

Artfully Dodged By

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Written around Chet's shoulder injury in "Syndrome", written by Michael Donovan

Stoker heard before he saw the percussive sputter of playing cards in bicycle spokes. Swinging closed the tool compartment on the Officer's side of the rig, he peeked through the windshield to see three boys riding up to the station. The tallest of the boys had short brown hair and wore a blue t-shirt with jeans and black shoes. The middle boy had dirty-blond hair and wore a brown plaid shirt and tan pants while the smallest boy sported a red t-shirt and jeans.

Mike stepped around the front of Big Red to meet the boys as they reached the bay.

"Hi! We're here to see Chet," the tallest of the boys announced.

"He have another trick for you guys?" Mike asked.

"We're not sure. But he told us to come by today."

"Hey, Johnny," Mike called.

Johnny peeked out from the back of the Squad, a polishing rag in hand. "Yeah? Oh, hey fellas."

"Hi," the boys chorused.

"Call Chet, will you?" Mike requested.

"Sure. Chet!" Gage called, head angling toward the dayroom as the three 10-year-old boys waited on their bikes in front of the apparatus bay.

"I coulda done that," Mike muttered.

"Huh? Oh. Yeah. Sorry," Johnny flashed a shy grin, laid aside the rag, and stepped over to meet the kids.

"Yeah, I'm comin', I'm comin'," came a grouched voice from the dayroom. Fireman Chet Kelly emerged with broom and dustpan, looking around the bay. "What now, Gage?"

"Your acolytes are here," Johnny answered, throwing a wink at the kids.

Chet peeked around the Squad. At the sight of the three youngsters, he laid aside the cleaning items then sauntered over to the boys. "Alright, gentlemen. Show me what you got," he said, folding his arms.

"Well, we didn't have time to learn another card trick," the tallest of the three replied.

"Why not?" Chet wondered.

"'Cause 'Goldfinger' and 'The Man From U.N.C.L.E!' were on TV yesterday!" the shortest boy exclaimed excitedly.

“Hey, that’s pretty cool. You guys like that spy stuff, huh?” Kelly asked.

“Oh, yeah! It’s real far-out,” the tall one agreed.

“My brother said that magic and spy stuff are kinda the same, ‘cause they’re both about redirection,” the smallest boy explained.

“Think your brother’s got a point. Hey, you guys wanna see a new trick I learned?”

“Yeah!”

“Alright, stay here. Don’t move, it’ll take me a minute or so to set it up, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Stoker here’ll keep you guys entertained till I come back.”

The boys turned to the tall engineer as Chet headed into the dayroom.

The middle boy assessed Mike with a curious eye. “Do you work on the fire engine with Chet?”

“Yeah. I do.”

“Whaddya do?”

“I drive the rig and work the pumps,” Mike pointed to the pump panel.

“Whoa,” the middle boy’s eyes brightened in awe.

It was the smallest boy’s turn to assess Gage. “Do you work with Chet on the fire truck?”

Johnny shook his head. “Well, actually, no. No, I don’t.”

“What do you do, then?”

“Well,” Johnny beamed proudly and patted the Squad. “I’m a rescue fireman. This here’s *my* rig.”

“Oh,” came the disappointed chorus of all three kids.

“Whaddya mean ‘oh’? Being a rescue fireman takes a lot of training and know-how. Way more than Chet, anyway.”

“Do you rescue people?” the middle boy asked.

“Well, yeah,” Johnny answered, his voice sounding deflated. “That’s what a rescue fireman does.”

“Well...do you...do you stuff with the fire engine?”

“Sure. Sometimes.”

“Oh. Well, I guess that’s not so bad, then.”

Johnny opened his mouth and was about to defend his profession when Chet backed out of the dayroom door with three Styrofoam™ cups and a small glass of water atop a tray and set it on the hood of the Squad.

“Hey, now! Roy and I just finished polishing that,” Johnny protested.

“Well, just think how much shinier it’ll be when you redo it.”

“Chet!”

Kelly waved away Johnny’s annoyance. “Just...cool it, Gage. Give us room, will ya? Learn from a master.” He ignored Johnny’s indignant huff and continued on. “Now,” he announced to the boys. “Watch carefully. I’ve got three cups here, all empty,” he grabbed each cup and shook them to indicate there was nothing inside. “Empty?”

“Yeah,” they nodded.

Mike leaned against Big Red with crossed ankles and folded arms, curious whether Chet’s latest craze was going to work or blow up in his face. It was always an equal chance of either.

Chet placed the three cups on the tray, open-side up. “Okay. Now, see this glass of water? I’m going to pour this water into one of the cups. Watch.”

He did and they did and soon the glass of water was emptied into one of the cups.

“I’m going to shuffle these around.” Chet moved the cups on the tray. “Now, you guys tell me which cup has the water.”

“The one on the end.”

“Which end?” Chet asked.

“That end,” the middle boy pointed.

“No, the one in the middle,” the shortest boy answered.

“Okay, I’ll make it easier,” Chet said and grabbed a cup on the end and turned it upside down. “Alright, which one is it?”

“It’s still the middle one,” the shortest boy pouted.

“It’s the other one,” the taller boy said.

Chet turned the middle one upside down.

The taller boy laughed. “Ha! See! I told you it was the other one.”

Chet shuffled the cups around and after the fourth shuffle, he quietly turned the last cup upside down and continued the move the cups around the tray.

After several moments, it suddenly occurred to the boys that all three cups were upside down and yet no water flowed from any of them. “Whoa!” they all exclaimed.

“How’d you do that?” the middle boy asked.

Chet stopped shuffling and turned a mischievous eye toward his young audience. “Redirection, my friend. Redirection.”

The klaxons sounded just then, ushering in a bunch of firefighters who just got redirected from their other tasks.

“Okay, fellas, you know the rules,” Chet said.

“Yeah. When the alarm sounds, we gotta beat it,” the shorter boy said, sounding disappointed.

“Let’s go figure out how he did that!” the taller boy announced and off the boys went, before the Squad and the Engine left the station to answer the call.

[one week later]

The tattle of cards in bicycle spokes sputtered to a series of asynchronous *thwacks* as three bikes were walked between Big Red and the Squad, parked in the driveway.

Marco Lopez stopped sweeping the bay floor as three boys approached. “Hi!”

“Hi,” the taller boy answered. “We came to show Chet our new magic trick.”

“Oh, you did, huh? Well, wait right here,” Marco suggested and headed for the hose tower behind the apparatus bay.

The Engine crew along with Charlie Wilson from C-shift were busy hoisting lines off the tower and laying them out in the parking lot.

Marco lowered his voice, the broom handle in his hand gesturing toward the front of the bay. “Hey, Cap. Those boys are here to see Chet, but...I don’t wanna tell them he’s been injured. What do I say?”

Cap’s eyes narrowed and he peered through the empty bay to see three silhouettes with bikes. Stoker and Lopez traipsed after their captain as he strode through the bay, leaving Charlie Wilson to continue laying out the hoselines.

Johnny emerged from the dayroom with the mop and bucket and saw the boys near the rigs and the engine crew heading to meet them. “What’s going on?” he asked.

Marco stepped over to the rescue fireman. “They came to see Chet, but I didn’t want to tell them he got his shoulder wrecked.”

“Oh, yeah...” Johnny agreed. He laid aside the cleaning items and followed the group.

“Hi, fellas,” Captain Stanley clapped his hands in greeting.

“Hi. Is Chet around?” the tallest of the three boys asked.

Captain Stanley rubbed the side of his nose. “Uh, well, boys, I hate to tell you this, but, um...he’s not here today.”

“Oh,” the smaller boy answered. “He told us to come by today. We have a new magic trick to show him.”

“Do you now?” Captain Stanley looked around at his crew, trying to give himself an extra few seconds to come up with a tactful explanation.

“Yeah! We worked on it all week,” the middle boy replied excitedly.

“Do you know when he’ll be back?” the smallest boy asked.

“It could be awhile. Fireman Kelly’s been temporarily transferred to a top secret firehouse.”

Three adult heads with furrowed brows slowly turned toward Mike Stoker while three pairs of youthful eyes widened in astonishment and awe.

“Whoa! A top secret firehouse! What do they *do* there?” the middle boy asked, dumbfounded.

“They conduct top secret covert fire missions.”

“Right on!” the taller boy exclaimed.

“What kind of stuff do they do?” the smallest boy asked.

“We can’t tell you that.”

“How long do the missions take?” the taller boy asked.

“Anywhere from a few days to a couple of months. It depends on the mission.”

“Is he doing a long one or a short one?”

“Even we don’t know. But probably a long one. Come back in a couple of months. He might be back by then.”

“Coupla *months*? Wow,” the middle boy breathed in astonishment. “That must be some secret mission.”

“I’m sure it will be,” Captain Stanley shot his engineer a look. “Alright, fellas. Run along, now. We’ve got a lot of work to do,” he gently shooed them out of driveway.

The boys steered their bikes around. “I’ll bet he’ll get shot at,” one boy said.

“No way. He’s too smart for that. He’ll probably drive a secret fire truck that has missiles that shoot out the back!”

“Ooh! I’ll bet it can make smoke bombs...!”

Their voices faded as they raced away toward home, expounding on the intricacies and exciting details of top secret firehouse equipment.

Stoker headed back toward the hose tower.

“Mike?”

The engineer stopped in mid-step and turned around. “Yeah, Cap?”

Captain Stanley stepped up to his second-in-command. “A top secret *firehouse*?”

“Sure, Cap.”

“Gotta admit, that was a...pretty interesting way to handle it. Remind me to have you answer the phone the next time HQ calls.”

“Why’s that?”

“So you can tell them where I’ve been transferred to.”

“You realize, Mike, that they’re gonna ask Chet all about his mission and he’ll have no idea what they’re talking about,” Marco waggled his eyebrows.

“He’ll make something up,” Mike knowingly replied.

“That’s probably true,” Marco agreed. “And, you know, they’ll believe him. Heck, *he’ll* believe him.”

“Boy, I can’t wait to hear that!” Johnny rubbed his hands together and he giggled in as he gathered the mop and bucket.

“He can’t tell them anyway. It *is* a top secret firehouse.” Stoker quipped.

Cap shook his head and chuckled as he shoed his crew back to their duties.