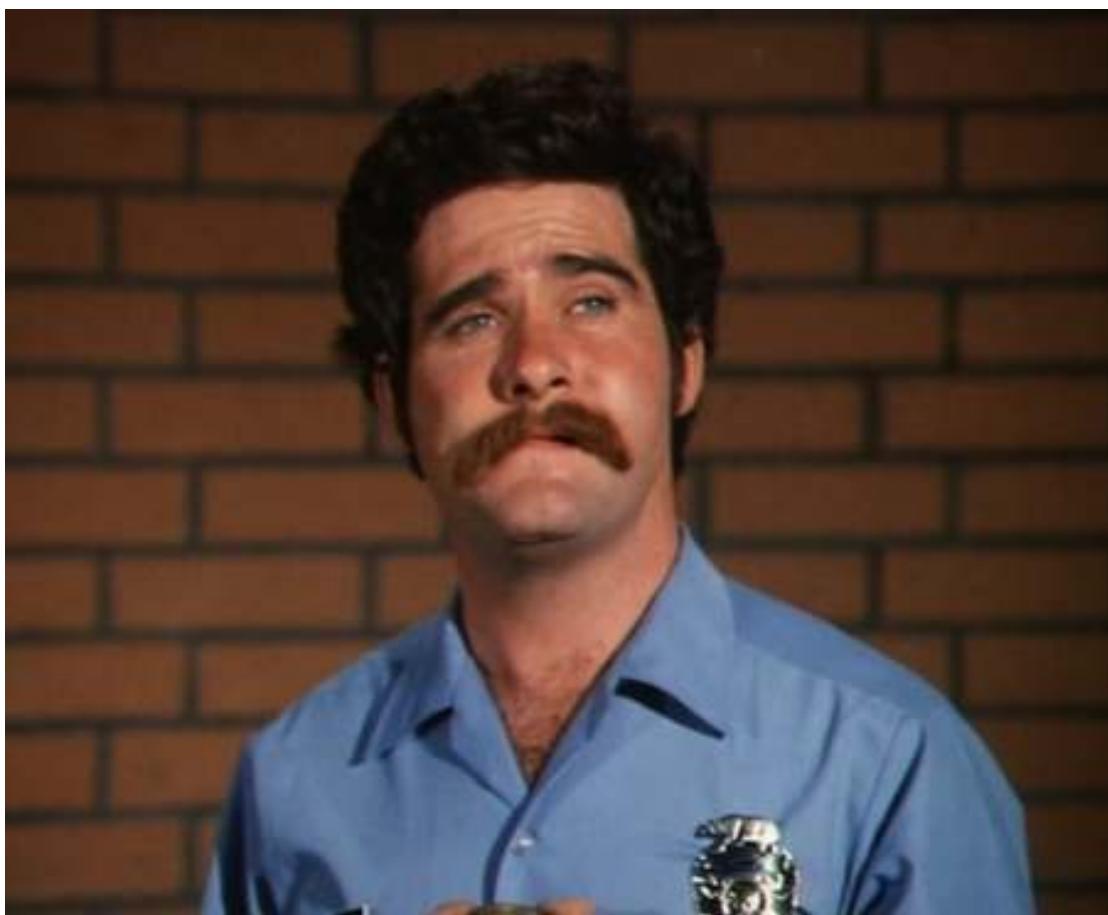


# **Chester Kelly**

# **(Heckler Style)**

## **Chapter 2**

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*"I found one day in school a boy of medium size ill-treating a smaller boy. I expostulated, but he replied: 'The bigs hit me, so I hit the babies; that's fair.' In these words he epitomized the history of the human race." -Bertrand Russell, philosopher, mathematician, and author (1872-1970)-*

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"I've heard of getting 'em to eat out of your hand, but drinking out of your shoe? Now that's a new one. You ever hear of Stockholm syndrome, Mikey? Where a victim starts to bond with the guy keeping him captive, say...on a leash?"

Mike gazed at Chet over his coffee mug without rancor, refusing to rise to the bait. Instead, he took his time picking out a maple bar from the two dozen assorted doughnuts that Foster Wing and his parents had just dropped off at the station to celebrate his first shift back. He tipped the box toward his captain in invitation.

"Don't call me Mikey," he said as he brushed past Chet to join Henry on the couch.

Chet sighed in resignation. It had been worth a shot, but Mike was always a hard target to get riled. He turned to consider the remaining choices in the pastry boxes. His perusal was cut short by the tones calling for Engine 51's response as well as several other companies. He snagged one of the glazed donuts because the powder from one of the more prized jelly filled delicacies would get all over the inside of the cab, not to mention the fact that he knew from past experience he could finish the glazed in two bites.

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Fifty One's engine crew each turned their collars against the drizzling March rain. The morning temperature was slow to climb its way up from an overnight low that had dipped into the 40's. This was their second response to an activated alarm box at Bonita Street Elementary School in as many weeks. The squad was still a few minutes out, responding from West Carson Street as they headed back from a supply run to Rampart.

"Mike, Marco, check inside. Chet, you're with me." Captain Stanley said as he headed for the playground where he knew faculty and students would be waiting until they received an all clear signal.

Hank's eyes scanned the sea of children who seemed arranged by height, although he knew the groups actually represented individual classrooms, each with its own harried-looking teacher trying to keep the fidgety students corralled. The youngest of the soggy, shivering kids stood on the rain-slicked black-top while the older kids milled further out. He noticed slouching white anklets as they wicked the chilly damp from the grass underfoot, and corduroy covered knees bearing the water marks of restless shoving matches.

"Chet, touch bases with the teachers and make sure everyone is accounted for. I'll be over here having a chat with the principal. Keep an eye out for guilty faces." Hank turned away from his lineman as he keyed the HT he held. "LA County, this is Engine 51. There's no smoke showing at our location, students have been evacuated. Have all units responding to Bonita Elementary continue in, code one."

Moving through the crowd of students, Chet saw more than a few misery-etched faces, but none seemed to bear dodgy or particularly guarded looks. Several small groups called out begging to be allowed to go back inside. The majority of the kids and several of the faculty had their arms wrapped in self-hugs and bounced on their toes, more than eager to end this unscheduled recess. His eyes fell on one of the teachers standing in the mid distance of the playground. His body executed an abrupt change of course before his mind consciously decided to move toward her.

Mike and Marco emerged from the front of the building accompanied by an overall-clad man, scant moments after Chet had struck up a conversation with Ms. Franklin, one of the fourth grade teachers. Mike signaled "all-clear" as he, Marco and the man who Chet guessed was probably the janitor made their way towards their captain and principal. Cap already had the HT up, and Chet again assumed all responding units were being canceled, although Truck 49 had just pulled up behind the engine. "That's our cue, Ma'am. It's safe to get your kids in out of this weather."

"I'm 'Karen' around here to anyone over the age of twelve," she responded with a smile. She turned to gently nudge the nearest students toward the building. She looked over her shoulder as she continued to herd her charges with the efficiency of a border collie - a pretty, somewhat wet shepherdess, but no "dog" by any stretch of the imagination. "Thank you... Kelly?" she ended with hesitation.

"Chet," he supplied, realizing that she must have read the stenciled letters on the back of his turnout. "Chet Kelly, and no problem." He turned abruptly at the shrill attention-seeking whistle he knew came from his captain's lips. "Gotta go..." he broke into a jog towards where the guys were waiting with knowing grins plastered on their faces. "Nice meeting you," he called as he turned back to wave, still jogging, but now moving in reverse. Karen returned the gesture before she followed the last of her students into a classroom as they filed through a side door.

Chet pulled himself into a jump seat and revised his initial assessment of one of the faces that turned toward him. "Sorry, Cap," he offered to the man wearing the long-suffering expression.

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Back at the station, Hank checked the run logs of the other two shifts and found that although B-shift had not responded to Bonita in over four months; C-shift had rolled on an alarm pull at the school a week before A-shift's recent responses. He tapped his pencil on the page as he tried to decide what his next move should be. Mr. Pomeroy, the principal, could offer no real leads as to who the culprit was. He closed the logbook, having made no decisions and went in search of his men to see how the day's chores were coming along.

Hank stepped into the bunk room just as Marco moved from making his own bed to start on Chet's. It was no secret that the two linemen were currently staging what their captain thought of as a blue alert prank war. They had been trading the occasional gag back and forth over the past few weeks. Pretty low-key stuff so far, but things seemed to be escalating - still not quite enough to raise the captain's internal prank-alert status to code yellow. At that stage, they would all be on edge, watching for misdirected fire and dodging shrapnel from standing too close to one of the two official participants. Hank leaned against the doorway as he silently watched Chet's sheets be shortened with crisp, tight folds. "Do I need to enter a witness protection program?" he asked a startled Marco, before he pushed away from the doorjamb and went in search of the next member of his crew.

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Chet, having finished with the day room, was taking a break and was bent over a pad of paper. "What are you working on there, pal?" Hank asked as he passed the kitchen table to get a drink of water.

"What?" Chet raised his eyes, his concentration apparently broken for a moment. "Oh, hi, Cap. I was just messing around with the letters of my name, rearranging them so they spell other words. It's called anagramming. Lots of folks throughout history believed anagrams could reveal important things about a subject."

John, who was leaning on a mop, looked over Chet's shoulder. "Huh, so that's what you call it. I had a girl friend who called me 'John Any Egg' all the time. I just thought it was a dumb nick name."

Chet snorted, "It *is* a dumb nick name, Gage," before returning to the task of revealing hidden prophesies in his own name.

"Johnny, you are the pickiest guy I know about how you want your eggs. How come she called you that?" Marco asked from where he'd been listening from the doorway."

"I would have eaten cardboard with a smile and asked for seconds to be with that girl. I guess she just ended up thinking I liked my eggs 'any old way'. She was into all kinds of puzzles and crosswords, so it doesn't surprise me that she would know about anagrams."

"But that's not a true anagram," Mike spoke up from where he was cleaning the burnt cheese from the bottom of the oven. This was the first non-muttered phrase anyone had heard him speak for the twenty minutes that he had been trying to mitigate the pizza-cooked-straight-on-the-oven-rack mess that had accumulated and been baked into semi-permanency. He stood and stretched the kinks from his back. "John' shouldn't be part of both the subject and its anagram. Here, let me show you."

Mike accepted the pencil and paper Chet offered him and wrote "ROY DESOTO". "We'll use Roy's name because shorter phrases are sometimes easier to anagram than really long ones. But too few letters will limit your possibilities. Give me a sec. here," Mike was back to muttering as he wrote a few letters, and paused for a moment. "There you go, a genuine anagram: 'Sooty Doer'. There's an old anagrammers' saying that describes it as 'torturing a poor word'. Anyway, you'd be surprised at what you can come up with."\*\*

Chet reached for the pad. "Whoa, that's kinda eerie. Wait 'till I show Roy. What do you suppose it could mean?"

"Me? I think it means that you mess around with something long enough, you can make it mean almost anything. And fair warning, guys: the next time anyone bakes something in that oven without using a pan to catch the drips, it better not be me that has to use a blow torch to remove the residue again."

"On that note of thinly veiled threat, I believe it's time to finish up the chores, gentlemen. Ladder drills at 1500..."

"Wait, wait, wait - your middle name's Antonio isn't it, Marco?" Chet lifted his head from the pad he'd been furiously scribbling on. He ripped off the bottom of the sheet and handed it to his fellow lineman with a flourish and a proud, "'No Aortic Moan', there you go, pal...you're healthy as a horse."

"Aortic moan? Come on man, they have to make sense. Do you mean aortic valve murmur? Chet, that is just lame." John shoved the mop into the bucket with a little too much force, and splashed dirty water on his clean floor. "Ah, man..."

"Look who's talkin', Mr. Any Egg."

"John, Chet," Cap interrupted in warning, just before the tones interrupted *him*.

*"Squad 51, child injured, Bonita Street Elementary School, 21929 Bonita Street. Twenty-one, nine, twenty-nine, Bonita. Cross street: E. 223rd Street. Time out: 1415.*

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No one had to ask for particulars on the run the paramedics had just returned from because John was supplying unsolicited details with hardly a breath taken between bullet points.

"It's a good thing that kid's x-rays are clear. Man, Roy, I was afraid his neck was broken. With his hands tingling and all, he still might have some permanent damage. What would that kid Parker have done if he had paralyzed his classmate with that little stunt?"

"Johnny, I..."

"What did he think would happen when he pulled that chair out from under his friend?"

"John, I don't..."

"He wasn't thinking at all, that's what - and on an elevated stage, no less. Did you get a look at his face? I think he looked sorry. Didn't you? Sorry and surprised. Roy, how the hell could he not have realized someone could get hurt?"

Roy didn't answer as they made their way into the kitchen. John turned back towards his partner, wondering why he had grown so silent.

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After a single day off, their next shift started out quietly enough, giving them a chance to fit in a few building inspections and Cap some time to make a fair dent in the stack of paperwork that always seemed to decorate his desk. He got up to stretch and lifted his coffee mug.

He walked into the kitchen. *Bloody hell, why couldn't he get his men to start a fresh pot as soon they drained the last?* He got the coffee can down off the middle shelf and set it none-too-gently on the counter. He turned to his crew in the day room, "I see it was 'good to the last drop' again..." Hank let his sarcasm die on his lips, since he was addressing the backs of four of his crew. He finished starting the coffee and then moved to see what had drawn the attention of the firemen lined up blocking his view of the couch.

"What's up, g-Ahh!" he ended in surprise as he performed an evasive maneuver. Henry had come barreling out from between Roy and Mike's legs. "What the devil has gotten into..." he started to ask, but again let the question trail off as the answer came lunging after the disappearing Bassett hound. "What in blue blazes is going on?" No one paused to enlighten their captain as the crowd followed the drama into the kitchen where Chet had cornered the dog against the back door.

"Chet, leave the dog alone before he bites you...what ARE you doing?" Hank asked in disbelief as Henry escaped once more to skitter past at an unheard of pace for a historically inert mass of dog flesh.

"Will someone please tell me what the heck is wrong with Henry? Or Chet? Why is Henry foaming at the mouth?" He was getting irritated at finding himself once again speaking to the backs of his men as they kept pace with the keystone-cop-like show that had moved out onto the apparatus bay.

Marco, wise man that he was, picked up on his captain's growing frustration.

"Chet decided the dog needed his teeth brushed, but Henry thinks Chet is loco. Who all agrees with Henry?" Four hands were raised. Hank abstained, not wanting to single out any one member of his crew of bedlamites.

"Shows what you guys know. I've been reading a book on dog care that says you should brush your dog's teeth to keep the tartar from building up. Dogs get gingivitis just like humans. And gingivitis causes bad breath. Have you gotten a whiff of Henry's lately? It could stop the engine."

Cap turned in silence. This time it was he who led the parade back into the kitchen. He settled into a chair and opened a section of the paper with an irritated snap. "Get him a bone to chew on. And find someone else to torture... no, scratch that..." Cap had to pause for a moment to think of something benign to occupy his pain-in-the-butt lineman to gain a few minutes of peace. "...go sit in that corner and work on your own anagram."

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Roy's eyes narrowed in suspicion as he gazed across the day room/kitchen area. Chet had moved his anagram-cooking lab to the blackboard, and Roy could make out a few of the letters of Cap's name in bold, block print. Relieved that their captain was again in his office, he moved to Chet's side to see what kind of mischief he was stirring.

Chet jumped when Roy startled him by coming up from behind. "Hey, Roy, get a look at how 'Captain Stanley' comes out. There's really something to this anagram stuff."

"You'd best keep this one to yourself," Roy said, keeping his voice down, as he lifted the eraser to obliterate Chet's handiwork.

"Hey! What's the big idea?"

"Look, you get Cap all riled up *again*, and this becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy. Then you get to do all the extra detail he dreams up in honor of this new mystical meaning you want to attach to his name."

Roy supervised as a pouting Chet took the eraser and finished wiping out "*Satanic Penalty*."

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It never hurt to have dinner waiting to pop in the oven if they caught a run. That was the reasoning Marco gave when he recruited Chet to help with the tuna casserole right after the lunch dishes were cleared. He had his back turned to Chet, who was sitting at the table chopping onion and celery with industry. Luckily, he wasn't noticing the apparent concentration it was taking for Marco to boil water.

Mike sat across the table facing the sous-chef and seemed engrossed in a paperback. He must have come to an amusing part, because he was smiling whenever Chet looked up.

Mike studiously kept his eyes on the page he hadn't turned for five minutes. A small grey form twitched its way from the corner of the kitchen, moseying along to the right of Chet's chair. Marco looked back at Mike and rolled his eyes at how long

it was taking Chet to notice their guest. In a bold move, Marco gave the fishing line he held a sharp jerk.

The little mouse leapt forward in a fair imitation of a springing attack.

Chet caught the movement out of the corner of his eye. With a startled exclamation, he stood, sending his chair backwards until it almost crashed into the backs of Marco's knees. His right arm swung wide and he lost his grip on the prep knife. That brought Mike leaping to his feet in alarm, only to settle back onto his chair once he saw where the knife had landed.

"Wha...?" Chet turned to Mike in confusion as Marco bent to retrieve the knife. "Mike, are you okay? What's wrong?" He reached to support his co-worker who had missed the edge of his chair and was now doubled over on the floor. He pulled back in dawning understanding when Mike lifted his head from his shaking shoulders.

Laughing, Marco carefully wiped at his tearing eyes with the back of the hand holding the knife. He held the rubber mouse up by its tail. "Well, Chet, now you've done it. You've gone and killed Herbert's little brother, I hope you're happy."

It took them several minutes to clean up the scattered vegetables, and re-chop some replacements. It didn't speed things up that every time Mike or Marco's eyes met they would break into snorts of laughter. Cap poked his head into the kitchen to find out what was a-foot. Chet finally stomped off when they couldn't even get through the re-telling of the tale without having to pause to take great gasps of air.

Roy and John had just stepped out of the squad, and exchanged a look of concern as Chet brushed by them on his way to the bunk room, muttering something about hyenas and knives. Cap paused outside of his office, chuckling. Somewhat less concerned that Chet was any more deranged than usual, they turned to head for the washroom, needing to clean up after their last run.

When the tones sounded a moment later, six men scrambled from all corners of the station.

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Principal Pomeroy met them at the curb and escorted Captain Stanley to the front steps where they were met by Lieutenant Bragg of the LA County Sheriff's Department. Roy and John instantly gravitated towards the distraught woman who turned out to be the missing child's mother. The child turned out to be Parker Tellyson.

While their captain and paramedics dealt with those fronts, 51's engine crew stood with Ms. Franklin and waited for their assignments. The teacher was pacing in a tight circle but all-in-all she was keeping it together.

"Karen, stop," Chet touched her arm to halt the motion. "You're making me dizzy. Tell us what you know so we can help."

The distracted woman ran a hand through her already abused hair. "I don't know what happened. He was there," she pointed to an area of blacktop that ran up to the side of the brick building, "playing dodge ball during recess. It started to rain again, so I made them all come back inside. It wasn't until the class settled down after getting their wet things hung up that I missed him. He isn't anywhere, we've checked *everywhere*. What if someone took him? We called his mom, and he didn't go home, he's not playing at the neighbors..." a single sob escaped before she took a ragged breath and then another.

Marco's arms itched to reach out to her, but instead he turned to see what was holding back the fireman beside him. Mike was giving Chet an exaggerated "what-are-you-waiting-for-help-her" look, but it took a shove to the shoulder to jump-start him.

"Come on, Karen. You know kids - he's probably just ditching class and once we find him, you can make him write he's sorry about a bazillion times in chalk."

Both Mike and Marco thought that the woman was in need of a hug; both wondered why it was taking Chet so long to offer it. Finally, their uncharacteristically *hesitant*? crew mate reached to give her shoulder a gentle squeeze. A speculative look was exchanged before their captain signaled them to join him.

They were each sent off in different directions to re-search the interior of the building: locker rooms - both boys' and girls', behind the bleachers, the offices, bathrooms, closets and all the classrooms. The weather had turned, and they moved outside into the sheeting rain as dusk began to fall.

Squad 51 was called out on a possible cardiac, just as a local news team arrived. The searchers ceded the area under the school's overhanging roof to the reporters to set up for taping, giving them a wide berth as they waited further orders.

"This is Roger Steins, reporting live for KNBC." The reporter was facing the school; the cameraman framed him against the background of the now dark playground. "Tonight, LA County sheriffs and firefighters, along with area school officials are searching for a lost child. Parker Tellyson, a fourth grader at Bonita Street Elementary School went missing at about 1:30 this afternoon. Parker is nine years old, four feet, six inches tall and weighs sixty-five pounds. He has brown hair and brown eyes." The cameraman moved to follow as the reporter turned slightly and continued. "He was wearing jeans and a blue and green striped polo shirt. Anyone

with any information on this missing boy should call the LA County Sheriff Department." The camera panned at a measured pace across the staging area of the emergency vehicles, past milling searchers to rest on the figure of a distraught mother, huddled in a thin raincoat.

"Come on, men, we're back in service," Captain Stanley called as he approached his engine crew. They had moved from where he had last seen them standing under the partial shelter offered by a brick wall to where they currently stood exposed to wind and rain. He knew instantly what they were up to and parted the wall of turnout coats to address Mrs. Tellyson. Karen Franklin stood close with a supporting arm across the weeping woman's back.

"Ma'am, we'll be with the engine. We can patrol the neighborhood streets and still respond as needed if we get called out on a run. There are several teams on foot going door-to-door. We'll keep looking, Mrs. Tellyson, I promise. Why don't you and Ms. Franklin wait inside? You'll be more comfortable, and that way we'll know where to reach you."

Karen gently turned her charge toward the school's glass doors and employed the subtle herding maneuvers Chet had seen her use on students. His captain stepped back out into the rain and each of his men moved to follow.

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Half an hour later, they received a call to return to the school from where they were trolling the streets to the south. On the way back, they learned via a radio conversation with Lieutenant Bragg that Parker had been found locked in the boiler room. The squad pulled up just as Marco and Mike were placing chocks behind the engine's wheels.

A relieved principal met the engine crew with the details while Roy and John gave the boy a quick exam.

It had been Mr. Anderson, the same overall-wearing janitor they had met two days ago that discovered him. The kid might have been locked in, but he had made himself at home, helping himself to what was left of Mr. Anderson's lunch, and settling in for the duration. He'd been found with his feet up, watching the small television set Mr. Anderson kept for use during his lunch breaks.

"I'll bet I can guess the reason Parker didn't bother to call for help," John announced as he stowed the boxes in a side compartment of the squad.

Roy turned from where he'd been keeping an eye on Parker and his mom. She hadn't let go of the boy since the moment they'd been reunited. It had been easy enough to get a set of vitals while she held her son's hand. He wondered how long it would be before she could force herself to let it go. When the father in him started to wonder how he would react in her place, he wrestled his thoughts back to the safer, though not necessarily saner, musings of his partner.

"...and I'd be willing to risk some serious cash on my theory that he was hoping to get those kids that locked him up into *really* big trouble."

Roy smiled at the thought of what John might consider "serious cash" just as a dispatcher's voice came over the HT asking if they were available. Roy waved to catch Cap's eye and signaled that he and John were back in service.

Cap waved as his paramedics left the parking lot under strobing lights with siren wailing. He turned for a head count and noted Ms. Franklin and Chet had moved off to the side for a quiet conversation. *Well*, he amended, *maybe "not-so-quiet" and more of a "one-sided venting session"*. Parker's mother might be overcome with relief that she had her son back in her arms, but it seemed his fourth grade teacher was struggling with the decision of whether or not to let the nine-year-old prodigal live to be ten. He wouldn't be surprised if she had to make that same choice on a daily basis.

"We've got to stop meeting like this," he told two-thirds of his engine crew as he joined them by the rig. He wasn't the only one who witnessed a scribbled exchange of slips of paper.

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Mike walked into the station his usual half-an-hour early. He just didn't understand why John had never caught onto the technique.

You could get a lot accomplished over a leisurely cup of coffee: catch up with the guys on C-shift, get a handle on important change of shift events - specifically, the phantom managing his trap lines.

Some days, Chet spent as much time disabling traps to use another day as he did in setting them in the first place. He juggled them in response to how a targeted crew mate's day was going. He brought pranking up to the level of honed finesse that a less involved observer would miss. Mike thought all of A-shift was aware of it on some level. It was an education in the evolution of technique and what Chet obviously considered an art form.

Chet would wander in and set at least one, some times as many as three or four. Sometimes, he would refrain from setting up anything for several shifts in a row. Mike assumed this was an effort to allow his marks to settle back into complacency.

The engineer placed the stapler full of party poppers on Cap's desk. Chet made it easy to fly under the radar. Mike agreed whole-heartedly that there was an element of artistry to it. He was nowhere near the office when the rest of A-shift trickled in.

Marco arrived in plenty of time to unwrap his duct-tape-encased locker and make it to roll call with minutes to spare.

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Chet entered the empty kitchen for a cup of coffee before beginning his assigned chores. He turned to inspect the open cigar box someone had left on the table. A familiar rubber mouse was laid out in state, nestled on a bed of tissue, a bouquet of tiny silk flowers held in its claws. (Upon closer inspection, Chet discovered the judicious application of super glue apparently strengthened its little mousie grip.) He took a sip from his steaming mug as he considered the little corpse. He reached to rotate the box to a better angle to read a note taped to the inside of its hinged lid.

## Ode to Sir Mouse

Gone but not forgotten, survived by Herbert Mouse

*He never knew what struck him; what tool of death Chet flung.*

*It came from out of nowhere; he ended life too young.*

*Chet's throwing arm was girly; his aim was weak and frail.*

*Sir Mouse died not from knife or fright, but from Chet's shrieking wail.*

Chet lifted his mug again. After a healthy swallow, he set it on the counter. He had  
hose to hang.

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Two hours later, John leaned back, hands stacked behind his head, basking in not  
being the current target of the phantom. Marco had just found his missing dress  
uniform hat in the freezer, frozen in a solid block of ice.

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The squad was called out several times, and the engine had a rubbish fire. It was  
early afternoon before both rigs were dispatched to the same scene. Captain  
Stanley had the HT to his ear 30 seconds after they entered the main entrance.  
"LA County, this is Engine 51, we're going to need another company and another  
squad at our location, over."

"Ten-Four, Engine 51, dispatching Truck 96 and Squad 45 to your location at  
20700 Avalon Boulevard, Southbay Pavilion Mall," Sam Lanier's muffled voice  
came over the HT which had already been shoved into a turnout pocket. Hank's  
men followed him into the chaos at the base of the escalators.

He counted eleven people of varying ages sitting or lying down with a growing  
crowd of more than two dozen milling amongst them. Roy and John were already  
moving from person to person, beginning triage. Hank's gaze flew from the scene  
at the base of the stairs to the one at the top and rested on the escalator steps  
themselves.

"Unbelievable," he muttered. People actually seemed to still be using the stalled  
steps as a viable path between the ground floor and second level of the mall.  
"Marco, second level, take the elevator. See what you can do about crowd control  
from up there. Chet, give Roy and John a hand. Mike you get the stairs. Get those  
fools off and..." Hank's eyes narrowed as the moving people parted. His engineer  
was taking the steps two at a time before Hank could send him.

Mike reached the teenager just as the escalator made a shudder and a feint at moving. "Cap!?" Mike shouted, knowing without looking back that a hand was already reaching to flip the emergency off switch.

He moved to take the place of the two men trying to free the girl's hair from where it was caught in the handrail. The steps below them gave another threat. "Up or down, guys - you choose, but you need to get off this thing *now*. And do me a favor, take these other folk with you."

Wide, frightened eyes met his. "Hi there, I'm Mike. Try to relax a bit for me. I've got you." And he did, if only he could get his hip under her thighs and...grunt...brace her...like... that. "So, just hanging out at the mall?" He got the hoped for response when the teen let out a giggle. Mike moved slightly to straighten her against the clear balustrade, just under the rail. He lifted his right hand a bit to keep her head in alignment and take some of the tension off her hair. "Better?" he asked.

"A little. Wh-what happened?"

"It's hard to say. 'Looks like a bunch of people fell down the steps, but your hair kept you from joining them. Did the escalator stop suddenly?'"

"Yeah, everyone was falling. I think I got pushed. My hair was all over the place, and then..." she finished her tale with a cryptic eye roll towards the back of her pinned head.

"Hey Mike, need a hand? How's the shoulder holding up?"

"It's fine, Chet. This is just an awkward angle."

"Just checking. Cap sent a message. He wants you to know that if your shoulder is bugging you, you'd better fess up now because if he finds out after-the-fact that you've re-injured it, a sore shoulder will be the least of your worries. You move up a bit, I'll brace her from down here."

Mike made an effort to smooth the features of his face.

"You formulate any kind of a plan on how to free Rapunzel's locks, or are we gonna go the route of the newest, *cutting edge* fashion?"

Chet's effort at subtlety was a wasted one. It took her half a heartbeat to register what this new fireman was suggesting before she began to protest, *loudly*. "Not my hair, not my hair, you can't cut my hair, you can't."

When she began to hyperventilate, Mike glared at Chet. "*Smooth move, dipshit,*" Mike mouthed over her head.

"Wow," she paused in wonder. "My fingers and toes are tingling."

"That's because you need to take slower, deeper breaths." *Lord, he hoped that was the reason, and not some stealthy nerve injury.* "Here, breathe with me," After twisting a bit to make eye contact, he took an exaggerated, shoulder-lifting breath. "With me now..."

"But my hair!"

"How 'bout you just concentrate on breathing for now. Chet was right about the shorter hair styles that are coming in style. Some of them are really cute. You'd better give us your name, or else he'll keep calling you 'Rapunzel.'"

"It's Dana. Please don't cut my hair!"

"Take a deep breath, Dana," Mike ordered before turning his head in Chet's direction. "Do you know what the damage is down there?"

"They're still sorting through the carnage, but Roy says one broken wrist, a collarbone, and several nasty abrasions. The worst is an elderly gal with a broken hip. Gage is going in with her and 45's paramedics are helping sort the rest. 'Looks like they're transporting five total so far.' Chet answered in a strained voice as he changed his grip to adjust for Dana's sliding weight.

"Told you," Mike grunted, as he too shifted his bracing stance. "Not as easy as it looks, is it?" He scanned the scene above and below, his eyes met another searching gaze. He remembered to paste what he hoped would pass as a reassuring, *pain-free*, look on his face.

Chet looked over his shoulder as a hand came to rest on his back. "Pat Driscoll, out of 96, how can I help?"

"Pat, could you call to see if one of the paramedics could come on up? I'm thinking they may want to put a C-collar on her before we move her much more. Have them bring..." Mike paused to make a scissors motion with the fingers of his hand behind her neck, "...anything they think they'll need."

Pat nodded and moved away, after Chet and Mike shifted yet again to keep supporting her. "How you doing?"

"Just fine, as long as no one tries to cut my hair. You won't let them, will you Mike?"

Mike blew out his cheeks in indecision and decided to err on the side of honesty.

"We'll do what we can, but I think you know that there's a real possibility that we might have to cut some of your hair to get you free. I can't seem to get it loose, but we'll have one of the paramedics take a look and see what he thinks." Mike paused when Dana seemed to be revving up for a bit more hyperventilation.

"How much?! How much do you think they'll have to take off?!"

"As little as possible, I promise." Mike eyed the length of hair that remained untangled and chose to keep any estimates on the vague side. "Look, I know this is hard, but hair grows. And you might even like it and decide to keep it shorter. But the bottom line is, we have to get you free and to do that, we might have to cut your hair." Mike moved yet again to ease the strain on his muscles, careful to keep his expression in check, but he almost grinned. He had injured his left shoulder weeks earlier; it was his right that was beginning to object to its current abuse.

Chet's eyes narrowed in assessment. "Say, Pat, we could use a hand here. You know, Dana, Dorothy Hamill wears her hair short in that wedgie-cut thing-y. I see plenty of teenagers wearing their hair short these days." Pat stepped in to share the lion's portion of the weight with Chet.

"Hey, guys, what've we got?" Roy asked as he climbed the last steps to their position. He leaned to get a look and reached to swiftly feel the vertebrae along the back of her neck. "It seems okay, but that was a good call, Mike," he said after he removed the C-collar from where he'd been gripping it in his teeth during his assessment. "Here, move your hand just a bit, there - got it." He moved to crouch at eye level in front of the girl and the three firemen who held her pinned in place.

"Hi, my name's Roy." He reached up under her head and followed the strands to where they disappeared under the black rubber of the handrail. "Well, I'm sorry, sweetie, but I think the only way we're going to get you free is to cut some of your hair."

Tears streamed down her face and dripped onto Mike's boot.

"She'll be okay, won't you, Dana?" Mike tried faking his most optimistic attitude. He was a little surprised when she took a wavering breath and said in a small hitched voice, "O-okay. It'll grow back."

"Atta girl." Roy pulled a pair of trauma shears out of a pocket.

Other than a bad haircut, Roy thought she was going to be alright. But it seemed Dana was suffering from a serious crush and wouldn't release Mike's hand. At the foot of the escalator, the engineer mounted a valiant effort but he was having little luck managing a self extrication.

Cap finally took pity and firmly pulled Mike's hand out of her grasp. "Miss, I need to borrow my engineer for a moment." Hank took her hand and tucked it by her side in the Stokes basket. "One of the paramedics here will be riding in the back of the ambulance with you, and your parents are going to meet you at the hospital." Cap sent Mike off with a backward gesture of his head much to the pouting dismay of the young lady. Mike didn't need more encouragement than that to make good his escape.

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At dinner that night, Cap dumped half of a cup of ketchup on his tater tots from a cap-loosened bottle. Without comment, he reached over the table to exchange plates with a chagrined phantom.

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Mike dropped a slip of paper on top of the magazine Marco was reading while the rest of the crew watched *The Bob Newhart Show*. "Here, this is a better one; it beats 'no aortic moan' anyway."

Marco smiled as he read *Am Into Corona*. "This deserves compensation. Are you free tomorrow night? There's a dart tournament going on at The Crest over in Torrance. A couple of the guys from 36 are doing pretty well. I'll buy you a beer and we can cheer on our compadres."

"Lights out in fifteen" Cap announced, setting aside the book he'd been reading. "I guess you'll just have to content yourself with tamer stuff until you can live up to your new nickname tomorrow night, Corona," he teased as he stood to start his nighttime ritual of putting the station to bed.

---

The morning showed a lot of promise after following a rare night of no runs. All six members of the crew, in various stages of undress, were gathered in the locker room changing, while B-shift gathered out in the bay for roll call. Cap finished dressing first and with a casual salute, headed out the door.

"So, Chet, got any interesting plans for our four days off?" Marco innocently asked, but not without shooting the other guys a significant look that gave them a heads up that the answer might be worth hearing.

"That Parker needs to learn some comic timing as well as when to put the brakes on." Chet tried a redirection, a technique all the guys recognized the moment he employed it. "I'm going to meet him after school and give him some tips."

"Yeah, Chet, it wouldn't have anything to do with trying to impress his pretty fourth grade teacher, now, would it?" A relentless Marco brought the conversation back to where he intended it to head.

John, deciding to join Marco's steering committee, leaned out of his locker with a "Don't tell me you're letting a pretty face talk you into adopting that juvenile delinquent?"

Mike and Roy leaned against the wall to enjoy the show.

"Hey don't go labeling me a softy. The kid is giving heckling and pranking a bad rep. He already has a rap sheet of misdemeanors longer than my arm. And we're not just talking swapping name tags when there's a substitute. He put blue food dye on the hand rails and Karen, ah, Ms. Franklin said several of the students ended up looking like smurfs.

"I figure I'm doing humanity and both you and Roy a favor. Someone is gonna try and murder Parker, and I don't want you two to have to respond to the grizzly scene." Chet's hand traced a path across an imaginary screen. "'Classmates force irritating tyke to swallow his own rubber vomit, paramedics in counseling...news at eleven.'"

John turned from closing his locker, his own hand tracing an arching path. "Tonight's profile: Chester B. - the man who will do anything for a date."

"And what if Karen Franklin did ask me to speak to him? Somebody's got to make the kid see that most of what he's been doing is no joke."

John shook his head in mock amazement. "Chet as a coach on sensitivity and taste, not to mention restraint - now that is something I never thought I'd see."

Marco thought the conversation was drifting from the more interesting details of Chet's love life. "So, Chet, when's your first date?"

Chet ignored the question. "Still, the kid's got the makings of a first class comedian. He spent a couple of weeks teaching the first graders to insert 'Walt Disney' as a president of the United States right between John Tyler and James K. Polk. Somehow the teacher didn't catch it before the school's Washington's Birthday assembly. Capitalizing on Gage's puzzled look, he added, "They were the tenth and eleventh..."

"Yeah, like *you* knew that before you were dating an elementary school teacher."

"Hey, don't knock the value of private lessons, Gage."

Roy bent to pick up his duffel bag. "Chet, only you would consider "class clown" as a legitimate and worthy answer to the question 'what do you want to be when you grow up?'"

Chet picked up his own bag and joined the small pack moving toward the door.

Once they reached the parking lot and started to split off in different directions, Chet cleared his throat and spoke up while he had the chance. "Speaking of careers, I'm dropping by Karen's class the Friday after next, for career day. How about one of you joining me to represent the fine profession of paramedic-ing?"

"Not me, Chet." John called as he climbed into the Rover. "I get enough of grade schoolers every time it's my turn to do a station tour. And I've seen enough of *Bonita* these past few weeks to last the rest of the year."

"How about you, Roy? You're good with kids. I'll even throw in lunch."

Roy opened the passenger door to his Porsche and tossed his bag on the seat. "As long as it isn't in the school cafeteria, you're on."

Marco turned to his friend as they made their way to their respective cars. "So, when is your next hot date with Ms. Karen Franklin?"

---

Parker met him at the door to Karen's classroom the following Tuesday after school let out. Chet raised a disbelieving eyebrow when the kid held out his hand. The sensation of his palm buzzing was only mildly annoying, and the only reaction Chet had to really rein in was the temptation to laugh in the short amateur's face. He followed Parker into the room, where the kid slumped into a student's desk, and Chet contented himself with leaning a hip against a low bookcase.

Karen turned with a smile that Chet mentally added to the plus side of this whole scenario. "Thanks for coming, Mr. Kelly. We both appreciate it, don't we, Parker?" Chet wasn't sure how she did it, but she managed to *not* make that sentence sound as irritating as it should have been.

Even Parker responded to the gentle suggestion, albeit with a not-so-sweet response of "Sure" chased with a withering glare behind her back.

Chet let the silence between them lay.

"I've got to go run some copies...you two make nice, I'll be right back." Karen paused to lay a hand on his arm and gave him an understanding smile before she left. Chet let that tip the scales heavily in favor of pushing ahead.

"So, Ms Franklin tells me you like practical jokes."

"Like you'd even be interested in me if she hadn't asked. This is just detention disguised as a session with a really lame Big-Brother wanna-be."

"You might be right there, kid. She must see something in you worth redeeming. Personally, I don't see the draw."

Chet watched in silence as the kid pulled out the remnants of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich from his desk and strolled across to another desk two rows over. He held his tongue as Parker painstakingly transferred the filling to the under-edges of the lift-up desk top, being very meticulous about spreading an even layer. He didn't comment as the young criminal turned towards him in an obvious dare and shoved what remained of his makeshift trowel into his mouth.

"But I did promise her I'd talk to you, so here goes."

---

By the time Ms. Franklin returned, Parker had resumed his resentful slouch, arms across his chest. She waited in the doorway and listened as Chet held a one-sided conversation.

"The point is to be able to take pride in a prank well played. In the end, it's supposed to be fun, for everyone involved. Look kid, it's never funny if someone gets hurt - even if it's only their feelings - even if it was an accident."

"Hey, you two, having a nice talk? Parker, I just saw your mom pull up. You can go now. See you tomorrow morning."

Karen moved back towards her desk after following the nine-year-old to the door. Chet caught the vaguely sweet-solvent-y scent of the stack of dittos she still held as she turned away from him to begin to sort the pages by arranging them across the front row of students' desks. Ducking her head, she wasn't quite quick enough to hide her worry and disappointment. "Thank you for trying. He isn't really the irredeemable delinquent he made sure you met just now. I was just hoping you could get through to him..." Karen jumped, startled by the sound of two erasers being clapped together behind her back. Schooling her face, she looked over her shoulder at an unrepentant Chet.

"You need all this erased, Teacher? Or do you want me to leave the slave roster?"

Karen gave an exaggerated sigh and looked pointedly at the fine white cloud settling on the linoleum floor at the feet of the over-grown kid before her. "You're supposed to do that *outside*, Chester B," she scolded in mock-sternness. "Leave the spelling list too, please." She turned back to her task with a smile on her face, which translated into a satisfied grin on Chet's.

---

The next afternoon, Chet parked his sister's Chevy Impala, borrowed for his first date with Karen, in a visitor's space at the elementary school. He adjusted the mirror to check his reflection and make sure nothing was caught in his front teeth. He reached over and poofed the flowers he had picked up. Taking a bracing breath, he stepped onto the curb.

His eyes narrowed as he caught sight of Parker loitering on the front steps of the school, just waiting to pounce. Granted, it was just after the final bell had rung; the kiddlet-hordes were still dispersing. The little hooligan might have the legit excuse of waiting for another ride, but Chet's money was on the convenient heckling opportunities as a primary motive behind the kid's choice of his current position.

*He'd hit that nail right on the head.*

"Chet and Karen sittin' in a tree, K-I-S..."

"First off, that's Ms. Franklin to you, you little smart ass," Chet said in an even tone. "And secondly, you keep her off your 'to-prank-list', hear me? She's about the best friend you've got at this school - heck, from what I can tell she might be the *only* friend you've got. You ought to take note and be grateful. Either way, you need to treat her with the respect she deserves. You got that?"

The boy backed down the steps with a nonchalant air. "Yeah, I got it. You kids have fun now. Don't stay out too late. *Ms. Franklin* has class in the morning."

Chet shook his head in warning at the retreating boy. The kid was relentless. *It could be worse. He could belong to Karen.* That one thought was enough to make him close his eyes in what was, perhaps, an irreverent prayer of gratitude. It was bad enough that she was his teacher. *I should send his mom a sympathy card for having drawn the short straw.* He let the thought go as he levered one of the school's glass doors open.

---

"How did your little chat with Parker go the other day, Chet?" Marco called from where he sat in the day room.

"Man, that kid is annoying. No wonder lions eat their young," Chet answered as he stepped further into the kitchen. "The little shit is out of control. Do you know he tried to get some second graders to drink a cup of his pee last week?" Chet pulled his head out of the refrigerator, not having found anything tempting inside.

Mike smiled in sympathy as he listened to Chet vent. "Discover any anagrams, lately?" he asked, thinking Chet needed to concentrate on something that wouldn't raise his blood pressure.

"Ooooh, yeah." Chet got a proverbial wicked gleam in his eye. "John Roderick Gage" transforms magically into 'a doggone rich jerk.' How cool is that?"

John, highly affronted at Chet's idea of magic stood up from the table where he and Roy had slips of paper laid out, chronicling their busy morning. Roy stayed seated as he entered another run into the log book. John faced Chet with a hand spread on his chest. "Me? I'm not rich. And I'm not a jerk." He turned to Mike. "Has anyone ever called me a jerk?"

"No, but other than that, Chet, it's not a bad anagram. Longer subjects are a lot harder to get to come out perfectly." Mike chose his words carefully, planning to remain perched as comfortably on the fence as possible.

"He probably had help." John said, on the outside chance that it might be true. "You take some more private lessons from a certain fourth grade teacher, Chet?"

"A gentleman never tells."

"Which is why I felt comfortable asking *you*."

Chet turned away from John. "If you liked that one, Mike, you're gonna love this next one. 'Michael Stoker' anagrams to 'storm-like ache'."

Roy gave a snort without looking up from the log book. "That sounds like the title of one of the cheesy romance novels my mother-in-law reads all the time."

"I think it sounds like something that a swooning teenager would go all gaga over. Mike, you know the one. Remember - from that escalator escapade last weekend, the one you had to hide from - in the engine cab, so that they could load her in the ambulance without a scene. Don't tell me you've already forgotten? Stoker! I never would have pegged you as a love 'em and..." Chet's voice trailed off as Mike demonstrated that he was in fact a "leave 'em" type of guy.

A minute later they heard the bay doors open and then the sound of the engine being backed out to stop on the cement apron behind the station.

Roy closed the log book and set it aside. "Cap, Johnny and I should be taking off for that protocol review at Rampart."

Hank nodded toward his paramedics as they headed out the door to the apparatus floor.

"On that note, Marco, Chet, time to join Mike in cleaning up the rig after that last run."

Mike was working on the driver's side and saluted Roy and John with a soapy cleaning rag as they climbed into the squad. He returned to working on the lower section behind the front wheel. They had driven through a side lot to get to a hydrant blocked by illegally parked vehicles. The continuing rains had saturated the ground, so it had been a messy endeavor to access and hook up to the hydrant and put out the smoldering fire in one of the-soon-to-be-ticketed vehicles.

Chet grabbed a rag to start on the passenger's side while Marco stretched the garden hose attached to the back of the station around to the rear.

"Geeze, Mikey, did you have to drive straight through every mud puddle?"

"That entire lot *was* a mud puddle. I suppose I could have driven over a few of those jerks' cars, but that might've put a scratch in her paint. Plus, Cap would have had to fill out a pile of paperwork, and well, washing off mud is easier to face. And don't call me Mikey."

The chatter died for a moment as the three men settled into a companionable silence.

Mike turned as an arm reached past him to engage a control on the pump panel at his right elbow. His eyes widened in understanding...just before he heard the sound of water rushing out of the hookups on the other side of the engine...followed by the outraged shout of dismay from Chet which settled into an angry, indignant sputter.

Cap paused long enough to give his astonished engineer a challenging look, a "that's how it's done, Stoker" kind of look. Then with a triumphant smile, he ducked away and crossed the apparatus floor to the office.

Mike stood frozen for a moment, considering his captain and wondering where exactly he had slipped up with the booby-trapped stapler. He turned to face Chet's irateness as the lineman rounded the front of the rig. Marco followed on his heels and gave Mike a congratulatory "thumbs up" behind Chet's back. Mike stood, letting the vocal tirade wash over him and shook his head as a dripping Chet stomped off to change uniforms. He considered once again the door that Cap had disappeared through. *Yep, it was a fine art.*

---

Cap walked into the kitchen as the guys were clearing lunch. "Change of plans boys. The hydrants on East Renton will have to wait. We're going on a field trip to Bonita. Chief McConikee just called and he has had enough of that student body's shenanigans. C-shift had another alarm there yesterday; this time it was a smoke bomb. It tied up three companies, a chief and a squad. While all fingers point to Parker Tellyson as the most likely suspect, there is no concrete proof. The chief wants me to have another chat with the principal while the five of you each take one of the upper classes and have a heart to heart with the students. You'll be splitting up six classes: two fourth, two fifth and two sixth. Combine the two fifth grade classes - they just happen to have a few less kids. Figure out among yourselves who gets which class. Let's go, gentlemen. You can write your speeches on the way."

They each bulled their way through a half hour of reciting directions on when and how to appropriately avail oneself of the services of the fire department. After fielding a wide range of questions, they followed the classes out to recess, ready for one of their own.

Roy and John headed for the squad, Mike for the engine.

"Madre Mia, what a macabre bunch of twelve-year-olds!" Marco exclaimed once they were out of ear-shot. "You wouldn't believe the conversation I just had about whether I've ever seen a person get burned alive. I think I might be traumatized for life. I could collect state industrial."

"There, there, Marco," Cap soothed with a sweet grin. "I'm sure you handled the little tykes' questions with grace and aplomb. And do you have any idea how much time I have to invest every time one of you gets injured on the job? Sorry, but this is definitely one of those situations where the phrase 'no blood, no foul' applies. Show me the marks before you claim those sweet little innocents dealt you an injury."

Marco huffed a humorless laugh before moving to join Mike. Hank's Spanish was unequal to translating the mutterings that drifted back from that direction, but he smiled at being able to catch the gist. He turned to his other lineman who was practically bouncing in place to get his captain's attention.

"Is it okay if I go and have a chat with Parker?"

Hank stopped himself from asking if Chet needed a hall pass, thinking they'd all been spending way too much time hanging out at a certain elementary school. He sent Chet on his way; someone had to get through to the kid. He walked over to a group of teachers standing with Dale Pomeroy.

Captain Stanley looked up from his conversation and took inventory. The squad had left the school's parking lot five minutes ago on another run. He scanned for the positions of his three men still at the school. Mike and Marco were holding up the front, left bumper of the engine and Chet had taken a detour and was in conference with a certain fourth grade teacher. The captain rolled his eyes before turning back to shake Dale's hand. He'd be inviting the man over for dinner if they saw much more of each other. It wasn't that he didn't like the guy, he just considered it ironic that the foundation of their relationship was based on trying to figure out how *not* to have to keep getting together over the one thing they had in common.

He joined Mike and Marco at their post while Chet moved off with that 'one thing' firmly grasped by the back of his neck for a brief conference.

---

The next afternoon, Chet marked his score after he picked up the spare. He decided not to call it when Parker crossed the foul line as he sent his ball down the lane. He was not going to mention the shiner the kid sported over his left eye either. He'd wait and ask Karen about it when he picked her up for dinner.

Since it was a Friday afternoon, the bowling alley was getting fairly crowded. The lane to their right was still empty, which was a good thing since the kid had already had two of his balls jump over the dividing rail.

Parker pulled a crumpled brown paper sack from his back pack. Taking one, he offered Chet the second Oreo. Nodding his thanks, Chet popped the cookie into his mouth as he swung his arm back. His forward swing went wide and he threw his first gutter ball in months after he bit down on a mouth full of toothpaste.

"Nice, kid," he said after he spit the foamy black crumbs into his palm. He would have loved to throw a strike with his second ball, but he left one pin standing.

"As I was saying, there is a fine balance you are trying for. You want to pace yourself so that no one comes to expect it, and you want to keep a low enough profile that the 'powers that be' pretty much leave you to operate in peace. And again, the point is for everybody to have fun - even if it takes awhile for your mark to appreciate the genius of a finely executed prank."

"Watch your toes; you keep stepping over the foul line." Chet grimaced as he took a drink of pop. There was nothing like cola to chase the minty fresh taste of toothpaste framed by chocolate.

"Yeah, like I'm sure when you have a fast one pulled over on you, you turn around and congratulate the guy who just zinged you."

"I only *wish* I could pull off a response that smooth. No, you're right. It does usually take a bit of time and distance for the victim of a truly great gag to gain the proper perspective." Chet threw a split and then missed the spare.

"Okay. For example, the guys at the station really had me going once by all working together to convince me I was losing my eyesight. They set up flickering lights, pretended to see stuff that wasn't there and made sure they were able to call out the smallest numbers on an eye chart because they had cheat sheets. For a bunch of rank amateurs, they did a decent job of executing a pretty complex prank. Even our captain was in on it. I couldn't admit it at the time, but that was a work of pure evil genius."

"I heard one of the other firemen call you Chester B. What's the 'B' stand for?"

"B."

Parker split, then threw another gutter ball.

"My middle name starts with an "N", wanna know what it is?"

"Not particularly."

Chet marked his last frame, a strike. "147 to 62. I win. Ms. Franklin tells me Bonita's got a home basketball game Sunday afternoon. You want to catch it with me?" He bent to zip his bowling ball into its bag. "Make sure you tuck the laces in before you hand the gal your shoes. I think this must be her first day on the job. She looked flustered enough without having to deal with untying knots."

---

Roy nonchalantly checked the lid of the salt shaker before up-ending it over his bowl of soup.

"Chet," John began, while keeping an eye on his shift mates' reactions as they started to eat. No one was making a gasping dash to the sink to rinse their mouth out yet. John took his own cautionary taste. It seemed okay. "Dwyer mentioned at shift change that they had a run to Bonita yesterday morning to patch Parker Tellyson up after a fist fight. Got any details?"

"Yeah, here's the rest of the story..." Chet reached for the salt shaker, pretended to use it and then deftly re-loosened it one-handed before he replaced it on the table. Mike, having followed the shaker's path with interest, thought it was a bit like keeping track of the pea in a shell game. Cap thought it was time to go on a salt-free diet. Having used his "pause for dramatic effect" to its full potential, Chet continued. "Parker teased an overweight kid when he couldn't finish running laps in PE. The kid ended up in tears and his friends lit into Parker. Karen says that on top of getting the snot beat out of himself, he came away with an even bigger chip on his shoulder."

"Last week some of the older kids gave him a swirly. You remember those? Where they hold you upside down with your head in a toilet and flush it."

"Personal experience there, pal? Is this some kind of traditional payback for pranks-played that we should all know about?"

"Ah, no, Cap, I've never had actual up close and personal experience of that nature with a toilet bowl. I was fast in fourth grade. Plus, even back then, I had an innate sense of comedy that this kid can't seem to grasp, that and a finely honed sense of self-preservation. I'm just gifted, I guess."

"Yeah, Chet, you're a regular idiot savant when it comes to comic genius," John muttered in an aside pitched for all to hear.

Chet sent the requisite glare in Gage's direction, but he was warming to his subject and let the paramedic's comment go unchallenged, merely filing it in the mental folder labeled "payback due," before continuing.

"Parker is just *that* kid in school. You know - the one that gets picked on by the class bullies. It's partly because he's an easy target: the skinny, geeky kid who doesn't fit into any of the usual crowds. His dad died in an auto accident three years ago, and he and his mom have moved a few times since then."

"Don't get me wrong. The kid has some real issues. Sometimes he deserves to get sand kicked in his face. And if he doesn't stop thinking of new ways to set off a fire alarm, I'll be standing in line to put him head first into a garbage can. But seriously, guys, the kid needs to grab a clue before he ends up drowning in a toilet."

---

Parker offered Chet some of the Cheetos he was munching on as they watched the beginning of the basketball game from half way up the nearly empty bleachers. Chet declined with a disbelieving snort.

"Suit yourself," the kid finished them off as the other team's post guard got the tip-off, sending it into a guard's hands who then neatly turned and put two points on the board from the top of the key.

Chet turned to Parker and made his own opening salvo. "Parker, pulling a fire alarm or setting a stink bomb are not just harmless pranks."

"You just think that cuz you'd rather hang out and be lazy and watch TV all day at the fire station."

"No, I think *that*, because every once in a while, we *lazy* firemen get called out on a bogus run and someone who really needs us has to wait while we get things sorted out..." Chet made himself pause for the few moments it took to refrain from overreacting to the insult. "...or some punk pulls a chair out from under another kid who really gets hurt, or someone else is hurt being shoved in a locker, or a garbage can or having his head flushed down a toilet."

He paused again, realizing he was really on a roll with this mini rant. The point guard of other team made a full court drive to the basket.

He pressed on. "What part of this don't you get? It's not funny when property gets destroyed or someone gets hurt, even if it's just their feelings. It's no excuse to claim you didn't mean it after the fact."

Parker, true to form, sat silent staring straight ahead as Bonita passed the ball in from a side line.

"Man, this is important. This is *key*. You make fun of the wrong thing, like who someone is *in here*," Chet tapped his own chest, "...or something they can't change, something maybe they would change if they could... If you make someone feel little - even if it's because you just didn't take the time to consider what your moment of fun might cost someone else...man, that makes you small...that makes you one of the bad guys."

Chet made a frustrated sound in the back of his throat and got up to leave when he caught sight of Parker's mom entering the gym. "But who am I to be trying to tell you what to do? I'm just a lazy fireman who's got nothing better to do than hang out with the mean kid who doesn't care who or what he hurts as long as he gets a laugh."

Chet halted his bounding, step-skipping descent of the bleachers long enough to give Parker's mom a polite greeting. He left the gym without turning back toward the stoic statue of a nine-year-old posed above him.

---

It was over a week later that Roy called from where he stood by the kitchen door.

"Chet, phone's for you." Chet raised his eyebrows in question as he took the handset from Roy.

"Karen," Roy mouthed. Chet might have appreciated the effort at discretion, if Roy hadn't politely stepped aside all of two paces, to lean a shoulder against the refrigerator.

Chet sent him a look that Roy was apparently immune to, because he stayed glued to the spot he had staked out. Chet turned a shoulder to the intrusion. "Hi, babe, what's up?"

Mike wandered in and sat at the table. Chet rotated his body so that he fully faced the wall.

"Will he be okay?" Chet didn't even turn at the sound of a chair scraping away from the table, nor when it was joined by its twin. He held a hand over his ear to further block the presence of his entourage. He dropped it and all pretense of privacy when his captain sauntered in and poured a cup of coffee before turning around to lean against the kitchen counter.

He held the phone out for all to hear Karen's faint but discernible voice.

"Parker asked me, if I asked nicely, did I think... Geesh, Chet, they are rubbing off on me. He wants to know if you would agree to see him again. Do I always sound like such a nine-year-old?"

Chet brought the phone back to his ear. "Not always, sometimes you sound even cuter. But, yeah, I guess I could talk to him again, for all the good it's done so far." He listened for a moment, then answered, "Yeah, sure," another pause, then: "Okay, see you soon...me too." He hung the phone up, and without waiting for the questions to begin, he filled in the few details his attentive audience might have missed.

"A couple of kids at the elementary staged a prank intending to frame Parker. They targeted a disabled boy who they frightened and he ended up falling out of his wheelchair. Parker was blamed at first, until the kid who fell spoke up and told them who all was involved. Karen says at first Parker was hurt that no one believed him. Now, I guess he's just righteously outraged that everyone so easily assumed that he would do such an awful thing." Chet heaved a sigh aimed at the whole situation. "I'm meeting with him tomorrow. I guess he just needs to talk." Roy clapped him lightly on the shoulder as he made his way to pour his own cup of coffee.

"Let us know how it turns out, or if there's anything we can do to help," Hank offered as Chet moved to the couch and pulled Henry's head into his lap.

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"So what's up kid? Chet plopped down on an outside bleacher and handed Parker an Orange Crush.

The boy was fighting valiantly to hold it together so Chet leaned way back on his elbows to bask in a rare break in the March clouds. He gazed out onto the baseball diamond where a pee wee team practiced trying to catching pop-flies and grounders. *Emphasis on "trying".*

"They all just assumed it was me. They wouldn't believe me, no matter what I said. I wouldn't ever do that to anyone, especially not a kid like Garrett."

"Why not a kid like Garrett'?" Chet asked nonchalantly, taking a sip of his own soda. He grinned as a curly-headed kid standing at shortstop let a grounder go right between his legs.

Parker looked sideways at Chet, seeming to try to discern the real question being asked. With a resigned sigh, he answered, "Because Garrett's the kind of kid that will fall for anything, and then never understand why people are laughing. Because, 'it's only funny if there's a possibility that the person getting laughed at can eventually get the joke and laugh too.' A guy told me something like that the other day, and I laughed at him. I shouldn't have, 'cause he was right."

"It does my heart good to know you were listening. So listen up again, it's never funny when someone gets hurt. It's a shame when it happens on accident. But man, if it is ever done on purpose? Kid, that's when someone should really be ashamed."

Chet continued on in the face of the kid's abject misery. "At least they know you didn't do it. And Ms. Franklin says Garrett will be alright, although Mr. And Mrs. Fauni are out for blood, so it's good you are in the clear. But I'm really glad you weren't involved, because I'd hate to think you would be part of something like that." Parker was still refusing to make eye contact, but Chet figured he had the boy's attention because the kid's whole demeanor lacked its usual antagonistic stiffness.

"So, anyway, you have your next prank planned yet? Did you remember to bring a list?"

Parker visibly began to un-wilt as he dug a crumpled piece of paper from the back pocket of his jeans.

Chet scanned the surprisingly long and detailed list before he smoothed it on his thigh. "Wow, Parker. If you spent this much time on your spelling words, you'd never have to re-take the practice test."

Parker caved, allowing an echo of Chet's teasing grin.

"Let's see, you want something original; something you can pull off with style. But there's also something comforting about the old standbys, ask my buddy, Johnny Gage how much he enjoys the occasional water bomb."

Parker had relaxed enough to turn and face Chet as he continued to peruse the list.

"You could teach the kindergarten class something harmless like: every time the teacher says a common word like - oh, I don't know, maybe 'rain' - they all chant in unison 'in Spain stays mainly in the plain.' He caught the spark of interest in Parker's eyes, just before he added, "Of course, it'll be awhile before they ever let you near any of the younger kids again."

Chet continued down the list. "Well placed 'out of order signs' have their possibilities. Hey, 'you ever wrap a rubber band across the spout of a drinking fountain?" The gleam was returning again as Parker considered the possibilities.

"Nix on writing on cars in the parking lot. Same goes for putting *anything* on the paint job of any car. Shaving cream'll destroy some finishes, believe me - been there, done that, paid the fine."

Chet looked up and nodded towards one of the players out in left field - in more ways than one - twirling in circles with arms flung out wide. "Behold, the next Ted Williams." He turned his wandering attention back to the subject at hand.

"Okay, here's my pick: I like the notes posted outside of five class rooms sending them all to meet in the library at once. The ensuing chaos would be magnificent to behold. Just try to have a solid alibi. It might be hard, but I would refrain from posting it on your own classroom door."

Parker started to protest, but held his tongue when Chet raised a stalling palm. "Hold on, here's why: first, they'll expect the perpetrator to capitalize on a chance to get out of class. Second, any principal worth his salt will be watching the crowd for anyone acting suspiciously. He'll know how tempting it will be for whoever set up the prank to be present to enjoy the fruits of his labor first hand. And finally, I don't want to get Karen, I mean *Ms. Franklin*, all pissed off at me for interrupting her class. So if you try this, make sure you are in class with your clean-looking nose in some textbook *before* the tardy bell rings, got it?"

Chet wondered if he was going to regret coaching Parker with this prank. He tried to imagine the worst case scenario, which he guessed would be Parker getting caught and earning detention. Karen would get wind of Chet's involvement. She might cluck her tongue at him, but he doubted she'd be truly mad, unless Parker chose to include her class in the re-routing exercise.

They were both keeping track of the action out on the field, so neither one missed it when two of the little guys going for the same pop-up collided because they were so intent on "keeping their eye on the ball."

Chet and his apprentice shared a disbelieving look. Chet chuckled, "Where else can you see such quality slap-stick for free? While I've got your attention, we need to talk about targets. You wanna pull a fast one on a good friend that you know can take it - great. Go for it. You decide to set the clock ahead when the teacher's out of the room; it's your funeral if you get caught. You decide to prank someone to get even, remember things have a tendency to escalate. Payback is a bi... Well let's just say you need to be prepared for the consequences." Chet turned to lean on one elbow to make sure Parker was following him. "You pick on someone littler than you, take advantage of someone just because you can - man that's just wrong. You destroy property...say with graffiti..."

Parker was lasting longer under this onslaught of advice than Chet had ever thought possible, but then the kid broke the spell with a roll of his eyes and finished Chet's sentence with, "Yeah, I know - I'll be doing time if I get caught."

"No, that isn't exactly what I was getting at. My point is, you shouldn't be breaking any laws, whether you think you could get caught or not. And anyways, it isn't always about *not* getting caught. Sometimes you want your pigeon to know exactly who struck."

"Look, I've been pranking friends and enemies since way before you were born...heck, maybe even before your mom was in grade school herself, and I am just trying to save you some grief. Learn from my mistakes. Think before you prank."

"Man, that sounds like some lame anti-bullying poster. Who writes your lines, anyway, Mr. Rogers?"

Chet turned to face the boy more fully. "Parker, just what do you think a bully is?" His answer came in the form of an ambivalent shrug. "Unless becoming one is a specific life goal of yours, I think you need to develop a working definition." Chet relaxed back into his former reclining position. "You pick on your classmates enough, not only will you be spending a few recesses locked in a broom closet, you'll be spending the rest of them alone."

"Man, I thought firemen where supposed to be tough. You are such a... a pansy." This bald insult was delivered with a sideways glance to gauge the grownup's reaction - which, actually, seemed to be nonexistent. He joined Chet in leaning back.

Chet smiled at the kid's attempt to poke at him and chose to ignore the barb. "I lost a few friends and probably missed out on a few chances at making new ones before I wised up." His smile faded as he continued, "But the stuff I really regret, some of it I just can't take back. Some of it I am still trying to forgive myself for.

So, let's finish going over that list of yours and talk about, really *think* about how some of these pranks will play out.

Chet scanned the list one last time. "Hey, I like this one...mind if I use it at the station?"

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The guys were taking a break after spending the afternoon at the training center running through extraction drills using the new attachments the department had just purchased for the Jaws of Life.

*The New Price is Right* was on, and Roy was, as usual, doing better than any of the contestants. "I'm telling you, Roy. You should get on this show. You'd clean up, you know you would," Chet voiced what they all believed. Roy routinely 'won' the car whenever he watched the show.

Cap walked into the day room to reclaim his chair after getting up to take a phone call. "Well, Chet, it looks like your persistence might have paid off. I just got off the phone with the principal over at Bonita. He called to let us know that the infamous mad alarm puller, a.k.a. Parker Tellyson apologized in person and in writing for the false alarms and the smoke bomb. Come to think of it, we haven't had a response out to our favorite playground in over three weeks, knock-on-wood." Raising his coffee mug in salute Cap added, "Here's to fewer frivolous runs."

"Here's to fewer injuries at Bonita Elementary," Roy lifted his glass of water in response.

"And fewer hurt feelings," Marco chimed in.

Chet looked up from scratching Henry behind the ear, and grinned. "Here's to the next generation of pranksters. May they jest in peace."

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\*A/N: two rug rats in this tale = two hidden anagrams. For the purposes of this and future anagram-tales, a "rug rat" isn't necessarily a toddler. (Pssst, don't worry about hunting for Garrett's middle initial, it's not there and you won't need it.)

\*\* The 17th century writer, John Dryden described anagramming as the "torture of one poor word ten thousand ways." I've seen that sentiment paraphrased by other authors as well.