

Never Poke a Stoker!

by Margaret-Anne Park



The characters depicted in Emergency they the property of Universal Studios/Mark VII Productions. No copyright infringement intended.

"Phil, this will be perfect," whispered the medium-height, burly young firefighter to his lanky blond engineer. "Mike's *always* been a quiet type, but since he started studying for the engineer's exam, he's positively a corpse by comparison. It's our *duty* to get him to quit acting so serious."

The engineer folded his arms across his chest and stared dubiously at his crewmate. "I dunno, Dave. You always have to watch out for the quiet ones. If you push him too far, it *could* backfire on you. It just might be," he paused for dramatic effect, leaned closer to Dave, and whispered into his ear, "like poking a stick in a rattler's nest." Phil studied the determined look on Mike Stoker's face and shook his head. "You're on your own, buddy. I know *exactly* what he's going through right now, and I'm *not* going to distract him."

Mike's left hand was covering a section of the textbook, and his face was twisted in concentration. Eyes squeezed shut, he whispered a complicated sequence of instructions to thin air. Stoker exhaled heavily, opened his eyes and tentatively lifted his hand from the text. He stared at the words, frowned, and slammed his hand back on the book. "Dammit!" he swore softly, pushing himself abruptly from the table. His blue eyes glinted with anger as he strode quickly to the coffeepot, snatched a mug from the drying rack, and poured a cup of coffee.

Dave grabbed Phil's arm and whispered in barely concealed anticipation, "Watch this! Oh, this one is gonna be good," he chortled.

Phil turned on him. "What did you do?" he demanded in a harsh whisper.

"Watch and see," smirked Dave.

Stoker lifted the mug to his lips and took a gulp, then let out a furious yell and dropped the mug. Coffee sprayed everywhere as the mug clattered to the counter and fell over, spilling its contents onto the counter and the floor. Mike raced over to the sink, turned on the tap, and leaned under it, letting the stream of water wash over his burning lips.

Phil shot Dave a dirty look, then grabbed his shirt sleeve and half dragged, half pulled him to the mess on the counter. "Clean that up," Phil ordered. He lifted the mug, sniffed suspiciously, then sneezed violently. "Cayenne pepper?!" he asked Dave incredulously, rubbing at his now tingling nose.

Dave nodded and shrugged goofily. His eyes twinkled in glee as he picked up a kitchen towel and cheerfully blotted up the spill.

Phil whistled softly, catching the murderous glare Mike directed at an oblivious Dave. *I think you just made a really **big** mistake, Dave. I **told** you to be careful with the quiet ones.* He stepped over to the sink and wordlessly handed Mike some paper towels to wipe his streaming eyes.

"Thanks," Mike muttered sourly. He looked skeptically at a glass, rinsed it several times, then filled it to the brim with ice-cold water. After hesitantly immersing his lips, Mike began to take small sips, rolling the soothing water gratefully around his stinging mouth. His blue eyes stared fixedly at the wall behind the sink, deepening almost visibly into a glacial blue -- hard, cold, and very, very dangerous.

Phil leaned over and whispered, "Hey, Mikey, I guess he's never heard of the infamous 'Stoker the Joker', huh?"

Mike replied quietly, with a ghost of a smile, "That's what makes revenge that much sweeter, isn't it?" He winked at his former college room-mate, and mentally began to review the many pranks they had used to terrorize the others in their dorm. His icy eyes softened slightly, glimmering with mischief.

Phil grinned viciously. "I *know* that look. Just like old times, pal-o-mine. Where do we start?" he whispered.

Mike dipped his fingers in the cool water and rubbed them lightly across his lips. "We start with his weakest point... his cookie stash. By the time we're finished with him, he may *never* want to see another cookie for the rest of his life. It'll have to wait until the next shift, though. Anything this soon would point the finger directly this way. You wanna check with Tim to see if he'll volunteer to be the 'fall guy' for this plan?"

Phil slapped his friend on the back. "Stoker," he declared, "I *like* the way you think. Should we bring Pat in on it, too? After all, he's usually the one that gets stuck with whatever Dave has to dish out."

Mike nodded slightly, then affected an attitude of sullen defeat as he took the glass of water to the table and opened his textbook again. Thoughts of cookie sabotage, not fire engines, filled his mind as he pretended to resume his studies.

Dave sat down at the table opposite Mike. "Uh... sorry about that, Mike," he said contritely. "No hard feelings?"

Mike snorted, "Naw, that's okay. I guess I *was* being a bit stiff. It's just that... it's really important to me to do well on the test, y'know?"

Dave smiled in relief. "Yeah. Yeah, I know. Anything I can do to help?"

"Just keep the practical jokes to a minimum, okay? At least for two weeks, until after the test?"

"You've got it," Dave replied enthusiastically.

Mike flipped a page in his textbook and started to read. *Hook, line and s*

"Pat, you'll have to keep him busy for about ten minutes," hissed Tim Duntley, cracking a wide smile. "We should be finished by then."

"Roger," whispered Pat. He flashed them a quick grin, and there was a mischievous gleam in his brown eyes. He ran his hand through his curly hair, trying to smooth the ever-present tangles. "After we finish with the chores, right?"

Captain Carl Keller cleared his throat. He raised his eyebrows, which caused his graying brush cut to look even more wedge-like than normal. "Gentlemen, what is so *important* that it couldn't keep until roll call is over?"

Pat replied quickly, "I'm having a bit of trouble with my car, and I thought Tim could help me figure out what's wrong."

"Very smooth, Pat," murmured Phil to Mike.

"Let me look at it," offered Dave. "My brother Charlie *is* the chief mechanic, after all, and that sort of talent seems to run in the family."

"Sure, Dave. Thanks," answered Pat, trying not to smile as Phil winked at Mike.

"I'm *sooo* glad we settled the 'important' things around this station," replied Captain Keller sarcastically. "Now, if we can get down to the humdrum, boring business that the County actually *pays* us to do?"

"Okay, that's the last one," chuckled Tim, putting the top biscuit back on the Oreo cookie. He deposited the cookie on the plate with the others, and placed the tempting plate on the counter near the refrigerator. "Did you two *really* do this at college?"

Phil nodded, smirking. "Yep. You just have to make sure that the circles of wax paper are smaller than the filling. That way, the outside edges of the filling still stick to the cookie top, and you don't notice the wax paper until you take a good bite. And we all *know* how Dave eats cookies... Mike, is that milk ready yet?"

"You betcha. The same formula that we used on Brian. The miniature marshmallows are slightly sour, thanks to a hint of vinegar, so it will make the milk look and taste curdled," chuckled Mike.

Tim bowed deeply. "I am obviously in the presence of true genius."

Mike and Phil clasped their hands in a victory salute. "Thank you, thank you," said Phil. "Maybe we should make up some business cards... 'Phil the Pill and Stoker the Joker', at your service." He checked his watch. "Quick, Mike, adopt the position," he hissed, scrambling to his spot on the couch. He hastily picked up the sports section and started reading.

Mike handed the glass of milk to Tim, then rapidly settled sideways into the deep armchair. He opened his textbook and began poring over it, as Dave and Pat came in from the parking lot.

"Thanks, Dave," said Pat. "Who'd have thought it was something as simple as a problem with the distributor cap?"

"Hey, guys, it's milk and cookie time," Tim announced mockingly, pouring some more milk into the 'special' glass in his hand. "Here ya go, Dave." He handed over the glass, then poured one for Pat.

Dave made a beeline for the plate, grabbing three of the Oreos.

"Aha! *Finally* got it!" Mike announced triumphantly, closing the book with a sharp thump. He stood up and stretched fully, just as Dave bit deeply into one of the cookies.

"Shit!" shouted Dave, spitting part of the offending morsel into his hand. He took a deep swig of the doctored milk. "What the hell?... Ack!" He scraped his tongue against the back of his teeth, then plucked the soggy mess from his mouth and threw it into the sink.

Tim doubled over, laughing uncontrollably. The others joined in, while Dave stared about in indignation. "Duntley, your ass is grass!" sputtered Dave.

"Round two," said Mike softly, with a smile.

Mike unscrewed the shower head and peered inside it. "Yeah, the old 'candy-in-the-shower head' trick." He fished out the three slightly dissolved candies and tossed them in the garbage.

Tim rubbed ineffectively at his legs, with a towel he had hastily knotted about his hips, frowning and grimacing at the stickiness from his aborted shower.

"Sorry, Tim," Mike apologized. "You can finish your shower now. Just let the water run about a minute or so first."

Tim groused, "If this doesn't come off, Maddie's gonna *kill* me. She's got all kinds of plans for our anniversary today, and I *don't* think me having a shower first thing is one of them." He studied his hands, and tried to spread his fingers; they clung together like the webbing on a duck's foot.

Mike grinned wickedly. "Oh, I don't know about that, Tim. You can have a *lot* of fun in a shower. Trust me. Of course, Maddie may just prefer to lick you off...."

A slow smile spread across Tim's face. "Mike, you sly old dog! You've given me a couple of good ideas there. Okay, just to take the wind out of Dave's sails, I'm gonna pretend nothing happened in the shower."

"That's the spirit, Tim. Now, on to Plan B -- Dave's 'secret stash' of cookies. We'll make three avenues of attack..."

"Wow, Mike, this is a masterpiece. *Now* I know why you wanted to borrow Maddie's hair dryer." Tim ran his fingers lightly down the sticky white streaks on Dave's black sports car. "Amazing. I'll have to remember this one. Let's see if I've got this straight.... you take the tops off the cookies, and stick the cookies on the car, filling side next to the metal?"

Mike nodded, an evil smile creasing his features. "Right. It works really well on a hot day. The heat from the sun, especially on a black car, causes the filling to melt, and the weight of the cookie drags it down the car, leaving a sticky path. Voila -- instant zebra. We don't have the sun at night, so I had to improvise and use the hair dryer to get enough heat to melt the cookies."

Phil chuckled. "It was a true stroke of genius to crumble the leftover bits and put them in Dave's boots and under his sheets, too. I'll bet he's wondering what happened to the rest of the cookies, heheh!"

Pat called across the parking lot, from the door to the station house. "Mike! C'mon -- the test results are in!"

All the color drained from Stoker's face. He took a deep breath, and stumbled toward the station.

"Get a move on, Stoker!" shouted Captain Keller from his office. The grin on his face broke the tension. "Congratulations, Mike. I guess we'll be losing you. The Chief is on the phone. He wants to talk to you."

"The...the Chief?" Mike stammered. He reached a trembling hand toward the phone. "H..hello?... Yes, sir.... I *what?*... You're *kidding?*!... S...second?!... Me?...I, uh... yes?... yeah, okay. That's great.... Thanks, sir.... Yes, I'll tell him. Thanks again. Bye." He fumbled the phone back into its cradle, then turned to his crewmates. "I came in second." Mike stared wildly around him, then shouted, "I CAME IN SECOND!!!!!!!!!!".

Amid the congratulations, and handshakes, Captain Keller called for order. "Well done, Mike! Where will you be going?"

"Uh... there's a new station that they're opening up in CarsonStation 51. I...I get to be the engineer on the 'A' shift." His voice dropped to a whisper. "I get to be the very first engineer to drive that rig.... this is amazing. I... I start in two weeks, when they open the station. Wow."

"We'll have to all come for the 'wet-down'," said Dave. "Hey, let me get my camera from my car. This occasion should be commemorated with a photo." He trotted out to the parking lot, then yelled, "MY CAR!!!!!! What have you done to my car???"

Captain Keller chuckled. "I guess he's never heard of 'Phil the Pill' and 'Stoker the Joker', has he?"

The others gaped at him. "You *knew?*" sputtered Phil.

"Do you really think Headquarters keeps us captains *that* ignorant? Very nice work, boys. Of course, that's strictly off the record. Well done, Stoker, on all fronts. I'm going to miss you." He extended his hand to Mike.

Mike shook Keller's proffered hand. "Thank you, sir. It's been a pleasure and an honor to serve here." He glanced at Dave, who was furiously trying to wipe the cookie filling from his car, and grinned broadly. *And that's the way the cookie crumbles, Dave.*