

# Dropping The Ball

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**What happens in the dead of night at the end of Bottom Line**  
**(Episode written by Bob and Charlene Bralver)**

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Dead time.

Such an auspicious phrase. Especially now.

Tonight...

He'd give both arms right now to hear anything other than his own breathing. Not even Chet was snoring. He'd counted on it, early on. To anchor him. To hold him in this reality. Keep him from drowning in the depths of his own hell. But Chet was as silent as the klaxons.

Damn them, both.

He briefly entertained the notion of reporting a fire just so the alarm would go off. So he could have life moving around him again. Instead of this deadness. This unbearable stillness.

That nearly became his world.

"What happened?"

Guilty revelation had settled insidiously into bed with him as he'd crawled in, coiling itself around his consciousness, hissing at the sleep he tried so desperately to grasp.

Eyes blinked in the weighted darkness, trying to see everything but what was in his mind.

"Hey! He's got a gun!"

Roy shifted anxiously, as if the sound of the rustling sheets would drown out Johnny's warning.

Contrition snuggled against him as Roy turned and looked at his partner on the bunk next to him. Unable to bear its sickening nearness any longer, the senior paramedic stiffly pulled the sheets back, swung his legs off the edge and sat up, watching the still form. Fast asleep. On his back, head tilted slightly to the left, the soft light from the window outlining his distinct features on the white sheets. Mirroring the night. Looking so...quiet.

Like a corpse on a gurney.

Huffing with a grimace, Roy tore his gaze from him. He craned his neck over the brick divider and squinted to see the clock: 3:17.

His eyes settled on his partner again.

With Vince's hand wrapped around his head. Throwing him to the ground.

The gun aimed at Johnny.

"I want him outta there."

"Alright, alright, just—"

"Are you gonna get him outta there?"

He'd heard the rise of voices as he was laying a sheet over their DOA and gathering up the equipment for Johnny's follow-up in the ambulance.

"Vince, cut it out, man, you're pointin' a gun at me!"

His heart had stopped.

Roy shuddered at the sudden chill of the dorm room. But he didn't hide from it. He reveled in the uncomfortable feeling. Small penance for nearly getting them all killed.

"I want him outta there—"

"Alright! Alright, fine! Just don't point a gun at me, Vince—!"

Roy stepped his feet into his bunker boots, slid his turnout pants up and hiked the straps over his shoulders.

He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. Sniffing, he took one last look at Johnny's sleeping form then headed into the latrine.

The hushed swish of his turnout pants drowned out his partner's voice, softly calling after him.

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He heard the flush followed by the muffled whisper of water in the sink.

Johnny rose up on an elbow and waited for DeSoto to round the brick divider and fill their sleeping space with his warm presence.

But the chill of the dorm remained.

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"Vince, cut it out, man, you're pointin' a gun at me!"

He came out from behind the demolished remains of the getaway vehicle in time to see Vince whip Johnny around, throwing him to the ground.

The gun in Vince's hand.

The gun. That'd been aimed at his partner...

"You got enough for two?" Gage softly asked.

Startled, DeSoto's head snapped up to see a sleepy Johnny leaning against the doorframe of the kitchen, patiently watching him. The two paramedics kept their eyes on each other for long moments, both waiting for the other.

"Sorry, Johnny. I didn't mean to wake you," Roy sighed with regret, returning to stir the pot he had heating up on the stove.

"S'okay." Johnny pushed off the doorframe and ambled over toward the sandy-haired firefighter, looking over his shoulder to see what Roy was making.

"Why don't you go back to bed? I'm not the best company, right now."

"Who said I came in here to talk to you?" Gage turned, crouched low and made a beeline for Henry, who was sprawled on the couch. At Johnny's eye-line approach, Henry's tail whumped the leather cushions several times while casting him a suspicious look.

Roy stole a glance at his partner, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"I came in here to talk to Henry. Didn't I, Henry? Huh, pooch? Didn't I, boy? Didn't I, boy?" Gage rubbed Henry's belly that he'd offered as Johnny sat next to him, one bent lazy forepaw in the air.

After some moments of belly rubbing, Henry decided he was too tired to keep paw and head up and sagged back onto the leather, head angled awkwardly, an ear dangling off the couch.

"You wanna talk about it?"

"Not really."

Johnny rubbed his nose. "Well, Roy, you're cookin' up a pot of warm milk at three thirty in the morning. Looks to me like you're kinda aimin' for a good ear."

Roy pointed to their prone canine who was watching them from the couch. "Henry's got a good ear." Roy flipped off the stove and moved the pot from the burner. "At least I can look him in the eye," he muttered, gathering a couple of mugs.

Johnny shifted, hands hanging off his knees. "Roy, I don't blame you."

"Well, why the hell not?" he nearly yelled. "I blame me. So should you. And the rest of the shift, too. And Vince. And Hal and George and..." he waved a hand in the air.

"Are you done?"

"No!"

"Alright, who else, then?"

Roy poured the hot milk into the mugs. "All the people who were gathered around, watching. The victim in the ambulance. Vince's wife. Cap's wife." He paused and took a deep breath. "Joanne. Jenny. Chris. Chet's family, Stoker's family, Marco's family, and your family, wherever they are..."

"Now are you done?"

Roy thought for a moment as he set the empty pot in the sink. "The other police officers that were there..."

Johnny hung his head. "Pete's sake, Roy, would you cool it?"

Roy lay a finger at his chest. "It's my guilt. I can feel guilty about whatever I want," he nodded in triumph.

Henry raised his head as Gage rose from the couch then settled back down.

A wry smile touched Johnny's lips and he shook his head as he sauntered over to his partner, "Oh, you're gonna drive me nuts. Look—"

"I said I didn't want to talk about it."

"Well, fine, then I'll talk about it and you can listen." He grabbed the mug Roy had made for him and sat at the table. "Roy, look, we all know what kind of a job we have. But we also know we're human. Sometimes, shit happens. It comes with the territory. If you'd done it on purpose, then, yeah, we might all be lining up to throttle you right about now. But you didn't. You assessed the situation, believed it to be valid to the best of your ability and what the situation called for and moved along."

"But—"

"No, Roy! Don't start doin' that! Just don't do it. You know as well as I do how dangerous it gets when we start second-guessing ourselves. It was a tense situation. But we dealt with it. Everything's fine. No harm done."

"No harm done. You know, if we'd only been doing this for a few months, I could make allowances for that. But I've been doing this for a long time now. I'm supposed to know better."

Johnny chuckled. "Jesus, Roy, you're just like Brackett. You think Brackett makes mistakes? Or Morton? Or Early?"

"Sure. I guess."

"You guess?"

"Alright, I suppose they do. Yeah."

"Well they've got years of training, right?"

"Yeah."

"So how does that make you any different from them?"

Silence.

"Uh huh."

"Johnny. He had a gun. Aimed at you. I put you at risk. I did. Because of a damn stupid mistake. It was unnecessary."

"Yeah, I know. He had a gun on me. Scared me shitless. But we took care of it. We got through it and now we're sitting here in the kitchen at 4 in the morning listening to you feeling sorry for yourself because you believe that you're not human and that you and you alone are responsible for the whole damn world."

Roy watched the bubbles in the milk in his mug. "Not human," he whispered. He glanced at Henry who had fallen back asleep. "I'd give anything to be Henry right about now."

"Why would you wanna be me?"

Jumping, the two paramedics stole startled glances at their stretching bleary-eyed captain.

"Sorry, Cap. Did we wake you?" Roy asked. Like I needed to feel more guilty than I already do.

"I thought I'd make it easy on you and lie, but dammit, it's three thirty in the morning, so yes, you did wake me up."

"Sorry."

Cap laid a comforting hand on Roy's shoulder and squeezed. "Don't worry about it. Am I interrupting?"

"No, come on in and join in the pity party, Cap," Johnny motioned, hands on the table, head lolling.

Roy threw him a dark look.

"What's the topic today?"

"How Roy DeSoto Nearly Killed Everyone," Roy answered.

"Mm, the Vince Incident," Cap verified, sitting at the table with his feet up on it.

"You see?" Roy tried to convince his partner. "It's already got a name. There wouldn't have been a 'Vince Incident' if I'd done my job, correctly."

Johnny looked indignant at his superior, who had an elbow on the table and his sleepy head against his fist. "Well how come you get to sit like that at the table?"

"Because I'm the captain and it's three thirty in the morning."

Johnny made a face, then thumbed over to his partner, "Cap, can you talk to him?"

"Roy?" Stanley assumed the most authoritative voice he could muster.

DeSoto found himself actually sitting up straighter. "Yes, sir?"

"Stop feeling guilty."

Gage groaned, shook his head then slid his arms across the table and put his head down. "Thanks, Cap. That was swell," he replied, his voice muffled against the table.

Stanley watched his younger paramedic for some moments with inner amusement. Then he flicked a sleepy glance at Roy, "No one blames you, you know."

Roy got up, put his and Johnny's mugs in the sink and returned to the table. "But I blame me. It was an unnecessary event that shouldn't have happened if I'd done my job."

"But it happened."

"Yeah," a resigned sigh.

"Did it turn out alright in the end?"

"That's not the point, Cap—"

"Did it turn out all right in the end?"

Pause. "Yeah."

"Well there you go."

Roy frowned. "There you go what?"

"It happened. Sure it could've been better. But it turned out ok. Take the experience as a gift for the next time. But don't dwell on this one. You know how dangerous it is second-guessing yourself. And especially for you two, you can't afford to be doin' that."

"I know. That's what Johnny said, too."

"You're not the only one who goes through this, you know. Every time one of you gets hurt on the job –" Cap pointed to Johnny with his foot - "my heart stops. Every time we go out there, every time you guys go out on a run, I get nervous."

"You, Cap?" Roy yawned.

Cap yawned at that and closed his eyes, too tired to keep them open. "Of course. I'm always worried a mistake is gonna get made and someone's not gonna come back. But mistakes do get made. And people get hurt. But as long as everyone makes it out alive, I'm thankful because I can look at it, reassess things and make it better for the next time. Because, really, that's all you can do. Shit happens in this business. And no matter how prepared you are, shit still happens. It's learning to live with it and learn from it, that's the challenge."

"Definitely something to think about," Roy murmured sleepily.

"You just have to find a way to deal with it without beating yourself up. The job does that enough as it is. I remember one time, when I was a lineman, up over at Station 23. I did something pretty stupid and almost got our goose's cooked. I'd never felt more stupid in my life..."

Cap looked over at Roy who had his head down on the table next to Johnny, both of them asleep. He glanced at Henry who also seemed to be in full slumber.

Stanley sighed and prepared to swing his legs off the table and go back to bed. But it suddenly seemed like too much work. "Ah, what the hell." He settled in against his fist and joined his paramedics.

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**A/N: When Roy first gave me this story, I assumed it was going to be just him and Johnny. Neither of us counted on Cap walking in and messing with the ending... So much for the author being 'in control'. What Cap says, goes. lol**