. "Why don't you help the doctor?"

"But, Cap . . ."

"Roy, those kids need to get to the hospital," Captain Stanley cut him off. "The boy's hurt and even I can recognize that the girl's in shock. Look, Pal, I know this is hard for you, it's hard for all of us, but we're going to get Johnny out."

"I know." Roy's head dropped as he made his way back to the helicopter. "But when and in what condition?"

"Roy, what's going on?" Brackett alternated between staring at Roy and gaping in shocked amazement at the widening hole. "Where's Johnny?"

"Down there." Roy felt his stomach do a flip and turned away. "Let's get these kids to the hospital."

"What about Johnny? How are they going to get him out?" Brackett climbed into the helicopter behind Roy.

"I don't know," Roy replied quietly. "I just don't know."

"And that's it?" Brackett's jaw dropped open. "There's nothing else we can do?"

"No." Roy turned away. "There's nothing we can do except do our jobs and wait." *Like always*, he added silently.

~*~*~*~*~*~

"Mister? Hey, mister, are you all right?"

Johnny groaned softly and raised his hand to his head. When he opened his eyes, he felt a brief stab of panic because he couldn't see anything. *What the . . .* He took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down and remember where they were. Trapped in a cave without any light. That was why he couldn't see.

"Johnny. Call me Johnny." He drew a deep breath and steadied himself. "Yeah, I'm all right. What about you? How's your arm?"

"It hurts." Jesse winced. "I slammed it into the wall when you pulled me out of the way."

"Anything else?" Johnny reached toward the boy's voice. "You didn't hit your head, did you?"

"No." Jesse's voice dropped. "But, umm, my leg is stuck."

"Stuck? How?" Johnny fumbled around in his turnout coat, trying to find his flashlight. "Does it hurt?"

"No. It's just . . ." The boy sounded embarrassed. "My leg is buried and I can't get it loose."

Johnny found his flashlight and switched it on. He quickly ran the beam over Jesse, looking for any signs of additional injuries, before checking the boy's leg. It was buried up to a few inches over the knee in the mud from the collapsed ceiling.

"Here, hold this." Johnny handed the flashlight to Jesse. "Aim it here and hold it steady." Johnny started digging at the mud, trying to free the boy's leg. "You let me know if this hurts."

"Okay. Hey, mister, you're bleeding," Jesse pointed out worriedly.

Johnny reached up tentatively and rubbed his fingers across his temple, suppressing a wince at the brief stab of pain the motion caused. He felt a damp stickiness and when he brought his fingers down they were stained reddish brown. "It's nothing," Johnny quickly assured the worried boy, trying to ignore the throbbing in his head. "Just a small cut. Now, let's get you out of here."

~*~*~*~*~*~

Dixie looked up from the supply requisition she was filling out and smiled at the familiar figure making its way toward her. "Well, Mr. Kelly." She set down her pen and planted a hand on her hip. "Just where do you think you're going?"

"Outta here," Chet grouched as he hobbled toward the door.

"Does Dr. Early know this?" Dixie asked as she stepped out from behind the desk into Chet's path.

"Um, yeah?" Chet bluffed.

"And he just let you walk out of here?" Dixie looked down at his swollen ankle. "Without rewrapping that or giving you crutches?"

"Well, he was a little busy and . . ."

"And nothing." Dixie scowled at him. "You wait right here while I get a wheelchair and then it's straight back to the treatment room for you."

"But . . . but . . ." Chet looked around in vain for some means of escape.

"But nothing, Chet Kelly." Dixie looked him in the eye. "If you move one inch from that spot my next move will be to that phone. And do you know who I'll be calling?"

"No." Chet's voice was very tiny as he eyed Dixie fearfully.

"Your captain," Dixie replied, fixing him with her best head nurse glare. "Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, ma'am." Chet swallowed hard.

Dixie spotted an orderly and motioned for him. "Bring me a wheelchair. I'll be personally escorting Mr. Kelly back to his room."

"Ah, Dixie, you don't trust me?" Chet looked up at her with an expression of injured innocence. "I'm hurt."

Dixie rolled her eyes and motioned for Chet to sit as the orderly returned with a wheelchair. "Not yet, but if you try a stunt like this again in my emergency room you will be."

Chet was busy eyeing Dixie, trying to gauge the sincerity of her threat, and nearly missed seeing the gurney that came careening around the corner, powered by Dr. Brackett and two orderlies. But he didn't miss the tail end of Brackett's statement to Morton as he hurried back down the hall.

"Can you handle this, Mike? I've got to get back to the scene. Johnny's been trapped in a cave-in."

"WHAT?" Chet burst out of the wheelchair. "WHAT'RE YOU TALKING ABOUT?" He made a grab for Brackett's arm. "WHAT HAPPENED TO JOHNNY?"

"Chet, I'm sorry." Brackett grimaced apologetically. "I didn't see you there. I'm sorry . . ." He looked to Dixie for support but found only shock and fear in her face. "There was a cave-in. Johnny and one of the victims were still inside when the whole thing went. I'm . . . sorry. I have to go, I have to get back."

"I'm coming with you," Chet insisted, starting after him.

Dixie shook herself mentally, reaching out to take Chet by the arm. "No you're not. You're going back into the treatment room and waiting for your x-rays to come back."

"But, Miss McCall, it's Johnny. I have to . . ."

"You have to get your ankle taken care of." Dixie pushed him gently down into the chair. "Kel, you'll let us know as soon as there's any news?"

"The minute I know anything." Brackett smiled weakly. "Promise."

~*~*~*~*~

Johnny cleared the last of the mud away from Jesse's leg, ignoring the increasing pain in his head. "Okay, hold the beam steady and don't move until I'm done checking you." He ran his hands quickly and expertly down the boy's leg. "Okay, I don't think it's broken. Can you move it?"

"Yeah." Jesse flexed his leg slowly.

"Does it hurt?" Johnny asked quickly, taking the flashlight from Jesse and shining it over his leg.

"No, it's just kind of stiff."

"Try standing, but take it slowly. If anything hurts let me know." Johnny tried to keep the worry from his voice as he played the light across the sagging ceiling.

"Okay." Jesse took a deep breath, waved off the helping hand Johnny offered and slowly stood.

"How does it feel? Do you think you can walk on it?"

"Yeah, I think so." Jesse nodded quickly, leaning against the cave wall for support. "It feels kind of prickly, like it was asleep, but it doesn't really hurt."

"Good, because I don't know how much longer this is going to hold." Johnny shined the light back into the cave. "How far does this go?"

"I'm not really sure." Jesse shrugged. "It used to be an underground river. It's supposed to go pretty deep into the mountain."

"Okay, I'm gonna try calling the engine." Johnny pulled his handi-talkie from his pocket. "But I don't think there's much chance of getting a signal through all this. If I can't get through we're going to try moving away from here. Engine 51, this is HT 51, do you read?" Johnny paused to wait for the answer he knew wasn't coming. "Engine 51, do you read? Come in, Engine 51, this is HT 51. Engine 51, if you can read me, we're going to move farther back into the cave to avoid further collapses."

"Nothing," Jesse whispered quietly.

"No, but I didn't expect there'd be." Johnny tried to sound confident for the boy's sake. "Let's get moving."

"But won't we be moving away from the rescuers?"

Johnny started down the dark tunnel. "We don't want to get too far from the rescue effort, but we need to move back where the ceiling isn't as unstable." He weighed how much he should tell the boy and shined the flashlight's beam once again across the rain swollen ceiling. "If that collapses on us there won't be anything to rescue."

"Oh." Jesse's voice wavered with repressed fear. "Okay."

"Good. We better get moving then." Johnny started down the dark tunnel. "Hopefully we won't have to move too far before . . ." Pain lanced through Johnny's head.

The flashlight beam shook as Johnny slumped against the cave wall. He took a deep breath and blinked rapidly, trying to clear his vision. The thin slice of his world illuminated by the flashlight's weak glow wavered and doubled.

"Hey! Are you all right?" Jesse's voice faded into the blackness as it swirled up to claim Johnny.

~*~*~*~*~

Man, Dr. Early looks exhausted, Chet observed as the man stepped into the treatment room.

With a weak smile to Chet, Early walked over and placed an x-ray in the viewer. A few seconds later he placed another one next to it. He flipped off the light and turned to Chet. "Looks good. No breaks. Just a mild sprain. I'll have Betty wrap it for you and write you a prescription for a mild pain killer."

"I coulda told you that, Doc," Chet replied dispiritedly.

"Yeah, but then we'd have missed the pleasure of your company." Joe's smile was a little more genuine as he started for the door, "I want you to take the next shift off and come back in on Friday so I can take another look at it."

"Okay, Doc." Chet nodded, not really paying attention. "Hey, Doc, any word on Johnny yet?"

"No." Dr. Early bowed his head, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Nothing."

~*~*~*~*~

An urgent tug on Johnny's sleeve heralded his return of consciousness.

"Johnny? Johnny, can you hear me?" an unfamiliar voice called to him.

"What happened?" Johnny groaned and raised his hand to shield his eyes as a bright light shone in them.

"You passed out." The voice began to ring a bell. It was the kid, Jesse, and they were still trapped in the cave.

"How long was I out?" Johnny closed his eyes and rubbed his neck.

"I don't know. A couple hours at least." The kid sounded terrified. "I didn't know what to do. I tried to wake you up, but . . . I'm sorry, I just . . ."

"Don't worry. It's all right," Johnny assured the boy. "I've just got a mild concussion. I'll be all right. We both will." Johnny pried the flashlight from Jesse's grip and ran the beam quickly over him. "How're you doing?"

"Okay, I guess. Just a little scared," Jesse admitted quietly.

"What about the leg? Has it been giving you any problems?"

"No."

"And your arm?" Johnny inspected the splint, making sure it was still secure. He pinched Jesse's fingertips and timed how quickly the color returned, making sure they were receiving adequate circulation.

"It still hurts, but not as bad." Jesse smiled weakly.

"That's good. Now, let's see where we are." The scene revealed by the weakening light provided little hope. The ceiling had collapsed further in the direction they'd come from and the cave seemed to stretch infinitely in the other direction. "It doesn't look like they're going to be able to get to us anytime soon. I think maybe we better see where this goes."

"Are you sure you're all right to move?" Jesse asked worriedly. "I read that you weren't supposed to move injured people."

Johnny grinned despite the situation. "That's right, under normal circumstances you should always sit tight and wait for rescue personnel. Unfortunately, however, these aren't exactly normal circumstances. And I don't think we've really got much choice. Even if the place doesn't come down on us on its own the rescue effort could bring it down. We need to get out of here." He flicked off the flashlight. "And I think we better save this until we need it. These batteries won't last much longer."

As the light flicked off they made their way through the darkness, using the muddy wall as their guide.

~*~*~*~*~

Roy stood on the sidelines, watching as the rescue effort continued. Three hours into the operation another section of the cave roof had collapsed, sending two men into the chasm. Both had been pulled quickly out, one suffering a broken leg and the other minor cuts and bruises, but it had pointed out the futility and danger in the current operation. That was when they'd brought in the heavy equipment.

As he watched the excavator digging out shovelful after shovelful of dirt, Roy felt his hope fading. He knew the routine. Brain damage began after just four minutes without oxygen. It had been nearly five hours now. Even if Johnny and the boy had managed to escape the collapse and find a pocket of air it would most likely have long since run out.

"Coffee?"

Roy looked up gratefully and accepted the cup that Dr. Brackett held out to him. "Thanks."

"I've got to tell you, Roy, I don't know how you do it." Brackett leaned against the side of the squad and nodded in the direction of the effort. "How do you stay so calm having to stand around and just wait? I always thought this was hard at the hospital. Waiting for some word, not knowing what was going on, but at least at the hospital there are distractions, other patients that need to be treated. Here, there's just the waiting."

"After a while you get used to it," Roy responded softly, staring into his coffee cup before draining it.

"Do you really?"

Roy raised his head slowly and Brackett saw the haunted look in his eyes. "No. Not really." He slowly crumpled the cup and turned away.

~*~*~*~*~

"Excuse me, Nurse."

Dixie stopped on her way into the treatment room and looked at the scared young blonde girl in front of her. "Yes, can I help you?"

"Can you tell me how my brother is?" Tara asked, her eyes puffy and bright from crying. "He was brought in here hours ago and no one will tell me what's going on."

"What's his name?" Dixie asked gently.

"Bobby. Bobby Wilson," she replied gratefully.

The boy Kel brought in, Dixie thought tiredly. The one Johnny rescued. She felt a brief stab of grief, wondering what chances, if any, Johnny and the remaining boy had. "Wait right here and I'll find out how your brother is."

~*~*~*~*~

Johnny stumbled, slamming hard into the rock wall of the cave. "Jesse, hold up." Johnny sank slowly to the floor, his head pounding, and pulled out the flashlight. Wandering through the darkened cave for hours had left them both exhausted and confused. The beam of the flashlight on the walls confirmed what Johnny had felt. They'd finally cleared the dangerous rain soaked mud.

"Let's stop here for a while and get some rest." Johnny leaned back, barely able to keep his eyes open.

"Are you sure it's all right?" Jesse asked weakly as he sat next to Johnny. "I thought it was better to keep moving."

"No, the ceiling here finally looks stable and we've probably already moved too far from the search area." Johnny fought to stay focused on the conversation. "The farther we are the more difficult it'll be for them to find us." Johnny's eyes slid slowly shut. "We're out of the danger area. It's time to stop and get some rest."

"Okay." Jesse leaned back against the wall, unable to suppress another yawn. "But wake me when the rescue comes."

"You got it, man," Johnny nodded, tucking the flashlight into the folds of his turnout before drifting off to sleep.

~*~*~*~*~

Twelve hours, Roy thought dimly. *Twelve hours. There's no way they could still be alive in there.* Roy rubbed his eyes, fighting the sleep his body craved. He couldn't sleep, not until he knew what happened to his partner.

"Roy, why don't you get some sleep, Pal?" Captain Stanley took him by the arm, gently steering him toward the makeshift camp. "There's not much you can do until they find something."

"Thanks, Cap." Roy shook his head slowly. "But I don't think I could sleep. Not until . . ." his voice drifted off. "Maybe later."

"Yeah, I understand." Hank's eyes drifted back to where the excavator continued its tireless digging. "I don't think I could either."

"Have you seen Dr. Brackett?" Roy's eyes searched the area. "Did he go back with the helicopter?"

"No, he took one of the bunks in the tent." Hank clapped his hands together. "He wanted to be here in case . . . in case they need a doctor when we find them."

"If we find them." Roy couldn't keep the pessimism out of his voice.

"When, Roy, when." Hank squeezed his shoulder before making his way back to the command post.

~*~*~*~*~

Dixie crept quietly into the doctor's lounge and lay a blanket across the figure sleeping on the couch.

"Why don't you go home and get some sleep yourself?"

"I could say the same to you," Dixie replied as she turned to see Joe Early standing in the doorway. "How long have you been here?"

"I'm not sure," Joe laughed softly. "I lost track hours ago. But that still doesn't change the fact that you should get some sleep."

"And so should you," Dixie responded, unwilling to let the point go.

"I can sack out in the residents' dorm," Joe commented with a slight lift of his shoulders.

"You can, but will you?" Dixie asked pointedly.

"I'll tell you what." Joe stepped back and held the door open. "I'll treat you to a cup of what passes for coffee in the cafeteria and we can continue this discussion there." He nodded toward the figure on the couch. "After all, we wouldn't want to wake Sleeping Beauty."

"Now there's an offer I can't refuse." Dixie followed him out of the room, pausing only to throw one last glance over her shoulder at Chet as he snored softly on the couch, overcome by the combined effects of pain pills and hours of worry.

~*~*~*~*~

"HEY! WE FOUND SOMETHING!"

Roy was off the bunk he'd finally settled down on and running toward the rescue site in an instant. He elbowed his way through the crowd and peered down into the hole. Below him he could see the top of a helmet buried in the mud. A few seconds more digging revealed the muddied edges of a turnout coat.

"JOHNNY!" Roy scrambled down the edge into the hole, rushing to his partner's side. "Let me see him."

"Roy, I'm sorry." Captain Stanley's eyes were filled with tears as he reached out to restrain Roy. "God, he never had a chance."

"You don't know that!" Roy struggled against the captain. "Let me go, there might be something I can do."

"Roy, please, you don't have to look," Hank pleaded with him, but Roy broke free and rushed around him.

"Oh God." The sight that met his eyes drove Roy to his knees. There was his partner, his best friend, laying still, staring sightlessly up at the cold dark sky. The harsh glow cast by Light Company 16 illuminated the bluish tinge of his skin. Slowly, as if afraid of making it real, Roy reached out and touched Johnny's throat, searching in vain for a pulse beneath the icy flesh. "Johnny, no. NO!"

"Roy." A hand shook him gently. "Roy, wake up."

Roy sat up with a start, looking around the nearly empty tent. "What happened? Johnny . . . I . . ."

"You had a nightmare," Dr. Brackett informed him quietly. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No." Roy stretched slowly, climbing out of the cot. "There's nothing to talk about."

"Are you sure?" Brackett asked softly. "I can be a pretty good listener, despite rumors to the contrary."

"It's just hard," Roy replied quietly as he stood and walked from the tent.

Brackett didn't have to ask what it was. He knew. It was the waiting. Hour after hour of sitting on the sidelines, watching, sometimes aiding in the rescue effort. But always waiting. Waiting for the worst, praying for the best. Waiting for some glimmer of hope, some sign to carry them through the long hours ahead. Waiting.

~*~*~*~*~

Chet woke up in the darkened Doctor's Lounge and gazed around in confusion, trying to place his surroundings. As memory flooded back, he sought out the clock and felt his stomach sink. It was after 4 a.m. The veteran firefighter knew that if they hadn't been rescued by now there was very little chance of finding anyone alive. He threw back the blanket that covered him, rose and headed out to find some news in the hope that maybe he'd simply been overlooked when the rescue effort had concluded successfully.

A little positive thought never hurt anything, did it?

~*~*~*~*~

Johnny groaned and shuddered as a hand shook him urgently.

"Hey, Johnny, wake up."

"Five more minutes, Roy," Johnny muttered sleepily and tried to find a comfortable position on the cold stone floor.

Jesse swallowed hard. He'd heard in school that it was a bad idea to let someone with a head injury fall asleep. But it'd been late and they were both so tired. Besides, Johnny was a paramedic and had said that he was all right. He wouldn't lie about something like that, right? But this thought didn't comfort him when failed again to rouse the sleeping paramedic.

"Come on, man, you've got to wake up." Jesse shook the unconscious paramedic's shoulder again. "I don't know what to do if something's really wrong and . . ." Jesse breathed a sigh of relief as he saw Johnny's lashes flutter briefly before the deep brown eyes pulled open.

"What happened?" Johnny carefully rubbed the tender spot on the side of his head as he scanned the darkened area.

"We stopped to rest," Jesse replied quietly. "I guess we both fell asleep."

"Yeah, I guess we did." Johnny stretched gingerly. "Let me check your arm." Johnny clicked on the flashlight. "How does it feel?"

"It's throbbing a little." Jesse winced as Johnny examined the splint, making sure it hadn't dislodged during the night.

"This looks okay, but I want you to try wiggling your fingers a little." Johnny squinted as the flashlight gave out. "Everything looks good, but we . . ." He stopped, raising his head and sniffing the air, "Do you feel that?"

"Feel what?" Jesse asked, confusion tingeing his voice.

"Air." Johnny sprang to his feet, ignoring the flash of pain in his head. "Fresh air. It's got to be coming from somewhere. Who knows," he reached down to help Jesse up. "We may just rescue ourselves."

~*~*~*~*~

Brackett looked wearily at his watch and wondered how it could have only been a little over 24 hours since he'd shown up at the air operations headquarters. Had it only been the afternoon before that he'd been joking with Mac about how long the day had seemed?

If I'd only known then what I know now, he thought dully. Reaching for another of the countless cups of coffee he'd consumed in the last 20 hours, Brackett spotted Roy standing forlornly at the edge of the tent. "Roy?"

"Oh, hey, Doc." Roy looked away from the excavation, dark circles rimming his tired eyes. "How's it going?"

"Why don't you tell me?" Brackett held out a cup of coffee which Roy gladly accepted. "How much sleep did you get last night?"

"I don't know." Roy shrugged listlessly. "A couple hours I guess."

"Feel like talking about it now?" Brackett probed gently. "It might help to get it out."

"There's nothing to get out," Roy responded curtly. "Once again my partner's gotten himself in over his head and I just stood back and let him do it. Only this time there's nothing that I or anyone else can do about it."

"Roy, you don't know that," Brackett offered up hopefully. "We don't know how far back the cave goes. They could have gotten away in time."

"And if they did? Then what?" Roy asked, his voice rising. "How much oxygen do you think is in there? Even if they managed to survive the cave-in and not run out of oxygen what are the chances that they survived the night without succumbing to hypothermia?" Roy stopped suddenly, looking at the doctor in embarrassment. "I'm sorry, Dr. Brackett, I didn't . . . I didn't mean to take it out on you. It's just that . . ."

"Don't be sorry, Roy," Kel replied sympathetically. "I don't know how you've held up this long. As good a friend as Johnny is, he's not my partner, if I were in your shoes I don't think I'd have lasted this long."

"Thanks, Doc," Roy started to say more when his attention was caught by a gathering near the excavator. Chief McConikee was standing next to Captain Stanley talking to the foreman of the excavating crew. From Roy's vantage point the captain looked like he was about to explode. "Excuse me, Doc."

"With all due respect, sir," Captain Stanley's words reached Roy as he approached them. "Gage is one of the finest men I've ever worked with, not to mention the luckiest, and I'm not ready to give up on him."

"Listen, Hank," McConikee's hand settled on the captain's shoulder. "I understand how you feel, and if it was one of my men lost in there I'd feel the same way, but we have to face the reality of the situation."

"And that is?" Roy interjected hotly. "What? You just want to give up on Johnny?"

McConikee was all sympathy as he turned to face Roy. "DeSoto, I know how hard this is for you, but . . ."

"But you're just going to walk away and leave my partner down there?" Roy asked, pulling away when the chief reached a hand toward him. "That stinks and you know it. We don't know how deep that cave is. They could still be alive down there."

Hank called out softly, "Roy, the chief's just doing his job."

"Come on, Cap, I saw your face," Roy exclaimed bitterly. "You don't accept that any more than I do."

"Roy . . ."

"Never mind. Don't try to make me understand." Roy threw up his hands in anger. "Because there's no way I ever will."

~*~*~*~*~

"Chet, why don't you go home?" Dixie closed the chart in front of her and regarded the tired fireman closely. "You've been here all night."

"So have you." Chet didn't bother to look up from the wheelchair he'd commandeered. "I don't see you heading out."

"No, but if I left now I'd have just enough time to take a shower before I had to head back," Dixie replied. "And I know for a fact that the empty bed I slept in last night was more comfortable than that couch."

Chet snorted softly. "Sleeping on a bed of nails would've been more comfortable than that couch."

"So, why don't you go home and sleep in your own bed?"

"I will." Chet finally raised his head to look Dixie in the eye. "Just as soon as I know Gage's going to be all right."

"You know, Chet," Dixie's voice softened. "You keep this up and people might just begin to suspect that you like Johnny."

"Like him?" Chet scoffed. "What would go and give you a crazy idea like that?"

~*~*~*~*~

Johnny held out a hand to stop Jesse. "Do you see that?"

"See what?" Jesse asked tiredly.

"My hand." A grin nearly split Johnny's face in two. "I can see my hand. There's light coming from somewhere up ahead."

"What are we waiting for, then?" Jesse's grinned matched Johnny's. "Let's find it and get out of here."

~*~*~*~*~

"I'm sorry, Roy." Captain Stanley's voice cracked as he approached the paramedic. "The chief feels we've done everything we can. That last collapse nearly brought the excavator down into the hole with it and McConikee feels that we're endangering more lives needlessly."

"Needlessly? NEEDLESSLY?!" Roy glared angrily, knowing it wasn't the captain's fault but needing an outlet for his rage. "My partner's life is a needless extravagance? Damn it, Cap, Johnny's put his life on the line for every one of us. How the hell can McConikee do any less for him?"

"I'm sorry, Pal, I really am." Hank shrugged listlessly. "If it were up to me . . ."

"But it isn't, is it?" Roy snapped. "And all the assurances in the world don't do Johnny one bit of good now."

"Roy, I . . ."

Roy waved a dismissive hand over his shoulder and started for the squad, intent on putting as much distance between himself and the scene as possible.

"Roy, what happened?" Brackett hurried by beside him. "Why are they pulling back the equipment?"

"Because it seems my partner's life isn't quite worth the risk."

"What?" Brackett shook his head angrily. "They can't do that."

"They can and they did." Roy yanked the squad door open, slamming it behind him as he climbed in, "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to get the . . ." Roy's attention was suddenly caught by two bedraggled figures making their way through the trees on the nearby hillside. One of the figures in particular, a tall and lanky form, captured his focus. "D-doc . . ." Roy cleared his throat and tried again, pointing. "Doc, do I see what I think I see?"

"What?" Brackett followed Roy's line of sight. "Oh my God. Johnny."

Roy leapt from the squad, pushing past Dr. Brackett in his hurry to reach his partner. "Johnny, is it really . . . how . . . where . . ." he grabbed Johnny's arm, reassuring himself that this wasn't a dream. "Are you all right? What happened to your head?"

"I'm fine, just fine." Johnny brushed away the hand that reached out toward his wound. "I'm just cold, tired and hungry. Seems the real fireman here had to do all the work while the rest of you lounged around."

"Johnny, let me take a look at that head." Dr. Brackett pulled a penlight from his pocket as word of Johnny's return spread.

"I told you I'm fine, Doc," Johnny sighed impatiently. "But someone needs to take a look at Jesse's arm."

"Why don't you let the doc take a look at you anyway, Pal." Captain Stanley stepped up behind the doctor, trying and failing to give Johnny his best scowl.

"He passed out a couple times in the cave." Jesse winced as Roy checked his splint before starting to take his vitals.

"Passed out?" Brackett frowned. "For how long?"

"Not long," Johnny responded, slightly petulantly. "And I told you, I'm . . ." He stopped and shook his head, blinking rapidly. "I'm . . ."

They barely had time to react before Johnny collapsed. "GET A STOKES OVER HERE!" Roy yelled as he reached for Johnny's wrist.

"Roy, get me a BP and then hang a liter of ringers . . ."

~*~*~*~*~

Johnny gasped as consciousness returned. *Oh God*. He raised his hand slowly. *What did I do to my head?*

"Mr. Gage?" a soft voice caressed his ears. "Mr. Gage, can you hear me?"

"Uh huh," Johnny groaned and forced one eye open. "What happened?"

"Ah, ah," the angel that appeared as his vision began to clear admonished. "You're supposed to tell me that."

Johnny considered the auburn-haired beauty that appeared above him, her blue-green eyes radiating concern, and quickly opened his other eye. "Well, hi." He flashed a weak version of his normally heart stopping grin at her.

"Hi, yourself." She brushed a stray lock of hair from his forehead. "How're you feeling?"

"Fine, just fine now." Johnny continued to grin. "You know, I have a feelin' we've met somewhere before."

She laughed as she shook her head. "I'll bet you say that to all the girls. Now, if you'll excuse me for a minute, I need to notify Dr. Early that you're awake."

"But you'll be comin' back? Right?" The grin he flashed at her this time was several watts higher.

"Try and keep me away," she responded with a shake of her head. *This one could break my heart*.

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"Dr. Early," said the nurse as she approached the base station, finding herself instantly surrounded by concerned firefighters. "John Gage is awake now."

"He is?" Dr. Early set down his cup of coffee and started toward the treatment room. "How did he seem,

Lisa? Was he alert?"

"Well," Lisa blushed slightly. "He was flirting with me."

"That sounds like Johnny," Roy replied with obvious relief, following Dr. Early into the treatment room.

"Hello, John." Dr. Early pulled a pen light out of his pocket and began to check Johnny's pupillary responses, much to John's annoyance. "How are you feeling? Any dizziness? Nausea?"

"Nah." Johnny shook his head, wincing at the movement. "Only a little bit of a headache."

"Well, you know the routine." Dr. Early smiled as he held up a finger in front of Johnny's face, moving it back and forth and then up and down, "Good. Good. Now, squeeze my hands. Excellent. Now, on to the hard part, what's your name?"

"John Roderick Gage," Johnny replied with an exaggerated roll of his eyes.

"And the day?" Dr. Early continued, working hard to suppress a grin.

"Well. . ." A lop-sided grin lit up Johnny's face as his eyes landed on Lisa. "It's the day I met the woman of my dreams."

"Johnny!" Roy cautioned, a hint of exasperation creeping into his voice.

"Sometimes, Roy, you're just no fun," Johnny sighed and folded his hands across his chest. "It's Sunday."

Dr. Early continued to ask Johnny questions, satisfying himself that the young paramedic showed no signs of a serious head injury. "All right, Johnny, everything looks good. But you do have a slight concussion, so I'm going to keep you here overnight. Roy, why don't we go let the others know how Johnny's doing while Lisa gets him settled in for the night?"

"Yeah, okay." Roy cast a quick glance at his partner. "I'll be right back."

"Take your time, take your time." Johnny fixed his gaze on Lisa. "We'll be just fine, won't we?"

"You're incorrigible," Lisa retorted, but the sparkle in her eyes belied her words.

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Roy pushed the door open slowly, stopping for a moment to simply watch as his partner lay in the bed, his left arm covering his eyes. *Another close one. Too close*, he thought as he sent up a silent prayer of thanks to the Big Fireman in the Sky or whomever it was that kept watch over fools and accident prone paramedics.

Watching the steady rhythm of Johnny's breathing, Roy crept quietly into the room, not wanting to wake his partner, but not quite ready to leave him in the hospital's capable hands. He pulled a chair cautiously across the floor and settled into it, the stress of the last 36 hours finally beginning to catch up with him.

~*~*~*~*~

"Roy?"

Roy lifted his head, not sure how long he'd been asleep. "Yeah?" He stretched slowly, the ache in his muscles a testament to too little sleep and the unyielding plastic of the chair. "How you feeling?"

"Tired." Johnny looked at him a bit confused. "What're you still doin' here?"

"I just came in to see how you were doing. I guess I fell asleep in the chair," Roy admitted sheepishly. "So, how'd you make out with that nurse?"

"Fine, just fine." A smile spread across Johnny's face. "We've got a date Thursday night."

"That didn't take long," Roy replied with a shake of his head.

"Well, you know," Johnny settled back down into the pillows. "She was powerless against the Gage charm."

"The 'Gage charm,' huh?" Roy was finding it harder and harder to suppress his grin. "That's not the word Chet usually uses for it."

"Yeah, well, ol' Chester B's just jealous of my natural charm and boyish good looks."

"Jealous, huh?" Roy laughed openly. "I don't think that's how Chet would phrase it."

"Well, of course not," Johnny smirked. "Then he'd have to admit my natural superiority."

"Uh huh." Roy rose slowly from his chair. "You know, you and I need to have a serious talk."

"About what?" Johnny was clearly confused by the sudden change in topic.

"About that stunt you pulled in the cave." Roy stopped at the edge of the bed, looking his partner in the eye.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Johnny replied casually, turning away.

"Yes, you do. I'm talking about your tendency to decide that your life is somehow less worthy than mine." Roy continued, "What you did in the cave was just another example of it. Johnny, you should've gone out with your patient."

"Maybe so, Roy, maybe so." Johnny shrugged, finally meeting Roy's eyes. "But it's not like stuff like this happens all the time." He went on, ignoring Roy's raised eyebrow. "And I'm not trying to get hurt, this was just a fluke. But if something does happen, well, I don't have a wife and two kids waiting for me to come home. Roy, how in the world would I explain it to Joanne and the kids if I came out of a situation like that and something happened to you?"

"I don't know, Johnny." Roy rubbed his hand across his face, sighing wearily. "But how do you think I'm gonna explain it to them if something happens to you? You know how much my kids and Joanne love you. Do you really think it's going to be any easier on them if they lose you? Wait, don't answer that." Roy shook his head as he stood again. "I already know what you think, but you're wrong. So would you do me a favor and just think about this some? I sure would hate to have to break in a new partner, Partner."

"Yeah, okay, I'll think about it," Johnny promised as Roy started out the door, waiting until it closed behind him to finish. "I'll think about it and do the same thing every time."

Thanks, as always to Lisa O. She's a great motivator and even better Beta Queen. And I hope she enjoys her *reward* for all her help. *VBEG*

More thanks go out to Keri for kicking me in the butt and asking me "Why haven't you finished this yet?" It's finished now. Can I have my cat back? I promise to work really hard on the Starsky and Hutch story.

Write to Gayle at GayelD@aol.com for the link for a follow-up to the Johnny and Lisa story :-)