

Washout

by Starr

Paramedic John Gage stood in the pouring rain, eyes closed, trying to catch his breath. His back and shoulders ached from hours of shoveling dirt into sandbags, a task that was interrupted only by having to take a turn on the relay line hefting those same bags onto the makeshift levee. He blinked the rain out of his eyes and peered over at the swollen river. It was rising at almost the same rate as the wall of sandbags was, maybe just a little quicker. If the rain didn't let up soon, they were going to lose the battle, no matter how hard they tried.

"Hey, what's this? Fall asleep on your feet, Junior?" Gage's partner, Roy DeSoto, gave him a nudge as he walked by. In his arms was a new batch of empty bags, which he dumped next to Gage's feet.

Groaning inwardly, Johnny gave him a look. "Gee, thanks." He drove his shovel into the pile of dirt in front of him and stretched his arms over his head, trying to work out some of the kinks before he started shoveling again. He looked around at the people milling around, some with shovels, some with bags, all with the same, grim look of determination on their tired faces. They were an odd mix of firemen and civilian volunteers, all working together for a common goal. Most of the civilians didn't even live in the neighborhood that was being threatened by the rain swollen river. They'd just heard about the river threatening to overflow on the news, and had started drifting in in groups of two and three, pitching in wherever they were directed. "Too bad it takes a disaster to bring people together like this," he thought silently. His eyes drifted back to the river, which was rushing by with thunderous force, dragging all sorts of debris along with it. As he watched, a huge tree was swept by, torn from the banks somewhere upstream. "Think we're gonna beat it?" he asked his partner.

Roy followed his gaze, watching the tree as it disappeared from sight. "Hard to say," he answered with a sigh. "Mother Nature can be a bitch when she wants to be."

Wiping the rain from his face, Gage nodded in agreement. "That she can, Pally. That she can."

"Hey, guys. Anyone need some coffee?"

Both paramedics turned at the soft, melodious voice that was so familiar to them as that of their newest emergency dispatcher, Jackie Sinclair. She was carrying a tray filled with steaming styrofoam cups, which they each accepted gratefully. Anything hot would have been welcome after so many hours in the bone chilling downpour, even some of Chet Kelly's rank brew, but the aroma that wafted up from the tray was promising.

"Thanks, Jackie," Roy said, peeling the corner of the lid back and taking a small sip. He was pleased to find that it tasted as good as it smelled.

"Yeah, you're a lifesaver," Johnny added with a smile. He could spot an attractive woman wherever he was, and though drenched and covered in mud, Jackie certainly fit the bill.

Her blue eyes sparkled as she returned the smile. After all, Johnny was no slouch himself in the looks department. "Anytime, Johnny. They have some soup cooking up at the emergency cantina, too. Should be ready in about twenty minutes. You should make sure you grab some before it disappears." She'd directed the statement to both of them, but her eyes never left the dark haired paramedic. She hesitated a second longer, then smiled at them and walked off to continue her deliveries.

Roy grinned as he watched his partner follow her exit with an appraising eye, the coffee in his hand momentarily forgotten. Gage turned back and caught the grin. "What?"

Roy just shook his head and sipped his coffee, which was already cooling down. "I take it she still hasn't change her policy about not dating firemen, huh?"

"No," he replied, his eyes glinting. "But I plan on changing her mind." Johnny peeled back the lid and took a deep swallow, flinching slightly as the hot liquid burned the inside of his mouth, but enjoying the warmth that followed it down into his stomach and radiated out into the rest of his chilled body. His turnout gear provided some protection from the elements, but hours spent in the unrelenting rain had left him cold, wet, and wishing he was at a nice, hot brush fire instead of digging in the mud.

"I guess in a way she's right, though," Roy mused as he finished off his coffee. "I mean, once she passes the department test, it could get kind of...awkward, being coworkers and all."

Gage's face easily conveyed his feelings on the matter of women taking on the firefighter's job. "If she passes the physical," he said pointedly. "She might have the brains, but she's awfully..." He made a diminutive motion with his hands as he struggled for the right word.

"Petite?" Roy offered.

His partner snapped his fingers. "Exactly."

"Hey, give her a little credit, Johnny. She may not be built like a Mack truck, but I saw her slinging sandbags before, and she was holding her own with the big boys."

"Throwing a few sandbags around and passing the physical are two totally different things," Gage argued. "Let's say she did get into the department. What if she was backing us up in a fire, and something happened and she had to pull us out? Would you be so open minded about it then?"

Roy shook his head. This wasn't the first time they'd had this discussion, and he knew there was no winning when Johnny had something set in his head. "I think she deserves a chance, and that's all I have to say on the matter." He clapped his friend on the shoulder. "Better get back to those sandbags. We've got a war to win, remember?"

Johnny nodded and quickly drained the rest of his coffee, then jerked his shovel back out of the mud. He cast an eye to the steadily rising river and the chain of people who were feeding sandbags up to the front line, trying to save people's homes. "Right. More sandbags, coming right up."

As Roy walked away he heard his partner sigh and mutter, "Man, if I'd wanted to do this, I would've joined the Army." Grinning, he headed back to the relay line to spell Chet.

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After filling another forty bags with the heavy muck the rain was making out of the dirt, John Gage was more than ready for a rest. His arms felt like lead weights that were about ready to pull out of their sockets. He'd barely had the strength to lift the spoon to his mouth as he chowed down on some of the soup that Jackie had mentioned. Now, walking back to the river's edge to see how the levee was holding up, he was working his arms in large circles, trying to loosen the muscles back up so he could spell someone on the relay. He reached the edge of the sandbags and surveyed the work that they'd done. So far, it appeared to be holding, and they even seemed to be keeping ahead of the rising water level. Johnny smiled. They might just win this one after all.

As he turned to head over to where the relay was currently working a few hundred yards upstream, he noticed two young boys standing by the levee. Squinting through the rain, he saw that they weren't just by it, they were standing *on* it. Frowning, he started walking towards them. *Damn kids are gonna get themselves hurt if they're not careful. Why are these even kids here to begin with? Where are their brainless parents?*

Jackie had been heading back towards the cantina after taking a shift on the relay, and was coming towards John and the boys along the water's edge. She saw them at the same time he did, and picked up her pace with much the same thoughts in mind. As the two converged on the boys from opposite directions, the worst happened. The layer of sandbags the kids were standing on, undermined by the constant pressure of the water, started to shift under their weight. They teetered for a moment, arms thrown out as they tried to catch their balance. Gage and Jackie both broke into a run, hoping to get to them before they went in, but both knowing they'd be just a second too late. The boys finally lost their balancing act and tumbled over the edge into the freezing water.

John made a flying leap for the boy closest him, throwing himself over the sandbags and half into the water. He managed to snag the boy's jacket, and clenched his fists tightly against the tremendous pull of the current, determined not to lose him. The boy gave a small, scared shout, getting a mouthful of water for his trouble, and started coughing. Grimacing as the already taxed muscles in his shoulders protested against this new abuse, he held on. "Don't worry, I've got you," he said in what he hoped was a convincing tone.

The boy's friend had managed to hook one arm and one leg over the sandbags as he fell, and was only half in the water. Clinging desperately to the shifting bags, he turned a full moon face filled with terror to Jackie as she dropped to her knees in front of him. "Please, get me out!" he pleaded. "I'm gonna drown!"

Jackie grabbed the boy by the forearms and sunk her heels into the mud. "No you're not," she said through gritted teeth. She pulled, fighting against the grip of the water, but the boy was squirming so hard that her grip kept slipping. "Get your other leg up onto the levee," she instructed. "And stop fighting against me. I've got you."

The terrified boy swallowed hard and slowly managed to work his leg up out of the water, so that he was laying across the levee on his stomach. Jackie gave one last heave, and he ended up in the mud next to her with a resounding plop.

Gage's luck was running in the opposite direction. The water was threatening to tear the other boy from his grip. "Jackie, get some --" The rest of the sentence remained unspoken as the sandbags beneath him let loose and he was pulled into the raging torrent. He let out a surprised cry as he went over, one hand flailing desperately for something to anchor himself with. What he found was Jackie's hands as she flung herself across the disintegrating levee. The combined weight of Johnny and the boy nearly pulled her in after them, but she jammed her knees into what was left of the pile of sandbags and held on for dear life. "Go get help!" she shouted to the boy laying next to her. He stared at her with terrified eyes for a moment, then scrambled to his feet and took off running towards the people working upstream.

The cold water was starting to take its toll on both Johnny and the boy whose life he literally held in his hands. The strain on the paramedic's arms was almost unbearable, but he hung on with grim determination, not willing to give the boy up to the river. His face was etched in pain, and he was already starting to shiver violently, despite the turnout gear he was wearing. He looked up at Jackie, who was fighting to keep her hold on both him and the levee, which was in imminent danger of collapsing. "Don't let go," he whispered hoarsely.

"Not a chance," she replied with a quick smile, hoping that the fear that was holding her chest in a tight vise wasn't showing. She knew she couldn't keep her hold on them much longer. "Can you swing him closer to

shore?"

Gage looked down at the boy who was now hanging limply in his other hand and willed his tired body to cooperate. Slowly, painfully, he managed to turn his body so that the boy turned as well, drifting in towards the shore. When he was within arms reach, Johnny gasped out, "Grab him."

Jackie looked at the boy, so tantalizingly close, and shook her head. "I don't know if I can hang onto you with just one hand."

"Do it!" he hissed. "My hand's going numb, I can't hold onto him much longer." Terrified of letting go and losing them both, Jackie hesitated, then tightened her grip around Johnny's wrist with her left hand. Saying a silent prayer, she released her right hand from him and snaked it out towards the boy. The sudden additional strain on her left shoulder drew a pained cry from her, but she swallowed and concentrated on reaching the boy, putting everything else out of her mind. Her fingers came within a hair's breadth of his arm, but she just didn't have enough reach to grab him.

Seeing how close she was to reaching him, Gage pulled the boy in closer, ignoring the screaming protest in his shoulder as it started to separate. 'I am *really* gonna feel this in the morning' he thought irrationally.

Jackie stretched as far as she dared, knowing that if she tipped into the water they'd all be swept away, gritting her teeth as Gage's fingers dug deeper into her wrist for purchase. Her fingertips brushed the boy's jacket, but she couldn't get a grip on it or him. "Come on, come on," she muttered impatiently, "reach out and grab me. I've almost got you."

She hadn't meant for the boy to respond, sure that he was unconscious or, worse yet, had already drowned. She'd been saying it merely as an outlet for her own frustration at not being able to get that extra inch to grab his arm. Then, without warning, the boy started to extend his hand towards her. She blinked, not believing what she was seeing, then coaxed him more urgently. "That's it, reach out for me! I'm right here! You can do it!"

The boy's shivering hand brushed hers, and she grabbed him. With every ounce of strength she could muster, she yanked him towards her, just as his other arm slipped from Gage's grasp. She rolled, onto her back, pulling the limp boy over the sandbags, one arm still extended out over the sandbags holding Johnny for all she was worth. Not caring where the boy landed, as long as it was on solid ground, she let him go and flung herself back over onto her stomach, her free hand meeting Johnny's in a death grip. Their eyes locked for a split second in triumph, then everything went black.

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When the boy had first come running upstream, no one had heard his weak yells over the rush of the river and the unending hiss of the pouring rain. When he'd gotten closer, he'd stumbled, out of breath, and that was what had gotten Roy DeSoto's attention. Seeing a kid, especially one so close to his own son's age, running along the rain swollen river threw a scare into him, and he handed off the sandbag he had in his hand to the person next to him and stepped out of the relay line. He walked over to the boy, brushing his mud caked hands on his legs before picking him up off the ground. That was when he saw the boy was soaking wet, more so than just standing in the rain would cause, and he was crying. All of his danger alarms went off, and he stooped down on one knee to get on face level with the boy. "What's wrong, son?"

The boy stood shaking, teeth chattering, and started to cry even harder. "My brother! He fell in the river! Please, mister, you gotta help him!"

Feeling his stomach knot up, Roy gripped the boy tightly by the shoulders. "Where?"

He pointed back over his shoulder, and Roy stood, trying to see through the downpour, but all he could make out was something blurry moving at the edge of the levee a few hundred yards away. He shouted over his shoulder. "Chet! Marco! We have a boy in the water!" Trusting, hoping, that they'd heard him, he took off at a run. As he moved along the water's edge, he saw how much swifter it was running, and how much more debris was being swept along. His chest tightened, knowing that a young boy wouldn't stand a chance in that river.

The sight that beheld him as he got closer almost stopped him in his tracks. Johnny, in the river, a seemingly lifeless child dangling from one hand, the other wrapped tightly around Jackie's wrist, who was laying across the levee. He put on more speed, only able to watch as they somehow managed to wedge the boy between them and into Jackie's outstretched hand. As the boy was flipped up onto the shore like a landed mackerel, Roy felt relief wash over him, thinking the worst was over. He could hear footsteps pounding behind him, and he knew that the cavalry would be able to reach Johnny within thirty seconds, and they'd all be ribbing him about rolling around in the mud with the department's golden voiced dispatcher.

Something caught his attention out of the corner of his eye, and he turned his head slightly to the left. Horror crossed his face as he saw a tremendous tree coming down with the current, swung sideways across the river, nearly touching the bank on the far side, and scraping along the levee on this. His eyes darted back to Johnny and Jackie, still struggling at the edge of the river. There was no way it was going to miss them. A cry rose to his lips, even knowing they'd never hear him above the roaring river. "Watch out!!"

Everything after that started to move in slow motion. The tree skipped against the levee and started to swing out and away, and for one brief second it looked like it might just miss them. Then the current brought it back around, and it slammed into them, dragging Jackie from her perch on the sandbags and into the swirling water. Roy thrust out his hand, thinking that he could catch hold of her, but his hand closed on thin air, and all he could do was watch them both disappear from sight.

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The blackness lasted only a second. The shock of the cold water drove Jackie awake with a gasp. She took in a mouthful of water and spluttered, where she was becoming clear, but how she got there still a hazy mystery. She flipped at glance towards the shore, and saw that they'd moved far beyond where the levee ended. They. *Johnny!* She looked around frantically. How could she have let go of him? She'd had him, had him with both hands! His life, in her hands, and she'd let go! The fact that she'd been knocked unconscious seemed too trivial to even take into consideration.

"Johnny!" she shouted. More water, more choking. *Bad idea.* She turned to see if he'd somehow gotten behind her, and her eyes widened. The tree was still flowing behind her, its size enhanced to gargantuan proportions by her perspective. *This is it. I don't have to worry about drowning, the tree's going to take my damn head off.* As she watched, it pitched to one side, as it had done while Roy had helplessly watched it careen towards his friends, but this time it did what he had hoped it would do then. It turned a full ninety degrees until it was pointing lengthwise downstream, making it less of a target. She watched with her heart in her throat as it picked up speed and shot past, disappearing from sight.

A choked off moan to her left made her whip her head around. A small patch of dark hair was bobbing along a yard and a half away, and she did what she could to coax her numbing body in that direction. She grabbed blindly, and connected with the sleeve of his turnout coat. She pulled herself closer and got a firmer hold on the arm that was in the sleeve. "Johnny?" she asked anxiously, shouting to be heard above the din of the water pounding around them, not caring that she swallowed another mouthful of it.

She was rewarded with a weak voice in response. "We have to stop meeting like this..." He broke off with a cough. Grabbing a firmer purchase around his chest, she held on tightly, trying to tip his head back to

keep it out of the water as she had learned years ago during lifeguard training. But the calm waters off the Long Island shore back east were a whole different animal from the snarling beast they were now fighting.

"Gotta get...to shore..." he managed to get out as the coughing subsided.

The weakness in his voice wasn't lost on her, nor was the gash on his forehead that was bleeding heavily. "No kidding, Gage," she panted out. "By the way, would now be a bad time to mention swimming was never one of my best sports?" she added jokingly. In truth, she'd spent a good portion of her life in and around the water. An extreme sports junkie, she'd even been planning on going white water rafting with some friends the following month. Somehow, the idea no longer seemed quite as appealing as it had before.

He rolled his eyes. "You've been hanging around with Kelly, haven't you?"

"Sorry." But at least the response told her that he was coherent.

"Watch...for rescue lines. They'll try to set up a catch zone downstream." He spat out another mouthful of water and closed his mouth tightly, concentrating on not letting the nausea that was boiling in his stomach take control. The water was frigid, and hypothermia was starting to set in. He knew that there was a real possibility that he might lose consciousness soon. As it was, the rap he had taken on the head had left him dizzy and disoriented.

The paleness of his face and the violent shivers that wracked his body worried her more than thinking about whether or not anyone would be waiting downstream with rescue lines. He'd been in the water longer than her, and if his temperature dropped too low, she knew he could go into shock, or worse, his heart or breathing could stop as parts of his brain shut down. If that happened, there could be a hundred lines waiting for them, and it wouldn't make a bit of difference. All they'd be pulling from the river was a corpse.

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Roy gripped the wheel of the squad with white-knuckled force, concentrating on staying on the road and trying not to think about the people that had gone into the river. It was all he could do to keep from screaming in frustration at not being able to do anything to help them. As he drove, he listened to the harried exchanges over the radio between Captain Stanley and departments that were stationed further downstream, trying to coordinate a series of catch zones along the river in hopes of snagging Gage and Jackie. The road they were on would get them there ahead of the river, which twisted and meandered for several miles before finally straightening out. It was what came after the straightening out part that had sunk the cold blade of terror in his gut when they'd checked the map. A waterfall. 'Johnny's luck is holding true to form,' had been his first thought when he'd seen it.

Chet Kelly sat next to him, his face as grim as Roy's as he consulted the map and fixed the location of the catch zones being transmitted. Neither of them spoke, not wanting to miss anything that was being said, not wanting to miss the news that they'd been spotted, or grabbed, or... Neither wanted to think about the last 'or'. It had only been minutes since the pair had been ripped off the levee into the water, but minutes were all it took for hypothermia to do its damage. Then there was the debris in the river. At the velocity the water was hurling it along, an ordinary tree branch could become a deadly projectile.

Suddenly the radio squawked. "This is Catch Zone One, we see them!"

Roy had to fight to keep from looking at the radio instead of the road in front of him. He heard Captain Stanley respond from the engine, which was right behind them. "Catch Zone One, this is Engine 51. Please advise. Over."

There was an interminable silence, then, "Engine 51, we missed them. Repeat, we missed them." Roy's heart sank. "We didn't have the lines in place yet. The water's moving faster than we thought." Static filled the heavy silence in the squad's cab as all radio traffic stopped at the news.

Chet glanced over at Roy, not sure what to say, not sure if there was anything he *could* say. Roy and Johnny were more than just partners, more than just friends. They were the closest thing you could come to family without actually being related. Either would gladly give their life for the other, and very nearly had on more than one occasion. It was a closeness that he sometimes envied.

The radio came back to life. "Catch Zone One, this is Engine 51. Could you at least tell if they were alive? Over."

Roy felt his breath catch as he waited for the response. "Affirmative, Engine 51, they both appeared to be alive and conscious, but getting pretty banged up. The debris is pounding them pretty bad. Suggest you proceed to Catch Zone Two for a rendezvous. Over."

"10-4, Catch Zone One. Thanks for the news. Engine 51 out."

Chet managed a shaky grin. "They're alive."

Letting out the breath he'd been holding, Roy couldn't manage more than a flicker of a smile in return. "Let's just hope they stay that way till they get to the next catch zone."

"You know Johnny," Chet said, his voice slightly strained. "The man of many lives."

Roy merely nodded, memories of the rushing river flashing through his mind. *Dammit, Johnny, don't you die on me!*

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"Dammit, Johnny, don't you die on me!"

Jackie touched her numb fingers to his neck just below the jawline, trying to find a pulse. He'd gone limp and quiet in her arms shortly after they'd passed the group of firemen that were scurrying around on the shore, trying to get their rescue lines strung before they were out of reach. A frantic toss had brought one of the lines with a foot of their outstretched hands, but they'd been swept past without time for a second chance.

She gave up trying to get a pulse, realizing that she wouldn't be able to feel one even if it was there. She pressed her lips to his ear. "God, Johnny, I can't do this alone. Don't leave me out here by myself." A sob caught in her throat as the real possibility of them both dying finally hit home.

He raised a weak hand and placed it over the one she had wrapped around his chest. "Not going anywhere..." he mumbled.

She gave his hand a surprised squeeze, almost laughing out loud. "Quit scaring me like that."

"Sorry." His words were starting to slur. "They'll try again. Try to spot them. Watch for the ropes."

"What if --" She broke off with a gasp as a fast moving tree limb rammed her in the back. Pain blossomed across her back and into her chest in a breath stealing bolt.

Johnny felt the impact radiate through her and tried to turn his head to look at her. "What happened?"

Jackie squeezed her eyes tight, fighting to take in a breath, but it felt like her lungs had deserted her.

Not getting an answer, Gage's paramedic training started to take over, clearing his mind somewhat. "Jackie, answer me!" He twisted in her grasp, which had weakened, letting the current drag her alongside of him, basically reversing their positions, swallowing more water as his head slipped momentarily below the surface. Coughing, he pulled her tightly against him, putting his lips to her ear as she had done to him. "Jackie, talk to me."

A small, wheezing gasp came through her lips. "Debris," she managed to get out. As much pain as she was in, the comfort of the arms that encircled her somehow made it a little more bearable.

Ignoring his shoulder's protests, he touched her back with gently probing fingers. "Where does it hurt?" He felt her jerk away with a hiss, and cursed silently. He could feel a wound below her left shoulder blade, but it seemed small. He couldn't tell more without being able to get a look at it. "Don't worry, we're gonna get out of this. Bet we're having some of that hot coffee at the cantina and laughing about this whole thing in less than an hour."

"You're a bad liar, John Gage," she said softly, still having trouble catching her breath.

He didn't even try to argue, he just held her tighter as they hurtled down the river into the unknown. 'You'd better be there, guys,' he thought tiredly. 'We're counting on you.'

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Roy stared out at the twin ropes that had been strung across the river, anchored on each side around thick tree trunks far enough back from the banks that they weren't in danger of being undermined by the raging water. Men were standing by on the shore, ready to act as soon as Johnny and Jackie appeared, not wanting a repeat of the near miss at the first catch zone. Unfortunately, the spotters along the river that had been feeding Catch Zone Two a constant flow of updates were all saying that they appeared to be almost dead center of the river. That was going to make it harder for them to make it to shore after they snagged the catch lines. If they snagged the catch lines.

Rubbing a hand over his eyes tiredly, he walked down to the water's edge. They'd been in the water for over twenty minutes now. With the water temperature hovering in the low forties, the chances of either of them being conscious by the time they came into range were pitifully slim. But there wasn't a man here who was going to give up on them. Besides, he kept telling himself, Johnny had come through worse than this. Like Chet had said, he was the man of many lives.

Shouts snapped him back to attention. He squinted and strained to see through the sheets of rain that were still pounding down on them. At first he couldn't see anything, and began to think that it was only some debris that had gotten everyone excited. Then he saw them. Two heads, bobbing in the middle of the surging river, heading for the lines that were waiting for them. 'My god', he thought with horror as he watched, 'they look so small out there.'

Suddenly he began to doubt whether they were going to be able to catch the ropes. They were moving too fast. The ropes were wet, slick, a minuscule target, even though they'd be looking for them. There were just too many things that could go wrong. He felt his own hands clench tightly as he held his breath and waited.

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"Johnny!" It had been intended to be a shout, but it came out as a loud whisper. Jackie tried again, but it came out no louder. She smacked the hand that was hooked around her waist frantically to get Johnny's

attention instead.

He started slightly, realizing that he's almost let himself drift off into unconsciousness. He tightened his grip on her. "What?" But even as he said it, he saw what she was looking at. They were coming up on a set of ropes across the water. Coming up fast. They were only going to get one chance at this. "Okay, this is where we get off, Jackie. You ready?"

She nodded quickly, spitting out the water that slipped through her blue tinged lips. Her eyes never left the ropes.

He pressed his lips to her ear again. "You're gonna have to grab it and hang on as we go past. The water's running fast, so it's gonna be tough to hang on, but you have to do it. Okay?"

She nodded again, a little more hesitantly this time. She just didn't know if she had the strength. She couldn't even feel her hands anymore.

Sensing her nervousness, he gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. "You can do it."

They separated then, moving side by side, still holding onto each other's hands until they were right on top of the ropes, not wanting to let go until they had to. They let each other go at the last possible moment and reached up towards the lifelines.

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"Come on, come on..." Roy muttered under his breath in an ongoing litany as he watched them approach the ropes. He didn't realize that almost everyone else standing on the bank with him was doing the exact same thing.

He watched as Gage and Jackie let go of each other and stretched their hands up to meet the first of the two ropes. At first he thought they'd missed as the rope stretched low into the water, and his chest tightened, but slowly the rope came back, and he could see them both hanging on for dear life as the water rushed around them, trying its best to rip them loose. One of the men from Rescue 27 was already attaching his life belt to the line. The belt also had a rope tied off to it that his crew mates on shore had a hold of. He carried a second life belt around his shoulders. Holding onto the rope, he waded into the water, then wrapped his legs around the rope and, hanging upside down below it, started pulling himself hand over hand along it, inching closer to Gage as quickly as he could without losing his grip.

Johnny had wedged the rope under his armpits and was hanging on with hands that were bone white. He gave the approaching firefighter a pained grin. "Glad you could drop by."

Del Marten chuckled. "Yeah, well, I was in the neighborhood." He unslung the spare life belt. "How ya doin, Gage?"

"Del, that has got to be the dumbest question I've ever heard." He shook his head as Del started to wrap the belt around him. "Take Jackie first."

"No can do, pal. You're closest, you go first." He tightened the belt around Johnny's waist and clipped it to the rope. At least now if he slipped, he wouldn't get washed away. That done, he looked past Johnny. "Hang in there, Jackie. I'll be back for you in a minute."

She gave an almost imperceptible nod. "Not going anywhere." She and Johnny exchanged a look, and she smiled weakly.

He returned it, but was overcome by guilt at leaving her alone. But what Del had said was true. There was no way to get to Jackie until he was out of the way. With Del's help, he managed to swing a leg up over the rope, and they slowly made their way to shore. Roy was waiting at the water's edge, his heart in his throat until his partner's feet hit the ground. He helped him unclip the belt, and had to catch him as he nearly collapsed into his arms.

"Easy, Johnny, I've got you." He lowered his friend to the ground and immediately started assessing his condition, letting the professional part of his brain take over so he wouldn't let the fear he felt inside show.

Johnny wanted none of it. He fought weakly against him, trying to sit up. "Jackie..."

"Del's going back out for her now. Just lay back and relax so I can finish checking you out." He sighed as Johnny batted his hands away again. He hadn't been able to detect any broken bones, but that didn't mean there weren't any internal injuries. "Do I have to strap you down to a stokes to do this?"

Teeth chattering, his partner grabbed his arm and pulled himself up. "Not until he gets her. Then you can do the whole Doctor Kildare thing."

Knowing that there was little chance of winning the discussion unless he really did strap him down, Roy acquiesced and helped his partner into a sitting position. Chet appeared with a blanket from the squad and wrapped it around his shivering friend. Johnny barely acknowledged it, his eyes glued to Jackie and Del.

Del had started the process again, clipping himself onto the rope and swinging his legs up and around. He'd only gone out a few feet when a shout went up from one of the men. All eyes swung over to him. He was gesturing and pointing frantically up the river. Roy frowned, then followed the man's line of sight and felt his heart stop. Barreling down the raging river was a tree. A huge tree. And it was heading straight for Jackie.

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Watching Johnny hit the bank and fall into his partner's arms had taken a great weight off of Jackie's shoulders. She didn't know why, but she'd felt somehow responsible for him. Maybe it was the maternal instinct her mother had always talked about finally kicking in. Maybe it was because out of all the firemen she knew, he was the only one who could make her doubt her self-imposed rule about not dating them. Or maybe it was just because she'd held his life in her hands, and it had effected her deeply. Too deeply. It had scared the hell out of her. Now, seeing him safe, she felt as though she could breathe for the first time since she'd grabbed his hand on the levee.

She felt her fingers starting to slip from the rope, and regripped it tightly. Only a few more minutes, she kept telling herself. Just hang on a few more minutes. Then she could close her eyes and sleep for a week. Or a month. In a nice, soft, warm bed, with a down comforter...in Maui, maybe. Or Bermuda. Anyplace where it was warm...

Her eyes snapped open as she heard shouting. *God, I was falling asleep. How stupid was that?* She looked to shore again, saw Del on the rope, then saw everyone staring upstream. She shifted her hold and turned to see what they were looking at.

"Oh... shit."

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Johnny's grasp on Roy's arm became bone crushing when he saw what was going to happen. He had no

idea how he did it, but he came to his feet, his chest pounding. "Jackie!"

The tree was heading right for her, no chance of missing, almost as if she had a target painted on her back. He knew the feeling well.

Everyone started yelling, telling her to try to get out of the way, to watch out, to move this way or that, but in the end there was only one place for her to go. Just before the tree reached her, she released her hold on the rope and dropped to the water, disappearing below the surface.

The shouts died off as one, leaving only the roar of the water to fill the silence. The tree snagged on the rope, pulling it taut, but temporarily holding it tight. Everyone's eyes scoured the water, trying to pick her out. It was Roy who saw her first. "There!"

She'd surfaced a few yards further downstream, coughing violently. She was only seconds away from the second catch rope. If she passed it, there was nothing left between her and the falls a few miles further down.

She threw both arms up and slammed into the rope, her hands closing reflexively around it and holding on with desperate force. Even before they were sure she'd caught hold, Del was clipping himself onto the second rope and pulling himself out to her as fast as his arms would take him.

"I'm right here, Jackie," he called as he got close to her. "Just hang on another minute." He didn't get any response, which worried him, but not nearly as much as the violent way she was shivering when he slung the second life belt around her waist. Once she was secured to the rope, he breathed a little easier. "Okay, Jackie, time to start making for dry ground." Still no response. "Jackie, c'mon, you have to swing your legs up and start pulling." Nothing. He glanced to shore, where everyone was giving him impatient looks and gestures, then back at his patient. Reaching out a hand, he brushed her wet hair back from her face. "Jackie, look at me." She continued to stare straight ahead, her eyes glazed and unfocused. He put the back of his hand on her cheek and grimaced. Ice cold.

The HT strapped to his chest blasted into life. "Dammit, Del, what's the holdup?" Charlie Richards, 27's usually even tempered Captain shouted.

Del worked the transmit button awkwardly from his upside down perch. "She's become totally unresponsive. Probably going into shock. We're gonna have to pull her in."

"Then do it!" came the quick response. "That other line isn't going to hold forever."

As if to prove he was right, the rope gave a loud groan as the weight of the tree that was pressed up against it tested its limits. Cursing under his breath, Del cast a quick glance at it, then grabbed the nearest of Jackie's hands. "Let go of the rope, Jackie. We'll do all the work." Her fingers loosened, then slipped off of the rope. He worked quickly at the second hand, and within seconds she was suspended only by the belt that was snugged tightly around her waist.

Del wrapped an arm around her and pulled her against him, then let his own legs drop from the rope and go into the river, so that he was similarly suspended by his belt. The cold of the water bit at his skin even through his protective clothing, and he wondered how either Johnny or Jackie had survived this long. He waved to the men on shore, and they started to pull on the rope that was attached to his safety belt. Progress against the raging water was slow, but by inches they were pulled closer and closer to safety.

They were within ten feet of the shore when the upstream rope gave another menacing groan, this time accompanied by a sharp, snapping retort. Del's head whipped around at the sound, his eyes widening as the

tree that had been safely hung up started to speed towards them again.

"Oh...shit."

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Roy had managed to coax Johnny back to a sitting position while Del went after Jackie. He'd applied a four-by-four to the gash over his right eye, and was keeping close tabs on how quickly the blood was soaking through it. He was guessing it would take ten or twelve stitches at least to get it closed. After opening a dialog with Rampart on the biophone and relaying his partner's vitals, he'd had a second argument with him about getting him into the ambulance. Captain Stanley had even joined in on this one, ordering Gage to get his butt in the ambulance *now*, upon pain of permanent latrine duty.

The outcome of the argument was made moot by the loud snap of the upstream catch line. Everyone's eyes swung around and watched as the rogue tree started again to move with the river. The team on the rope hauling Del and Jackie in began to pull with every ounce of strength they had, and several other firemen pounced on the rope and started to help as well, but they were just no match for the speed of the river.

Del saw that there was just no way they were going to be able to pull the dead weight of two people out of the way in time, and made a rash decision. He wrapped his legs around Jackie, then reached out and unclipped her belt from the rope. Her dead weight drew a groan of protest from his body, but he held on.

On shore, Johnny's mouth dropped in stunned silence as he watched. It appeared as though the paramedic was going to dump Jackie into the river to save himself.

With a final prayer that the hands on the other end of his tether would be able to hang on, Del reached up and unclipped his own life belt and dropped them both into the water a split second before the tree slammed into the catch rope. It stretched, creaked, and let out a heart-stopping groan, but it held.

The rope attached to Del's belt went dangerously taut, and the tug-of-war between the firemen and the river began in earnest. They heaved hand over hand, reeling in the two people at the end with agonizing slowness, everyone fully aware that there was nothing anchoring Jackie to the rope except Del's grasp. The water raged around the two bodies as they were pulled backwards against the current, until finally they were within arm's reach and several men waded knee high into the water and grabbed them.

Silent from the moment the rope had snapped, Johnny finally heaved a sigh of relief and put his head in his hands, his entire body going limp. Roy knelt next to him quickly, checked his pulse, then motioned for Chet to help him. Together they lifted Gage onto a stretcher, and got him to one of the two waiting ambulances. Stepping into the back of the rig, Roy caught a final glance of Del and his partner working on Jackie, and the last thing he realized before the door swung shut was that the rain had finally stopped.

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"No!" Johnny came awake with a violent start, hand grasping at thin air, his heart pounding in his chest. Disoriented, his face screwed up in a confused expression as he looked around his dark hospital room, trying to figure out where he was. Then he remembered. The river. The mere thought sent a violent shiver through his aching body.

He pushed the covers back and slowly eased himself out of his bed, pulling on the robe that Roy had brought by with some of his things earlier that day. His left arm was in a sling, to keep him from moving his injured shoulder too much, so he just draped the robe over that arm and pulled the sash tight around his waist. The effects of the hypothermia were still clearly evident in his pale complexion and weary

movements. Just the short process of getting out of bed had exhausted him.

He padded silently to the door and slipped out into the hallway. It was deserted and quiet, visiting hours having ended hours before. He made his way down to the very end of the hall, hoping that he wouldn't run into Dixie on the way. She'd already scolded him several times about being out of his sickbed, and had threatened to have a very large male nurse named Otto posted at his door if he didn't start listening to her, and he had every reason to believe she was serious. But this was too important a trip to put off until he was discharged the next day. The nightmare demanded that he make it now.

He entered the room at the end of the hall quietly, letting the door slip shut behind him with a soft click. Approaching the bed, his eyes played over the assortment of monitors that surrounded it. The respirator that was breathing for Jackie hissed softly, the only sound in the otherwise silent room.

He pulled a chair up to the edge of the bed and sat down, wincing as his aching muscles protested. Nothing was broken, which Roy had noted as being something of a miracle, considering everything that had happened. The separated shoulder would heal as good as new in a few weeks, and the gash on his forehead had taken twenty-one stitches, almost doubling Roy's initial estimate. Doctor Brackett had made a few jibing comments about the lack of a concussion and Johnny's hard head, but the paramedic knew he'd tested his guardian angel's limits that day, because by all rights he should've been dead.

The hypothermia from his long submersion in the frigid river had been the worst of his short list of injuries, and it had kept him in critical condition for the first twenty-four hours he'd been at Rampart. He'd stayed unconscious another day after being upgraded to serious, and when he'd finally come around and was coherent enough to understand what was being said to him, he'd been shocked to find out that his core temperature had gotten down to a frigid 91 degrees. Roy had come up with the only explanation for why he had been conscious and alert when he'd first been pulled from the water.

"You're just too damn stubborn to listen to anybody, Pally," he'd joked with him at his bedside. "Even your own body." He'd had a light tone, but Johnny had seen the worry that shone from his eyes. It had been really close this time. Too close. And they both knew it. The man of many lives was starting to push his luck.

He took one of Jackie's hands into his own and stroked it idly with his thumb. He knew it was only his imagination, but he thought she still felt cold. Her own hypothermia had been worse than his, since she lacked the protection that his turnout gear had provided, however limited it had been. The first reading they'd gotten from her had been unthinkably low, only 86 degrees. He'd cringed inwardly as Roy had described to him the flurry of frantic activity in the ER as they'd worked to get that raised as fast as possible without throwing her body into any further shock. Heated saline had been pumped through double IVs, followed by heat packs and warmed oxygen while they examined her. Then she'd been sent up to the OR, where she was put on a transfusion machine that drew her cold blood out, warmed it, and recycled it back into her system. They hadn't been sure it would work - bringing a patient back when the body's core temperature got down so low was a delicate and often impossible task. But after several agonizing hours, her temperature had slowly started to inch back up.

Instead of being able to celebrate, the doctors were then forced to deal with the fallout of her thawing body. Internal bleeding that had been almost nonexistent became severe hemorrhaging, and as much as they hadn't wanted to, they'd had to open her up and take care of what was going on inside before they'd gotten her temperature back up to an acceptable level. They'd found a puncture wound in her back, which had collapsed her left lung and nicked an artery. In a weird twist of fate, it had been the hypothermia that had saved her life by slowing the bleeding.

Johnny thought back to when she'd been rammed from behind by the tree limb. She'd been in pain, and had

trouble breathing, but he hadn't imagined that she'd been in that much distress. The hypothermia had numbed her to the point where the pain hadn't felt as bad as it should have.

He'd been beating himself up over it for the past three days, blaming himself for her condition. "I should've let go of her hand," he'd lamented mournfully to Roy. "It's my fault she ended up in the river. She was trying to help me, and I ended up pulling her in."

Roy had shaken his head and laid a comforting hand on his friend's shoulder. "I saw you both go in. The way that tree hit you both, there's no way she would've avoided going in even if you *had* let go. Besides," he'd added after a short silence, "did you ever stop to think that she was holding onto you as much as you were holding onto her?"

That had hurt even more. "I told her not to let go." He'd rubbed his eyes wearily, trying to get the dull ache behind them to ease up. "Dammit, why did I say that?"

Roy had been silent a few minutes, then answered, "Do you really think she would've let go even if you told her to?"

Gage had thought back to the look of determination on the dispatcher's face while they were struggling on the riverbank. "No," he'd said finally. "I guess not."

"Then stop thinking about the what-ifs. They'll only make you crazy."

Now, staring down at the pale face that was partially hidden by the respirator, he gripped her hand more tightly and repeated what he had said to her on the river bank. "Don't let go," he whispered. "Please, don't let go." He felt tears welling up in his eyes, and he choked them back down.

Then, without warning, he felt her hand tighten against his, ever so slightly. He blinked, unsure whether he had truly felt it, when she did it again. "Jackie?" He bolted from the room, his weariness forgotten, and tracked down Dixie, who was filling out paperwork.

She gave him her best annoyed nurse look. "John Gage, you may be my favorite paramedic, but you have to be the worst patient I've ever had when it comes to following orders. I thought I told you to stay put or else?"

He was too excited to worry about being subjected to Otto. "She's waking up, Dix" he said, tugging at her sleeve with his good hand.

Rampart's head nurse frowned and followed him, not allowing herself to be swept away as Johnny had been. She'd seen too many false alarms from hopeful friends and family who were sure they'd seen some sign of recovery, when in fact it had simply been an autonomic reflex or a muscle spasm.

Johnny sat at the edge of Jackie's bed and took her hand in his again. "Jackie, come on, squeeze my hand. Show Dixie you're back with us." He waited expectantly, but there was no response, only the soft hiss of the breathing apparatus. "Jackie, come on, just once more." Nothing.

Dixie sighed and touched the dark haired young man's shoulder. "Johnny..."

"No!" he said quickly. "I know what I felt. She responded to what I said. I know she did." He looked at Dixie, his eyes desperate for her to believe him, then he turned back to Jackie and leaned in close to her ear. "Come on, sweetheart, I know you're in there. Show her what I already know, that you're a fighter."

This time he was rewarded with another squeeze. He looked at Dixie triumphantly, his face an ear to ear grin.

She returned it. "I'll go get Kel." She disappeared out the door.

Johnny touched Jackie's cheek lightly, watching her eyelids start to flutter. "Way to go, kiddo, way to go."

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A week later, Johnny walked into Jackie's hospital room, a bouquet of flowers clutched in one hand. He was pleased to see that she was sitting up in bed, and the color had returned to her face.

She looked up from the book she was reading and smiled widely. "Hey!"

"Hey, yourself." He handed her the flowers and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. "You're looking good today."

She made a face. "I look like crap, but thanks." She laid the flowers on the bed next to her, and tucked a lock of brown hair behind her ear. "The good news is Doctor Brackett says I can go home in a few days."

"That's great." He pulled a chair up next to her and sat. "You need a chauffeur?"

Her brow wrinkled slightly. "That's okay, I don't want to impose."

He waved off the idea. "I insist."

She smiled and gave a small nod. "Okay, thanks." She started to say something else, then stopped, staring down at her hands silently for a moment.

Johnny noticed the pensive look that had crossed her face, and was suddenly concerned. "You okay?"

She nodded and gave a small sigh. "I just...wanted to say that I'm sorry." She continued to look at her hands, picking at the plastic ID band around her wrist.

Confused, Johnny leaned forward. "Sorry? For what?"

"That I couldn't get you out of the river in time." Her voice was so soft he could barely hear it.

He stared at her, dumbfounded. "What?!" He got up and sat on the edge of the bed next to her, clasping her hands. "Jackie, you can't be serious."

Still unable to meet his eyes, she gave a small shrug. "If I could've pulled you out before that tree got there, none of this would've happened." She pulled one of her hands away to wipe at a tear that was slipping down her cheek. "Guess you were right about women joining the department, or me, at least. I was just fooling myself that I'd be able to do the job without getting someone else hurt."

The dark haired paramedic took her chin in his hand and tilted her face up to look at him. "Jackie, stop that," he chastised firmly. "You did everything you could do."

"Exactly. And it wasn't enough."

Slowly, Gage realized that she had been giving herself the same mental guilt trip that he'd been giving himself about what had happened. "It was more than a lot of people would've done. Most people would

never have put themselves in that position in the first place. You put your life on the line for those kids, and for me. You could've let go at any time to save yourself, but you didn't."

"I couldn't." She sounded surprised at the idea. "I couldn't just let go."

"Then it was enough."

She searched his face, trying to tell if he truly meant what he was saying or was just trying to make her feel better. It was his eyes that gave her her answer. Relief flooding through her, she managed a weak smile.

"Besides, if I'd let go, Roy would've killed me for making him break in a new partner."

Johnny chuckled and patted her hand. "There's the Jackie I know." He paused and thought about what he was going to say very carefully. "Jackie, about what I'd said, about the job... Well, I was wrong. I think you're gonna make one hell of a firefighter."

Her eyes widened in surprise at the unexpected vote of confidence. "Thanks," she stammered. "I just hope you're right."

They chatted for a while longer, until Dixie came in and shooed the paramedic out so Jackie could get some rest. On his way out the door, he flashed her a crooked smile, and she sighed to herself, slumping back into her pillow. With the likes of John Gage around, she was definitely going to have to give some serious consideration to changing her not-dating-coworkers rule. The thought of that smile kept a similar one on her face for the rest of the day.

On his way out of the hospital, Johnny ran into Roy, who was restocking the squad's drug box down in the emergency room while his temporary partner was off getting them coffee. "Hey, Junior," he said with an easy smile. It did his heart good to see his friend up and around under his own steam again. "Visiting Jackie?"

With a nod, Johnny leaned against the counter next to him. "Ayup."

Roy grinned. "That makes it every day since you were released. Something I should know about?"

"No!" Johnny replied defensively. "I just don't want her to be alone, not having any family around and all."

"Uh-huh." Roy continued to grin as he closed up the drug box. "So, she still won't date firemen, huh? Even after everything you two went through?"

The younger paramedic rubbed his chin thoughtfully and let a lazy smile cross his handsome features. "Well now, I'm working on that, Pal, I'm definitely working on that."

~fini~