"Semi Conscious"

by Ross

Summary

Johnny and Roy prove that it pays to be conscious of your surroundings. *wink wink*

"LA, Squad 51 available. Returning to quarters," firefighter paramedic, John Gage, wearily informed central dispatch.

"10-4, Squad 51…" the dispatcher blurted back, via their rescue squad’s dash-mounted radio.

Gage replaced the mic’ and ran the fingers of his right hand back through his sweat-drenched, wind-whipped hair. "Wonder what Marco fixed for lunch?"

"Does it matter?" his partner, Roy DeSoto, pondered in return.

The pair had been going nonstop since the start of their shift, at 08:00 hours. It was now rapidly approaching 15:00 hours.

"Nahhh. Guess not," his famished friend was forced to concede, over the low rumbling in his empty tummy.
DeSoto hit their rescue truck's right turn signal and moved into the freeway's next EXIT lane.

Gage's sweaty head swung in the driver's direction. "You gonna take Highland?"

"Yeah. I know it's a little longer. But there'll be less traffic. So, we should make better time," his equally famished friend explained and gave his complaining stomach a couple of comforting pats.

The rescue squad pulled onto Highland and the pair traveled along the divided highway in relative silence.

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'Roy sure was right about there bein' less traffic,' John silently realized, six miles later, and gave an oncoming semi-tractor-trailer a disinterested glance. His right eyebrow suddenly raised in thought, as something about the vehicle struck him as odd. It took a few seconds for it to finally dawn on him what it was. "Get into the eastbound lanes!" he anxiously requested and started reaching for their radio's mic'.

DeSoto immediately slowed up and then unquestioningly obeyed—turning onto the very next EMERGENCY VEHICLES ONLY cut across.

"LA, Squad 51. Standby for a possible still alarm," Gage informed the dispatcher, as they began heading back in the direction they'd just come from.

"10-4, Squad 51…"

"Pull alongside a' that Peterbilt," John further requested of his puzzled, but compliant, partner, and pointed at the back of the big rig that was now just ahead of them and one lane over. "When it went by, I didn't see anybody sittin' behind the wheel," he solemnly explained.

DeSoto's eyes about doubled in size. "Somebody has to be driving, or it would have left the road by now. Maybe they just bent down to get something," he further postulated.

"May-be," Gage agreed, sounding hopeful. "Pull up alongside, and we'll find out soon enough."

DeSoto obediently depressed their rescue truck's gas pedal until they were traveling side-by-side with the bright red semi, which was doing about 45.

The firemen's worst fears were confirmed, as only one head was currently visible in the open driver's side window of the big rig's sleeper cab. It belonged to a teenaged boy—who was seated in the Peterbilt's passenger seat! Both of the panic-stricken lad's white-knuckled fists were gripping the runaway semi's steering wheel, in a desperate attempt to keep it traveling in a steady—and straight—path. The kid got his first glimpse of the firemen and immediately began screaming for help.

The ends of two rubber high-pressure hoses were dangling from the tractor's undercarriage: one red and one blue.

Speaking of the firemen…

Gage and DeSoto exchanged a pair of very grave glances.

Both of the big rig's air brake lines had been severed, somehow, and were currently whipping in the wind.

Roy re-donned his helmet and then reached out to flick their lights and siren on.
His partner depressed their mic's send button. "LA, Squad 51 responding to a still alarm in the eastbound lanes of Highland Highway, approximately six miles from the Pamona Freeway. There is a driver-less semi-tractor-trailer—with no brakes—approaching the Pamona Freeway onramp. Request an ambulance at our location. Also, contact CHP and have them stop all traffic on the Pamona Freeway near the Highland Highway entrance. My partner and I will attempt to… intervene."

"10-4, Squad 51. Ambulance is responding…CHP will be notified to stop traffic near the Highland Highway entrance to the Pamona Freeway…Time out: 15:08."

John replaced the radio mic', re-donned his helmet and released his seatbelt.

Roy held his right arm across his partner's chest and prevented him from leaving his seat. "What—exactly—did you mean by 'intervene'?" he nervously inquired.

"The driver is obviously incapacitated. His foot is probably pressing on the accelerator. One of us has got to get into that truck cab," Johnny irrationally rationalized.

"No. One of us does not have to get into that truck cab," Roy—the voice of reason—calmly contradicted. "One of us wants to get into that truck cab."

"It's not that I want to get in there," John assured his upset associate. "It's just that I want to respond to a 'twenty-car freeway pile-up' even less."

Roy watched the highway's six-mile marker go by. They were rapidly running out of time.

"Okay. Say you make it into the cab—without killing yourself. What do you know about semi's?"

"I know a lot about semi's. For instance, I know that that is a 13-speed '77 Peterbilt 359 EXHD sleeper, with a Cummins 450hp diesel, Jacobs Engine Brake, 370 ratio, tandem axle and air ride suspension."

DeSoto shot his knowledgeable associate a strange stare. His friend never ceased to amaze him.

"Okay. Then, how do you intend to stop 80,000lbs of runaway semi in less than six miles?"

"I'll open all 18 valves on the Jake Brake and just keep downshifting. If that fails, we'll open the doors and jump."

Roy exhaled an audible sigh of resignation. "Be careful! Will yah?"

"Always," Johnny assured him. "I'm gonna get out on the running board. You pull as close as you can and I'll 'transfer' onto their running board."

Roy cringed at the details of his partner's proposed plan of action, but then managed a reluctant nod—er, an extremely reluctant nod.

His fearless friend stood and stuck the upper half of his torso out of their moving truck's open passenger's window. John then turned around and began pulling the rest of his body out of the Squad's window, as well.

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Several miles away, in an office at LA County Fire Station 51…
Captain Hank Stanley had been only half-listening to the radio chatter coming from the wall speaker out in the garage. That is, until he overheard the conversation between his paramedics and headquarters. The fire officer had found Gage's little announcement, that the two of them were planning to 'intervene' with 40 tons of runaway tractor-trailer, especially disconcerting.

"Hey, Cap?! Guys?!" Chet Kelly suddenly called out into the garage. "Can yous step in here a second?! There's somethin' on the TV that I think yous should see!"

Hank got stiffly to his feet and started heading for their station's rec' room.

"KXLA just interrupted the ballgame with a special live report from their traffic chopper," Kelly informed his Captain and crewmates as they stepped into the rec' room, and directed their attention to the scene on their TV's screen.

Stanley stared in disbelief, as the hovering helicopter's cameraman zoomed in on the LA County Fire Department Rescue Squad that was traveling alongside of the runaway semi-tractor-trailer.

One of the Squad's occupants began climbing out of the moving vehicle's passenger window—without a lifebelt or lifelines.

The Captain cursed beneath his breath and covered his eyes with his right hand.

"What is he doing?!” Mike Stoker alarmedly inquired.

Stanley gazed out at the television screen from between two splayed fingers and watched—in horror—as John Gage suddenly latched onto a mirror brace and then jumped, from one moving truck to the other.

The fearless fireman's shiftmates emitted a group 'gasp' and their racing hearts skipped a few beats.

"Good lord!" the daring paramedic's Captain exclaimed...among other things.

The tractor-trailer's terrified, temporary driver was so preoccupied with the attempt that was being made to rescue him, he failed to keep his eyes on the road.

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Speaking of eyes...

DeSoto's already wide eyes got even bigger. A colorful expletive escaped from the paramedic's tightly pursed lips, as the big rig they were traveling beside suddenly left its perfectly straight path and came careening towards him—er, them. "Johnny! Look out!" he warned.

But his shouted warning came a couple of seconds too late.

Johnny had already begun his 'transfer'.

Roy watched in disbelief—and anguish—as the swerving semi slammed into his leaping partner. He hit the Squad's brakes and then the shoulder of the highway. "Hang on, Johnny! Hang on!" the fireman fervently urged—er, prayed, and promptly pulled back onto the pavement.

An "Ooof!" had escaped from the leaper's lips as the big rig suddenly collided with his already in-forward-motion self—knocking all the 'wind' right out of him. The breathless fireman's sweaty face filled with a grimace and his mouth immediately formed a silent 'Dammit!'

The rescuer's shiftmates saw the semi swerve, just as John jumped, and winced in unison.
"Oooh. That looked like it hurt," a deeply concerned Chet Kelly quickly determined. "C'mon, babe! You can't let a little 'collision with a semi' stop you!"

"Oh! Gawd! I'm sorry! I am so-o sorry!" the swerving big rig's young passenger assured his rammed rescuer and forced his straying eyes to return to the roadway.

John felt the running board beneath the soles of his boots and promptly braced his feet. The fingers of his right hand had somehow managed to lock onto the semi's doorframe. His left hand was still clutching the chrome-plated mirror brace. 'Ah, shit…' he silently said, as his oxygen-deprived brain began to 'shut down' and his vision began to 'tunnel out' on him. He could feel his grip starting to slip.

51's engine crew saw their shiftmate's knees beginning to buckle and exchanged anxious glances. The group emitted another unified 'gasp'—of abject horror—as their friend's right hand suddenly let go of the runaway truck's doorframe.

The crew continued watching, as Johnny's right arm dropped limply to his side and his bruised body swung out and away from the driver's door he'd been hugging. Fortunately, the fingers on the now semi-conscious fireman's left hand remained firmly attached to the chrome mounting brace on the big rig's back up mirror.

"Ah! Shee-eesh! Hang on, pal! Hang on! That's an order!" their Captain proclaimed, just prior to covering his wincing eyes back up. He'd be damned if he was going to watch his young friend fall to his death.

Seeing that the petrified kid had put the runaway big rig back on a straight path, DeSoto pulled up alongside of it once again, being careful to keep far enough away, to avoid running over his friend—should he happen to…fall off.

Seeing that his cyanotic partner appeared to be just about ready to ‘pass out’, Roy realized Johnny's diaphragm must still be 'in spasm'. His friend wouldn't be able to resume breathing until the spasm stopped. The equally petrified paramedic cursed aloud and began encouraging—er, ordering his breathless buddy to remain conscious.

John was just about to 'black out' completely, when he heard his friend calling to him—screaming at him, actually. The semi-conscious paramedic couldn't be certain of what his partner was saying, but the fireman figured it had to be pretty dang important. In fact, if the volume of Roy's raised voice was any indication, the message had to be downright urgent. 'Something about staying with him…' he dazedly realized. His buddy also expected him to 'hang on'.

Just as DeSoto had done, Gage unquestioningly obeyed, and fought off the black veil of unconsciousness that kept threatening to envelop him.

At long last, the fireman's 'in spasm' diaphragm relaxed and his lungs resumed functioning. The agony of that first 'gasped' breath caused Gage to grimace again and cry out in pain. “Ahhh-uh!” He had to fight the urge to grab his damaged midsection.

Within seconds of inhaling the oxygen, the paramedic's color grew to a lighter shade of blue and the thoughts racing through his reeling brain became much more organized. 'The semi. You gotta stop
the semi—before it reaches the freeway.' The rescuer gave his woozy head a couple of quick shakes. Then he swung himself back around, reached through the open driver's side window and latched back onto the truck's doorframe.

As a seemingly rejuvenated John Gage appeared up on their TV's screen, a joyous cry went out from Station 51's rec' room, that could have been heard from blocks away.

"Atta boy, Roy!" their Captain applauded. Hank had no doubts—whatsoever—that it was DeSoto's encouragement that had managed to keep Gage going.

John peered into the semi's cab.

The truck's 300+ pounds driver was slumped over sideways in his seat. The middle-aged man's non-moving head and right shoulder were resting on his young passenger's lap.

The paramedic didn't need to check the poor guy's pulse to determine if he was still alive, or not.

The driver had a definite 'death-like' appearance.

John looked up and locked gazes with the runaway rig's petrified 'co-pilot'. "Is this man…related to you?"

"No. His name's Bruce. I don't know his last name. I was just hitchin' a ride. He said he could take me as far as San Francisco. I'm sorry I slammed into you!" the terrified teen told him, sounding on the verge of tears.

"Look, don't worry about it," his rescuer warmly replied, speaking over the rush of the wind and the constant roar of the diesel engine's 450 horses. "Just keep your eyes on the road." That said, the forgiving fireman got a couple of fresh handholds and began hoisting his bruised body up and in through the semi's open side window—feet first.

John stood on the floor of the cab and then bent down, to peer through the truck's open window once again. "All right now, I'm gonna take the wheel. Once I have the wheel, I'm gonna need you to unbuckle the driver's seatbelt for me. Okay?"

The kid nodded.

"Great! Then I want you to climb back into the sleeper compartment, so I can move this man out of the way."

The boy gave his rescuer another 'ready, willing and able' nod.

Gage flashed the boy back a reassuring smile—and then grabbed the wheel.

Once he had his left hand firmly planted on the steering wheel, Station 51's 'Main Squeeze' promptly proceeded to wriggle the rest of his torso into the truck's exceedingly cramped for space cab, as well.

As soon as he was 'all there', John chanced a quick glance away from his upside-down view of the road. 'Sheesh!'  

The semi's dash was solid rosewood and its instrument panel contained almost as many gauges, knobs, dials, switches and levers as a jet airliner!
The rescuer's roving eyes quickly located the Jacobs Engine Brake. He used the fingers of his free right hand to flip its control switch from **OFF** to **HIGH**.

Once the Jake Brake was fully engaged, John blindly reached down and lifted the trucker's booted foot off of the accelerator.

The truck's engine immediately began to decelerate.

The Jake Brake's distinctive 'Ba-derrrrrr…ba-derrrrrr…ba-derrrrrrr' resounded inside the cab, as each of the eighteen valves it controlled were opened, releasing all of their compressed-air energy out into the engine's chrome exhaust pipes, instead of its driving pistons.

Unfortunately, the big rig's forward momentum remained pretty much the same.

The fireman frowned down at the speedometer.

Inertial energy was still propelling all 40tons of the runaway tractor-trailer forward—at close to 40mph.

Gage groaned inwardly and his frown deepened.

'Plan B' was beginning to look better and better.

The highway's three-mile marker had just whizzed by.

The frowning fireman was now beginning to seriously doubt that they were gonna have enough time, or distance, to stop—*before* they reached the freeway.

"Bruce is…dead. Isn't he," the rescuer's young helper quietly stated.

Since both lanes up ahead were currently clear, John was able to chance another quick glance away from his topsy-turvy view of the road.

Staring down at the driver's dead body was quickly causing the kid's resolve to crumble.

The fireman figured it was time for him to 'intervene' again. "Yes. He is. I'm sorry. What's your name?"

"Tony."

"Hi, Tony. I'm Johnny. Did you get that belt unbuckled for me, yet?" Gage knew he hadn't, but his little reminder managed to spark the stalled boy back into action.

"There was this hu-uge hunk a' metal layin' on the highway, a ways back," Tony explained and began sliding out from under the top half of the trucker's…corpse. "We came around a curve—and ran right over it," the kid continued, as he turned in his seat and began fumbling with the dead driver's seatbelt buckle. "I asked Bruce why he didn't try to swerve around it—"

The boy's narrative was interrupted by a telltale 'cli-ick' and the dead driver's lap belt fell free.

"Bruce said, 'Because yah gotta keep the shiny side up, and the greasy side down.'" Tony obediently began scrambling up over the back of the seat and into the cab's sleeper compartment. "I asked him what he meant by that, and he told me, 'You can't make any sudden moves when you're haulin' a full load, or you'll flip your rig, for sure!'"

Being careful to keep one hand on the wheel and both eyes on the road, Gage stepped over the dead
guy's legs and the semi's knobbed shift sticks and assumed a portion of the passenger's seat. He had to pause, to give his helmeted head a couple more quick shakes. The fireman was still feeling a little 'woozy'. He figured it was probably because his blood sugar was so low, or because he'd had to hold his head upside-down for so long—or it could a' been a combination of both. "Okay. Tony. Think you can reach the steering wheel from back there?

The boy's head popped up from the sleeping compartment. "If I lean over the back of the seat."

"Do it."

Tony did as directed. "Right after we hit that hunk a' metal, Bruce said he'd lost the service brakes. He figured the tires must a' kicked it up under the truck and nicked an air hose."

John stood, as best he could, and latched onto the dead guy's belt.

"He pulled this knob out. But nothing happened. He said that hunk a' metal must a' hit both hose lines, because the emergency brakes weren't working, either. He was about to do something with that switch down there, when he just grabbed his chest—and keeled over. I-I didn't know what to do! I latched onto the steering wheel and tried to keep the truck as straight as I cou—"

"—You did...just fine...Tony," Gage breathlessly assured his now near to hysteria helper.

"Yeah. Til I plowed into you."

"Don't you...worry none...about me...I'm a lot...tougher...than I look...Just got...my 'wind'...knocked out a’ me...is all." Following a great deal of 'grimacing' and 'gasping' and 'gritting of his teeth', the 160lb fireman finally managed to maneuver the 300+lb dead guy out of his way. 'Bruce' ended up on his back, on the floor in front of the passenger's seat, with his legs bent at the knees, his arms folded across his chest, and his baseball-capped head shoved up under the dashboard.

The panting paramedic rested his right hand on the steering wheel and aimed his dazed gaze out the runaway truck's windshield. "Pass me...a blanket," he breathlessly requested.

Once again, the boy wordlessly obeyed.

Johnny gave the kid back control of the wheel and draped the blanket over the trucker's dead body. Following that, the exhausted fireman collapsed into the driver's seat and frantically began downshifting.

Gage could tell, by the horrific grinding sound he was making, that the teeth on the transmission's gears were 'stripping' instead of 'gripping'.

The truck was just too damn heavy!

The paramedic got his first glimpse of the freeway and cursed beneath his breath. Even from over a half-mile away, he could clearly see that the CHP hadn't been given enough time to avert disaster, either.

Heavy traffic was still flowing fast—and freely—in all five of the Pamona Freeway's northbound lanes.

Gage gasped in exasperation and glanced at the speedometer. Between engaging the Jake Brake and downshifting, he'd managed to cut the runaway rig's speed by more than half.
The problem was that they were going too fast to stop, and yet, not nearly fast enough to safely enter the steady flow of traffic.

The frustrated fireman gasped again, as he realized he didn't have any time—or gears—left, to get the big rig back up to freeway traffic speed, which was generally between 60 to 85mph.

'Plan C' immediately replaced 'Plan B' in his slightly woozy brain. "Tony, I want you to get back up here," he solemnly ordered.

The boy climbed up out of the sleeping compartment and back into his seat, being careful not to step on 'Bruce'.

"I am gonna pull over onto the right shoulder of the highway, and you are going to open that door and jump."

"What are you gonna do, after I jump?"

His rescuer completely ignored the question. "I want you to jump out—as far away from the cab as you possibly can—and then keep right on rolling away from the road."

Tony saw where the truck was headed and put two and two together. "You're gonna put the 'greasy' side up and the 'shiny' side down. Are-ent you."

Gage couldn't help but grin. "So-o, what's a smart kid, like you, doin', runnin' away from his problems?"

"Maybe I'm not nearly as smart as you think I am."

"O-or, maybe you're a lot smarter than you think you are," Gage suggested right back. "Now, go on! Open the door and get ready to jump!"

Once more, Tony did just as his rescuer directed. "I'm sorry, Johnny. If I hadn't a' rammed into you, you might a' had enough time to stop this thing…"

"Na-ahh. The load's just too dang heavy," Johnny reassured him. He buckled and then snugged up his seatbelt. "I prob'ly couldn't a' stopped it in time, anyway. Besides," Johnny paused to tighten his helmet's chinstrap and flash his concerned young friend a mischievous smile, "I've never wrecked an 18-wheeler—before," he wryly added, and finally succeeded in coaxing a slight smile from the kid. "Remember. Jump as far away as you can from the cab and then roll clear. I'd really hate to run you over with the trailer wheels."

Tony gave the crazy fireman one last, eternally grateful glance—and then jumped from the truck's cab.

Station 51's engine crew watched, in stunned silence, as the runaway tractor-trailer reached—and then started heading up—the freeway's onramp, still traveling at a pretty good clip.

Marco turned his troubled gaze away from their television screen. "I don't get it, Cap. Why isn't John jumping?" he anxiously inquired, giving voice to the question that was on everyone's mind.

The Captain had a nagging suspicion as to why Gage had—so far—failed to abandon the big rig. "Apparently, he hasn't finished 'intervening', yet!" he angrily stated, and then covered his eyes for the
tenth time, in as many minutes.

Roy was still following along in the Squad. "John-ny, don't do this to me! Jump already! You said you were gonna jump! You as much as promised me you would jump!"

Via the semi's side mirror, John had watched the leaping boy land at the bottom of a grassy gully. He waited until the tail end of the truck's trailer had passed the kid's position. "We-ell," he muttered to himself, "here goes nothin'."

That said, the runaway big rig's driver cranked its steering wheel, as hard as he could, to the right.

As the tractor's chrome bumper crashed through the steel guardrail that ran along the edge of the onramp, Gage dropped down onto his right side and planted the soles of his boots up against the driver's door. The fireman latched onto the stick-shift levers with both hands and then held on—for the ride of his life!

Squad 51’s driver glanced in his right rearview mirror.

The kid that had jumped from the truck's cab was apparently uninjured, because he was currently clawing his way up out of the gully.

The flustered fireman saw the semi veer sharply to the right and prayed he'd be able to say the same for his crazy, crashing crewmate. His numb right arm reached out and his hand fumbled blindly for their radio's mic'. "L.A, this is Rescue 51! Respond an engine company and an additional squad and ambulance to our location!"

"10-4, 51…"

"Dammit, Johnny!" Roy angrily exclaimed.

He didn't bother to replace the mic'. He just tossed it aside.

Squad 51 skidded to a stop alongside the hole Gage had just made in the guardrail.

DeSoto jumped out, screaming his partner's name—over and over again.

With the wrecking vehicle's speed now down to only around 20mph, the scene up on Station 51's TV screen appeared to play out in sort of slow motion.

As the big rig left the roadway, its back end folded in on its front end.

Because both sides of the onramp were steeply sloped, the truck's fully loaded trailer listed sharply to the right, until gravity finally caused it to flip completely over.

The engine crew emitted another group 'gasp' and then—all but one of them—watched, in wide-eyed horror, as the heavily loaded trailer continued to tumble down the grassy slope.

The attached tractor was whipped wildly about, like a stuffed animal that was being shaken in some
playful pooch's mouth.

One of the tumbling trailer's sidewalls burst open and cases, of whatever cargo it was carrying, came cascading out. Upon impact, the cases split open. Smaller boxes spilled out. The boxes, and their contents, were then scattered—everywhere.

The wreckage finally came to rest at the bottom of a grassy gully.

It took a few moments for KXLA's usually unflappable lady traffic reporter to recover her voice. "Oh...Wow! For our viewers at home, who may be just tuning in, KXLA has been bringing you live coverage of an LA County Fire Department Rescue Squad's attempts to prevent a runaway semi-tractor-trailer from entering the Pamona Freeway's northbound lanes. As you can see, we are currently over the Highland Highway onramp, where—in a last ditch effort to stop the brake-less vehicle—one of the firemen has just driven the truck off of the roadwa—"

The remainder of the rattled reporter's comment was drowned out by the sound of muted claxons, coming from the garage.

The firemen leapt to their feet, but then froze, as Station 16 was dispatched to the scene.

"Why didn't we get the call?" Kelly questioned and turned to their Captain. "Couldn't you ask headquarters to send us, instead?"

"Of course I could," Stanley solemnly replied. He knew how badly they all wanted to be there for their shiftmates. "But our response time would be over twice as long as 16's, and they need help right now."

The firemen exhaled audible sighs of frustration, and then reluctantly sank back down into their 'front row' seats.

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Speaking of front row seats...

With his feet braced against the driver's door, and both hands locked on the stick-shift levers, Johnny had managed to remain in the same, safe position for the entire duration of his 'wild ride' down the grassy hillside.

Unfortunately, everything else in the cab—that was not attached or tied down—had promptly become a projectile...including Bruce's corpse.

The semi's tractor had come to rest sort of leaning towards its driver's side, and its former driver had come to rest on Johnny.

Another "Oooff!" had escaped from the prone paramedic, as all 300+ pounds of the dead trucker's weight landed on his chest, effectively dispelling the air from his already traumatized lungs. The fireman tried—with all of his might—to free his pinned arms, so he could shove the ridiculously heavy burden off of him. But he was too weak and too 'woozy'—and becoming even woozier every airless second that passed by.

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Roy was in the process of emptying their squad's compartments of equipment, when the kid from the truck cab came running up. "You hurt anywhere?" the paramedic anxiously inquired.
"No," the teen gasped back, a bit breathlessly. "Need any help?"

"Uh-uh…Yeah. Can you grab that green case for me?"

Tony latched onto the oxygen case's plastic handle and then joined Johnny's partner in a controlled slide down the slippery slope.

Due to the dangers inherent in his job, Gage didn't exactly have his heart set on dying of old age. Hell, the fireman figured he'd probably end up buyin' it in an explosion…or at a fire…or even from a spectacular fall—all noble, and rather dramatic, ways to 'go'.

But never, even in his most morbid daydreams, did the paramedic ever imagine that he would—or could—ever be killed by a…cadaver.

Because the paramedic had also been buried beneath the entire contents of the cab's sleeper compartment, he couldn't see a thing. But he could hear perfectly. And what he heard was his name being called.

Sheesh! His buddy sounded really worried.

Too bad he couldn't respond. He had tried to call out. But he had no air. So there was no sound.

'Air is…pretty damn…important…It takes…air…to talk…It…takes…air…to…live.'

More sounds. Somebody was climbing on the truck's cab.

"Johnny?! Johnny, can you hear me?!"

'Ro-oy?…Oh…gawd…help me, Roy…I can't…I can't…brea—' Johnny never got to finish his thought.

The breathless firefighter's head rolled limply to the side, as he finally slipped from semi-consciousness to unconsciousness.

Roy leaned over the tilting tractor's mangled hood and peered through its shattered windshield.

The driver's side of the cab was buried beneath a mound of debris.

Somewhere under that mess, his best friend lay, either seriously injured—or, perhaps, even dying!

The frantic fireman set his equipment down and started climbing—and calling for his partner.

Roy reached the open passenger's door window within seconds. "Okay. Pass me those two cases!" he ordered down.

The boy set his case down and promptly passed the paramedic his equipment.

DeSoto dropped the cases, and then himself, down into the truck's tilting cab, and immediately began flinging all the papers, books and magazines, and shoes, boots, shirts, pants and blankets back into the empty sleeper compartment, calling his partner's name out, all the while.

Roy got down to the dead guy, and his gut knotted.
The reason his partner had not been responsive quickly became apparent.

In an almost superhuman display of strength, DeSoto picked the 300+lb trucker's body up off of his partner's chest and tossed it aside. Hell, there was so much 'adrenaline' currently coursing through the panic-stricken paramedic's arteries, he could have probably lifted 500+lbs—every bit as easily.

Johnny's chest was not moving—which, no doubt, accounted for both his unconscious state, and cyanotic appearance.

Roy dropped to his knees on the steeply slanting passenger seat and braced himself, to avoid toppling forward onto his friend. Then he reached numbly down and forced himself to feel for a pulse. The rescuer exhaled an audible sigh of relief.

His non-breathing buddy still had a faint corotid!

Roy opened his victim's airway and pinched both nostrils shut. He cocked his head at a near forty-five-degree angle, fitted his open mouth over his partner's—and began to breathe for him.

Johnny's blue-tinged lips pinked up a little, but he did not spontaneously resume respirations.

AR—alone—wasn't working.

Roy glanced anxiously around and silently cursed the fact that there wasn't nearly enough room for him to work on his respiratory arrest victim. His partner needed a cervical collar, an airway and some pure oxygen. The paramedic paused between breaths, and aimed his deeply troubled gaze upward.

His young helper was perched on top of the passenger door, peering anxiously down at him, through its open window.

"Can you pass me…that green case?"

The kid did.

DeSoto took the equipment case and knelt there, marveling at the fact that the youngster had had the presence of mind to carry their O2 up onto the truck cab with him.

51's engine crew saw the oxygen being lowered into the semi's slanting cab.

Apparently, they were not the only ones who were having difficulty breathing.

Tony watched as the blond paramedic worked frantically to save his partner. "Please don't die, Johnny!" he desperately pleaded, tears accompanying his heartfelt words. "I know you were just trying to make me feel better. If I hadn't crashed into you, you could have stopped this truck. If you could have slowed it down—just a little sooner—rolling up the onramp would have stopped it."

Almost as if in response to the boy's plea, the dark-haired paramedic obligingly began to breathe again.

Roy sent a silent prayer of thanks heavenward, as his partner suddenly gasped in agony and then resumed spontaneous respirations. "Easy," he gently urged, as his friend's unfocused eyes fluttered open. "EASY!" he repeated, with more emphasis, and promptly pulled the airway from his now gagging victim's throat. "Where are you hurting?"
Gage gazed dazedly up at his upside-down partner. 'What was the question, again?...Oh...Yeah.' "Everywhere...but my fingernails...and my hair."

DeSoto found his patient's reply both amusing and alarming, but mostly alarming.

"Relax, Roy," Johnny urged, as his alarmed partner promptly replaced his O2 mask and then began taking an initial patient survey. He reached up and raised the mask, so he could be heard. "Nothin's busted...My entire body...just feels like...one big...bruise...is all."

DeSoto pressed the oxygen mask back down over his friend's mouth. "If I'd a known you weren't going to jump, I'd a never let you crawl out that window."

Gage lifted the mask—again. "Sorry...But I just had to stop it...I couldn't bear the thought...of having to respond...to another freeway pileup...I positively hate...freeway pileups!"

"Yeah?" Roy's voice ratcheted up an octave, or two and he pressed the O2 mask back in place. "Well I hate having to respond to a semi roll over! Especially when my partner is inside the semi—when it rolls over!"

"Sorry," his partner solemnly repeated, this time, speaking through his oxygen mask.

"No you're not. You'd do it again—in a heartbeat!"

Gage looked guilty as charged.

While his partner was attempting to contact Rampart on their Bio-phone, Johnny swung his long legs back around and then sat stiffly up in his seat.

"Where do you think you're going?" DeSoto demanded, looking more than a little astounded.

His 'victim' unbuckled his seatbelt and then calmly pointed up at the open passenger's window.

His partner appeared downright appalled. "You can't just climb out of here!"

"Why not?"

"Because you were just unconscious! That's why not! You were just in full respiratory arrest, for cryin' out loud!"

"So-o? You would be, too—if you had 300 plus pounds parked on your chest!"

Since he couldn't raise Rampart on their radio, and since his victim's vitals were all perfectly normal—for him, Roy reluctantly permitted his antsy partner to exit the truck's cab—without being completely immobilized on a backboard.

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For nearly fifteen—interminably long—minutes, 51's engine crew had remained on the very edges of their seats, and for nearly fifteen—interminably long—minutes, their Captain's eyes had remained closed.

The engineers back at KXL A's studios had managed to turn the helicopter's live footage into videotape, and the TV station had been running an 'instant replay' of the horrifically violent wreck—over...and over...and over.

The firemen saw their dark-haired friend's helmeted head finally pop up through the tilting tractor
cab's open passenger window—sans a cervical collar or a backboard.

Another raucous shout reverberated out from Station 51's rec' room, and much 'back-slapping' and 'high-fiving' ensued.

Gage allowed his assistants to help him out of the tilting truck cab and back onto solid ground again, but then balked, when they attempted to drape his arms across their shoulders. "I kin walk, yah know."

Bryce and Bellingham came sliding down the slippery slope just then, carrying a Stokes filled with their medical gear—and a backboard.

"It's either us…or them," DeSoto informed his stubborn buddy.

John mumbled something incoherent, and reluctantly allowed Roy and Tony to drape his arms around their necks and begin assisting him away from the wreckage.

Speaking of the wreckage…

The semi-wrecker got his first good look at all the carnage he'd caused.

The entire hillside seemed to be awash, in a sea of nuts and bolts—and washers.

The 'responsible party' didn't feel all that guilty, though. The paramedic would rather see spilled bolts than spilled blood—anyday!

"There's a Code F inside the cab!" Roy called back to their puzzled counterparts. "Oh…and could you see to it that our gear gets topside?! Thanks!" he tacked on, without bothering to wait for a reply.

That said, the three of them started working their way up the steep, debris-strewn hillside.

Johnny's imaginative mind immediately began to formulate a solution to the 'spilt bolts' problem. "Say, yah know what would work slick? If they were to bring in one a' those giant Electro-magnets. You know? Like the kind they use to move cars around. I'll bet one a' those babies would make short work a' this mess. A' course, then somebody'd hafta sort it all out…and and I s'pose the nuts and bolts would all be 'magnetized'…"

Tony studied the scene of mass destruction for a few moments and then glanced up at Gage. "You sure you've never done this before? Because you seem to be very good at it."

Once again, his fireman friend was forced to grin. "Beginner's Luck."

Roy and the boy—and their unwilling burden—finally reached the top of the treacherous slope.

James Mason, one of Station 16's Captains, was waiting there on the onramp, to greet them. "Good goin’, guys!” the fire officer commended.

"Thanks, Cap!" 51’s paramedics responded, speaking in perfect unison.

The trio passed through the hole in the guardrail.

Mason followed along, as DeSoto steered Gage over to the rear of their rescue truck and then sat him
down on the Squad’s back bumper. “Will your partner, here, be needing an ambulance?”

Gage’s bruised body stiffened and his helmeted head immediately swung in DeSoto’s direction.

Roy could feel his partner’s imploring, penetrating gaze. “I kin just take him on over to Rampart, an’ the docs can check him out.”

Mason flashed the senior paramedic’s young assistant a warm smile. “What about your ‘helper’, here?”

“He definitely needs to go in and get checked out,” DeSoto promptly determined.

Mason raised his handheld radio to his lips and thumbed its send button. “LA, Engine 16. Cancel additional ambulance…”

“10-4, Engine 16…”

The fire officer’s full attention returned to Squad 51’s crew. “You guys need anything?”

“No,” Roy assured him. “We’re just waitin’ for somebody to bring up our gear.”

“I’ll get a couple a’ guys right on it,” Mason promised.

“Thanks, Cap!” 51’s paramedics responded, again speaking in perfect unison.

The Captain grinned and promptly took his leave.

Speaking of the senior paramedic’s young assistant...

Roy suddenly realized that he didn’t even know the boy’s name. “I’m Roy DeSoto, by the way,” he introduced and extended a hand in the teen’s direction.

The kid took it and shook it. “Anthony Larkin. But everybody just calls me Tony.”

Roy beamed the boy a broad, grateful grin. “I tell yah, Tony, I really appreciated your help down there.” The paramedic suddenly recalled the one-sided conversation he’d overheard, and placed a reassuring hand on the troubled teen’s left shoulder. “You helped save my partner’s life.”

Tony’s dark eyes moistened. “I’m just glad I could be of some help.”

Speaking of being of some help…

Gage exchanged a knowing glance with his partner and then cleared his throat. “Yah know, Tony… sometimes it helps to ‘talk things out’…”

The teen’s eyes suddenly moistened even more. “That’s exactly what Bruce said…right before we came around that curve—” the kid’s voice cracked with emotion and he turned away from the firemen, obviously embarrassed to have them see him…crying.

Johnny blinked his own blurring vision clear. Then he reached out and latched onto Tony’s left wrist. “Bruce was a smart man,” he said, and pulled the kid down beside him on their squad’s bumper. “So…‘talk’,” he encouraged, and bumped shoulders with the boy.

“My grandparents got me this really cool, remote-control airplane for my fifteenth birthday. I fueled it up out in the garage. I wanted to make sure it was going to run—before I walked all the way down to the park with it. So I started it up.
I had forgotten to replace the cover on the fuel can.

There must a’ been fumes…down near the garage floor, because as soon as I spun the propeller, there was an explosion. I jumped back and my foot knocked the fuel can over.

The next thing I knew, the whole place was on fire.

I called the Fire Department right away, and then sprayed the fire with the garden hose until the firemen got there.

It seemed to burn forever.

Finally, they managed to get it out.

They were able to save the building.

But the fire destroyed everything that was in the garage—including my Dad’s ‘67 Ford Mustang Convertible.”

“Accidents happen all the time,” Roy reassured the guilt-ridden boy. “Right, Johnny?”

“Right! If you were to tell your parents how sorry you are, I’m sure they’ll—”

“—You don’t know how much my Dad loves that car,” Tony suddenly interrupted, sounding on the very verge of tears, once more.

Johnny realized that teenagers were sometimes prone to ‘low self-esteem’, but it broke his heart to hear that Tony could actually think that his father would love a car more than he would love him.

“Sounds like your Dad is really gonna miss his car. But, you wanna know somethin’? He’ll get over it. He’s never gonna get over losin’ you,” Gage guaranteed and bumped shoulders with the boy again.

Tony picked his hanging head up and then looked to Roy, for further reassurance.

“It’s true,” Roy told him. “I’m a dad, myself. So I should know.”

The boy’s head swung back in Johnny’s direction and his glistening eyes brightened. “Think they’ll let me call my folks from the hospital? It’s a local call…”

“I’m sure they will! There’s a nice nurse there, named Dixie. Just tell her you’re a friend of ours, and she’ll see to it that you get ‘special’ treatment. Say,” Gage exclaimed, with a snap of his fingers, “I got tickets to the Monster Truck Show next weekend. If you ain’t ‘grounded’, you wanna go?”

Tony’s whole face lit up. “Are you serious?!”

Gage grinned and nodded.

“A-all ri-ight!” the teen exclaimed.

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes’. Just call the fire station, and let me know if you kin go. If I ain’t there, leave your number, or a message, and I’ll get back to you. Okay?”

“Okay.”

DeSoto was more than a little dumbfounded. “I don’t get it. I would a’ thought the two of you would a’ had your fill of ‘trucks’, for awhile.”
Gage gave his buddy an ‘Are you for real?’ look. “Ro-oy, there’s no such thing as having your fill of ‘trucks’. Right, Tony?”

“Right,” Tony readily replied, but then thoughtfully added, “as long as you’re lookin’ at ‘em from the outside.”

The two firemen glanced at one another and grinned.

“He’s a smart kid,” Gage re-affirmed and bumped shoulders with the boy for the third time in as many minutes. “See? I knew you were smart.”

The ‘smart kid’ suppressed a bashful grin and then hung his head again.

The first ambulance that had been summoned to the scene finally arrived and pulled up beside the Squad. Its siren grew silent and its back doors popped open.

Roy escorted the boy over to the emergency vehicle and then helped him up into the back of it.

“Take care, Tony. Maybe Johnny and I’ll see you again, over at the hospital.”

“Okay, Roy. You guys take care, too.”

“Always.”

“See yah next weekend!” Johnny called out, just before the rig’s doors closed. “Hopefully,” he added, speaking just beneath his breath.

The ambulance drove off—non Code R.

Two members of 16’s crew came staggering up to the rear of the rescue truck, carrying 51’s retrieved equipment cases.

“Where would you like these?” one of them breathlessly wondered.

“Thanks. You can just set ‘em down right there,” Roy replied, and then said, in an aside to his partner, “I could get used to this.”

DeSoto backed their rescue squad up to Rampart General’s Emergency Receiving. He put the truck in park and quickly killed its engine. “Let me get the door for you,” he requested.

Gage reluctantly allowed his partner to run around the front of the Squad and pull his passenger’s door open for him. “I still can’t see why we had to come here,” he groused and climbed slowly and stiffly out of the vehicle.

His pal slammed the door and then stood there, pretending to look pensive. “Let’s see…You got hit by semi. You wrecked a semi—rather spectacularly, I might add. You were in full respiratory arrest—twice! Once, to the point of being semi-conscious. Once, to the point of being unconscious—and you damn near died! All within a span of about fifteen minutes. And you still can’t see ‘why’ the docs should examine you?” The paramedic studied his unbelievably dense friend for a moment. “I’ve obviously overlooked a serious head injury.”

“There’s no need to get sarcastic. I was merely stating an opinion.”

DeSoto gave his ‘opinionated’, stalling partner a not too gentle push in the direction of the ER’s
sliding glass doors.

“Ou-ouch! Watch it. Will yah. I told yah, I hurt—”

“—Everywhere but your fingernails and your hair,” his impatient partner finished for him. “Yet another reason ‘why’ we are here,” he added and pointed toward the ER’s entrance.

“I’m goin’. I’m goin’.”

Twenty minutes later…

Dr. Kelly Brackett entered Exam Three and found John Gage seated—shirtless—on a treatment table.

The paramedic’s entire upper torso was one big mass of contusions.

Kel winced. “Sheesh! No wonder you ‘hurt everywhere but your fingernails and your hair.’”

The fireman frowned. “I see you’ve been talking to Roy.”

“No-o,” Brackett quickly corrected, and began his very thorough examination. “Roy’s been talking to me. He tells me you had a ‘close encounter’ with a semi.”

“What else did he tell you?”

“Oh-oh, nothing much. Except that you were involved in a ‘rather spectacular wreck’ and ‘damn near died’.”

It was Johnny’s turn to wince.

“Did you hit your head?”

“That’s about the only part of me that didn’t get hit.”

“Guess that explains why your hair doesn’t hurt,” Kel lightly remarked and finally succeeded in coaxing a grin from his extremely unhappy, apparently pained patient.

“Beth, bring me a bottle of Demerol and a syringe, please…”

The RN nodded and left the room.

The on-duty paramedic panicked. “Uh-uh…Doc, I don’t need a shot. I was sort a’ hopin’ to finish the shift,” he tacked on, a bit more truthfully.

The physician finished his neurological exam and began probing his patient’s black and blue abdomen. “You’ve bruised your transducers and your obliques.”

“Tell me somethin’ I don’t already know,” Johnny sarcastically requested, from between gritted teeth.

“You’ve bruised your ribs and your intercostals, as well,” the sadistic doctor calmly continued and proceeded to press his fingertips into his patient’s black and blue ribcage.

Johnny inhaled sharply and then swore beneath his breath. “Believe me…I know.”
“You sure you don’t want that pain shot?” Kel innocently inquired.

Gage gave his sadistic doctor a definite nod—closely followed by an irritated glare.

“From what Roy tells me, you have also managed to bruise your diaphragm—again.”

“I already knew that, too.”

“I’m gonna be recommending a medical leave of absence for you.”

The fireman’s pain-filled eyes widened with surprise. “Now, that I didn’t know. How long?”

“Four to six weeks—at the very least.”

The paramedic’s entire face took on a pained expression. “Why so long? I thought it only takes about two weeks for a bruised diaphragm to heal.”

“That’s only if there’s been no subsequent re-injury. How many times would you say you’ve had your ‘wind knocked out of you’—just in this past year, alone?”

His extremely unhappy patient gave his sore shoulders a slight shrug. “I dunno. I guess I sort a’ lost count.”

“Five. Seven—counting today’s two.” Brackett folded his arms across his chest and assumed his best lecture stance. “As you already know, your diaphragm is made up of muscle tissue, rather specialized muscle tissue, actually, since it works in both the autonomic—or smooth—and voluntary—or striated—methods.

A slight spasm of the diaphragm muscle results in a case of the hiccups. A mild spasm produces a painful side-ache—the kind runners often experience. Blunt force trauma to the ribcage, or abdomen, can cause a moderate to severe spasm, resulting in temporary respiratory arrest—which very rarely lasts longer than twenty to thirty seconds.

According to Roy, you stopped breathing for close to two minutes. The fact that you damn near ‘blacked out’ the first time you had your ‘wind knocked out’, and did ‘pass out’ the second time it happened, tells me that your diaphragm has suffered some serious damage. It’s going to take some serious time, in order for it to heal—properly.” The physician flashed the frowning fireman a sympathetic smile. “There’s a new Paramedic Class starting on Monday and I could really use your help. The next six weeks will fly by so fast, you’ll be back to work with Roy before you know it.”

Johnny looked extremely dubious. “Can I at least finish the shift?”

“Sorry, Johnny. But we just can’t risk it. I don’t want you driving, either. Any blow to your ribs, or abdomen, could put you back into full respiratory arrest—again.”

“Do-oc’, what are the odds that I’d get the wind knocked out of me three times—in one shift?”

“This is you we’re talking about. Right?”

Gage’s shoulders sagged in defeat. “I think I’ll take that shot, now.”

Almost as if on cue, Beth returned with the requested Demerol and syringe.

Brackett had everything he could do, to keep a straight face. “Don’t worry about how you’re going to get here for the classes. I’ll personally drive you to and from the hospital, everyday,” the doctor
promised, and promptly filled the hypo with a potent dose of painkiller.

“Ri-ight,” his fellow instructor less than enthusiastically acknowledged.

Kel held up his fully loaded syringe. “Where do you want it? In your gluteus maximus? Or your left bicep?”

The unhappy paramedic climbed carefully down from the treatment table…turned around… unbuckled his belt…and dropped his pants.

“How’s Tony doing?” Johnny anxiously inquired, a few minutes later, as he came limping stiffly up to the counter at the Nurses’ Station.

Dixie’s pretty head popped up from the medical chart she’d been studying, and she flashed the questioner a warm smile. “He didn’t have a scratch on him. Joe just took him down to the cafeteria, to get a burger. His parents’ll be here in a half an hour, to pick him up.”

“Well, all-righty!” Gage exclaimed with a grin. “That is great news!”

The nurse grinned back in agreement, and then returned all of her attention to her medical chart.

“Yah know, I came through the crash without a scratch, too. It was what happened after the crash, that damned near killed me.”

“What happened after the crash?” the RN inquired—without bothering to raise her eyes from the chart.

“This 300lb dead guy fell on top of me. That’s what happened.”

The nurse’s head suddenly shot back up. “You’re kidding!”

“Dix, who—in their right mind—would ever ‘make up’ something that morbid?”

The RN’s right eyebrow arched in thought. “Good point.”

“And, of course, I couldn’t breathe with him lyin’ across my chest like that. Passed right out.”

“He damn near died!” Roy clarified, as he came stepping up to the counter, to stand beside his understating buddy. “Cap is trying to scrounge up a replacement for you. Since the Squad’s gonna be ‘out of service’ until he finds somebody, he gave me permission to drive you ho—”

“—Oh-oh no. No. No. No. I bought in, and I ain’t goin’ home until after I’ve had my lunch. I’ve been trying to eat it—all afternoon! And—dang-nabbit—I’m gonna eat it!”

“Forget about lunch. We’re waaaay past lunch. Our ‘lunch’ has now become our ‘dinner’.”

“Call it what you will. As long as it’s still edible, I fully intend to devour it. Ma-an, I am famished!”

Roy couldn’t help but smile. It was pretty apparent that his previously hurting partner was now ‘feeling no pain’. “C’mon, Evel Knievel. I’ll give you a lift back to the Station, so you can…devour something.”

Gage grinned. “Bye, Dix.”
“Bye, Johnny.”

DeSoto took his still grinning, pain-free friend by the elbow and began escorting him off down the corridor, in the direction of the ER’s exit.

“What did you just call me?”

“Evel Knievel. It’s a perfect fit. Don’t yah think. I mean, since you both seem to be so fond of pulling crazy stunts!”

“Bye, Doc!” Gage called down the hall, as Brackett came backing out of Treatment Two.

“So long, Johnny!” Kel called back. “I’ll see you—bright and early—Monday morning. Don’t forget! And don’t drive!”

“Ri-ight…” Gage glumly acknowledged.

51’s paramedics rode back to their quarters in complete silence.

But only because one of them was completely ‘zonked’.

“Johnny? Johnny! C’mon! Wake up! We’re here,” Roy announced and began backing their squad into its designated spot in the parking bay.

His ‘out of it’ friend’s eyes fluttered open and he sat stiffly up in his seat.

Chet was waiting in the garage, to razz—er, to greet them, upon their return. “Well, well, well. If it isn’t ol’ John ‘Gear-Jammer’ Gage…in the flesh.”

Gage slid slowly—and stiffly—out of his seat and then aimed his dazed gaze at Kelly. “Oh. You guys heard about that, huh.”

“Even better,” Chet assured him. “Thanks to KXLA’s traffic helicopter, we got to watch the whole thing on TV.”

The paramedics exchanged a pair of mildly amazed glances…and then went strolling into their station’s dayroom.

“What’s to eat around here?” Roy wondered, as he crossed into the kitchen. “We need some nourishment.”

“Yeah,” Johnny joined in, and followed his friend over to the stove. “We’re starving!”

Their Captain suddenly poked his head into the room. “When you guys finish eating, I’d like to see the two of you in my office,” he requested, and then disappeared.

The two ‘guys’ swapped a couple of anxious, guilty glances.

Kelly caught the exchange and waggled his bushy eyebrows. “Guess it’s true what THEY say. The condemned really are allowed a ‘last meal’.”

Gage gave their taunting chum an annoyed glare. But then nervously repeated, “The condemned?”
Chet nodded.

John looked even more anxious. “Cap’s pretty pissed, huh.”

“Royally!” Kelly assured him.

Gage groaned and then locked gazes again with his equally anxious looking partner. “I think I may have just lost my appetite.”

“Yeah. Me, too. C’mon. We may as well go get this over with.”

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The condemned men rapped on their upset Captain’s open door and then stepped into his office.

“You wanted to see us, Cap?” Roy reluctantly inquired.

Stanley seemed surprised to find the two of them standing there. “I thought you guys were starving…”

“We were,” his youngest paramedic glumly replied. “Until Chet told us how…upset you are with us—er, me…us.”

Their Captain couldn’t help but grin. “Yea-eah. Well…Consider the source.”

Gage looked hopeful. “Then…you’re not upset with us?”

“The two of you managed to save some lives and property this afternoon. And live to tell about it. Why should I be upset, when you were just doing your jobs.”

His paramedics glanced at one another, looking relieved.

“Just, plea-ease, promise me you’ll never pull a stupid stunt like that again,” Hank ordered, more than asked. “Cuz, I swear, if you do, you’re gonna cause me to have a heart attack! And you guys don’t want to give your poor, old Captain a coronary. Do you…”

“No-o!” John assured him. “No. Of course not, Cap!”

“Goo-ood! Good. Dismissed.”

Gage heaved an audible sigh of relief, and immediately took his leave.

Stanley gazed glumly after him. “He’s gonna do it again. Isn’t he.”

DeSoto turned to stare at the open doorway, through which his impetuous partner had just disappeared. “Eh-yup.”

The Captain emitted a mournful moan, and promptly placed a hand over his eyes.

The End
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