

Chapter 4

Roy:

Stoney Point's a pretty popular rock climbing and hiking area, but it's not really conducive to hang gliding. Well, none of the areas around here are, really.

We headed up Topanga Canyon Boulevard and saw it as we got closer, about half way down the cliff face, a bright red dot against the pale rock.

"Holy crap is right," Johnny exclaimed, hanging out the window and peering up at it.

We had to go almost entirely around the site to access the service road that runs along the back and top of the cliff face. A police cruiser was already at the open gate and the officer motioned for us to go on in. We raced up the dirt road, climbing higher until we spotted a Park Ranger Land Rover and the ranger waved at us to stop.

A genial black gentleman with a kind expression that reminded me of Dr. Early extended his hand as we climbed out. "Hi, Ranger Bernard Plunket."

"Roy DeSoto. This is my partner, John Gage."

He shook our hands and then gestured to his right eye as he gave me a quizzical look.

"Cut myself shaving."

Johnny looked at Plunket, then at me and scowled.

"That musta been one helluva razor, my friend."

"Tell me about it. Ranger Plunket, this is Captain Stanley."

"Call me Hank," Cap walked up from behind and shook hands with him as we followed Johnny to the edge of the cliff.

We all looked down at the red glider shifting along the rocks, looking like a battered pterodactyl trying to re-launch itself from the cliff with its crumpled wings as outstretched as it could manage.

Cap turned to Plunket. "What's the story?"

"Well, looks like she thought the winds were an invitation for a day of glidin'. You can see for yourself how well that turned out."

"She?" Cap asked.

"Yup. I don't think she realized this place isn't for hang gliding."

“Is she conscious?” Johnny kneeled as if to see better down the cliff.

“Far as I could tell she hasn’t been since I first arrived.”

“How long ago did this happen?”

“Mm, little more than an hour, maybe? Some rock climbers spotted it and called it in. But who’s to know how long she’d been here before they saw her. Certainly not before sun-up.”

“Well, how do you boys wanna do this?” Cap laid his hands on his hips.

“The way that glider’s moving around down there, Cap, it’s making me nervous.”

“I don’t see the pilot,” Johnny noticed. I didn’t, either.

“You want air support?” Cap asked.

I’d thought about it as we were driving up. But now that we were here and looking at the scenario, I was rethinking the logistics of that idea.

“Don’t think so, Cap. These winds are too fierce. The wind from the blades are gonna make things worse. And even if we get it secure I’d hate for it to cut loose with the chopper hovering.”

“Yeah. So what’re you thinking?”

I looked up to see that weather front that was hanging off to the east helping to cause all this turbulent commotion in the atmosphere. At least it was keepin’ the direct sun off of us, for the moment.

“Well, we’re gonna have to secure that glider, first of all, as I’d imagine she’s still attached to it. We can use the bolts to secure us once we’re down there then have you guys lower a Stokes down. We’ll attach her to a line so we can hoist her up and put her in and then we can bring up the Stokes. But it’s gonna be pretty tricky in this wind.”

“Well, we’re gonna need more manpower. We can’t back up the Engine, here.”

Cap was about to get on the HT then nodded his head at me. “You, uh, you alright with those burns, there, Roy?”

“Oh, I can see fine, Cap.”

“Alright,” Cap patted me on the shoulder and started in on a call to dispatch and his orders to the rest of the guys.

I was a little worried about the condition of the pilot, but no sense worrying now as we’d find out soon enough.

Johnny had gotten to his feet and was looking down toward the wreck. “Hey, Roy?”

“Yeah?”

He was pointing out a path in line with the way the glider was positioned against the cliff, its right wing tip pointing about 80 degrees vertical toward the top.

“You see where the right wing tip oughta be? Down that line and along the backside of the glider, I think, is about where the bolts for this ascent are located.”

“You’ve climbed this route before?”

“Nuh-uh. No way. I’ve heard about this ascent through the grapevine. There’s a reason they call it ‘Holy Crap’. I ain’t *that* dumb. But the problem is, I don’t see any place to tie the glider off on the side of the leading edge. If the bolts are along the back that only gives us one side to secure it. Which means it ain’t gonna be all that secure. An’ I think only one of us oughta be doin’ it.”

“Well, it’s not like we have a choice. If she’s been unconscious for the last hour, that doesn’t bode well. We’re gonna need to get to her, fast. We’ll have to take the chance.”

“Alright. You want to tie it off or you want me to do it?” Johnny asked as we started to put our belts on that Chet had brought us.

“No, uh, why don’t you go ahead and tie-it off. The minute you’ve got it wrangled, I’ll go in and check the victim. It looks like there’s a pocket I can slip through between that bent section of the wing by the leading edge and the cliff face.”

He sidled up right next to me. “Yeah, I see it.”

“I don’t think the glider will hold for much longer. It’s possible her weight is helping to hold it down, but that may be less of a factor as the winds pick up. We just better be sure we both don’t get knocked out by that thing or there’ll be no one to rescue her.”

I checked the buckle on the belt.

“Roy, you need me—?” Johnny started.

My head snapped up as that same feeling I’d felt back at the station flashed right through me, again, but a lot stronger, this time, and it almost knocked me over. I closed my eyes for a second to settle myself.

“Hey, are you ok?”

I opened my eyes to see Johnny’s expression, full of worry and...something else, just staring at me, his hand on my arm.

“You want to sit this one out? Wait for another squad?”

I thought about it for a second, waiting for his words to register while I tried to ignore the warm reaction pulsing through me from the look he was giving me.

“No. No, I’m fine. Just got a chill from the wind, that’s all.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Alright.”

I looked back down the cliff to distract myself.

“You need me to make a pack for you?”

“Uh, sure.”

And all of that was the beginning of the notorious Mistake Number 4. And a beauty of a blunder if there ever was one. I should’ve taken the hint from Johnny and sat this one out. Sometimes, hindsight is just a little too clear for my personal comfort.

We discussed the best route down as we finished gearing up. The Engine crew had pulled the lines through the rig and were getting the Stokes ready. Johnny was suited up and had put the pack together for me.

“You got your HTs?” Cap asked us both.

“Yeah. Hey Johnny, let me have a C-collar.”

“Already in there,” he said, handing me the pack.

We ran the lines around our belts and put our gloves on. I hoisted the pack and we put the coils around our necks and shoulders. I looked back down at the glider – it seemed to be getting more battered as the winds picked up.

Johnny handed me a belt with a line from the rig. “Here’s the line for the victim. You ready?” He was holding onto me with an intense look that tried to mask his worry. Tried. But didn’t.

I attached the line and did a double-check of everything. “Yeah. You ready?”

“It’s now or never.”

I looked over at the Engine crew as they dug in, waiting for our signal. “Alright, let’s do it!”

I saw Plunket just shake his head. “Guys’re crazy.”

Chapter 5

Johnny:

We grabbed our lines, got into position and off the edge of the world we went.

Standing up top, the wind is harsh, but it isn't that bad. But right up against the cliff, it was comin' at me like a tornado and I was gettin' wind-whipped, already, having a hard time keepin' steady. I figured it was kickin' Roy around, too. Every movement off the cliff face felt like I was either fightin' a brick wall and was gonna get crushed back against the cliff or I was launchin' myself to fly, the wind would just grab me and I'd hang in the air. In another time and place I might've thought it was fun, but all I could think of right then was gettin' down to that glider so we could get this over with.

You remember that feeling I mentioned? That helpless one I felt when Roy fell through the space between the roof and the power line and all I could do was watch while he got electrocuted? It came back at me, again. It took every inch of my willpower to stuff it somewhere and concentrate on making sure we got down okay.

Mike and Marco needled me, one day, about how much of an adventure junkie I was, always gettin' in there, being the one to do the stunts while I left Roy on the ground. It's not that I'm necessarily into all that macho stuff. It's a high, I *will* admit. Especially when you've saved someone who's in serious trouble. But a big part of the truth is, I like to do the crazy stuff because it's harder for me to watch it when Roy does it. Because I can't control it, I can't control the circumstances. I can control *me*, when *I'm* doing it. But I can't control things when *he's* doing it.

It's not that I don't trust him, I mean far from it! I trust him with my *life* and I *don't* mean that casually. But it's not him I have the problem with. It's everything else around him. *That's* what I don't trust.

And that's why that feeling was comin' back at me, again. With the sun startin' to lay off those clouds to the east, the winds were pickin' up and we were headin' straight into the maelstrom. And him with those fresh burns on his face and his dislike of heights...

I felt worry settle into my gut and I had to bite down awfully damn hard against my instincts to signal to the Engine crew to lower us down further. Cause I wasn't likin' this. Not one damn bit.

Roy:

We were gettin' down pretty close, now. I could see the scratches along the rocks that the glider made as it must've tumbled down to its present position. The updrafts were gusting every so often and I had to plaster myself against the rocks if I didn't want to go airborne.

I could hear a set of sirens far off down on the road below as I reached the glider.

"Hello?" I had to yell over the wind and the metallic, ringing sound of the glider being pummeled against the cliff face. "My name is Roy. I'm with the Fire Department. I'm comin' to get you, so don't move, alright?"

If there was any response, I didn't hear it. Then again, my own voice was getting blown right back in my face, so I doubt she could hear me if she was even conscious, at all.

I got down to the glider and waved to Cap up top to halt.

The glider was an unsalvageable mess. The right side of the frame was bent in several places and beating against the rock. The left side of the frame was also bent and mangled and looked like the far edge had managed to wedge itself a bit between a crack in some rocks that jutted out from the cliff. Both wings were ripped in spots, the material flapping wildly, adding to the ruckus of all that bashing and scraping and the twisting of the frame against itself. That and with the wind howling in my ears I could barely hear myself think.

The edge of the right wing frame was hammering the rocks in a constant rhythm as it fought with the wind, right about where the bolt was. *Dammit.*

I grabbed my HT. "Engine 51, HT 51. Cap, can you read me?"

"Loud and clear, Roy. Go ahead."

"Cap, this glider is hittin' the cliff about where the bolt is and I don't see any others that are within reach, so there's no way for me to get off this line, unless Johnny can manage to tie-off the glider."

"16's just arrived so we should have enough manpower to hold you and Gage and the lines for the glider and the Stokes."

"I think we're gonna need six lines for the Stokes, Cap. This wind is just too strong."

"Did you say six lines?" I could hear the wheels turning in his head as he calculated logistics with manpower.

"10-4, Cap."

"Alright. John, do you read me?"

"Loud and clear, Cap."

"Start gettin' that glider secured. I'll have to call in another company. Stand by."

"10-4, Engine 51."

"10-4, Cap. If you'll lower me down further, I can get to the glider a little better."

“10-4, John.”

Johnny:

The glider was bashing itself pretty hard against the rocks. Figured this'd be like bareback riding, only I'd get to use both hands. But I was gonna have to time it awfully damn well if I didn't want to get my teeth knocked out.

I walked along the cliff face to get on the back side of the glider. As the Engine crew lowered me down to the left wing I noticed that the leading edge was wedged in a bit and the deflexor and parts of the sail and the rigging were snagged on an outcropping of the rock. Barely.

Roy:

"Hey, Roy," Johnny's voice came over the HT.

"Go ahead, Johnny."

"I'm below the glider. Can you see the victim?"

"A little. She's not moving."

"OK. I think I can secure this thing, but it may be awhile. I'm not sure if it's all that safe for you to go pokin' around in there, just yet."

"My thoughts, exactly. You need me over there?"

"No, I don't want you to come over here. This thing is too unpredictable. No sense both of us gettin' knocked around."

"10-4. Just let me know if you need anything. Otherwise, I'm just gonna hang around."

"Oh ha ha, very funny. If I'd known you were such a comedian I'd've brought another line for you."

"Very punny, partner."

"Oh, you're just full of it, today, ain'tcha? If you're gonna be hangin' around hoistin' bad jokes on me, pardner-o-mine—"

"Would you two just get on with it? Ai yai..."

"Aye, aye, Cap."

"Oh boy... John, I'd like you to keep in mind that we have the end of the ropes and large cutting tools like K-12's on our end." Twit. He says it even when he doesn't say it, sometimes.

"Yes, sir. Securing the glider, Cap."

I could just hear that mischievous laugh of Johnny's at Cap's apparent scolding, although it would never be obvious to anyone else that Cap knew we were on edge, otherwise he'd-a said something sooner and not bothered joining in. It's not often Johnny and I banter like that during a rescue, but we have been known to do it on the rare occasion. In situations much like this, actually. And this particular situation was getting to all of us.

"Engine 51, HT 51, Roy?"

"Go ahead, Cap."

"There are no other companies available for another 30-40 minutes. Sorry, pal, but you're gonna have to secure yourself to the bolt if we're gonna need six lines on the Stokes."

"10-4." *Dammit.* Not the best scenario, but I didn't have a choice.

"Hey, Johnny."

"Yeah?"

"Did you catch that?"

"Yeah. I think I can hold it long enough for you to get to the bolt. I'm gonna tug on it twice to let you know I got it, cause I'm gonna need both hands, okay?"

"10-4."

After a few minutes, I saw the telltale tugs. I walked along the cliff face and secured myself to the bolt and tugged on it, hard.

I moved away a little then got on the HT. Before I could say anything, I heard a scraping noise and saw the glider shift. I scrambled away and heard a yell, but not before I got reamed on the helmet with the leading edge of the glider and saw a tunnel of dark form in my vision...

Johnny:

I saw it bash him on the head...and I freaked.

Chapter 6

Roy:

I had to fight to stay conscious. I shook my head to keep myself awake.

If it'd hit me any harder I think I might've passed out.

His voice came over the HT, "*Roy, are you alright!*"

"Yeah."

"Sorry, partner. I think my pulling on it shifted the balance and it slipped. I tried to keep hold of it, but I couldn't hang on to it or it woulda thrown me. You sure you're OK?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm alright. Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Let me tie-it off before you go in after her."

"10-4. Hey, Cap?"

"Go ahead, Roy."

"I'm off my line and secured to the bolt."

"10-4."

I felt my line from topside slacken a little then got into position to await Johnny's signal. I shook my head again. I was still fighting to keep from blacking out.

After another few minutes, I heard from Johnny on the HT, "*OK, Roy. It's secure.*"

"10-4. I'm heading in."

I called down to the pilot again, but got no response. I lowered myself down through the pocket between the bent leading edge of the glider and the cliff face to get at her. Even secured, the glider was fighting the ropes like a wild, caged animal. The pilot was unconscious and still wrapped in the harness and tangled in the rigging. Her helmet was cracked and I could see some blood around her head and face.

"It's just not your day today, is it? Doesn't really seem to be mine, either, so we'll just get through it together, okay?"

At least, underneath the wings, I had the wind off of me for a bit.

"Engine 51, HT 51. Lower down the Stokes."

“10-4. Stokes comin’ at ya. Rampart is on standby.”

“10-4.” I assessed the pilot’s condition as much as I could, although I couldn’t check for pupil response with her prone. I attached the C-collar, the belt and line on her and grabbed the HT.

“Cap, you ready for the vitals?” I relayed all the vitals, which weren’t all that promising, and peeked out of the pocket. Johnny had come up and around by now and was keeping an eye on the Stokes being lowered. It threatened to twist in the wind on its way down, but with three lines attached to both ends, they managed to keep it against the cliff face and pretty stable. Hopefully, her weight will help stabilize it even more on the way up.

There was a bit of a ledge that we could use to settle the Stokes. I cut her loose from the harness and the rigging and with the help of both Engine crews, we were able to get her out from under the glider and into the Stokes and secured, along with my pack for added weight. But fighting the wind and keeping one eye on her and one on the glider was wearing me out.

“Engine 51, HT 51. Okay, take her up.”

I pulled myself out of the pocket and watched the Stokes inch up the rock face, holding my breath that it wouldn’t twist. But the pilot’s weight seemed to stabilize it. Johnny was hauled up right behind her. I relayed some adjustment instructions up top and they were able to pull her up without too much trouble.

Johnny kept watch on her ascent and I allowed myself a few moments to relax. Fighting this wind on top of the rescue itself was making my shoulders, my neck, my back and my thighs ache.

“HT 51, Engine 51. Roy?”

“HT 51. Go ahead, Cap.”

“Johnny and the victim are topside. We should be ready to bring you up in a few minutes.”

“Might wanna make that on the double, Cap. This glider’s about to go any minute.”

“10-4, Roy.”

There was a break in the hurricane-force winds that had been berating the cliff. I took that break to reattach my line from topside.

A fierce gust of wind came up, just then, worse than the one before.

And then I heard it.

A horrific shredding sounded as the fabric of the left wing was almost completely ripped off, still attached near the Kings post with threads of it still attached to the frame. It ballooned out like a sail in the updrafts with a terrifying *whoomph!*, the shredded strands at its base flapping madly. The glider bucked ferociously, straining against the lines.

And then came a sound I'll never forget - a screeching metallic, grinding noise. The pterodactyl was launching itself into the sky...

In the span of half a breath, I saw the entire wreck shift.

“Cap—!”

The left side of the leading edge ripped itself from the rocks and came straight at me. I jerked away instinctively to get away from it, felt my helmet fly off. But it happened too fast and I had nowhere to go.

The full force of it careened right into me.

And that's the last thing I remember.

Johnny:

“ROY!”

I'd just gotten the IV instructions for the pilot from Rampart when I heard Cap yell like his life was at stake. I snapped my head up to see him with his hands cupped around his mouth yelling down the cliff face.

He spun toward the Engine crew, his arm gesturing madly, “Pull him up! Pull him up!” I'd never seen a crew move so fast to haul line.

I was already on my feet.

“Gage!” Cap's hand was gesturing frantically for me to hurry up. Cap got on the HT, “Roy! Roy, can you hear me? Roy!”

I could see the fear on his face as I rushed over to him and peered down at my partner, who was hangin' listlessly, twisting in the wind, with the glider dancing uncontrollably around him like it was drunk.

My heart was in my throat. “What happened!”

“The left wing of the glider broke free from the rock and smashed right into him.”

I stopped breathing, right then... *Son of a bitch!*

But then, something was wrong. We could see his body archin' kinda weird.

“Cap!” Marco came running over. “Something's pulling him back. I think he's stuck.”

Cap whipped his head at me, “Is he still attached to the bolt?”

“Ah, shit, yeah, he might be!”

“Alright, stop pulling!”

The logistics of this whole operation zipped through my head. “Cap, I can go down there and get him, but I can’t do that and help her at the same time.”

“Alright, pal, I’ll take care of it.” Cap got onto the HT, “LA, Engine 51, request second paramedic rescue unit and second ambulance at this location. What is the ETA on the rescue unit?”

“Engine 51, LA. ETA on second unit approximately 10 minutes.”

“10-4, LA. John, is she stable?”

“Well, she needs an IV.”

“If you can get a line in, we’ll take care of the rest.”

“Marco! Get me two lines for the glider.” I scrambled back to the patient and got the IV started on her, handing the bag to Chet.

I double-checked my belt as Marco ran up with the lines. God, my fingers felt like a charged 2 and a half; I couldn’t get my belt back on fast enough...

“Chet! Tell Rampart we’ve got a Code I comin’ in,” Cap ordered.

“Cap, I’m gonna secure that glider with a coupla lines, keep it from flying into us.”

“You sure you can get close enough to that thing to tie a line to it?”

“Do I have a choice?”

Cap patted my shoulder again and was back on the HT. “Roy, can you hear me? Roy!” Cap had an intense look on his face as he watched me get everything secured, “You ready?”

“Yeah. Listen, I’m gonna have to secure him to my line. In this wind, there’s no way to keep him stabilized if we’re on two separate lines, even if he regains consciousness.”

“Yeah, OK. Just give us the signal.” A hand on my shoulder, “Bring him home, John.”

“All in the plan, Cap.” I got into position at the edge of the cliff.

“Alright, let’s do it!” Cap yelled to the Engine crews.

And I went over the edge.

A metallic creak and battering, ringing noise got louder as I got closer to it, along with the crazy flapping of that left wing.

With the left frame free from its holdings on the rocks, the wind was thrashing the glider even harder against the cliff. And it was falling apart. The glider isn't designed for the kind of stress the wind was giving it in the condition it was in. And with the pilot's weight off the control bar, it wasn't gonna be long till the wind tore the whole thing loose. And the only things holding it were the lines I tied to it, earlier.

Shit!

And as I got a better look at the way the wreck was situated, I realized what'd happened. The ripped fabric had acted like a sail and the wind just took it and picked up the whole glider like a toy sailboat, rippin' the deflexor in the process and freeing the left wing from the rocks. The whole mess then shifted in the direction of the lines, makin' 'em slack, twisted it 90 degrees and brought up that crumpled left wing and smashed it right into my partner.

I had to tighten the lines I'd had on it first 'fore I could secure the new ones. Man, I had a *helluva* time tryin' to get to the first one 'cause the damn wreck was tryin' to take me out the same way it did Roy. Not only did I have the frame to worry about, but the shredded fabric of the wings was comin' at me like a lion tamer with a whip. I tried to time it gettin' to that first line, but a gust came up, whipped those shreds around and I got a lashing, right up my left side. Stung me like a jellyfish with an attitude. Damn, but that was gonna smart like hell for a good week. Took a *helluva* few tries, but I finally grabbed onto that first line without that bronco takin' me out and re-secured it tight, nearly pullin' a few muscles to do it. With that first one tied-off, I could finally get to the second one and then secured the two new ones.

I've done ranch work that hadn't tired me out this much.

The glider was still fightin' mad like a caged animal, but at least it wasn't goin' anywhere and wa'n't gonna bash Roy against the rocks. At least for now. I was already exhausted from fightin' that beast and I still had to get to my partner.

I toggled the HT, "Cap! The glider's secure. Haul me up a little, so I can get over to Roy."

As I came up over the glider I could see him. And I really didn't like the fact that he still hadn't moved.

Chapter 7

Roy:

I kept...bumping into something. Or something was bumping into me. Something hard. It hurt. *I hurt.* All over. I didn't know why... I couldn't open my eyes to see what it was, where I was. Too hard. I just couldn't do it.

But I could damn well hear it. And feel it. A wind tunnel. I'd woken up...in some kind of wind tunnel..... Tried to remember....

Where am I?

Something bumped my face. I flinched away from it, then reached out but there was nothing there. Just air. Air and cold, brutal wind.

There it was again... Right in my face. I reached up.... Rope. *Rope?* I followed it down, felt the belt on me. I hadn't even noticed the belt till now.

What happened? Where am I?

I couldn't...open my eyes.....I wanted to. I tried...I couldn't. I couldn't do it. It was just too hard.

Couldn't.....breathe..... all this wind and...I couldn't breathe. It was stealing my air. Ripping it from my lungs. I couldn't breathe. It hurt to breathe. My head hurt.

Everything hurt.

Where am I? What am I doing here? What's all this wind?

Rope. Belt. Rope. Johnny. Johnny must be here.

Spinning... I realized I was spinning and I couldn't stop. *Dizzy. It's making me dizzy...nauseated. Somebody, make it stop.*

“Johnny?”

It hurts to yell...

Johnny, you there? Why isn't he answering?

Where am I...?

Something bumped into me, again. I put my hands out. Something solid, felt for it, felt it. Rock. *Rock?* I held onto it. I stopped spinning. *Thank God. But...?*

What's that god-awful noise? That flapping...banging noise?

The wind. That noise. So loud. It's making my head hurt.

God, I'm cold.

I wrenched my eyes open.....My right eye hurt. I blinked against the light. Colors. Just...colors. Blue.....beige, red. I can't...focus. I can't focus. On anything. Trying...it's not working. *Why can't I see? Where am I? What's happening?*

“Johnny!”

God, that hurts...

He's not answering.

Johnny, where are you?

Somebody, anybody, please answer me...

....please...

Johnny:

As I started along the cliff face away from the glider, I could see Roy was finally startin' to move and I breathed out a sigh of relief. Considering we'd just saved a hang gliding pilot who'd been unconscious for the better part of an hour, I wasn't lookin' forward to another unconscious cliff rescue.

But I could see his hands slowly creepin' along the rock like he was feelin' for something, his legs lookin' for solid ground. And he was callin' out, but I couldn't hear what he was sayin'.

'Dunning left Roy in a fire...'

Shit!

I had to get to 'im.

“Roy!”

I called out to him, knowing it was pretty damned useless in this wind.

I saw his head snap in my direction, like he wasn't sure he'd heard somethin'. But he didn't look directly at me.

"Johnny?" His voice was awfully faint. In fact, he sounded a little hesitant.

“Roy!”

He moved again. But I could tell he wasn't seein' me.

“Johnny!” He sounded desperate and he was wincing every time he yelled.

He seemed to be looking around, too... Somethin' was wrong and I had a feeling it was the worst thing that *could* go wrong. Helluva welcome back from my vacation. I wouldn't ordinarily mind jumpin' back in to this kind of a scenario. But not when it involves my partner. And *especially* not after that damned cockamamie Dunning story Marco 'n' Chet laid on me this mornin' that still had my blood curdling so hard I couldn't see straight.

I tried to walk the cliff face toward him but it was near impossible as I kept gettin' plastered against the rocks.

“Johnny? Johnny!”

I could barely hear him over the freight train of wind and the commotion from the glider.

“Roy! Just hang tight!”

Well that was a stupid thing to say. I was almost to him but, damn it, walkin' along in this wind was like tryin' to walk through a brick wall. I got to him as fast as I could, “I'm here, Roy.”

His head reared back like I'd spooked him, “Johnny? Johnny, you here?”

He sounded scared and my gut flipped as he reached a hand toward me like he wasn't quite sure where I was. *God...dammit!* My heart sank cause what I'd feared happened had, in fact, happened, and I knew this was one of those things that freaked him out the most.

I grabbed his hand and peered closely at him, watching his eyes darting around underneath that frown of his, trying to pinpoint exactly where I was. I've only seen that look maybe once or twice, when he was in real danger. He was tryin' his damndest to keep his fear under control. “Roy, I'm right here.”

My skin went white as his fingers dug into me. “Johnny, I...I can't see.”

I swallowed. Hard. “Okay, I know. I gotcha. It's gonna be okay. Here, just hold onto me, alright?” I tried to pry his fingers from my hand, but he wouldn't let go. “Roy, you're gonna have to le'go my hand, first, okay?” It took some moments, but Roy finally relaxed enough that I could put his hand on my shoulder while he had one on the rocks. “You got me?”

Roy:

I was so relieved all I could do was nod. And I was surprised at how relieved I was just to hear his voice.

There's only one other time in my life I'd felt relief like that and that was when Joanne finally gave birth to Jennifer after having been on bedrest. My wife was ok, my baby girl was healthy and my mother-in-law was leaving. But this, right here, right now, was gettin' pretty close to that.

Johnny:

"Okay, now, are you completely blind or just blurred vision?"

"Blurred."

"Okay."

"Johnny, where are we?"

Oh, man... I fought to keep the worry out of my voice, "We're hangin' off a cliff, Roy. You remember?"

Roy:

A cliff? Well, that would certainly explain a lot of things.

Not the least of which was that I was obviously dangling from somewhere, gettin' wind-whipped and feeling disoriented, dizzy and none too good. My muscles were aching, I had no idea why, and, worst of all, I couldn't see. *Fantastic.* I figured a head injury. But...from what? *And how'd we end up on a cliff?*

I tried to remember...vaguely...I think...with the wind howling and all that noise going on and everything else, I figured it really wasn't a dream... "Was there a...hang gliding accident?"

"Good. Real good, Roy. I'm gonna look you over a little, okay? What else do you remember?"

I felt Johnny gently grab my head and pierce my eyes with his pen light. Damn, that hurt. And it shoved the nausea up from my stomach and I almost lost it, I could taste bile. I had to fight awful hard to keep it down. Then he lolled my head around a little, I suspect, to scrutinize whatever injuries I must've sustained from...*what? What happened?* It made my nausea even worse and I had to grab his hands and make him stop.

"You gettin' nauseated?"

I could only nod a little. Any more movement, and I was worried that whatever I dropped down was gonna come right back up at us in this hurricane.

"OK." He caressed the side of my head. I wished I could see his face.

"What else do you remember?"

I closed my eyes and searched my memory, again.

Other...images... “Did I...did I get the pilot?”

Johnny:

“Yes, you did. She’s topside and she’s gonna be okay. But the glider slammed into you and you’ve been out cold for the last few minutes. Can you tell me your full name?”

“Roy Patrick DeSoto. It’s Sunday.”

“Good, you’re doin’ real good. Alright, look, I tied-off the glider again so it’s not gonna bash us into talcum powder. I’m gonna look you over s’more then I’m gonna attach you to my line and then they’ll bring us home. OK?”

He nodded.

“Now, are you feeling dizzy, at all? Headache, anything like that?”

I looked over his arms and the rest of his face, checking for other injuries.

“Yeah. Dizzy. A little. Nauseous. Headache. Having a little trouble...breathing, too.”

“OK. There’re some minor lacerations on your arms and face and one right above your hairline. There’s another at the back of your head, too, and those burn bandages need to be redone. Where else’re you hurt?”

“Feels like everywhere... Johnny, what happened?”

Aw shit, Roy, don’t do this to me! “You just got a bump on the head, that’s all. You remember where we are?”

Roy:

I can’t think of any scenario where that question’s considered a good indication of anything and it had me a little worried. “Uh...no.”

Johnny:

I squeezed my eyes shut to take a good 10 seconds to calm myself down. Cause all I wanted was to get him off that cliff and there was no way in hell it was happenin’ fast enough for me. Figured my partner’d gone over his quota for the week as far as all this life-in-danger nonsense. It *damn* sure as hell was enough for me. And I wasn’t even *there* for the first one!

God help him, ‘cause I *will* string Dunning up by his toenails, if I ever lay my hands on him.

“Well, Roy, we’re hangin’ off a cliff. Aside from your head, you hurt anywhere else?”

“Ribs...”

“Fractured?”

“Not sure. Maybe.”

“Which side?”

“Both.”

“Alright, I’m gonna check you over, real quick, okay, so hold on tight to me.”

I ripped off my gloves and held them in my teeth.

I looked at him – his eyes were closed, scrunched up with the pain he musta been in, those burns and lacerations on his face, the wind whippin’ his hair around and howlin’ in our ears and his breathing, all ragged like he was havin’ a hard time controllin’ it.

And that feeling came over me, again.

‘You’re damn right I’m mad at you!’

I gently laid my hands on his shoulders to steady myself in the wind. Then slowly I slid my hands down his chest. His body felt cold, even through his uniform, as I palpated for fractures.

And he kinda flinched a little. Figured I’d hit a sore spot. But he didn’t move away from me.

Roy:

I felt his hands on my shoulders slide down my chest and I flinched a bit when this... *feeling*... cascaded all the way down inside of me and warmed me down to my toes. It didn’t seem like much...but it grabbed a hold of me somethin’ fierce and didn’t let go.

It was real gentle...but the more Johnny touched me the more that feeling coursed through me. It came at me in waves, gathering in strength and before I knew it I was caught in the rip current.

And as soft and gentle as it was, it was squeezing all the air out of my lungs and ringing my body like a bell that wouldn’t stop chiming.

Johnny...

I was having an even harder time trying to breathe. Whatever was happening was overwhelming. Felt like my system was about to shut down from sheer overload.

What is happening?

I grabbed at his hands to make him stop 'cause I couldn't take it.

Johnny:

Dammit... I musta hit one helluva sore spot.

I yanked my gloves outta my mouth and stuffed 'em into my shirt then grabbed him again, "Roy? Roy, what is it? You in pain? Is that it?"

He'd twisted toward the cliff, breathin' hard like he'd just gone for a full court press.

"Roy are you a'right?"

I kept tryin' to gently turn him back but he was fightin' me.

Roy:

"Johnny..." I couldn't catch my breath, "...don't..."

I'd never have believed you could die from "oversensation", but I'm tellin' ya, I felt about near on the edge of death, just then, from exactly that. If he touched me again, I was afraid I was gonna go into shock.

"Roy, now I know it *hurts*, but you *gotta* let me finish!"

I couldn't answer him. But I realized that whatever Johnny's assumption was of why I'd reacted was nowhere near the reality of why I really had.

He grabbed at me again and I flinched away from him.

"Roy, now just take it easy. I'm not gonna hurt you, okay? I'm gonna be real gentle."

Ah, hell, no, Johnny. No, don't...please...just...don't...

He touched me again and every rational thought I had flew out of my head, just then.

Johnny:

I put my hands on him again and he started guardin' on me.

"Okay, I'm just gonna go real slow, okay?"

His eyes clenched up real tight an' his fingers were diggin' into me like I was doin' surgery without any anesthetic.

Roy:

Everything he did in thinking he was doing me a favor, was, in fact, doing exactly the opposite. I'd've rather endured an anesthetic-free tonsillectomy at that moment than feel his hands sliding all over me.

Jesus Christ...

What the hell was happening?

Every...caress, every touch of his hands was sending sensations through me that I couldn't... It was like I'd taken a plunge into an ice bath I couldn't get enough air. I think I was about to go into respiratory arrest...

Johnny:

“Man, you really *are* cold. Doesn't feel like you've got any cracked ribs, though.”

I yanked my gloves back on and watched as he shivered like crazy.

“How's your head?”

“Worse.”

Shit. I tried to keep myself calm, but his head injury was making me nervous. If he wasn't feelin' nauseated, I was. I had to get him up top.

“Cap?” I called into the HT. “Roy's got a concussion, blurred vision and he's having trouble breathing. He's also got some head lacerations. We'll need the O2 when we get topside, burn bandages, sterile sheets and sterile water.”

“10-4.”

'I was running out of air and I lost the HT. I didn't have a whole lot of options.'

Damn it, Roy...

I rolled my head to loosen the muscles Roy'd been squeezin' and grabbed his belt to hold him. I got onto the HT, “Cap, lower me down about an inch.”

“10-4.”

I came down a bit to be level with him.

“I'm ready to secure Roy to my line.”

"10-4, John. Hang on a minute." After a couple of moments, the HT crackled. *"OK, John, we've got you both secured to the Engine. Anytime you're ready."*

"10-4, Cap. Securing him now."

As I tied Roy to me, I felt my line sag a little with the added weight on the one line. Then I loosened Roy's lines from topside and the bolt, tied them together and kept a hold of them so they wouldn't turn into a bullwhip.

I carefully grabbed his arm and slung it over my shoulder and then snuggled in real tight to him. With Roy up against me like that, I could control the effect of the wind upon us a little better. On the one hand, anyway.

On the other hand, a part of me...I had to be honest with myself...an incredibly selfish part of me, allowed myself to throw professionalism into all this wind and revel in how grateful I was to be able to hold him, finally. Keep him safe. I didn't move for a few moments, my hand gently keepin' his head against mine as the tornado howled like hell-fury around us.

I meant what I said, Roy...

I hate to admit it, but...considerin' the situation we were in, it was a little wrenching to have to get back on the HT. Like the world was intrudin' on us. "OK, Cap, anytime you're ready, get us out of here."

"10-4, John. Here we go."

As we inched upwards, it was all I could do to keep him close to me while I tried to keep us from twisting all crazy in the wind. Roy was holding onto me like he wa'n't ever planning on lettin' go and I could tell he was bracing against the wind's attempts to break us apart.

Roy:

I knew I was digging my fingers into him but I couldn't help it.

I was thankful to have something solid to hold onto. I hoped it would anchor me and ease this agitation I was feeling. But being up close to Johnny wasn't doing my body any favors. In fact...it was amplifying whatever it was that just kick started every nerve to come alive at once.

Holding onto him, feeling him against me, I was aware of him. How warm his body felt, his arm around me, mine around him. I could feel every point of contact our bodies made. Could feel his heartbeat, feel him breathing.

I'd never been aware of him, before.

Not like this.

I don't understand. *What am I doing? Why is this happening...?*

Johnny:

A sudden, strong series of updrafts caught us just as we dangled under an overhang and we twirled at the end of the line. Unable to control it, I found myself sandwiching Roy against the cliff face as we hit the top of that overhang. The Engine crews were still hauling us up at the same time and his back grated against the rough rock.

I grabbed the HT, "Wait wait, hold it hold it!" I clutched at a handhold in the rock to steady us. "Dammit...! Roy—? *Shit*, are you okay?"

He was clutchin' me real tight, his fingers digging' into my back and I could feel his whole body was tensed up. He whimpered in my ear and I could tell it musta hurt like hell 'cause his breathing was shallow. "God..." his voice was strained.

"Shit, Roy, I got you. We're almost there, alright? Just hold on. I ain't lettin' go o' you, okay?" I meant it. In fact, I...didn't want to let go him. I hugged him tighter, could feel his heartbeat racing, and got back on the HT, "Cap? Bring us home."

Roy:

God...! that hurt like hell... I knew I'd never be able to grate cheese, ever again.

I didn't understand what was happening. Maybe it was the concussion. Or the pain. Or the lack of oxygen. Yeah, that had to be it. The lack of oxygen.

I knew it made no sense. Even if the concussion completely rewired my brain...

What on earth am I going on about? Alright, look, just concentrate on the cliff. But something surged through me. OK, not the cliff. Concentrate on...aw hell, think! Concentrate on...

But I couldn't concentrate. All I was aware of was how much I hurt all over, how much it hurt to breathe.

And my partner.

No. No. Just...just think. Just...think about...something...what? I don't care...anything...

Son of a bitch. It hadn't worked. As Johnny released me into the arms of our brothers topside, it seemed as if something warm was ebbing away from me and I felt icy cold.

Ee-yup, definitely the concussion. I'm starting to hallucinate...really hallucinate...

Johnny:

I clambered up top after handing Roy off to the guys.

“Rampart’s on standby. They know it’s Roy,” Cap said.

“Thanks, Cap,” I tore the belt off of me.

They’d gotten Roy’s belt off and the O2 on him while I checked his pupils and his vitals. He seemed like he was still havin’ trouble breathing. I got his shirt off and palpated, again, for any rib fractures, but didn’t feel any. I grabbed the stethoscope and started listenin’, hoping there wasn’t a fractured rib that I’d missed puncturing a lung. He was guarding again and he kept flinching every time I touched him. I kept apologizing, ‘cause he looked like he was struggling, like he was really in pain.

I got down to him. “Roy?”

He opened his eyes, trying to focus on me.

Roy:

I knew he thought I was in pain. I was. But I was at a loss as to how exactly to tell him that it wasn’t the pain that was wreaking havoc on me but something else, entirely. Something a lot more... no, I wasn’t gonna allow myself to go down that path. Couldn’t.

I just...

Ah hell, Johnny...

Johnny:

“I gotta check your back, OK?”

He looked at me all wide-eyed, cause I think he knew how much it was gonna hurt.

“Sorry, partner. I’ll make it quick, OK?”

He nodded and when we rolled him over his face scrunched up real tight. He let out a groan and he practically hissed every breath. The back of his shirt was shredded and I rolled it up. *Shit*. Those lacerations weren’t as bad as I’d feared but they were bleeding and musta smarted something fierce. I imagined those abrasions weren’t making it any easier to breathe, either. I had the guys bandage him up as fast as they could while I got on the horn to Rampart.

“Rampart, this is Squad 51.”

“Go ahead, 51.” Early’s voice.

“Rampart, we’ve finally gotten Roy topside. He was knocked unconscious for several minutes after sustaining a blow to the head by a hang glider. Stand by, Rampart.” I covered the biophone receiver and turned to Cap. “Did you see whether he had his helmet on when he got beaned?”

Cap blew out a breath as he thought about it. "No, John, I think it got knocked off of him when he tried to get out of the way."

I got back on the horn. "Rampart, he was not, I repeat, he was not wearing his helmet when the glider hit him. He has since regained consciousness but he's complaining of dizziness, blurred vision, nausea and some memory loss. Pupils are reactive but slow and uneven. He also has lacerations on the frontal and occipital areas of his head. He's having trouble breathing but there are no immediate indications of rib fractures and bilateral breath sounds are clear. His vitals are: pulse is 130, respirations are 28, BP is 130 over 86. He's also sustained abrasions and lacerations on his back and the second degree burns on his face are exposed. He does appear to be in a lot of pain, Rampart."

"10-4, 51. Start an IV with normal saline, redress the burns with sterile water and sterile bandages and transport immediately."

"10-4, Rampart."

I got the IV started, redressed his burns and we got him in the ambulance.

I heard Cap tell Chet to bring the Squad.

It was only then I'd realized I'd entirely forgotten about the pilot.

"Where is she? How is she?" I asked Cap.

"Don't worry about it. 110 took care of her. She should be at Rampart, by now. Go take care of your partner." And the ambulance doors closed in on us.

We raced to Rampart and I kept an eye on him, making sure he was breathing okay. I noticed he was listening to what I was doing, seeing it in his mind. He had a...weird look on his face. Figured he was working on trying to remember. But I looked at him a few times. There was something in his eyes I couldn't make out. Something...

I rubbed my neck and shoulder where he'd clawed into me, rolling my head to ease the knot he'd put in there. "Ouch!"

He reached up and took the O2 mask off.

"Hey, hey, now don't be doin' that, Roy. You know better'n that." He hates to be Mother Hen'd as much as I do. I figured if I put on my best tender Mother Hen routine, he'd listen so he'd stop gettin' fussed over and I could stop fussin' over him and do my job. I gently put the mask back on him. There it was again, that *weird* look on his face.

He laid his fingers over mine on the mask and took it off again. "Sorry," he whispered.

"What for?"

He slowly reached up and caressed the back of my neck, fingers lingering on my shoulder where he'd grabbed me.

"S'okay."

I leaned over him as I put the mask back on him. We just looked at each other.

And then it hit me. Without warning. A hundred-pound weight sank in my chest threatening to take me down with it and I felt tears hit my eyes. I turned away from him cause I had to fight tooth and nail to keep it from gettin' a hold of me.

... *'All I know is....'*

I felt his fingers touch me lightly on the back of my arm and I turned back to 'im.

"What's wrong?"

I forced a smile, probably for just as much my benefit as it was for his. "Nothin', partner. Now you just rest and let me do all the worryin'. Not that there's anything to worry about..."

He was lookin' sick, a little pale and his breathing was more rapid. He was clearly in a lot pain.

I leaned over him. "Head or ribs?"

He just nodded.

"Both?"

He nodded again, his face sweating from the pain he was in.

"Hey, we're almost there. Just hang on for me, alright? You're gonna be okay."

I grabbed his hand and felt something rush through me.

But I couldn't fathom for the life of me what it was...