

D. Lee Jackson  
5509 Saddleback Rd, Garland, TX 75043  
(972) 269-1555  
dleejackson@lbjackson.com

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## SERGEANT MARCOS'S RESCUE

by D. Lee Jackson

"This is 4206, need backup on a welfare check. Woman has barricaded herself and her son in a duplex and refuses to come out. Threatening to burn the house if I don't leave. Claims to be armed. 37, respond."

That call from the field started my weirdest afternoon.

My name is Sergeant Richard Marcos of the Houston Police Department. I was on patrol in the general area of officer 4206 when she made that call, so naturally I volunteered as backup.

"37, this is 3119, can back up 4206, over."

"Copy, 3119. Proceed code 1 to complex on the 5000 block of Noble Street and await further backup. Houston Fire Department units are also being requested at this time."

Fire units. Good thing. If that woman burned that house, she'd burn down the whole Fifth Ward. It's the most run-down part of Houston. The Fifth Ward has been ravaged by hurricanes, neglect, poverty, and crime, and it's a wonder any of it is still standing. What's left is a tinder box.

I arrived on the scene a few minutes later. The home was a dilapidated, single-story wooden duplex with peeling white paint, jammed into a group of other duplexes. All of the windows on one half of the duplex in question had been boarded up from the inside with plywood. Nearby, neighbors stood as spectators, apparently wondering what all the commotion was about.

Officer Patrice Johnson stood out front by her patrol unit, looking somewhat worse for the wear. "Just what I needed on a Sunday afternoon. The Texans are playing the Colts, and I've got money on Houston that should actually come through this year."

"Tell me who won later. I got the situation background on the way here, so right now, just give me a status report."

"Right. So, I show up at the front door and there's this woman with a VR helmet on her head. Real high-dollar one. I tell her that her father-in-law has asked for a welfare check on his grandson. She freezes for a second, then slams the door in my face and locks it. I hear a cocking noise from behind the door, followed by a lot of screaming: 'Get the fuck away! I'm armed! I'll burn the house to the ground before I let you take me alive!' That sort of thing, all the while yelling the name, 'Stephen.'"

"Her husband's name," I said. "Copy that."

Other officers began to arrive as Johnson gave me her report. I'd recorded a transcript on my brand-new qLink 3 computer, so I started sharing that with every officer who had a

compatible head-mounted system. I sent the ones still wearing the older basic qLink 2 or, God forbid, the original qLink series, over to Johnson for a voice update.

About the time that Fire units started showing up, my Captain arrived. Good. I was glad to let him handle the business of administration and delegation. Point me in the right direction and tell me what to do, and I'll make sure my officers get it done with me. That's how I work.

"Marcos," my Captain said, "I want you and Officer Johnson to work with a special guest on this case."

"Special guest? On a welfare check and barricade, sir? Who, sir?"

"A Tapper."

You could have knocked me over with the beam from my flashlight. "Pardon me saying so, sir, but what the hell?"

"This comes from higher up than me. Dr. Lukas Zilker personally offered the services of a Tapper to the HFD Chief. Told 'em they were having a 'slow day' at the Institute and that they could use the run to keep their rescue skills sharp. Besides, you know the situation. If this woman makes good on her threat, we're going to have a firestorm on our hands and a lot of people who'll need rescuing."

"Wh...what's the protocol, sir? Who takes the lead? Me or him?"

"You do," the Chief said, looking me in the eyes, "and it's a her. Name's Angela. She's finishing the Drilling procedure at a safe zone and will arrive with her Driller via a HeliPod in about ten minutes."

"So, I'm in charge?"

"You are, unless Angela sees something you can't. Then, you and Johnson get the hell out of her way."

For a split second, I was confused. "I'm sorry ... sees something we *can't*?"

"Use your head, Marcos. She's a *Tapper*. Extra senses, remember?"

"R ... Right, Captain." There went my pay raise. "Extra senses."

"And, they've got better computers than we do. So, yeah, you're in charge, but listen to what Angela tells you."

"Yes, sir."

"One more thing: at all times, *keep her safe*. The last thing we need is a Tapper going into a blowout. If you see her start to make a dash toward the duplex, one of you sit on her while the other takes her place. Let them talk you through, but no Tappers in burning buildings. Got it?"

"Got it, sir."

"Good. Now, go round up Johnson and brief her on the situation."

*Good Lord*, I thought as I hustled over to Johnson's cruiser. The last of the stragglers were finishing their briefings with her as I arrived. *A person who can go off like a bomb. How do you even work with someone like that?*

Johnson turned to me as I arrived. "What did the Captain have to say?"

I gave her my update.

"No shit!" she said, looking genuinely excited. "I've always wanted to meet one of them. They do some pretty fantastic rescue stuff. Remember that high-rise fire in downtown Chicago last year? They cleared out the upper floors just by manipulating gravity to lift everyone away from the building and down to the ground. Damned impressive."

"Yeah, well, it's not gonna be so damned impressive if our Tapper has a blowout and wipes out the whole Fifth Ward, now, will it? We've been ordered to literally sit on her if ..."

"Her?"

"Yeah, her. Angela. If she tries to do anything heroic like run into a burning building, we've been ordered to sit on her and take her place. You do the sitting in that case--I'll do the heroic running."

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Right as I said that, the distinctive drone of an eight-bladed, self-flying HeliPod approached from a distance. Its shrouded blades sent dust into the air as it landed a good distance from the incident scene. Even more neighbors emerged from their homes to look on as the craft's engines spooled down.

The hatch opened to reveal a short, young Asian woman, possibly of Japanese descent, wearing sweats and a warm-up jacket over a Polo shirt. As she left the HeliPod, her yellow Hard Hat with a "Zi" logo became visible. Beneath it, she wore a qLink 3 computer that wrapped around the back of her head and hung over both ears, but with a couple of additions: grey wires extended down and stuck to her neck, as if they were glued on.

Behind her came a 50-something Black male dressed in a labcoat and slacks. He had grey hair and a moustache and was tall enough that he had to stoop in order to exit the HeliPod. He carried a laptop-style computer console along with the same modified qLink 3 that the Asian woman wore.

I brought Officer Johnson along and met the pair half way. "Hello, I'm Sergeant Richard Marcos, HPD. This is Officer Patrice Johnson. She was the first to arrive on the scene and served the welfare check. I'll let her give you a transcript."

"No need, Sergeant," the Asian woman said. "I got a transcript en route. Thanks anyway, though." She extended a slim hand. "I'm Angela, and I'll be working with you today."

I looked at her hand like it was a bomb fuse.

She smiled widely, took my hand, and gave it a firm shake. "See?" she said. "Nothing to be worried about. Tappers aren't porcelain dolls, Sergeant. It takes a hell of a lot more than a handshake to make one of us go into a blowout."

"How ... how did you know?"

"Let you in on a little secret," the older man in the labcoat said. "Tappers--especially experienced ones like Angela--are good at reading auras. Yours probably told your life story." He held out his hand and shook mine and Officer Johnson's. "Dr. Wayne Milby. I'm Angela's Driller. Pleased to meet you."

Officer Johnson still stood transfixed by the sight of Angela. She barely shook Dr. Milby's hand.

Angela came closer to the officer. "Yes, I'm real. I'll shake your hand, but I can't give out any autographs, sorry." The contact of the handshake seemed to break her spell.

"Oh, God," Johnson said. "I can't believe I fangirled out like that just now. I promise it won't happen again. I'll be professional. Honestly."

*Christ, is this what I'm going to have to work with?* I thought. Here I was, worried to the point of being afraid to touch Angela, with Officer Johnson, starstruck to the extreme by her.

This assignment was going to work out just great.

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"So, Sergeant," Angela said, "Where do you want us to start?"

"Hang on a second." I took inventory of our forces. My qLink showed four officers, Johnson included, one Sergeant (me), and my Captain were on the scene. On the Fire Department side, one full house had arrived, complete with EMS (just in case). Two more were on the way, while three others were on standby.

"For now, we need to stay right here by Johnson's cruiser. We've got an officer on the back door, another on the front, and one more watching the side. My Captain is coordinating everything, so our best bet is to feed him information and let the others do the work."

Angela's eyebrows drooped in disappointment. "I was hoping I could get in on some of the action."

"Yeah, well, I've got specific orders from my Captain to keep you *out* of the action. Just so you'll know." Angela started to protest just as a fire truck arrived with lights on and siren wailing.

"Idiots!" my Captain shouted over the group comm link. "Code 1, damn it! Get those lights and siren off *now!* You want to spook that woman in the house?"

Right on cue, a shotgun blast tore a gaping hole through the plywood and glass of the window next to the front door, narrowly missing the officer on guard. All four of us hit the

ground and ducked beside Johnson's cruiser. One of the buckshot pellets hit her front fender like a hammer hitting an anvil. That was enough to keep us plastered down.

"Sergeant?" Angela asked. "While we're down here, do you think might wanna fill us in on any gaps that might be causing her to act this way? Might be a good time for it, now that she's shooting at us."

I sighed and brushed some gravel out of the way of my face. "You've got the basics. Sheryl Morgan. Lost her husband, Stephen--the guy whose name she was shouting--when he drowned saving his seven-year-old son, Travis, down at Galveston back in August. She and the now eight-year-old Travis pulled a disappearing act some time before school started at the end of August. Liquidated everything they had left and dropped off the radar."

"How the hell did she do that?" Dr. Milby asked. "Did she ditch her qLink and go off the net?"

"We don't know," Johnson said, "but she was a quantum programmer before she disappeared. If anyone knew how to escape the QuantumNet, it'd be her."

"Anyway," I continued, "come October 12th, we get a request for a welfare check from her father-in-law. Wants to know how her son is doing. Turns out she covered her tracks well enough for anyone who wasn't *actively* looking for her--like the school district, damn them--but not well enough for an active search."

More Officers arrived and set up positions away from the house for crowd control. Another fire company joined them, thankfully without lights and siren.

"I pulled the assignment to do the search and, later, serve the welfare check," Johnson said. "That leads us to where we are, face down on the concrete outside her front door."

"Hell of a story," Angela said. "What now?"

I thought for a few seconds. "Do you think you can keep your head out of the line of fire and use your 'special senses' to see what's going on inside that house?"

Angela laughed quietly. "Sergeant, my 'special senses' are only going to be good in this case if someone's affecting either the gravity or electromagnetic fields inside that house. However, I do have some portable thermal imaging available through my Zilker Institute Network qLink, as well as a few other computer tricks up my sleeve that might come in handy."

"Okay, then. Give me a location of where everyone is inside."

Angela nodded and slowly rose to a crouch. She peered over Johnson's cruiser and took in as much of the house as she could before kneeling back down with the rest of us.

"Hang on," I said. "Let me put this on the police network." I linked her in, introduced her, and let her rip.

"There are two people in the house. One is near the front door, moving frantically around the spot where the shot was fired. The other is in a bedroom next to the main room where the suspect is. Be warned: his heat signature is very low. He might be in very bad shape. It looks for all the world like he's tied to a steel bed or something."

My Captain came over the link. "What was the woman doing?"

"I don't know," Angela said. "Pouring something? I can't be sure."

"Shit," my Captain said, one of the few times I've heard him swear. "Get those stand-by fire units out here now. Angela, are you absolutely certain there was no one else in the house?"

"I'm sure of it."

"We're going in, then. She's dousing the house with something--getting ready to make good on her self-immolation threat. We can't let that happen. Officer Johnson?"

"Yes, Captain?"

"Have you got a battering ram in your trunk?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Give it to Sergeant Marcos and have him pass it to Officer Warren at the front door, quickly but quietly. Likewise, I want whoever's set up on the back door to do the same."

The Officer at the back door called in. "Captain, we've got a screen door to contend with. Looks like it could be a squeaky one. Might give us away."

"So, you know the drill, right? Get a can of spray lube and open it slowly, then check in when you're ready. Now, someone get Officer Richardson on the side another battering ram. I want you to stay in place, though - don't attempt a window entry unless the doors fail. Does anyone have any questions?"

No one called any in. Johnson was already handing her battering ram to me.

"Good," my Captain said. "Back door units, get started on that screen."

I waited for confirmation as I quietly walked the ram up to Officer Warren. The ram was a dual-handled sealed stovepipe type, so I remained at the door to help him use it--hoping all the while that Mrs. Morgan didn't decide to take another peek out the shotgun hole in her plywood.

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"Ready at the back door, Captain."

"All right, on my mark. Three ... two ... one ... *go!*"

Warren and I smashed the door open just in time to see a lit match fall to the floor.

Mrs. Morgan stood in the middle of her living room, wearing her VR helmet. She had a smile on her face. "It's okay, Stephen," she said as the flames rose around her and spread outward. "We'll always be together this way! Finally!"

"Warren! Get her out of here!" I shouted. "I'm going for the boy."

"NO!" Mrs. Morgan shouted, lifting her shotgun toward my voice. "He's not worth saving!" She fired a round, missing me and hitting the wall instead. More of the splashed fuel ignited, spreading flames toward the door of the boy's room.

I turned to look and saw that all three officers were converging on Mrs. Morgan, fighting through the flames to reach her. She still held her shotgun. I'd have to be careful if I were going to make it into her son's room without getting killed. I moved around the fire, swung the battering ram back, and threw it with all my might at the doorknob. The door burst wide open. At that same moment, I ducked to avoid Mrs. Morgan's aim. She got off one more round, lighting the fuel that had seeped into the bedroom entrance.

Warren and the other Officers finally converged on Mrs. Morgan, stripping her of her shotgun. They pulled her toward the back door, through the path of the least flames. Mrs. Morgan screamed bloody murder as they dragged her along.

While they took care of the crazy lady, I jumped through the burning entry and landed in a nightmare. The kid had been shackled to the iron bed against the far wall by his legs. Rusty chains held him fast. He'd obviously been trying to get out of them, because his legs were covered in fresh and dried blood. The rest of him wasn't any better: he sat in a pool of his own urine and feces. He was gaunt, pale, and nearly lifeless. I say "nearly" because my battering ram

had obviously caught his attention. He did his best to look me in the eyes and croaked one word:

"Help."

I nearly broke down and cried right there. Heat against my back brought me to my senses. I turned to see flames covering the floor and the wall behind me.

I dashed to the kid's side and went to work on his chains. They were tight as hell. I tried lifting the iron bed, but it was too heavy for one person. The flames rapidly grew closer.

We were going to die in there.

Suddenly, a massive rumble filled the room, accompanied by huge creaking and snapping sounds. Just as I was certain the ceiling was about to cave in on us, the outside wall opposite us flew away, leaving a gaping hole in the side of the duplex. Seconds later, my stomach felt queasy, as if I was falling. I grasped onto the bed as a reflex. Instead, I rose, as did the bed and the boy. We floated through the hole and headed toward the barren lawn next to Johnson's cruiser.

Once I looked up, I saw Angela standing in front of the cruiser, making arcane motions with her hands. As she did, the bed and the two of us came to a rest on the ground. I let go and immediately got onto the group voice link. "3119, I need a rescue unit stat and a team with something that can cut through heavy-duty chains. Be prepared to be careful with them--they're attached to an eight-year-old boy." Two EMS personnel came running my way almost instantly.

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With that, I finally had a chance to take a deep breath, look Angela's way, and give her a perplexed smile. "I assume you and Dr. Milby had something to do with that?"

"Something to do with it?" Officer Johnson exclaimed. "You wouldn't have believed it if you'd seen it! She ripped a hole out of the side of the house and pulled you and the kid outside! It was incredible!"

Angela smiled shyly. "Just good timing, that's all"

"How did you do that?" I asked.

"Force of gravity. Bumped it up to rip the wall open, and blocked its lines to float you guys out. I'm still keeping an eye on things to make sure the side wall isn't going to collapse, so please excuse me if I seem a bit distracted."

At that point, Officer Warren brought around Mrs. Morgan to his cruiser, handcuffed and without her VR helmet. He had help from the other two Officers, since she was thrashing and screaming at the top of her lungs. "NO! MY HUSBAND! STEPHEN! NOOOO!"

The boy stirred at the sound of his mother screaming. He blinked, smiled, and passed out again.

I studied him and tried to imagine what he'd been through. I couldn't do it.

The woman's half of the duplex was now engulfed in flames. Fire units worked like mad to keep it under control. As they did, I turned back to Angela.

"I want to apologize for the way I acted when we first met. I gotta admit, I'm still a little nervous working around Tappers, but I think I can trust them with my life now." Not just me--the whole Fifth Ward was able to trust her today.

Angela smiled a wide smile and extended her hand.

I took it and gave it a firm handshake.