

Chapter 9

Sal started walking out of the tunnel toward the line of waiting cars. “Vince, I’ll be back in a minute,” Sal said as he made his way out into the morning light. He tapped the tailgate of his trailer a few times with his knuckles as he turned. He pulled the cap off his head, ran his other hand through his hair, and then replaced the cap. Sal called back to Vince as he stepped toward the waiting cars. “I’m going to let these people know that we’re working on a solution.”

Sal approached the Volkswagen bus where the man was inside listening to his music, slapping the dashboard and bobbing his head up and down. Sal tapped on the driver’s side window because the man inside had his earbuds in and seemed not to notice him standing there. The man had a startled look on his face as he turned toward the window. He rolled the window down by turning a handle around and around. It was an old van. “Sorry about the delay, buddy,” Sal said. “We’re trying to get the truck out of everyone’s way. It might be a little while, though.”



The man nodded his head and smiled, and went back to listening to his music. Sal smiled and continued down to the next car.

The next car was driven by a woman in what appeared to be some kind of uniform. Her hair was red, and it was done up very tall, practically tall enough to touch the roof of her car. She lowered her window with the touch of a button. She stuck her head out as she saw Sal coming her way. “Good morning, darlin’,” she said.

“Uh, good morning, ma’am.” Sal returned her greeting, a little less enthusiastically.

“What’s going on up there?” The woman wanted to know.

“Well, we kinda got our truck stuck inside that tunnel. We’d never driven this road before.”

“Me neither, honey,” she offered, shaking her head.

“It might take us a little while to get out of the way so you folks can get through. Sorry if we are makin’ you late for an appointment.”

“The only appointment I got is with the pillow on my bed. I just put in ten hours at my diner. Say, didn’t I see you and your friend back there before?”

“Oh, yeah that was us. Boy, your diner sure does have some good pie,” Sal said. “Well, sorry again for the delay.”

“Don’t worry, honey. I’ll just catch some shuteye here in my car while you fellas figure out what to do.”

“Thanks, ma’am.”

The next car was a station wagon with a woman asleep in the driver’s seat. Sal didn’t want to wake her. He noticed a boy in the back seat with his head down, focused on some kind of video game. Sal took a step to the right and looked in the back window. He tried to get the boy’s attention, but when the boy saw Sal’s face close to the window, he turned away as though he were looking out the window on the other side. Sal noticed a completed Rubik’s Cube™ on the floor of the back seat, along with a drawing pad open to a page with hand-drawn cartoon figures on it. To Sal, there seemed to be something familiar about that kid, but he just couldn’t place it.

Sal scratched his head and continued walking toward the next vehicle, which happened to be a bread delivery truck. He didn’t see anyone inside, so he walked toward the back. He noticed a man sitting on the open tailgate, facing away from the tunnel, legs hanging down, snacking on an open bag of tortilla chips.

“Excuse me,” Sal said as he reached the back of the man’s truck. “We got a little problem with our truck inside the tunnel. It might take us a little while to get it out.”

The bread driver sat slumped over his knees. His head was still down as Sal made his way around to face him. Sal recognized the man from the diner before. The man spoke without looking up. “Huh..?” grunted the man whose cap still covered most of his bearded face. “You were saying?”

“Yeah, I wanted to tell you we were sorry for holdin’ you and the other drivers up,” Sal said apologetically.

“Oh, sure, okay, yeah,” the man said. He had his white and blue bread company windbreaker zipped all the way up to his neck.

“I’m sure you got places to go,” Sal offered. “Sorry if we’re makin’ you late for your deliveries.”

“Nah, not really,” Dean said solemnly. My truck’s empty. I’m on my way back

home. I ain't in a hurry."

"Oh," said Sal. "Sorry just the same."

"Want some?" Dean said as he held out his bag of chips.

"Uh, sure.... Thanks," Sal said with an embarrassed smile. He took a few and popped one in his mouth.

"No problem," Dean said as he got to a standing position. He shook his head and shoulders quickly in an effort to warm himself up. "I got some bottles of water, too, if you want one."

"Thanks, mister. I'm good," Sal answered.

"Got any idea how you're gonna get your truck out?" Dean asked.

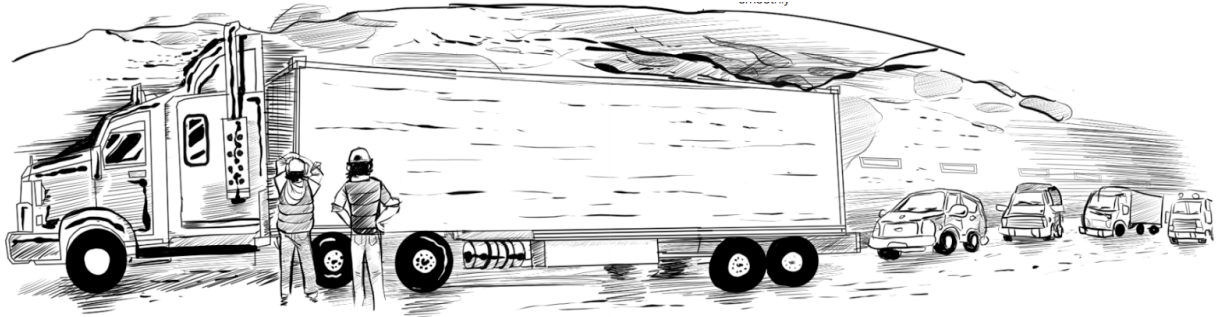
"Not yet. It's kinda wedged in there pretty good, Sal answered. "But if you got a suggestion, don't keep it to yourself."

"Sure, will do," the bread driver said. "But I'm sure you guys will solve it."

"Thanks," Sal said. "If you can spread the word to the other folks waitin', we'd appreciate it." Sal headed back in the direction of the tunnel and the truck inside.

The boy in the back of his mom's car had resumed playing his video game. His mom, now awake from the noise of the game, was checking on her son from time to time in the rearview mirror. In the car just ahead, the woman with the big hair opened her purse and began looking for another piece of gum. She unwrapped it, held the new stick in one hand, spit the old one into the paper from the new, then closed the paper around it and added it to the mound that was forming in the styrofoam cup by her seat. She folded the stick in half with her tongue. Her back teeth then began working it into a chewy ball. Her lips smacked every few seconds as the saliva flowed back to provide the needed **lubrication**¹¹⁵.

¹¹⁵ **lubricate** means to moisten, or make wet (in this case, with saliva); or to make a machine work more smoothly with oil or another liquid



While Sal and Vince continued looking over the situation, some drivers got out of their cars, walked over to the truck, and started **gazing**¹¹⁶ up. Some walked to the front to look at the place where the top of the truck’s trailer first made contact with the top of the tunnel. A few of the drivers stood at the sides, pointing fingers upward and sharing their ideas. Though it was still rather dark in the tunnel, the morning sun was shining in from the far end and **illuminated**¹¹⁷ the truck and the rocky archway it was stuck to.

Sal and Vince knew they couldn’t go forward any more without further damaging the truck. Vince asked Sal if they ought to try and back the truck out. “It’s worth a try,” Sal said. “Hop up there and try to start the engine. I’ll get these cars to back up.”

Vince got the engine started and the drivers of the cars behind the truck one by one started their engines and slowly moved back out of the way. The boy playing the video game noticed his mother start their car and shift into reverse. He called up from the back seat, “What’s going on, Mom?” without lifting his head or slowing the movement of his fingers. “Why are we going backwards?”

His mother answered, “I’m not sure, honey. The truck driver waved at us to back up.”

Once there was enough room behind, Sal, standing near the back end of the truck on the driver’s side, gave Vince a wave to go. He held his two hands up, close together, indicating to Vince to back up just a little. Vince looked in the side mirror to look for Sal’s signals and slipped the gear shift into reverse. He gently pressed the gas pedal. The truck did move a tiny bit, but Sal waved at Vince to stop, because not only did he hear a terrible grinding noise, but he also saw sparks **cascade**¹¹⁸ from the top of the truck down to the **asphalt**¹¹⁹.

¹¹⁶ **gazing** means looking and wondering

¹¹⁷ **illuminated** means lit up

¹¹⁸ **cascade** means for things to pour down, like water in a waterfall

¹¹⁹ **asphalt** is the black material used for road pavement, parking lots, school playgrounds, and other durable surfaces

Vince cut the engine and slowly stepped out onto the road. His head was down and his shoulders were slumped as he walked toward Sal. Sal again tried to lift his buddy's **spirits**¹²⁰. "We'll solve this problem. Don't worry." Sal thought for a moment and then continued, "Vince, get on the **radio**¹²¹ and call to see if there are any truckers that have any ideas. If there are any driving nearby, maybe one of them can give us a hand."

Vince called around, and while all the truckers who answered were happy to help, the only idea any of them had was to unload the truck's cargo into another truck. Vince thanked them, but said he hoped another solution could be found.



¹²⁰ **spirits** means feelings that a person has that can be good or bad

¹²¹ **radio** means something like a walkie-talkie or cell phone truckers use to talk to each other