



Season 2
Episode 1 Transcript
12 Hours Trapped in Quicksand

Torah Kachur:

Not every couple would consider a winter hike through rugged terrain in a remote corner of a national park to be romantic.

But Ryan Osmun and Jessika McNeill aren't your average couple - and that is exactly how they decided to spend Valentine's Day.

They've been hiking for five hours... They're at the bottom of a canyon... steep cliff-walls rising on either side. And they're crossing the freezing waters of a raging stream.

Ryan Osmun:

She fell hands, face first... I was able to put my hand under her chest, and under her waist, and then lift her up.

Torah Kachur:

He's saved Jessika, but doomed himself.

Ryan Osmun:

As I was lifting her up is when I could feel my right leg sinking pretty fast all the way down. And that's, it was pretty quick. My right leg sank past my thigh.

Torah Kachur:

He tries to pull it straight up. Then, he tries spinning in the spot. All his efforts just make him sink deeper.

Ryan Osmun:

Quicksand had never crossed my mind at all.

Torah Kachur:

But that's exactly what it is. A patch of quicksand in the middle of an icy river.

Overhead, the gray sky grows darker.

I'm Torah Kachur - and this is "Tell Me What Happened - True stories of "people helping people" - an original podcast by OnStar.

Every day when you wake up... you don't know if you will be a person who

needs help ... or if you will be a person that helps someone else. It's important to remember, that it's in all of us to be either one of those things, every day.

It's seven a.m., and Zion National Park in Utah is gorgeous. There's two inches of fresh snow on the ground and the air is cold, but the sun is bright.

Ryan Osmun:

I like to hike in the wintertime because you almost have the place to yourself most of the time.

Torah Kachur:

Ryan and Jessika park their car in the trailhead parking lot. They're alone in the wilderness... and with big plans.

Ryan Osmun:

I love hiking. I started hiking... 10 years ago and it was just, it intrigued me to see these places that not a lot of people get to see in person.

Torah Kachur:

Today they are going to take on something called "the Subway trail."

Ryan Osmun:

I had always wanted to do the Subway Hike, but you have to have a permit in order to hike it.

Torah Kachur:

Getting it, required being interviewed by a park ranger.

Ryan Osmun:

Just because of it being more dangerous and nobody was out there... I'd convinced him that I kind of knew what I was doing. I'd hiked the Grand Canyon before alone, in the winter time... So he ended up giving us the permit.

Torah Kachur:

They pull on their neoprene socks, and lash their crampons to their backpacks. They've got food and water and a first aid kit.

Jessika smiles at Ryan and says "Happy Valentine's Day." They kiss... and start walking.

Ryan Osmun:

The sun was out... we were actually sweating... It wasn't as cold in the morning.

Torah Kachur:

They've got a simple plan... It should be five hours in, and five hours out. That will get them back to their car before it gets dark.

Ryan Osmun:

It's probably a half-a-mile descent down into the canyon.... and it's just, it's real, real slippery... that's when we put the crampons on.

Torah Kachur:

Crampons are metal spikes you attach to your boots. They are pretty standard for winter hiking.

Down into the canyon they go.

Ryan Osmun:

You could really only see white, snow, and water, and the canyon walls.

Torah Kachur:

This is the kind of beauty few people ever see... It's magical... Exactly what Ryan and Jessika are looking for.

They're crossing a stream of rushing water... stepping on ice covered rocks when Jessika's foot slides off... and down she goes.

Ryan Osmun:

She fell hands, face first and her hands and knees.

Torah Kachur:

It's unpleasant, but nothing serious.

Ryan Osmun:

But I was able to lift her up and then she could walk enough through the water to get to the side.

Torah Kachur:

Then Ryan realizes he's in trouble.

Ryan Osmun:

I could feel my right leg sinking pretty fast all the way down. And that's, it was pretty quick. My right leg sank past my thigh, fast,

Torah Kachur:

He lifts his left foot... searching for solid ground... something to push off of... but there's nothing he can step on.

Ryan Osmun:

I couldn't move it... I couldn't move my foot at all on my ankle because it was so tight down there. It was basically, it was like it was just dry concrete.

Torah Kachur:

Jessika wades back into the river... it's two feet deep, so above her knees... She braces herself... grabs Ryan's arm with both hands and pulls.

Nothing.

Ryan Osmun:

She just put her hands down in the water and started moving, trying to move the sand away. And I was trying to shovel it away, but literally, the second you would shove it away... sand... it would refill all the way back up to my, very top of my thigh.

Torah Kachur:

The stream is, quite literally, ice cold. Only the fact that it's moving so rapidly keeps it from freezing. They dig at the river bottom with bare hands.

Ryan Osmun:

Your skin touches the water and within 10 to 15 seconds it's bright red... I couldn't feel my leg after five minutes, it was completely numb to the cold.

Torah Kachur:

For thirty minutes they pull and dig. Until they're forced to accept an unbelievable truth. Ryan is trapped in quicksand.

Ryan Osmun:

I was screwed. I didn't know, I didn't know how I was going to get out of there.

Torah Kachur:

They are miles away from having a signal on their phones. Hands numb, teeth chattering, lips turning blue... they reach a desperate conclusion. Jessika will have to hike back the way they came in search of people who can help.

Ryan Osmun:

I knew it would be really difficult for her to hike back all the way by herself... She wasn't as an experienced hiker as I was. So, it was scary to ask her to go back all the way by herself.

Torah Kachur:

Jessika, standing in the river. Gives Ryan a kiss. The second of the day, but very different than the first. Then she heads back down the trail. Her crampons clinking on the snow-covered rocks as she disappears around a bend in the canyon.

Ryan, waits.

Ryan Osmun:

I had figured a minimum of five hours at least, because that's how long it took both of us. So I was giving her about six hours of estimation time to, before I would hear a helicopter.

Torah Kachur:

It's the middle of the afternoon... but the sun has already disappeared behind the high walls of the canyon... the valley is shrouded in twilight.

All of Ryan's effort is focused on one crucial task - staying alive. He knows if he passes out from the cold, he could slip below the water and drown.

It's a cold like he's never felt before.

Ryan Osmun:

About 30 minutes after she left, it actually started pouring snow... that's when it got kind of scary... it was so cold already and... the snow was really coming down.

Torah Kachur:

Hours pass... twilight becomes darkness. Ryan's estimate of six hours expires. Still no helicopter... no hikers appearing on the trail.

Ryan Osmun:

I basically didn't think that she had made it. And I figured that... it would've been at least a full day before anyone found out that they couldn't reach me. I knew I didn't have that long.

Torah Kachur:

This is 'Tell Me What Happened' a podcast created by OnStar to showcase how important a human connection is when you need help.... Whether you are lost on a backcountry road... or standing in a frozen river, thigh deep in quicksand.

Standing in that icy river... his leg encased in the river bottom.... And all the world around him pitch black darkness... Ryan is losing body heat and hope.

But miles away Tim Knaus, a veteran park ranger is having a remarkably average day. But keep in mind, Tim's average day is still pretty unpredictable.

Tim Knaus:

Things get thrown at you left and right. Things come out of left field. Really strange calls can happen at any moment... which is part of the reason I love it.

Torah Kachur:

Tim performs between 40 and 50 rescues a year. But even with 200 missions

under his belt, he knew right away this one was different.

Tim Knaus:

We had a broken cell phone call from the trailhead to our dispatch... she was saying about her boyfriend was stuck in quicksand somewhere in the subway route in Zion.

Torah Kachur:

The call was from Jessika. After hiking six hours, getting lost in the dark, then finding her way again... she finally got close enough to the trailhead to get a cell signal.

Her teeth are chattering so much she can hardly talk.

But even in that jumbled message one word stands out: Quicksand.

It's not something Tim, or anyone at the park has to deal with very often.

Tim Knaus:

I've heard of quicksand quite a bit in Glen Canyon and some of the other areas in Southern Utah... if you do have quick sand in Zion, it's generally about an ankle deep, so it's hard to get stuck in.

Torah Kachur:

But the panic in the young woman's voice tells him this is serious.

Tim Knaus:

With the water being probably 40 degrees and the air temperature being 35 to 40. It's a perfect recipe for hypothermia.

Torah Kachur:

Before he can get any more details... the signal breaks up. Jessika's voice is gone. Now Tim's got two people freezing in the wilderness... And he doesn't know where either of them are.

Tim Knaus:

My dispatcher again, spectacular dispatcher, she was able to ping the cell phone, which put that phone call being not too far from the road.

Torah Kachur:

The rangers form a two-prong rescue. Tim and two others are the first response team, going first and moving quickly. A second team will follow bringing more equipment and support.

Tim Knaus:

Based on the GPS points of her phone and we were able to locate her pretty quickly... I took her back into my vehicle and we put her in my vehicle in a

warm area.

Torah Kachur:

But Jessika can't give specifics about where Ryan is. I mean they were on a trail... in a canyon, crossing a river.... That describes hundreds of spots in the park.

Then, she has an epiphany. She pulls out her phone and shows Tim the last photo she took. It's a beautiful scene, the sun glinting off the snow and a winding trail leading into a rugged canyon. It was just a few hours ago, but Jessika looks at it as if it was taken in a different lifetime.

Tim recognizes the location immediately. He gears up and starts hiking.

Tim Knaus:

I knew that I had to go quickly in there. And kind of my strength, I'm a very strong, fast hiker, so that's part of the reason I end up usually on the hasty team... I was moving pretty swiftly.

Torah Kachur:

The rapid response team is just three people... and one of them has to stay in the vehicle at the trail head with Jessika.

The second member... pushing hard in the darkness... slips on a rock while crossing a stream. She twists her ankle. It's not bad, but it means she can't go on... but Tim decides to push on alone.

An hour goes by, then two. Tim is moving steadily - quickly but safely... his crampons rattling on the rocks. All the while he knows... that it's quite likely the person he is rushing to save is already dead.

Tim Knaus:

Which was not great to think about, but when you're a responder, sometimes you have to get yourself mentally prepared for something like that.

Torah Kachur:

Ryan has spent ten hours trapped in a frozen river. He has no feeling in his leg. A layer of ice covers all of his clothes. Stranded in the darkness, wondering how long he has left.

Ryan Osmun:

I had seen what seemed to be like a light pass over... So I had pulled my head up. I could see that there was an actual light moving back and forth. And that's when I started, I just started yelling for help.

Tim Knaus:

I saw him look up at me... And I thought, "Man, this is really good. He's conscious, he's alert, he's breathing".

Torah Kachur:

Ryan's first question is about his girlfriend Jessika... the woman that hiked into the darkness in search of help.

Ryan Osmun:

When he told me that she was okay, I was... relieved.

Torah Kachur:

Tim sets up a flashlight then wades into the river and starts digging the sand away from Ryan's leg.

Tim Knaus:

I had a dry suit, I didn't have any... like neoprene gloves or anything like that... I would dig for about half a minute... And then once I lost feeling in my hands, I couldn't really do anything because I couldn't tell what I was doing. So I'd bring my hands back out, we'd warm them up... then I would start digging again.

Torah Kachur:

But as before - when Jessika tried the same thing - every bit of sand he removes is immediately replaced. One person digging with bare hands is not going to work. He needs the second team... they have more people and more gear. For now, all he can do is try to keep Ryan alive.

Tim Knaus:

I said, "You're going to grab onto my shoulder. If you feel like you're going to pass out, I'm going to hold you above the water until we get more people up here to help out".

Ryan Osmun:

He didn't seem to be worried about anything at all, which made me feel a lot better... just talking to him, just being around him.

Torah Kachur:

The second team assembled and departed about an hour after Tim... but thanks to a locator beacon Tim carries, they now have exact information about where they are going. And when they arrive, they have to move quickly.

Ryan Osmun:

There were two guys under my shoulders, and then Tim was behind me digging.

Tim Knaus:

We tried to just kind of give him shoulders and pull him up.

Ryan Osmun:

And then there was a girl who had, basically a ratchet pulley system that she had strapped around a big boulder. And then we had strapped it around my knee.

Tim said... it'll basically rip your leg off if we want it to. And I was like, "Yeah, I don't care what happens at this point, just keep going until it comes out." And so she'd started ratcheting it...

Torah Kachur:

Ryan feels his body pulled upwards. But his leg stays locked in place.

Ryan Osmun:

I was screaming in pain, but I was able to tell her to keep going.

Torah Kachur:

The pulley system is cranked a second time. Ryan screams louder. The ranger on shore methodically cranks the ratchet.

Tim turns his attention to removing Ryan's boot.

Tim Knaus:

We noticed it was moving... millimeters at a time.... I was able to slip both of my hands, two fingers each, into the boot, toward the heel. And I just started wiggling and pulling up at the same time and I felt it start to move.

Ryan Osmun:

I felt my ankle pop up. And then I felt my whole leg kind of move... My whole leg came out.

Tim Knaus:

I was just wiggling and pulling at the same time and we finally got it yanked out... it was a huge relief right at first, for about the first 30 seconds.

Torah Kachur:

Ryan is free of the river... but not out of danger.

Tim Knaus:

Now we have a patient.... Now we have to warm him up. Now we have to assess his foot and... and see if he did not have feeling in his foot, if... he did not have a pulse in his foot from what we could find.

Torah Kachur:

Ryan's wrapped in heating pads, put in a sleeping bag, and given an IV. In fifteen minutes, his body temperature is back to normal. But his leg is still frozen.

Ryan Osmun:

I had asked them not to tell me anything about what my leg looked like, because I didn't want to look at it... Just assuming being stuck for almost 11, 12 hours that it would be pretty destroyed.

Torah Kachur:

Meanwhile the weather is getting worse... The snow is falling heavily ... too heavy to bring in a helicopter. And it's too dark to try and carry Ryan out on a stretcher. The team decides the safest thing is to hunker down and spend the night where they are.

Ryan Osmun:

I felt bad for them because it was snowing so bad... All they had was a sleeping bag. And some tarp to that over trees, and we started a fire. Honestly, I was so tired. I fell asleep within 10 to 15 minutes after everything was set up.

Torah Kachur:

When Ryan wakes up... it's daylight ... but what gives him hope... is what he hears.

Ryan Osmun:

It was pretty crazy to hear the helicopter... It was hard to believe that I had made it

Tim Knaus:

They've got a winch in the helicopter and they lowered one responder down and they were able to just pick up Ryan and hoist him out.

Ryan Osmun:

I still didn't know about my leg. I still hadn't looked at it or anything. But I did, I felt safe and I felt like everything would pretty much be okay.

Torah Kachur:

And it was. Ryan made it to the hospital in time to save his life and his leg.

No less than five minutes after he arrived in a wheelchair, Jessika entered his room safe and sound, after her gruelling hike to raise the alarm the night before.

Tim Knaus:

I have no doubt in my mind, if we didn't show up that night, he would not be alive.

There's a saying in rescue and fire, "Risk a little for a little and a lot for a lot". And I knew that the risk was very high to Ryan, so I took a risk and I think it worked out.

Ryan Osmun:

I was just really grateful that there's people out there that'll put their life on the line to rescue yours.

Torah Kachur:

Quicksand isn't just a problem in Utah. In fact I found a rescue expert in the UK - Faz Ali, of the Bay Search and Rescue unit. His team practically wrote the book on quicksand rescue - and I asked him to share his best story.

Faz Ali:

The most interesting and the closest we've ever got to a near death was not actually a human. It was a cow. And we got called there quite late by the Fire Service. We got there in our tracked vehicle. It's got a cargo back on it and a large crane. The tide was coming in. And we brought down the crane. Backed it up to it. Managed to get a harness underneath it while the tide was coming in and lapping around everyone's feet. The tide comes in very quickly where we live in Morecambe Bay. And we only just got it out in time. Its face was literally in the water as I lifted it up with the crane. And we moved it out. And the cow survived.

Torah Kachur:

This show is produced by OnStar and they are focused on keeping you safe, so before I wrap it up I want to get a few safety tips from Faz... starting with "how to get yourself out?"

Faz Ali:

In terms of how you do extract yourself from the quicksand. The best thing to do is get rid of any excess weight. If you've got a rucksack on, take your rucksack off because that's only going to add extra weight. If there's anything you can put under your bottom so you can sit down onto it to distribute your weight. Because it's all about weight distribution. So if there's a plank or a log or anything that your companions can throw you or that you can reach, put that under yourself and distribute your weight because that's going to make you go down slower.

Once you do get yourself into a comfortable position, you've got to make sure that you don't damage yourself. So you can actually damage your joints if you try getting too aggressive. If you get a very healthy person who thinks they're

just going to pull themselves straight out of it. That's not going to happen. They need to make a gap. So if you get both hands around your knee. Start with one leg. Push it forwards, push it back, and start rocking it backwards forwards to make a bit of an air pocket. And then start going left and right. And start rolling your body a bit over to the left, a bit over to the right. And eventually you will start freeing up and wiggle your foot. You'll eventually make enough room to get your leg out, hopefully. And once you've got one leg out and fully extracted, put it to the side and lay it flat so it doesn't start going down again. And then you can move over to your next one.

Torah Kachur:

Do you see any injuries that happen from people trying to extract themselves? And if you do, what are the most common injuries?

Faz Ali:

If you were going to injure yourself, I'd imagine it would be most likely a dislocation. It'd be for moving your legs too far. Some sort of sprain or dislocation. Most people do wait for us, though. It's normally our own team members we're trying to calm down while they're trying to extract themselves, because they just get a little bit over keen.

Torah Kachur:

So now what are the best strategies to help someone out? Your friend gets stuck in quicksand. They're sinking decently fast, but they can't get themselves out and they're starting to move too quickly. So what's your advice?

Faz Ali:

I'd certainly advise them to slow down. I would... If it looks like they're going to be stuck and especially if there's any incoming water, I'd certainly advise ringing the emergency services in your country to ask for help. And you can start on the extraction process. I'm sure they won't mind turning up. And I'm sure they'll be very happy if you've got yourself out before they get there. I know we certainly would be.

I would look around to see if there's anything. A plank or board. Anything flat. A log. Anything that we can use. Surfboard, if you're down at the beach. Something nice and big that's going to distribute the weight well.

Now depending on what type of footwear you've got on, you might also be able to slip your foot out. People when they go walking around the coastal area, certainly in the UK, they normally wear Wellington boots. And if you've got a Wellington boot that goes into the quicksand, you can quite often just get your whole leg out. Because it's almost like a glove. You'll end up leaving a Wellington behind, and you'll be walking on with one Wellington. But I'd rather be doing that than being sat stuck in the quicksand.

Torah Kachur:

Now most areas where they have quicksand are generally marked, but what are the kinds of things that... Besides... By the time you look at it. By the time you walk on it, it starts to wiggle a little bit. What are other warning signs there might be quicksand nearby?

Faz Ali:

It is quite difficult to spot, which is part of the reason why so many people end up on it.

We look for areas of water. So at the river mouth. Wherever there's water and you can see it tracking through, snaking through. If it looked damp, there's a good chance that bit's going to have quicksand in.

And also people might not necessarily just be on foot as well. You get a lot of people going out on these motorbikes, quad bikes, all these all-terrain vehicles. And they get stuck as well. And the vehicles that they take out there to go and do that, the 4x4s, they get stuck as well.

Torah Kachur:

Wow. Wow. So, okay. What if you're driving and all of a sudden you hit quicksand. Just keep going?

Faz Ali:

Reverse. If we ever drive into anything and we don't like the look of it, we reverse out very carefully. I think the problem you might find if you're in something such as a 4x4 type truck. You might find that you've already gone in too far to the point where you can't get out. And that's the point when you need recovery.

Torah Kachur:

Faz, I really appreciate your expertise on this. Thank you so much.

Faz Ali:

Thank you very much.

Torah Kachur:

That's it for this episode of OnStar's 'Tell Me What Happened - true stories of people helping people.'

If you'd like to read more stories like this one, or if you want more information about how to identify quicksand and other wilderness dangers... there's a link in the show notes to take you to our website.

Or you can go straight to OnStar.com and tell us your favourite story about

a time that a stranger helped you. Let's share some love for people who help others, in big ways and small.

On behalf of OnStar... I'm Torah Kachur -- and please... "Be safe out there."

Find more episodes of *Tell Me What Happened* at [OnStar.com/podcast](https://www.onstar.com/podcast)